RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Fall
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QUARTERLY

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FINDING HOME IN THE LITTLE HOUSE

by Peyton Tracy

This article was written by Peyton Tracy, a senior majoring in History at Willamette University. Peyton joined the Museum team this summer as an exhibit intern. A Renton native, Peyton previously interned at the Willamette Heritage Center and Mission Mill Museum. Her work on our Little House makes the exhibit much more family-friendly. Stop by the Museum to see the updated exhibit!

THE INTERNSHIP

One of the experiences most Renton youths have moving out of state for college is having to answer the question "Where are you from?" with "Seattle." I was lucky that I attended a school in Oregon with a large population of Washington students who would then ask for specifics. Even heading into my senior year of college, it's amazing

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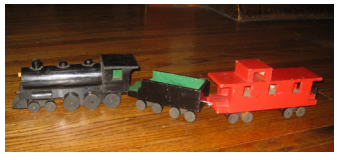

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GREETINGS FROM RENTON! A JURIED PHOTOGRAPHY SHOW

From
SEPTEMBER 10
To
FEBRUARY 25

Go into any gift shop for tourists and you'll find tens of postcard views—breathtaking sunsets, unique architecture, leafy trails, sunny beaches—all taken to capture the special essence of a place. The photographers in our exhibit have found all these views and more. Join us in celebrating the photographic talent in Renton—vote for your favorite and the winners will become postcards available for purchase in the Museum!

RENTON RIVER DAYS A SUCCESS

As usual, the Museum participated in the Renton River Days festivities in late July. Volunteers, Board members, and staff all worked together to operate both the Museum and a booth at Liberty Park.

This year Volunteer & Education Coordinator Dorota Rahn introduced a new children's activity at the booth. In order to recognize the diversity in ethnic heritage in Renton, children were given the choice of four different masks to decorate: African, Chinese, Indian, and prehistoric Mexican. Over 1000 people stopped by our booth and enjoyed a break from the festival creating these unique masks.

The Museum also sponsored other activities during Renton River Days. "Sounds of Culture," an activity station, allowed children to experience instruments of various cultures. The Museum also funded a performance by Flamenco Gitana, a dance troupe educating about the complex and beautiful tradition of flamenco.

MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart, Museum Director

For the past few months, the Renton History Museum has been working with the Renton Municipal Arts Commission (RMAC) on several projects. If you visited the Museum this summer, perhaps you saw our collaborative exhibit, *Defining Spaces: Picturing the Places That Shape Us*. *Defining Spaces* brought the best of the City of Renton's visual art collection to our visitors, courtesy of guest curator Colleen Lenahan and the Arts Commission. As two of the strongest local cultural organizations, the Renton History Museum and the Renton Municipal Arts Commission's partnership is a natural fit.

Our second collaboration with RMAC came to fruition in August. Earlier this year Commissioner Peter Hartley asked us if we'd be interested in joining forces to apply for a 4Culture Heritage Site(s) Specific grant. This innovative grant program provides funding for art projects to take place at historic sites around King County. It's a relatively new grant program that uses the arts—whether visual or performing arts—to bring unorthodox perspectives (and new audiences) to heritage sites. In writing the grant application, Museum staff provided the historic background about our site and RMAC volunteers made suggestions about the artistic activity that could go on there.

Our joint application was successful, and the result was Kristin Schimik's *The Infinity Loop*, an installation and performance that took place at the Renton Mine Hoist Foundation site on Benson Road in August. Kristin describes herself as interested in "the dynamic transformation of materials within the context of deep time," and what could be a better fit for that than our coal mining site? She has developed numerous other installations in the Seattle area, Virginia, and Florida, among others, always with an eye toward the geological and cosmological. Her piece helps us better understand our human experience as a blink of the eye in the history of the Earth, but also reminds us of our duty to be stewards of both history and the environment.

This is exactly what 4Culture's Historic Site(s) Specific program was designed to do: help create partnerships that call attention to landmarked sites and make visitors think about them differently. Every time the Museum works with a new organization—whether the students of Renton High, ESL students from Renton Technical College, or the photographers in our latest exhibit—we learn something new and exciting about how others think about Renton's past. We believe that the sharing of experiences makes us a better Museum and a richer community.

Elizabeth P. Stewart
—
Director

Planning for the installation at the Mine Hoist Foundation site.

Artist Kristin Schimik works on a model of the installation.

QUARTERLY
Fall 2013

RENTON HISTORICAL QUARTERLY
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4 CULTURE

UPCOMING
EVENTS

GREETINGS FROM RENTON! EXHIBIT OPENING
September 12
5:30-8:00pm
Join us as we celebrate Renton's scenic beauty and the photographers who bring it to life.

YO! HO! HO! THE PIRATE SHOW!
October 5
1:00-2:00pm
Take a Pirate Ship adventure on a search for treasure with puppeteer Crazy Captain Jenny and Clarence the Baby Crocodile.

STORIES THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT
October 26
1:00-2:00pm
Celebrate Halloween with storyteller Naomi Baltuck's hair-raising, spine-tingling, and rib-tickling tales!

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Theresa Clymer, President

In June the Trustees, along with some Museum staff, enjoyed working together at our Museum retreat. The retreat helped to stimulate a shared understanding of issues and promote consensus. As a result we have a new sense of unity and mutual respect among Board Members and Staff. In addition, the retreat was a launching pad for more effective teamwork in the coming year. To maximize our effectiveness we will be considering revising our current committee structure. The Board is very grateful to the leadership and direction provided by our retreat facilitators Jay Covington and Terry Higashiyama.

Also in June, three of our Board Members -Phyllis Hunt, Anne Melton, and Larry Sleeth- completed their terms. We said good-bye to these wonderful, hardworking people. We all thank them for their years of service and we will all miss them. We are very lucky to announce that we have three new people joining us as trustees: Amy Rayl, Alice Stenstrom, and Laura Clawson. Each of these ladies brings a strong background of community service and a high interest in providing history and education for our members. Laura, a former Renton Historical Society Board President, has graciously agreed to serve as the Treasurer in her new term.

It is the wish of the Renton Historical Society and Museum Staff to educate and involve our guests by providing a top-rated museum that is innovative, entertaining, and fun.

With this in mind mark your calendars for our annual dinner auction on Wednesday, October 9th. Please join us for good fun and good food. Hope to see you at the museum soon!

Theresa Clymer
—
President

Jay Covington, Meris Mullaley, and Terry Higashiyama at the Board Retreat.

FINDING HOME IN THE LITTLE HOUSE

New interpretation in the Little House featuring Sarah Tonkin and the organ she played at the First Presbyterian Church in Renton.

Continued from page 1

when someone knows exactly where you mean when you say you're from Renton. I thought I knew where I came from, being born and raised in the Highlands, but through my internship at the Renton History Museum this summer I got a glimpse into life and stories in Renton's past that showed me a whole new character to my hometown. I learned about people and their contributions to the Renton community that made this little coal mining town a home to thousands of people throughout the years.

My task for this internship was to create new interpretation for the Little House exhibit, which had been relatively unchanged for about twenty years. It contained daily objects from life in Renton beginning in about 1870 through the 1930s, from a multitude of people. It was crowded and cluttered, and had little to no guidance or interpretation. But what the attraction to it was, and what visitors enjoyed, was the stories about the objects. Grandparents would

Cover photo:
Intern Peyton Tracy posing with new interpretation in the Little House featuring local carpenter and contractor George W. Custer.

George W. Custer, ca. 1897.
(RHM# 2000.127.8346)

Sarah Tonkin, ca. 1900.
(RHM# 1966.059.3724)

George W. Custer house on Wells, 1942.
(RHM# 2000.127.8478)

point out an object to a young child, one that was long since obsolete or uncommon in the present day, and immediately share a story about their own family, or what growing up in their day was like. I wanted to preserve this experience while also adding stories from Renton's history to the exhibit. So I dug around in the archives and learned about some wonderful early Rentonians who had objects in the Little House.

THE FAMILIES

The first family I met was the Custers. The Custer family settled in Renton in the latter half of the 19th century and remained prominent figures in the community well into the 20th. George W. Custer, the man I decided to focus on for the exhibit, was born in Newcastle in 1879, and grew up to be a major contractor and carpenter in the county, building many historic buildings in Renton that still exist today.[1] When George's son Charles died, much of the Custer

Edmund E. Duff, ca. 1898.
(RHM# 2000.127.8778)

family estate was left to the Renton Historical Society and many of their belongings are presently in the Little House. Among these are the sewing machine in the kitchen and the sofa and wooden toy train set in the parlor.

The next family I met, the Tonkins, was related to the Custers through marriage. Sarah Tonkin moved from rural Illinois to Renton with her husband, William, in 1883. She had two children, James and Florence, the latter of which married George Custer's brother, Bertram. She helped found the first church in the town, which at that time was mostly filled with coal miners and workers in related industries.[2] Sarah was an elder in the First Presbyterian Church and played organ there for over fifty years; that organ now sits in the parlor of the little house. She couldn't bring much with her when she moved with her husband, so she truly had to establish a new life for herself in Renton. Raised by a minister, it was very natural for her to create a home oriented toward her faith.

Edmund Duff and his family represented another major population of settlers in Renton--immigrants. Edmund was born a poor Irish boy who was orphaned at an early age. When he was sixteen, he sought opportunity and a new life in the United States, initially moving to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.[3] He followed mining jobs throughout the country, eventually moving to Renton for a time before heading up to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush. Finding no success, he moved back to Renton, met and married fellow Irish immigrant Jane Luke, and opened the Gladstone Hotel in present-day downtown.[4] They settled in and quickly had three children: Edmund Jr., Marian, and James. Throughout the years Edmund Sr. established himself as a businessman, beginning a concrete company that created many of the original sidewalks in Renton.

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COLLECTION REPORT

by Sarah Samson, Collection Manager

Sarah Samson
—
Collection Manager

The departments of collections and exhibits are intimately connected. Most artifacts exist in collections to be used in exhibitions, and exhibits rarely exist without using artifacts from collections. The purpose of an exhibit is to tell a story to the visitor. Using artifacts is a visual way to accomplish this. But the artifacts themselves aren't really the key: it is the stories behind the artifacts that are important.

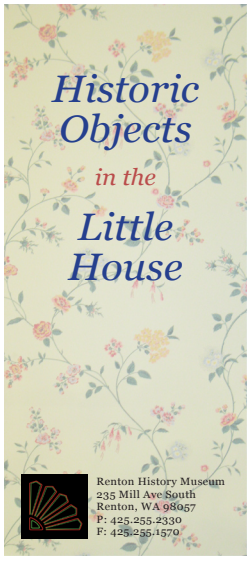
If you walk into the Museum and see a sofa, you may walk right past it with a glance unless you are particularly interested in antique furniture. But suppose this sofa has a large panel next to it with a photo of the woman who owned the sofa and information about how this sofa played an important role in her family's history. Suddenly, the sofa becomes more than just a sofa; it becomes a symbol representing a whole family's history.

We try very hard to make sure our artifacts' histories are told in our exhibits. Most of our collection is filled with stories, but the space confines of exhibits make it difficult to convey all the hidden meaning. Intern Peyton Tracy's reinterpretation of the Little House highlights some of what we know about the artifacts on display.

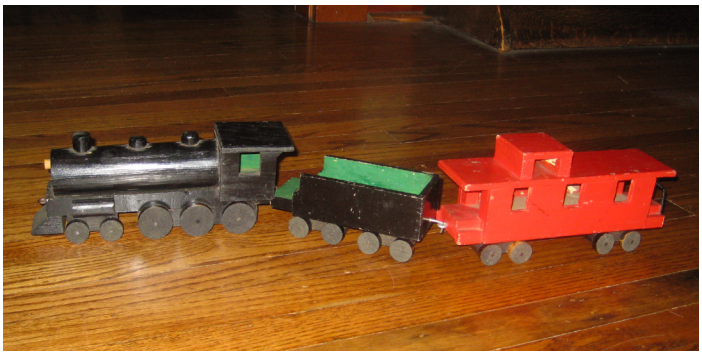
Three artifacts and the Little House itself are highlighted in large new panels focusing on four Renton families. An additional ten artifacts are highlighted in our new brochure "Historic Objects in the Little House." All of these artifacts have larger tales behind them: who used them, what the artifacts meant, and what role people and objects together played in Renton's larger history. These stories help the Little House come to life.

My favorite of the artifacts highlighted is the toy train in the parlor. This little train actually consists of nine handmade and hand-painted cars, though only five are currently on display. This train was made for a young Charles L. Custer by his father George W. Custer. George was a carpenter and contractor in Renton. He used his woodworking skills to make wooden toys for his only child, many of which survive in our collection. We also have many photographs of Charles playing with the toys now in our collection, though sadly, not the train set.

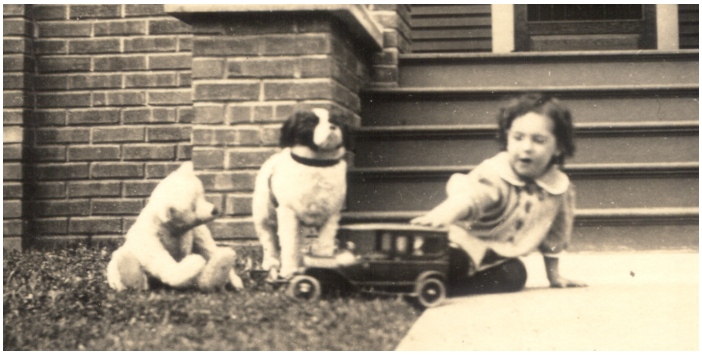
Be sure to stop by and visit the improved Little House. We hope that the stories told by it help you connect with Renton's history and the Rentonians that lived here before you.



New brochure for the Little House exhibit.



Toy train set in the Little House (RHM# 1980.999.1280, etc.)



Charles L. Custer with some of his other toys (RHM# 2000.127.8225)

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WHY PARENTS COUNT IN THE VOLUNTEERING WORLD

by Dorota Rahn,
Volunteer & Education Coordinator

We all know the importance of parents, but who would expect that they would create a new trend in volunteering? Our museum volunteer corps has experienced a recent influx of mother-daughter teams; the Museum can accept volunteers under 18 years of age to greet visitors on Saturdays only if they work together with their guardian or an appointed caregiver. Three high school-aged girls have greeted visitors with their mothers on Saturdays since 2011. Now all three of them are young women headed off to different colleges after graduating from high school.

Shayla and her mother Jennifer (pictured) joined our Museum two years ago. Shayla will be attending Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah this fall. She plans on studying business and accounting. She has always loved reading and traveling, and would like to visit every country in the world.

Elona and her mom, Bogdana, followed in the footsteps of our first family team and began greeting visitors in 2012. Elona will go to Seattle University this fall to pursue her interest in science. She also hopes to continue her creative writing in poetry and novels.

Destiny and her mom, Josette, joined the Museum last September. Destiny was accepted to Washington State University in Pullman, Washington this spring. She plans to study Criminal Psychology. She also likes to read and wants to travel around the world.

Please join us in wishing Shayla, Elona, and Destiny the best of luck! As our three mother/daughter teams leave the Museum, a new family team has joined us: 17-year old Josephine Lyou and her 16-year old brother James. The siblings, under the supervision of Jennifer Otake, joined our greeters last month. We also hope that fathers will follow these mothers' model and join their teenage children to volunteer at our Museum as well.

Continued from page 7

He also unsuccessfully ran for mayor in 1904 but continued to be very involved in local politics. The drop-front desk where he did much of his business is now in the parlor of the Little House.

The Delaurenti family was also made of immigrants. Pietro and Modesta Delaurenti moved from the small village of Ciconio at the base of the Italian Alps to British Columbia, to join Modesta's aunt and cousins.[5] They eventually moved to be with Pietro's brothers and sisters in Renton, and the men in the family worked the coal mines in Newcastle. Pietro and Modesta had two sons, Charles and Vico.[6] Modesta became a matriarchal figure in the Italian immigrant community in Renton, and many sought her guidance and support throughout the years. Vico recalled in his memoirs that during the Great Depression, she would cook extra food for hungry passersby and often was an integral part of cooking for the annual Italian picnics.[7] Her stove, a 1923 Monarch Malleable range, is in the kitchen of the Little House today, surrounded by utensils and tools that would have been familiar to any kitchen as active as hers likely was.

THE EXHIBIT

Each of these families and their associated objects became very near and dear to me over the course of my research. Some families, like the Custers and Delaurentis, already had a multitude of research and records accumulated by descendants and the Historical Society. The other families had less research, which left me to go search archives of the Museum and the internet to find out about them. Each new record I discovered that told me more about the family was like discovering a small treasure; it taught me about their life experience and how it might have affected them and shaped their lives and future. It helped shape my understanding of life in Renton.

When it came to creating the exhibit, boiling these stories and life experiences into two-hundred word panels to go in the exhibit was the biggest struggle I had faced yet. The amount that could be said (and that I wanted to say) about each of these amazing, strong people and their families could fill a full-fledged thesis paper. And the most unfair, but simultaneously most remarkable and important, part of being involved in the preservation of local history is that any family in Renton and beyond could have as much said about them. I feel this exhibit does its part to bring some of these families' lives and experiences to light, and I feel grateful to institutions such as the Renton History Museum for helping to preserve these stories for future generations, so that young people like myself can become as entranced with the past of their own hometown as I have.

Modesta Delaurenti, 1934
(RHM# 2012.019.001)

ENDNOTES

1 Sarah Iles [Samson], "Building Renton: George W. Custer, Carpenter & Contractor," *Renton Historical Society & Museum Quarterly* 39.1 (2008), 7.

2 "Renton Will Fete Opening of First Church," newspaper clipping (Vertical File, "Tonkin Family," Renton History Museum).

3 Marian Duff Thomson Oral History, 13 Sep 1988, p. 1 (Oral History Collection, Renton History Museum).

4 Marian Duff Thomson Oral History, 13 Sep 1988, p. 1 (Oral History Collection, Renton History Museum).

5 Vico L. Delaurenti, *My Remembrance of Things Past,* unpublished manuscript, July 1995 (Vertical File, "Delaurenti Family," Renton History Museum), p. 5.

6 1920 Federal Census; Delaurenti, *My Remembrance of Things Past*, p. 5.

7 Delaurenti, *My Remembrance of Things Past,* p. 23.

6TH ANNUAL RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BENEFIT DINNER AND SILENT AUCTION

Get your tickets now for the Annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction on Wednesday, October 9, 2013 at the Renton Senior Activity Center. The event will feature a silent auction, fantastic meal, entertainment, and will be hosted by an emcee. Please support the Renton History Museum by celebrating Renton's past and promising future! Tickets are $40 per person or $300 for a table of eight. Call the Museum at 425.255.2330 to reserve your space now or order online at www.brownpapertickets.com.

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RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM
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IN HINDSIGHT...

Orillia School Patrol, 1964. Welcome back to school! (RHM# 1986.080.2476)