

A River Ran Through It: The Great Renton Flood of 1911

By Tom Monahan

Foreword

This story was originally written and published in a longer form, in the August 2000 issue of the *RHM Quarterly*. With the current discussion about the Howard Hanson Dam and the possibility of flooding in Renton if we get too much rain this fall, this edited version of the story has suddenly become relevant, and worthy of another look.

Renton's citizens have developed a close relationship with the rivers that run through this area, demonstrated by the annual Renton River Days festival. But relations between human beings and water became strained to the breaking point one fateful fall day in 1911. This is the story of that disaster and its legacy today.



Above: A view of homes on Williams Street as the flood waters receded (#41.1206)

Hell's Bells

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 11 November 1911, Renton residents were awakened by the ringing of church bells. This was not unusual for a Sunday morning, but on this day, church attendance had nothing to do with the commotion. Instead, the bells heralded a day of terror for Rentonians living in the lower parts of the city.



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Renton History Museum
235 Mill Avenue South
Renton, WA 98057
Phone: 425-255-2330
FAX: 425-255-1570

Hours:

Tuesday - Saturday 10:00am - 4:00pm

**Admission: \$3 for adults
\$1 for children**

**Always free to members and to the
general public on the first Wednesday
and third Saturday of the month.**

**Board Meetings: Please call the museum
for time and location.**



President's Message

By Laura Clawson, President

As we move into the holiday season, I can look back on a fall that has been spectacular with fall color and Master Plan excitement. Fall is a season of dropping seeds that quietly wait through the winter and burst into flower in the spring. Many ideas, like little seeds, are being sown in the Master Plan process. The ground they fall upon has been industriously tilled by all of us.



Our museum had a humble start, the ground soil laid by a group of Rentonites who had good stuff in their garages, really good stuff. Their spouses, so I've been told, were anxious to get the "stuff" out of their garages, perhaps to make room for the cars they thought should be there. Eventually the city added their special mix to the ground. Historic Fire Station 1 was empty.

What to do? The "Miracle Gro®" was successful: Renton grew a museum in the fire station, preserving both building and artifacts. More artifacts were donated, more volunteers tended the museum. Ernie Tonda, the head gardener, was tireless. And he had a vision. He went before the Mayor, the City Council, and anyone who would listen, and badgered them, I mean convinced them, to provide another miracle. He wanted a professional, paid Museum Director. This season of sunshine and rain produced a wonderful Century to Century exhibit and more acquisitions of artifacts, more programs. When Steve Anderson left there was a short drought but once again the city's sun shone on the ground and gave us Liz Stewart. All through its history the museum has had nutrients from the city, from citizens, from members, from the heart of Renton itself.

It is anybody's guess where the Renton History Museum would be now if it weren't for the city's investment. Would we have hosted a Smithsonian traveling exhibit? historically reconstructed the coal car? Provided exhibit space for Renton Technical College ESL students? Exhibited Renton's first 100 years? sold pictures to Fry's to decorate their store? Told about the Garden of Eden in Kennydale at their neighborhood meeting? Recorded people telling their Renton stories? Published a quarterly newsletter?

Renton is a fabulous place to live and has a rich, vibrant history. The calendar of local events is full, the citizens are diverse, white-collar, educated folks with young families, as we've learned from our Master Plan consultants. (Is this a surprise to you? It was to us.) Along with parks, libraries, arts and music, the museum is central to making Renton a livable city. When people want to move here, or companies look to locate here, they want more than a job or affordable place to live. They want a community and city that supports those things that make Renton a great place to raise a family. They also want an authentic and cohesive place to live, which the museum provides by telling Renton stories and

Renton Museum Report

By Elizabeth P. Stewart

Our Museum Master Plan got off to a roaring start in late July, and it has been racing forward ever since, in the capable hands of our consultants—Gyroscope Inc.—and the steering committee of trustees, volunteers, staff, and Renton



residents we put together to oversee the process. Thanks to an investment from the City, the Museum was able to undertake this plan to prepare for our next fifteen years of sustainable operations. I think the timing couldn't be better: having formulated this plan at the bottom of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, we can be poised to take full advantage when the economy turns around.

we've hit our midlife crisis, when the things we used to do well don't quite seem to be working anymore. We see empty seats at our high-quality speaker programs, for example, and as our founding generation passes from the scene, our membership is declining.

We started with the notion that we are an organization ready for a shake-up. Like many thirty-year-old institutions,

On the other hand, there are real opportunities for growth that we want to tap into. Renton's population has become more culturally diverse, with more sophisticated tastes. While Renton has always had a core group of civically active leaders, there's a generation right behind them ready for more responsibility. We hope to get these groups engaged in the work of preserving Renton's heritage.

Gyroscope Inc. has encouraged us to think broadly and creatively about what museums can do to link the past to the present and the future. They are helping us see how being more experimental and risk-taking—sharing the process of exhibit development with the community, for example, or exploring topics we may have missed in the past—can create greater benefits for our community. We are studying models of success like the Wing Luke Asian Museum and the History House in Fremont. And we are looking for new ways of doing business that will ensure our financial future.

The Master Plan will be complete in early February. If you'd like to know more about what we're thinking and talking about, I hope you will attend one of our public meetings, participate in our on-line discussion forum on wiggio.com, or contact me directly for more information. It's an exciting time!

Liz Stewart

Shop at the Museum for Christmas Gifts

Still available is the beautiful Centennial Afghan depicting Renton's history of coal to jets. Price for non-members (including tax) is \$82.07. For members price (including tax) is \$73.85. Also gift memberships make shopping easy.



A River Rant Through It continued from page 1

At that time, a reservoir was held back by a dam located 28 miles up the Cedar River, and it appeared to be failing. The reservoir held 11 square miles of water. Citizens living in the low-lying farms near the current location of Southcenter Mall were accustomed to having the ground get saturated with rainwater, causing minor flooding in basements. No one, however, was prepared for the swiftness with which the great flood of 1911 arose. That year, November arrived with a heavy snowfall, followed by an unseasonably warm “Chinook” wind. This problem was then compounded by heavy rainfall, all of which brought an overwhelming amount of water to Renton’s three nearest rivers, as well as to Lake Washington and dam.



Above: This bridge sustained damage not only from debris, but also by an attempt to clear the blockage with dynamite. (#1966.047.0638)

Buildups of water on the Cedar, Black, and Duwamish rivers began to inundate the area where Renton Center now resides. At the high water mark, and for a long period after, a person could easily travel from Renton to Kent via rowboat. The reality of this situation soon began to make some people in town very nervous.

As the danger increased, disaster plans were hurriedly put into place. Word quickly spread that if the dam couldn’t hold, a siren at the Renton Coal Mine, affectionately called “Calamity Jane,” would sound, and all the church bells in town would ring. Several people with binoculars were stationed on the brow of the hill above the Denny-Renton brick plant. Their job was to signal watchers at the first sign of trouble upstream. The watchers, who were positioned on the roof of the railroad depot, would in turn notify the different groups in charge of ringing all the bells in the city. It was decided that the coal mine siren would be sounded at intervals of one half-hour if the dam was still holding. If the dam appeared to be failing, a constant thirty-minute blast would be sounded. Johnny Bevan, a coal miner, handled siren duty all afternoon, giving the appropriate signals as ordered by Mine Superintendent Lew Jones.¹

Run to the Hills

According to a first-person account, the siren’s “shriek could run up and down five octaves, and raise the hair up on the back of your neck.”² At one point the siren was sounded accidentally. Contemporary accounts described panicked residents abandoning their homes in tears, fully expecting to give up everything they owned to the raging waters. One resident remembered witnessing a group of men trying to move a piano when the first whistle blew. At that point, “they just dropped it and ran. I don’t remember now whatever happened to that piano.”³

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported that there were “stampeding horses, barely held in control by their struggling drivers, sons carrying their old mothers on their shoulders, and women with bundles on their heads dragging their children behind them, while baggage-laden fathers followed.”⁴ Couriers came down through the valley on horseback with the speed of the wind and shouted, “Run to the hills, the dam is about to break! Run for your lives!”⁵

Unconvinced of the danger, many ignored the siren and went back to sleep. The *Renton Herald* later reported that the Day Marshal, J.W. Edwards, and the Night Marshal, Jack Stewart, “worked heroically all night long to warn all that they could reach.”⁶ Since telephones were not in common use at this time, a door-to-door search was conducted by the marshals to ensure that everyone got to higher ground. By about 2:10 am, a long line of struggling, terrified refugees trudged along the streets leading up Renton Hill. The real crisis, however, didn’t come until 8:30 am, and by that time, a significant number of individuals who had heeded the original false alarm had decided that the dam was not about to break after all. Some had even come back down from the safety of the hills and returned home, assuming that what little water damage they had received in the initial deluge was to be the worst of the day. They would soon come to regret that decision.

Bridge Over Troubled Waters

It was not long before the situation went from bad to worse. Adventurous citizens decided to view the rapidly swelling torrents from some of Renton’s many bridges. Even the bravest didn’t stay long, however, as the bridges soon became clogged with driftwood, logs, and debris. Although the Road Bridge appeared to be in danger of collapse from a massive log jam beneath it, the bridge survived the disaster intact.⁷ In fact, most of the damage to that particular bridge occurred when city officials attempted to clear the obstruction with dynamite. Ironically, the TNT nearly finished the job that the logs and debris had started.

Once free from under the bridge, some of these logs raced down river, destroying nearby electric light poles, and plunging the city into near total darkness. On top of wading through the rising, frigid waters, Renton’s terrified citizens now had to do it without being able to see clearly. A small army of electricians worked bravely through the night, and well into the next day repairing the damage. Their work was extremely dangerous, since the new power lines had to be swung across raging waters, with nothing but hand-held lanterns to light the work area. Add in the detail that they were working with live high-voltage wires, while standing waist deep in icy flood water and the extent of those men’s courage becomes clear.⁸



Caption: Fred and Caroline Freymann kept the Pioneer Bakery running to provide fresh hot bread for refugees during the worst of the flooding (#41.3676 and #41.9999).

The electrical workmen’s valor during the flood was not unique that day however. Pioneer Bakery, located on Third Avenue and run by Fred and Caroline Freymann remained open for business, even in the face of rising waters. It was observed that the baker “stuck to his post, baking bread for the homeless families, and refused to budge, even though several people urged him to leave. Caroline waited in the front of the store, passing over loaves of bread at the regular price of five cents per loaf until they were completely sold out, and every case was empty. Then they went right back to baking more, because many people were hungry, and many more mouths had to be fed.”⁹

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Here Comes the Sun

To those people caught in the worst flood in Renton's history, it must have seemed like their nightmare would never end. Thankfully, the floodwaters stopped rising later that night, and began to slowly ebb over the next few days. The dam that so many residents feared would collapse, destroying the city, held together. It was damaged, and its top-most timbers gave way, but a catastrophic collapse was fortunately averted. Flood weary residents came down from the hills to find their cellars still flooded with dirt and debris. Instead of being able to sit down and relax, they faced the daunting task of setting right all that the cataclysm had ruined. Besides, the damage to private homes, businesses, and even the city streets had to be cleared of massive amounts of wreckage.

The first thing that the town decided to do after the flood was to tackle the problem of the rivers. The first meeting of Waterway District #2 was held in December 1911, in the office of a local lawyer. By the summer of 1912, the Water District Commissioners reported that a channel 80 feet wide and more than 2,000 feet long had been dug through the city, which they hoped would effectively end any major threat of flooding to the downtown area. The Waterway District remained until 1956, when it ceased to exist as a legal entity.¹⁰

The Black River, which also contributed to the Great Flood of 1911, is no more. It ceased to exist around 1916, when dredging in the lake caused the water level to decrease, cutting off the river's source. Very few homes remain on what was the former flood plain. That area is now filled with car dealers and shopping malls. While there is far less reason for residents to fear that the entire city will be wiped out in a flood, we would do well to learn a lesson from the events of 1911. Mother Nature will not be disregarded without terrible consequences.

¹ *Renton News Record*, 5 September 1937 p.1.

² Interview with Frank Storey for RHS paper titled *Fire and Flood*. Date unknown.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 12 November 1911, p.1.

⁵ *Renton News Record*, 5 September 1937, p.1.

⁶ *Renton Herald*, 24 November 1911, p.1.

⁷ We assume the "Road Bridge" refers to the Bronson Street Bridge. It has also been referred to as "the County Bridge" in photos.

⁸ *Renton Herald*, 24 November 1911, p.1.

⁹ *Ibid.* Mr. Freymann had been an officer in the Prussian Army prior to WWI. After his military service was complete, he moved his family first to Chicago, and then to Renton where he opened his bakery.

¹⁰ Interview with Mrs. Dail Butler Laugherty, *RHM Quarterly*, August 1973.



Above: This photo, taken at the corner of Bronson and Mill in 1911, shows flood damage to the street after the river receded. (#1986.073.2213)

Volunteer Report

By Dorota Rahn, Volunteer and Education Coordinator

Dear museum members and volunteers,



The Volunteer Department was joined by an impressive number of volunteers this fall, at the time when incoming help is becoming more and more crucial to museum operations. It all started with Gentry Williams who is a middle school student in Renton and began helping us on Saturdays when we host a speaker.

Steve Denison, retired City of Renton employee and husband of board member Betty Childers, signed up next as a Saturday greeter. He was joined by a few more new greeters: Andy Sparks, Janet Christiansen, and Cindy Hershberger. In addition, Wenda

Collins offered her services in graphic design and photography.

Gentry Williams will turn thirteen on Christmas Eve. He is a “junior handyman” in his neighborhood and helps seniors with their chores and gardening. Gentry enjoys band and social studies, including military history and airplanes at his school.

Steve Denison volunteers with Renton Rotary, enjoyed history in college, and worked as a computer analyst at the City of Renton. Andy Sparks is a member and legislative chair in the Bryn Mawr PTA. He has two children.

Janet Christiansen has volunteered in PTA for many years and at the King County Library system for ten years. She is interested in literature, history, and politics. Cindy Hershberger has volunteered as gallery host at the Museum of History and Art in Santa Cruz, California and as a docent in the visitor center at Seacliff State Beach near Palo Alto, CA. She has recently moved to Renton.

Wenda Collins is a fourth generation Washingtonian. She grew up near Angle Lake (in what is now the city of Seatac). She lived and raised her children in Kent for 25 years. She has lived in Renton for five years. Her interests include family history, local history, gardening, and art.

Steve, Gentry, Andy, Janet, Cindy, and Wenda, you all are extremely appreciated by the museum community. Your help is vital to the museum operation. Welcome aboard!!!

Speaker Program

Several speaker programs were featured at the museum in September and October this year. The museum audience had an opportunity to commemorate 9/11 with a talk by Professor Faizi Ghodsi, director of the International Student Center at Seattle University. Prof. Ghodsi explored the relationship between Islam/Middle East and Western cultures in their religious, historical, social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions.

Tames Alan, in her program *Trial by Fork: Formal Victorian Dining Demystified*, explained the mysteries of a formal twelve-course Victorian dinner, from the menu and place setting to what dishes were served.

In addition, two family programs enriched our fall offering. *Mixed Beans Soup* by Karol Brown introduced the audience to nutritional and social values of serving beans. Karol presented “...comfort stories with a pinch of nutrition education, spiced up with multicultural folktales, a sprinkle of poetry, and garnished with songs.”

Naomi Baltuck and her daughter Bea presented us with their selection of stories for Halloween. They were scary and funny at the same time. Children were able to do some Halloween art projects and get a little bit scared in our haunted room.

For those looking for some activities for children and grandchildren in December, on Saturday, December 12 at 11:00 a.m. the museum will host Allan Hirsch with his holiday program, *The Tales of Hans Christian Andersen*. It will be also a good opportunity for adults to remember all time favorites such as *The Wild Swans*, *Hans Clodhopper*, and *The Tinder Box*, among others.

From the Collections Department...

By: Sarah Iles, Collection Manager

Heavy Lifting: Behind the Scenes in Collections

Dollies, padded blankets, foam, bungee cords, plastic wrap...and lots of heavy lifting! My past few months of work have centered on safely moving the collection into the Annex. Thankfully, I do not toil alone: contract assistant Benny Eisman helps every step of the way. Aside from his strong back, Benny brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the job. He has worked for both Museum of History and Industry and Experience Music Project/Science Fiction Museum and is currently employed at Art Work, a company that specializes in fine art handling and transportation.



In early October, the first phase of the physical move took place. We contracted with Mayflower moving service to move the large heavy items, such as furniture, industrial artifacts, and even a piano. Once we completed that phase, we began the arduous task of moving all of the smaller items and boxes off their current shelving onto temporary shelving. This was necessary because we reused four of the original shelving units.



Above: Wrapping objects for the move.

The Collection and Flooding

The potential dangers lurking this winter from flooding directly concern the Museum. Thankfully, the main Museum building is located outside of the Green River flood plain. Worst-case flooding projections also place the Museum outside of the affected areas. Projections, however, are educated guesses, and no one can know for sure the impact flooding could have on the Museum. The Museum is right across the street from the Cedar River and we aren't sure how the Cedar will be affected by flooding from the Green River.

Although it was not part of our original consideration when purchasing the Annex, the potential for Green River flooding certainly makes this collection move a timely one. The Annex is only a short distance from our old off-site storage, but the latter was a basement in an area already prone to flooding even without the added threat of the Howard Hanson Dam leaking and/or failing. I guarantee you when the last box comes out of the old off-site storage, I will be sleeping a little sounder a night knowing that we just completed a huge project that made the collection immeasurably safer.



Above: Mayflower movers loading objects into the truck.

We dismantled the shelving (this is not a delicate process!), moved it to the Annex, and reassembled in its new home. The many smaller objects and boxes then made the trip over and it appears the bulk of the heavy lifting is finally over. Now begins the long process of re-shelving, organizing, and documenting the collection. Hopefully when all is said and done, there will be room left over to grow.

Farewell



By now many of you know that because of the economic downturn, the Museum has lost one of our city-funded positions. Part-time Research Specialist Tom Monahan has been with the Museum for 11 years, answering research queries, handling photo orders, and researching and writing some of your favorite Renton Historical Society quarterly newsletter features. Tom is involved with St. Anthony's Catholic Church and the local Knights of Columbus, so you will continue to see him active in our community, but his absence from our staff represents a loss of historical knowledge and institutional memory.

Tom will continue to write for the newsletter when he can, but we will certainly miss his day-to-day contributions to the work of the Museum team. We wish him the very best of luck in his future endeavors!

New Memberships

Mark & Carolyn Boatsman family

David J. Thompson family

Marilyn Steiger

Janet Miller



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denotes former Society member



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Peter Agnesani 



Glenn H. Anderson



**Roberta Adams
Benedict**

**Phyllis Robinson
Craig**

Ronald G. Dohrn

Gail Jean Humphries

Robert L. Johnson

Lewis Pappas



William Richter

Frances Sherwood

(October - November 10)

 **Vivian Thomas
Burmester**

Roby W. Crutchfield

Edward A Delanty

Robert J. Hughes 

Faye Kielgass

Ann J. O'Brien

Elizabeth Potoshnik 

Mike Potoshnik, Jr. 

Sirio John Samora

Nancy L. Ward

Laura Warren

Barbara Jean Weyer

Roberta Williams





Rentonians Remembered

Steven Brodie
Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Florence Bull
Don & Judy Gunderson

Vivian Burmester
Louise George; Jean Tonda; Mervin Thomas

Bill T. Daly
Beth & Mike Potoshnik; Betty Sipila; Renton High School Class 1944; Don & Shirley Lindberg; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Ron Dohrn
Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Lora Henry
Mario Tonda; Victor Tonda

Robert Hughes
Renton High School Class 1944; Richard Lucotch; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Jerry & Barbara Shellan; Jack Morrison

Loretta Corinne Lucotch
Sam Ruffalo

Angela Malmassari
Don & Judy Gunderson

Lewis Pappas
George & Frances Subic; The Management & Employees of Farmers New World Life Insurance Co.; Renton High School Social Fund

Elizabeth Potoshnik
Mike Potoshnik, Jr.; Debbie, George & Kari Blomberg; Richard Lucotch; Al & Arlene Bergemann; Don & Shirley Lindberg; Louise George; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Betty Sipila; Paul & Nancy Duke; Jean Tonda; Pauline Kirkman; Steve Toschi; Charles & Joan Jensen; Fred & Fran Stray; Renton High School Class 1940; Dan & Erma Sullivan

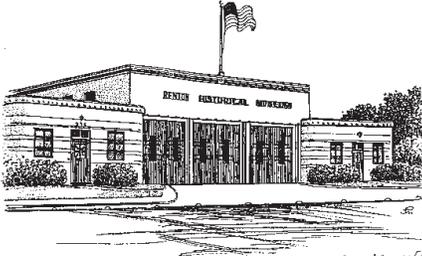
Mike Potoshnik, Jr.
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Renton, WA 98057

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In Hindsight...



Above: The Renton Fire Station decorated for Christmas, December 1948 (#1981.071.1529).