

RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM

Spring
March 2026

QUARTERLY

Volume 57
Number 1



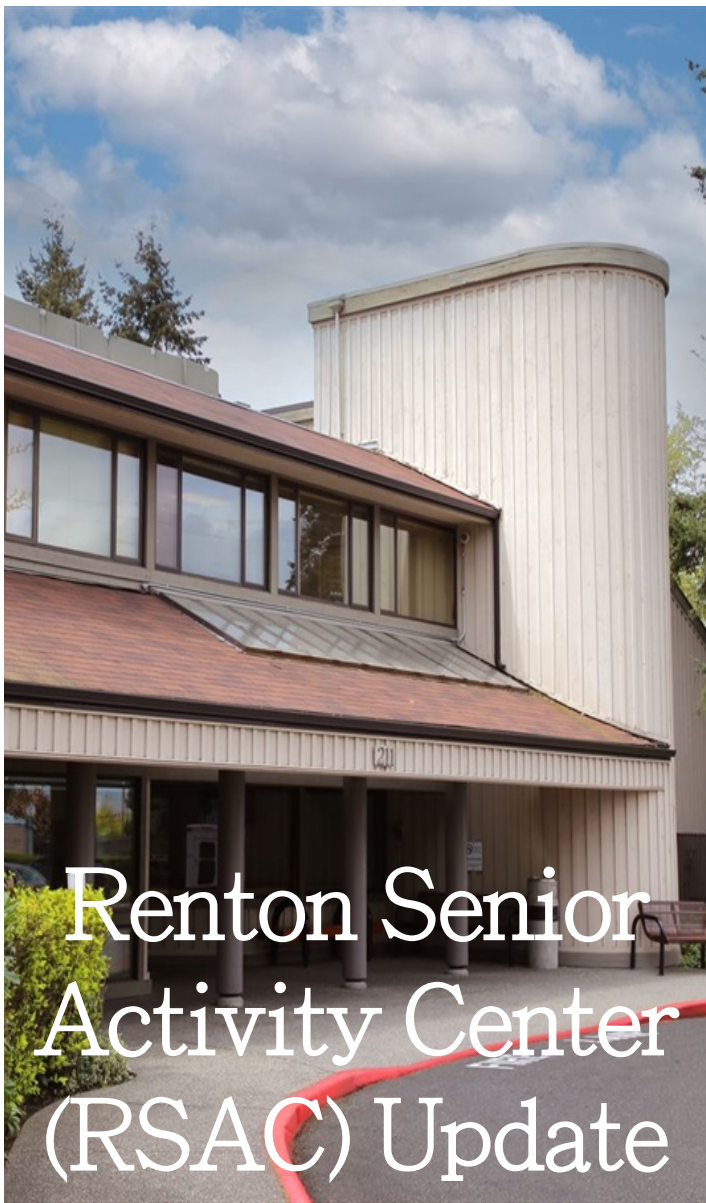
The Cedar River has played a defining role in the history and development of Renton, shaping the city's landscape, economy, and relationship with the natural environment. Originally a dynamic, meandering waterway, the river has been transformed through decades of human intervention driven by the dual needs of industrial progress and flood protection. Long before modern infrastructure, the river followed a wide, shifting course that responded to seasonal rains and snowmelt. Early survey maps, such as those documenting Township 23 North, Range 5 East, reveal a complex network of channels and

broad floodplains that influenced where early residents could safely build. These natural movements made the river both a vital resource and an ongoing challenge, as its unpredictable path required communities to adapt repeatedly to shifting wetlands and seasonal expansions.

Continued on Page 6

The Renton History Museum
Newsletter is going completely digital.
To stay in touch please scan this QR
Code or Email us @
rentonhistorymuseum@rentonwa.gov





Happy Birthday, Renton! As we prepare to celebrate our 125th birthday on September 6th, the Museum is reflecting on the rich tapestry of experiences—from the cultures of the First Peoples to the bustling industrial hub we call home today—that has shaped our community. While Renton was officially incorporated on September 3, 1901, the story of this land begins thousands of years earlier with the Coast Salish people. The Dkhw'Duw'Absh, or Duwamish, traditionally lived along the Cedar and Black Rivers, organizing their lives around the seasonal salmon runs that once filled our local waters. Known as the "people of the inside," they built permanent winter villages of cedar longhouses and were renowned for their expert basketry and deep connection to the land.

As settlers arrived in the mid-19th century, Renton quickly transformed into an industrial powerhouse. Our past was literally carved out of a "northwest jungle" of massive Douglas firs and cedars, some so enormous that early settlers had to burn holes through their trunks just to fell them. These natural resources laid the foundation for Renton to become the "Town of Payrolls," a hub of activity for logging and coal mining. Coal mining, in particular, was a cornerstone of our early economy, with mines dotting the hills and mountains east of town. Access to the rivers and Lake Washington allowed Renton to serve as the vital center for transporting these resources.

Renton's early years were characterized by a "rough-and-tumble" atmosphere, driven by a predominantly male population of miners and laborers. In 1885, the town famously featured nine saloons and no churches. However, incorporation in 1901 brought a new era of civic organization, leading to the establishment of a municipal water supply, a volunteer fire department, and the graduation of our first high school students in 1904. Throughout the early 20th century, Renton continued to evolve, seeing the rise of major industries like the Pacific Car and Foundry (now PACCAR) and eventually Boeing.

Significant environmental changes also marked our history, most notably the 1916 completion of the Montlake Cut, which lowered Lake Washington's water level and caused the Black River to dry up, fundamentally altering the local landscape and the Duwamish way of life. Despite these changes and the challenges of the Great Depression, Renton continued to grow and thrive. Today, as we look back on 125 years, we celebrate the diverse spirit of the immigrants, laborers, and entrepreneurs who built this city. We are so excited to share these stories and celebrate our community's incredible journey with all of you!

Renton Parks & Recreation is excited to share that many programs and events typically held at the Renton Senior Activity Center (RSAC) will continue

during the facility's improvement period. Thanks to the work of our recreation staff, several favorite experiences have been relocated to welcoming City locations, including the Renton Community Center, Liberty Park Recreation Building, and the Renton History Museum.

While improvements are underway, the RSAC facility will be closed to the public and programs at this location will pause. We appreciate your patience and look forward to welcoming everyone back to a refreshed and improved center this fall.



For four decades, the Cedar River has served as the scenic backdrop for Renton's favorite summer tradition. As we are preparing to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of Renton River Days, we aren't just looking back at forty years of history—we are looking forward to a milestone weekend that promises to be our most vibrant celebration yet.

This landmark anniversary festival will span three days full of fun for your family and friends. The city is preparing to transform into a massive hub of energy, art, and connection, bringing together tens of thousands of people to discover for themselves the spirit of our 40th anniversary celebration.

While our full schedule is currently being finalized and fine-tuned to ensure every moment is perfect, we are thrilled to share a sneak peek at the incredible lineup of experiences currently in development. The spirit of the festival is anchored by classic events that define the Renton experience, starting with the highly anticipated Renton River Days Parade. This colorful procession is expected to wind through the heart of town, showcasing the local schools, businesses, and community heroes that make our city thrive.

On the water, anticipation is building for the legendary Rubber Duck Derby. There is nothing quite like the sight of thousands of bright yellow ducks racing down the river toward the finish line. It's a whimsical, nail-biting tradition that has remained a fan favorite for generations, and we can't wait to see who takes the crown during this anniversary year.

For those who love to browse and support local creators, the Summer Bazaar will return with an eclectic mix of vendors. It's the perfect place to discover handmade treasures, home decor, and unique gifts while supporting the makers who keep our regional economy creative.

If you prefer to see art created in real-time, keep an eye out for the Chalk Art Competition. We expect our local sidewalks to be transformed into temporary masterpieces as artists of all skill levels compete to turn the pavement into a gallery. It's a vivid, colorful reminder of the talent tucked away in every corner of our city.

We believe that play is essential, which is why we are hard at work organizing the FREE ActivityZone. This area is being designed as a haven for kids (and the young at heart) to engage with interactive games and hands-on fun without any barrier to entry.

For the competitive spirits among us, the Pickleball Tournament is expected to take over the courts. Whether you're a seasoned "dinker" or a curious spectator, the energy at the tournament is always infectious and represents one of the fastest-growing pastimes in our community.

No celebration is complete without great food and even better music. The Renton Foodie Fest is shaping up to be a culinary journey, featuring a diverse array of vendors serving everything from festival classics like kettle corn to modern international street food.

To wash it all down, adults can head over to the Craft Beer & Wine Garden. It's the ideal spot to relax, grab a local brew or a glass of Washington wine, and toast to 40 years of friendship. While you sip and snack, you'll be treated to Live Concerts featuring a variety of local bands. From soulful acoustic sets to high-energy rock performances, the soundtrack of these three days will be as diverse as Renton itself.

Beyond the entertainment, our Community Booths will offer a chance to meet the non-profits and local organizations that work year-round to make Renton a better place. It's the "connective tissue" of the festival, where you can find new ways to volunteer, learn, and grow alongside your neighbors. As we finalize the specific times and locations for all these events, we invite you to keep your weekend clear. The 40th Anniversary of Renton River Days is more than just a festival—it's a homecoming forty years in the making. We can't wait to celebrate with you!

MUSEUM REPORT

by Ava Jo Schuldt,

The Renton History Museum is currently navigating a pivotal era of transformation, one that carefully balances the preservation of its past with a visionary outlook toward the city's second century. As a cultural cornerstone of the community, the museum is undergoing a comprehensive evolution intended to ensure that Renton's diverse stories remain accessible, protected, and vibrant for generations to come.

This journey reached a significant milestone in 2025 when the museum initiated a massive logistical undertaking: the transition of its entire collection. To facilitate essential structural updates, thousands of artifacts were meticulously cataloged and moved to secure, climate-controlled storage. This relocation was not merely a move; it was a necessary precursor to a series of critical renovations designed to safeguard the historic 1942 Art Deco fire station that has served as the museum's home since its inception.

While the building undergoes these vital repairs, the museum has made the strategic decision to implement temporary operational adjustments, including a pause on new and renewing memberships. This "reset" ensures that when the doors eventually reopen, the museum can offer a revamped benefits package and a seamless visitor experience without the interruptions caused by construction.

Since January 2026, the museum has been the site of intensive structural work and infrastructure modernization. The focus of this phase is twofold: repairing the visible scars of time—such as settling cracks and persistent window leaks—and fortifying the building's envelope against the increasingly severe weather patterns of the Pacific Northwest.

These improvements go beyond simple aesthetics; they are an investment in the building's survival. By modernizing the HVAC systems and sealing the historic facade, the museum is ensuring that the Art Deco landmark remains a permanent, resilient fixture of the downtown landscape.

PROJECT TO STOP FLOODS IS BEGUN

Renton Citizens to Ask King
County Commissioners to
Dredge and Straighten Ce-
dar River by Assessment.

RESIDENTS of Renton believe they will soon realize their long-cherished dream to see the day when destructive floods in the Cedar River Valley will be a thing of the past. Within a week or two they intend to file with the county commissioners a petition asking for the creation of a dyking assessment district for the purpose of straightening and deepening Cedar River where the Columbia & Puget Sound Railway's trestle crosses it to its confluence with Black River, a distance of a little less than a mile.

The effect of such an improvement will be to divert the waters of Cedar River into Lake Washington. They now merge with the Black River and flow into the White River further on.

No More Danger.

By straightening out the channel of Cedar River there will be no more danger of the water backing up into it during floods and overflowing 2,000 acres of land in the bend of the river. It is proposed to reclaim this land and assess the owners for the improvement, which will cost about \$25,000.

The improvement, it is said, will be a part of the government's scheme of draining the entire White River Valley following the lowering of Lake Washington, and has the approval of United States Engineer, Maj. H. M. Chittenden. The latter is now preparing plans for the proposed improvement.

Petition Is Circulated.

John Monahan and Fred Smithers, two old residents of Renton, are behind the project, and they have employed Attorney L. Frank Brown to circulate the petition among Seattle business men.

Among the owners of property whose signatures it is hoped to obtain are the Seattle Electric Company, Seattle Car Manufacturing Company, Earlington Improvement Company and Frank T. Hunter. It will be necessary to obtain the consent of a majority of the property owners.

RENTON HISTORY
MUSEUM
235 MILL AVENUE S
RENTON, WA 98057

P (425) 430-6440
E rentonhistorymuseum@rentonwa.gov

TEMP HOURS:

Currently Closed

ADMISSION:
Currently Closed



Memberships have paused at this time. Please call the museum with any questions regarding Renton History that you may be interested in!



Museum Report Cont.

In tandem with the physical renovations, the museum is modernizing its communication strategy. This year marks the transition of the museum's newsletter to an all-digital format. This shift allows for more frequent, real-time updates regarding construction progress and upcoming events, while significantly reducing the institution's environmental footprint. It reflects a broader commitment to sustainability and accessibility, meeting the community where they are—online and on the go.

Despite the scaffolding and the temporary closure of the physical galleries, the museum's mission remains active. The institution is currently operating "outside the walls," utilizing traveling exhibits and pop-up installations to keep history alive in schools, libraries, and public spaces throughout the city.

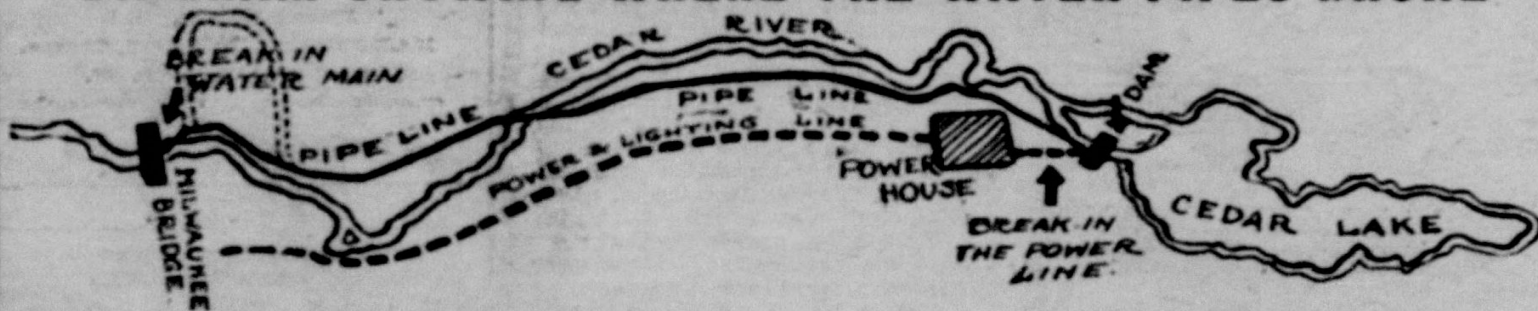
As Renton prepares for the world stage, the museum's role has never been more relevant. With the city gearing up to host major festivities surrounding the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the museum is positioning itself as a primary cultural anchor for international visitors and locals alike.

Furthermore, the museum is a vital partner in the development of the new Legacy Square initiative. This project aims to create a central gathering space that celebrates Renton's heritage while fostering modern community growth. By aligning with these city-wide developments, the museum ensures that history isn't just a look backward, but a foundational element of Renton's future urban identity.

The "new" Renton History Museum is being designed with a focus on inclusive and discovery. The goal is to create a space that reflects the true diversity of the Renton community, highlighting underrepresented voices and fostering a more equitable narrative of the city's growth.

Through refreshed exhibition spaces and community-driven activations, the museum is moving toward a future where history serves as a bridge. It is an invitation to explore how our shared past can inspire a more connected, empathetic, and forward-thinking city.

DIAGRAM SHOWING WHERE THE WATER PIPES BROKE



The above map shows the water and power situation in a nutshell. At the Cedar river dam the water undermined the power mains and they broke. Sixteen miles below is the bridge used to convey the four and six-foot water mains over Cedar river. The Milwaukee railroad two years ago changed the course of the river at that point, causing a swift current to strike the bridge and wash out one of the piers, breaking the mains. Dotted lines at that point show original course of the river.

Railroad on Cedar River Cause of Present Trouble

Seattle today suffers from a water famine, and an epidemic is threatened because of a clogged-up sewage system. Fire danger is greater than in the city's history.

All because the city allowed the Milwaukee railroad to run down along the Cedar river, changing the course of the river.

A few years ago The Star fought the Milwaukee railroad program.

At that time City Engineer Thomson predicted the very thing that has happened. He also fought it, but the city council let the railroad have its own way.

The Milwaukee built its road. It filled in the river and cut off a large loop. The river became a swift torrent at that point. The railroad laughed at predictions of disaster and said that rip-rapping would make the bridge safe.

The rip-rapping went out like straw before the flood of yesterday. And because the Milwaukee was allowed to have its way, Seattle suffers.

Continued from page 1

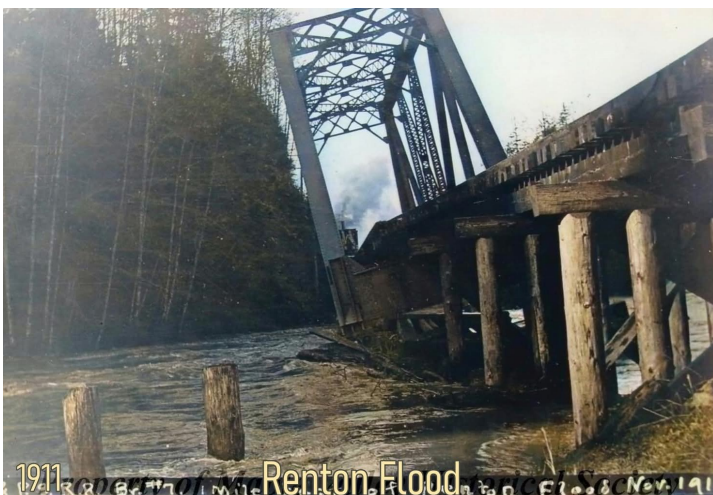
By the early twentieth century, as Renton grew into a hub for coal mining, logging, and industrial development, the frequent flooding of the valley became an unsustainable economic burden. In April 1908, local citizens led by long-time residents John Monahan and Fred Smithers petitioned for the creation of a diking assessment district to protect the growing township. Their goal was to dredge and straighten the river from the Columbia & Puget Sound Railway trestle to its confluence with the Black River. Under the guidance of U.S. Engineer Major H. M. Chittenden, this project aimed to divert the Cedar River directly into Lake Washington. At the time, the river merged with the Black River and flowed into the White River; diverting it was seen as a way to reclaim approximately 2,000 acres of fertile but flood-prone land. Proponents estimated the project would cost \$25,000, funded by assessments on local property owners and major stakeholders like the Seattle Electric Company and the Seattle Car Manufacturing Company.

Despite these early engineering ambitions, the river remained a volatile force, leading to the catastrophic disaster of November 1911. Following exceptionally heavy autumn rains and snowmelt, the Cedar River dam reached a dangerous condition, triggering a crisis that remains a cornerstone of Renton's history. At 2:00 a.m., a siren began a mournful screech that lasted for three days and nights, signaling to residents that the dam had reached its breaking point. The scene was one of chaos and survival; families were forced to flee to the surrounding hills in the dark of night, with some residents using rowboats to rescue neighbors who were unable to hear the rising water. The destruction was immense; floodwaters broke the main supply pipes to Seattle, threatening the region with water shortages and disease, while local homes were inundated to the point that furniture and food stores floated against basement ceilings.

The 1911 flood marked a turning point, accelerating the "taming" of the river. Initial remediation involved labor-intensive methods where workers used teams of horses to haul millions of willow trees from the marshes, piling them into the riverbanks and securing them with hundreds of sandbags. Over time, these temporary measures were replaced by massive dredging operations that narrowed the river into the rigid, straightened channel that exists today.

While these engineering feats allowed for the expansion of residential and industrial areas, they significantly altered the natural ecosystem by reducing wetlands and disrupting wildlife habitats. The wide, curving river of the nineteenth century was effectively replaced by a confined urban corridor, representing a triumph of engineering over the natural landscape.

In recent decades, the relationship between Renton and the Cedar River has entered a new chapter defined by both environmental stewardship and the challenges of a changing climate. Modern projects now seek to balance flood management with ecological health by restoring natural bank stabilization and improving salmon habitats. However, the river continues to test human control, as seen in the significant flood events of 2020 and the record-breaking atmospheric rivers of late 2025. In December 2025, the river reached a historic crest of 18.25 feet, shattering a 35-year record and forcing residents in neighborhoods like Maplewood to deploy thousands of sandbags. Massive flows of woody debris clogged the mouth of the river at Lake Washington, requiring emergency intervention. These modern emergencies serve as a reminder that while the city has grown in response to the river's power, the Cedar River remains a living force that continues to shape Renton's identity and future. Through these maps and historical accounts, the story of the river emerges not just as a record of geographic change, but as a narrative of a community learning to coexist with a powerful and essential natural neighbor.



The Renton Farmers Market is stepping into a landmark year in 2026, marking its 25th season of bringing the bounty of Washington's farms directly to the heart of downtown. Since its humble beginnings in 2002, the market has transformed Piazza Park into a bustling Tuesday tradition, and the excitement for this silver anniversary is palpable throughout the community. There is a unique energy that comes with a quarter-century of success—a feeling of deep-rooted connection between the people who grow our food and the families who gather each week to enjoy it.

We are incredibly thrilled to celebrate this milestone alongside the farmers, artisans, and volunteers who have made the market a staple of Renton life. This season feels particularly special as we look back at how much the market has grown—from a small gathering of stalls to a premier destination featuring live music, the beloved "Kid's Patch," and an incredible variety of organic produce and handmade goods. The anticipation for the June 2nd kickoff is at an all-time high, with neighbors already buzzing about the return of their favorite flower vendors and the smell of fresh kettle corn drifting through the air.

This anniversary isn't just about a number; it's a celebration of the community's commitment to sustainability and local commerce. Whether you've been coming since the very first season or are planning your first visit this year, there is a shared sense of pride in seeing the market reach such a significant chapter. We can't wait to see the park filled with familiar faces, hear the first notes of the season's live entertainment, and toast to twenty-five years of fresh food and friendship. It's going to be a season to remember, and the countdown to opening day has officially begun!

MUSEUM CHANGES

The Renton History Museum is in the midst of preparing for much-needed facility updates and repairs that will help protect the building while also enhancing the experience of every visitor who walks through our doors. At this stage, the project is still in the design and planning phases, which means that staff, architects, and city partners are carefully reviewing the building's needs and considering the best ways to carry out improvements without compromising the museum's historic character. These upgrades are being approached with great care, as the building itself is an important piece of Renton's history, and any updates must strike a balance between preservation and progress. The planning process is also giving us the opportunity to consider how improvements can create more welcoming, accessible, and flexible spaces for exhibitions, programs, and community events in the future.

While the exact timeline and scope of the project are still being determined, the museum is excited about the possibilities these changes will bring. Visitors can expect improvements that will make the museum easier to navigate, safer to enjoy, and better equipped to care for the collections that preserve Renton's rich past. We are also considering ways to use this time of planning to expand opportunities for community partnerships, ensuring that when the museum reopens after construction, it will be a place that feels even more connected to the people it serves.

Although there are many details yet to be finalized, we look forward to sharing more updates as the project develops. These renovations represent an investment not only in the building but also in the future of the museum as a vital resource for learning, storytelling, and community connection. We encourage our visitors and supporters to stay tuned for future announcements as the planning process continues to move forward..



The United States is rapidly approaching a historic milestone: its Semiquincentennial. On July 4, 2026, the nation will mark 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, an anniversary that serves as both a massive national celebration and a moment for deep civic reflection. This "America 250" initiative is designed to be the most expansive and inclusive commemoration in the country's history, reaching far beyond the original thirteen colonies to engage every state and territory.

The scale of the celebration is unprecedented. Major national events are already in the works, including Sail4th 250, which will bring a vast fleet of international tall ships and military vessels to ports across the Eastern Seaboard. In Washington, D.C., the National Mall is slated to host a "Great American State Fair," a multi-week expo showcasing the unique culture, innovation, and agricultural heritage of all 50 states. These flagship events are intended to mirror the spirit of the 1976 Bicentennial but with a modern emphasis on the diverse stories that have shaped the American experiment over two and a half centuries.

Beyond the spectacle of fireworks and parades, the 250th anniversary is driving a massive wave of historical preservation. National museums, archives, and parks are currently undergoing significant infrastructure updates and gallery renovations. The goal is to ensure that the foundational artifacts of the American story—from the Charters of Freedom to the everyday objects of various eras—are preserved and accessible for the next 250 years.

This anniversary is not just about looking back at 1776; it is an invitation to consider the ongoing journey of the nation. It provides a unique opportunity for Americans to reconnect with their shared history while imagining the innovations and social progress that will define the centuries to come.

ONLINE NEWSLETTER DATABASE

Good news for Renton researchers! All of our quarterly newsletters from 2002 to the present are now available online via Laserfiche, which you can access from home via our website. This new database makes it easy to find exactly what you're looking for. The newsletters are organized in folders by year, but the search function also lets you look up people, places, and events by name. For the first time, the search will include the full text of articles—so if you've ever wanted to read everything we've written in the past 20 years about a particular historical figure or place, Laserfiche makes it easy to do so. This service is free to the public, and even includes issues that were previously only available to Patron and Benefactor level subscribers. Staff will add new newsletters to the database as they come out.

You can try it yourself by visiting our web address, <https://www.rentonwa.gov/Activities-Events/Museum/Newsletters>, or scanning the QR code below. After you click the yellow button, you can browse folders or type in the search bar. Try typing in names of some of Renton's well-known families, like "Moses" or "Smithers," or a location, like "Highlands" or "Longacres." We've also included some additional keywords that can help your search, like "local businesses" and "true crime." Play around and see what happens! You might just learn something about Renton you didn't know before.



RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Special Issue
February 2023

QUARTERLY

Volume 54
Number 1

THE ROADHOUSE MURDER



When Prohibition was repealed on December 5, 1933, alcohol became legal again and a new era of social drinking, dancing, and drinker forms of fun arose during the Depression. The newly formed Washington State Liquor Control Board did its best to "protect the welfare, health, peace, morals, and safety of the people of the state," with regulations designed to protect against public drunkenness, driving under the influence, and prostitution, some of the ills that provoked Prohibition in the first place. Many of these

problems centered on the roadhouses that sprang up just outside the reach of Renton and Seattle law enforcement. These roadhouses multiplied like mushrooms along the new highways that catered to American car culture in the 1920s and 1930s.¹

On June 10, 1933, Fred Arnooney signed a ten-year lease for Peoples Park at Renton Junction for \$75.00 a month.² Perhaps Arnooney had followed the debates in Congress and anticipated a gold mine at the end of

Continued on page 3

About This Issue...

This special newsletter is a gift to our biggest supporters: Benefactor, Patron, Business, and Life members. Your support makes what we do possible. We hope you enjoy this story from Renton's past.