

# Strike Up The Band! :

## Renton's love affair with musical expression

By Tom Monahan

Over the many years since this area was first settled by humans, musicians and singers of every instrument imaginable and countless musical styles have banded together to make life a little more enjoyable through their music. Whether they used the "instrument" of the human voice, or something more traditional like a trumpet, drum, or accordion, Rentonians have never been timid about making a "joyful noise." This article examines some of the most interesting bands and musicians that Renton has ever produced.

*"I hate music, especially when it is played." - Jimmy Durante!*



Above: The "Big Drum" of the Renton High School Band, circa 1956. This bass drum was reported to be the largest in the state at the time. (#2008.016.003)



**Renton Historical Quarterly**

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Renton History Museum  
235 Mill Avenue South  
Renton, WA 98057  
Phone: 425.255.2330  
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**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

Change is coming to Renton History Museum! It's exciting! We are finished with the coal car exhibit, the *Century to Century* exhibit is catalogued and stored in preparation for the upcoming *Key Ingredients* exhibit this March, and I just picked up a package of proposals from prospective Master Plan consultants to be reviewed. You might say this is the calm before the storm. Next year the Master Plan Task Force will be in full swing. The traveling Smithsonian *Key Ingredients* exhibit will arrive and a Renton component, *Sustaining A City*, will be built, the largest new exhibit since *Century to Century* opened in 2001.



But coming down to Earth, let's talk about something I'm frequently asked: the City of Renton / Renton Historical Society / Renton History Museum

relationship. Steve Anderson explained at every teachable moment but it took a couple years before I really got it. Others, too, struggle to understand. What belongs to the Society? What to the Museum? What to the City? Who pays for what? Who does what?

Renton Historical Society (RHS) partners with the City of Renton to manage and support the Renton History Museum.

In this partnership, the City provides one full-time employee, Museum Director Liz Stewart, and two part-time employees, Administrative Assistant Daisy Ward and Research Specialist Tom Monahan. The City owns and maintains the historic fire station building that houses the Museum, and provides computer and printing support. The City has been invaluable to the continued success of the Museum by providing operational support that RHS can build on.

RHS covers all expenses relating to our mission of preserving and educating about the city's heritage. RHS has one full-time employee, Collection Manager Sarah Iles, and one part-time staff, Volunteer and Education Coordinator Dorota Rahn. The Society owns the entire collection, plus office furniture and supplies, and we recently purchased the Annex Building. The RHS Board of Trustees provides oversight, governance, policies, and procedures, as well as raising funds for our mission.

RHS is Renton's sole heritage organization. Without the vision and drive of Ernie Tonda and early organizers we would not have a Museum. The Renton History Museum is the end product of the City-Society partnership, a place where people gather to hear and see and learn Renton's history, a place where we "Capture the Past, Educate the Present and Inspire the Future."

RHS members, the City of Renton and Renton citizens all support the Museum, but the Museum serves the community in return. Educational services, preservation of elements that would otherwise be lost and collection of artifacts, photographs, and historical documents can answer questions about history, genealogy, and related topics from both interested citizens and City government. At the Museum we are telling the unique stories of Renton that no other organization is telling.

# Renton Museum Report

By Elizabeth P. Stewart



As we look forward to the holiday season, many of us are thinking about how to make this one the best one possible, in spite of financial worries. In researching a recent article about Renton in the Great Depression, I looked at what was happening here when Franklin Delano Roosevelt came into office. By late 1932 national unemployment was 25% and thousands of Americans had lost their homes or farms. Although our current situation is not as dire as the 1930s, it is instructive to look at how the city responded. By the time FDR took office in March 1933 he represented a spirit of change, and while not everyone was confident his ideas would work,

Rentonians had high hopes for the future. I found a surprising can-do spirit. Business owners trumpeted their willingness to continue investing in the city in spite of tight cash, and consumers committed themselves to spending locally whatever little money they had.

A similar movement is underway now. Sustainable Seattle, Communities Count, SoCo Culture, and many other local organizations have joined together to promote “Celebrate Local,” a drive to encourage King County citizens to patronize local merchants, to buy green, and to consider giving experiences instead of things for the holidays. How would this work for you? Instead of shopping at chain stores or Southcenter, you could get to know what Renton shops have to offer. You could give tickets for performances at Evergreen City Ballet or Renton Civic Theatre, or best of all, give Renton Historical Society memberships as gifts!

If tough economic times lead you to redouble your support for local institutions, then something good will have come from the uncertainty. The Renton History Museum has so much to offer you, your family, and friends, and your support and involvement—of all kinds—can only make us better.

In 2009 the Museum will be working with consultants on a Museum Master Plan that will provide us a blueprint for the next 15 years of the Museum’s life. Like Renton business owners of the 1930s, we are determined to continue investing in our city. But to be truly successful we need you to redouble your commitment to supporting our efforts. As you plan for the holidays and 2009, please remember to donate your money and your time. Attend our programs, give us suggestions for improvement, and tell your friends and family that you believe the Renton History Museum is important. In this way, you ensure that Renton’s heritage will be preserved for future generations. And that is truly a gift you can be proud of!

*Liz Stewart*

For more information on the “Celebrate Local” movement, see <http://sustainableseattle.blogspot.com/2008/10/celebrate-local.html>.

For SoCo Culture’s handy calendar of local events, go to <http://www.sococulture.org/html/calendar.html>.

To follow Museum news and updates, join us at <http://twitter.com/rentonhistory>.

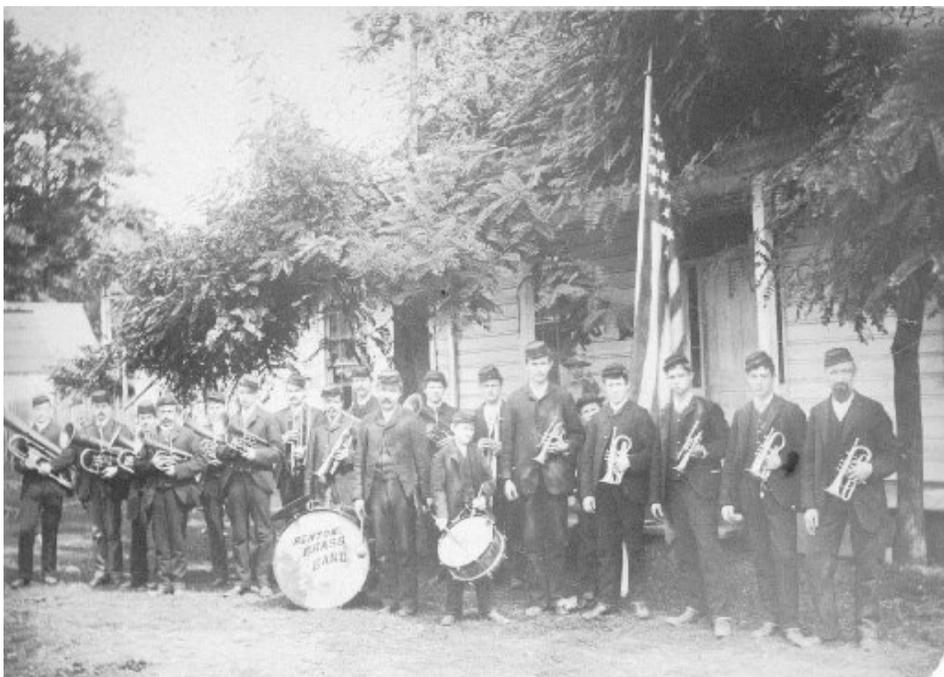
*Strike Up the Band! continued from page 1*

## Singing Sparrows and Musical Miners

Before the city of Renton was founded, local tribes living in this area used song as a means of cultural expression. Tales passed down over generations frequently contained references to main characters singing songs during their adventures:

*Ground Sparrow got his face dirty gathering wood from old burned cedar stumps. He never did really wash his face. He was just dipping his hands and calling his uncles. After he touched his face, he felt so bad! He called the whole family of Chinook Wind. He sang: "Uncles I am washing my face; rain in long drops, rain in long drops." We call that bird Spetsxu. He is the ground sparrow or swamp sparrow. If ground sparrow is taking a bath on a sunny day and facing south, look out; it will rain. –Puyallup tribal story "The man who would not wash his face (4<sup>th</sup> version)."<sup>2</sup>*

The Native peoples of this area felt that song was not just an amusing way to pass the time when the work day was finished, but that their songs contained magical energy to affect the world around them. As illustrated in the story above, animals with supernatural powers, who served as guardian spirits for individuals and tribes, would often use songs and chants to accomplish their objectives. All the major tribes in the Puget Sound area, from the Duwamish and Puyallup, to the Snoqualmie and Skagit, have similar tales that involve songs which harness magical powers. According to writer K. G. Watson, if a village did not possess a separate structure for ceremonial use, one of the large dwelling houses could be cleared of partitions and converted to a meeting place where tribal members could spend nights sharing dances and songs given to them by their guardian spirits as proof of their relationship with the supernatural world. Everyone present would then benefit from the supernatural powers that the sacred music would unleash.<sup>3</sup>



Above: Renton Brass Band, the first of its kind in the city, ca. 1888. (#1976.014.0843)

When white settlers moved into the area in pursuit of employment, they also brought with them a deep interest in music. As early as 1888, the working men of Renton began to come together with their favorite wind instruments in the form of the Renton Brass Band, the first of its kind in the city. Dressed in pseudo-military fashion, with Kepis on their heads and a drummer boy in the vanguard, the RBB made a quite a spectacle while on parade. No doubt their martial look was heavily inspired by the military bands that many of the men had witnessed and possibly been a part of during the Civil War, just two decades earlier.

As more and more people began to immigrate to Renton for work, bands and choirs also began to spring up along ethnic lines. Cultures where singing was valued—like the Welsh, Irish, and Italian communities—found fertile ground for interested singers and musicians in this area. Choirs became especially popular in turn-of-the-century Renton, as miners and lumberjacks did not always have extra funds with which to purchase musical instruments. The Welsh community was particularly fond of their choir, which was attached to their own Welsh-language church, and which performed religious and ethnic songs brought over from Wales. No doubt the songs from the old country were a consolation to many a miner who found himself far from his home and familiar faces. This musical tradition continued for quite a few years after the mines shut down, until the population of native Welsh speakers declined due to old age. The Renton History Museum still maintains a number of concert programs from over the years, which attest to a lively tradition of choral singing among the Welsh in Renton.<sup>4</sup>

## Rock & Roll High School

As the population of Renton began to increase and diversify, many more organizations and groups began to explore music as a way to express themselves. The local schools were quick to see the value of music for a well-rounded education. Renton High School got in on the growing band phenomenon when it founded its first band shortly before World War I. Leading the band as its first director was Harlan Beanblossom, and the original line-up included kids from such well-known Renton families as the Adams, Iddings, and Hancocks. The largest contingent of instruments was in the brass section, with trumpets, trombones and French horns the most popular. Woodwinds and percussion tied for second place with two drummers and two clarinet players each.

With this modest beginning, the Renton High School Band grew and transformed over the years into the modern marching and concert band it is today. But Renton High was not just the birthplace of an official school marching band. In the 1950s, musical styles like rock & roll, folk, and jazz were becoming increasingly popular with young people, and before long, high school kids from all over Renton were forming their own musical groups. One of the most successful bands to come out of Renton was formed by Renton High students Stan Farber (class of '55), Ron Hicklin ('56), Ron Rolla ('54), and Bob Zwirn ('55). They were known as "The Eligibles."

Not long after gaining a fan following, the Eligibles were discovered and signed to a major recording label, Copital Records. They moved down to Hollywood, California to begin recording their tunes. The Renton History Museum has in its collection one of the Eligibles singles from 1960 containing their song "East of West Berlin," written about the time that East and West Berlin were separated by the Berlin Wall.<sup>5</sup> As the title indicates, The Eligibles music was not only entertaining, but was also socially relevant to the time in which they lived. During their time as a band, The Eligibles recorded for a number of different labels, including Mercury, Bel-Air, and Fable Records. While the band eventually broke up, some of the members went on to have very interesting careers as studio musicians, performing with many of the major names in the music industry.



*Above: Renton High School's first band, date unknown. (#1966.076.0438)*

Strike Up the Band continued from page 5

## The Beat Goes On

Renton today is still a city filled with musical expression. The current incarnation of the City's official musical talent comes in the form of the Renton City Concert Band. Evolving out of what was once known as the Renton Parks and Recreation Community Band in the late 1980s, the Renton City Concert Band has grown steadily over the years. According to the band's website, the orchestra was born out of a brainstorming session including several great musicians from our area. Randy Rockhill, Jim Young, Harley Brumbaugh and several others started talking about the need for an outlet for all the talented young musicians who lived in Renton.<sup>6</sup>

Below: Frank Vaise Post V.F.W. Drum and Bugle Corps, State Champions, 1940. (#2002.014.5605)



This group of musical pioneers decided to invite a group of the most promising musicians they knew to a music reading session at the Renton High School band room. They were so encouraged by the enthusiasm shown by the participants that they decided to form a band and begin performing. From their first performance, where band members outnumbered the audience, the Renton City Concert Band has grown to a group of between 60 and 70 members, representing some of the finest musicians in the region. The band currently performs at the Renton IKEA Performing Arts Center, and plays to large enthusiastic audiences all year round, led by their current Director, Michael Simpson.<sup>7</sup>

It is hard to say what the next musical style to become popular among the citizens of Renton will be like. Whatever it is, it will carry on a tradition of cultural expression that dates back before recorded history. As the classic Sonny & Cher song puts it so well, "the beat goes on...."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Music," entry in Wikiquote, <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Music> (accessed 7 November 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Ballard, *Mythology of Southern Puget Sound*, with additional material by Kenneth G. Watson (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1929; reprinted., Snoqualmie, WA: Snoqualmie Valley Historical Museum, 1999) 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, iii.

<sup>4</sup> For example, #2002.052.0026, Renton Historical Society Collection, Program *From the Annual Baptist Music Festival*, ca. 1900, and #2005.012.001, Program *from the St. David's Day concert at the Grand Theatre*, 1918.

<sup>5</sup> Renton Historical Society Collection, #2004.007.050.

<sup>6</sup> Renton City Concert band Official Website, <http://rentoncityconcertband.com> (accessed 7 November 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "The Beat Goes On," by Sonny & Cher. From the 1967 album, *In Case You're in Love*.

# Volunteer Report

By Dorota Rahn, Volunteer and Education Coordinator



Every fall the Museum presents a series of interesting lectures on different historical and cultural topics. This year the Museum commemorated the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 by inviting Don Holsinger, professor of history at Seattle Pacific University, to talk about *The Travels of Ibn Batutta: Explaining the Divergent Paths of Islam and the West*. His lecture gave us a lot of insight into the current conflict between Islam and the West.

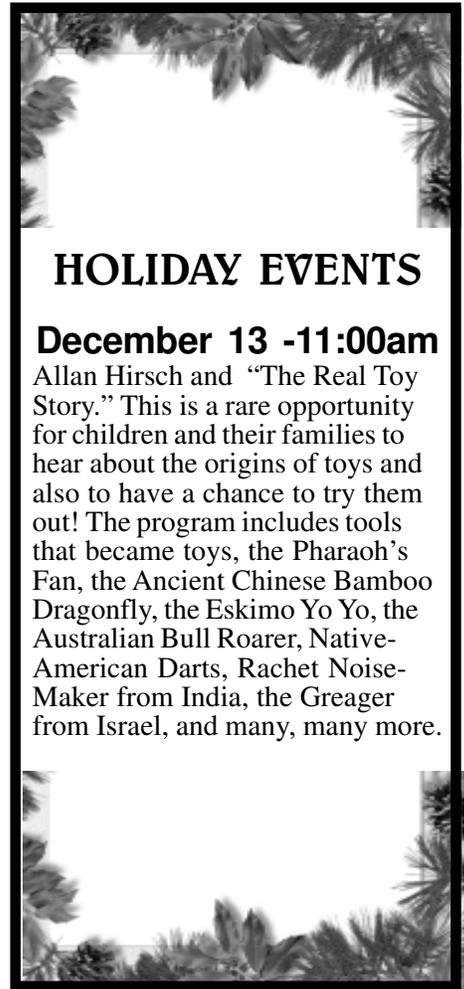
In his words: "For the past 14 centuries, since the rise of Islam in seventh-century Arabia, the civilizations centered at the two ends of the Mediterranean, have struggled to understand each other.... The dramatic shifts in power [between East and West] undermine such arrogant assumptions on both sides and remind us how much the two civilizations have in common and how much they have borrowed from each other."

The presentation by John Salicco, *Jacques Portier – Old Nor' West*, helped us understand how the pursuit of mutually beneficial interests can be more effective than force in achieving peace, order, and prosperity. The opening of the West was first and foremost a business enterprise. Mr. Salicco portrayed an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Frenchman named Jacques Portier who reminisces about his time as a voyageur and a partner in the old Northwest Company.

In celebration of Native American Heritage Month in November, we hosted Harvest Moon, Coast Salish Ambassador, with her program about *Occupations in the Long House*. Harvest Moon described in depth the lives of the carvers, basket weavers, tree-fallers, and weathermen. She also focused on the role of women in Coast Salish society. She blended humor, legends, songs, and hands-on artifacts into her program, evoking a compelling and thought-provoking account of the Coast Salish culture. *Teachings of the First People / Mythic Stories of the Puget Salish Tribes* by Roger Fernandes celebrated the original ancestors of the Coast Salish world.

In December come celebrate the Holiday Season with Allan Hirsch and *The Real Toy Story*. This is a rare opportunity for children and their families to hear about the origins of toys, and to have a chance to try them out! The program includes tools that became toys, the Pharaoh's Fan, the Ancient Chinese Bamboo Dragonfly, the Eskimo Yo Yo, the Australian Bull Roarer, Native-American Darts, Ratchet Noise-Maker from India, the Greager from Israel, and many, many more.

I hope to see everybody at the museum enjoying more of the funny, educational, and very interesting programs we offer.



## HOLIDAY EVENTS

### December 13 -11:00am

Allan Hirsch and "The Real Toy Story." This is a rare opportunity for children and their families to hear about the origins of toys and also to have a chance to try them out! The program includes tools that became toys, the Pharaoh's Fan, the Ancient Chinese Bamboo Dragonfly, the Eskimo Yo Yo, the Australian Bull Roarer, Native-American Darts, Ratchet Noise-Maker from India, the Greager from Israel, and many, many more.

## From the Collections Department...

By: Sarah Iles, Collection Manager

### The Discovery of Edwin M. Smithers' Tragic First Marriage



Last year I began a research project to thoroughly document the Smithers family genealogy. Most of you likely know that Renton's patriarch, Erasmus Smithers, owned the land on which the city was platted in 1875. Smithers Avenue and the Thorne Building on Wells serve as physical reminders of Renton's roots with this family. While compiling my research, I relied heavily on the website Ancestry.com, the Puget Sound Archives, and the Renton History Museum's own files. I thought that my research was complete until a woman from California contacted me with information about Edwin M. Smithers (Erasmus's eldest son) that was previously unknown to me and, seemingly, to anyone else in Renton. This woman, following a trail of historical bread crumbs, hypothesized that her ancestor, Jennie Ziegler, had eloped with Edwin. Wanting confirmation of her theory and additional information about Edwin, she contacted me. After sorting through the scraps of information, a story of young love cut short emerged.

We believe Edwin and Jennie married sometime between June 25 and October 29, 1885; both in their early 20s, they likely eloped. It is unknown how the two met, but in letters now held privately by a relative, Jennie speaks of a trip to Puget Sound taken in early 1885. Jennie spoke highly of her new husband in a letter to her uncle. It also indicates, though, that her family might not have approved of the union. Jennie grew up in one of Spokane's affluent families. Her father, Louis Ziegler, was a prominent businessman involved in real estate. After their marriage, Edwin and Jennie settled down in

Renton. Their young marriage, however, was cut tragically short when Jennie died in January 1886. Jennie's body was returned to Spokane and was buried in the Ziegler family plot under her maiden name, Jennie Louise Ziegler. It is not known for certain why she was not buried under her married name, but it could support the theory that the Zieglers did not approve of her marriage to Edwin.

Edwin, now widowed, continued on with his life. He headed north during the Klondike Gold Rush and later returned to Renton where he held various jobs. It wasn't until around 1902 that Edwin married again to Ella D. Heckman, a school teacher from Illinois. They had no children and Edwin died from a heart attack in 1937 at the age of 75.



Above: Edwin and his second wife, Ella, ca 1915 (RHM# 41.3165)

I am sure that there is much more to this story, but it has likely been lost to history. We don't know how they met, where they were married, how the Smithers family reacted to Edwin's elopement, and whether or not they approved of his new bride. One thing is for certain though: without this woman's willingness to share her information, an important detail of Renton's history would have been forgotten.

New stories such as this one are always out there waiting to be discovered and it certainly keeps the research aspect of my job very interesting.

### New Memberships

Derric & Irma Iles family  
Dolores & Bill Schmalz  
Linda Hays family  
Diana Durman  
Rick & Lisa Roberts

### General Contributions

Derric & Irma Iles  
Ralph & Peggy Owen w/Boeing Matching Gift

### General Contributions over \$100

From the Estate of Florence Damon Culp  
Florence passed away at the age of 99 years. In 1927 she was one of the first women to be hired as a postal clerk. In 1942 she was promoted to Assistant to the Postmaster and retired in 1957.

### New Benefactor Member

Roxy Johnson

### In-Kind Contributions

RHS Trustee Robin Baches  
RHS Trustee Susie Bressan

#### A RENTON TRADITION:

Last year in the December issue we profiled a long-time Renton Santa, Lewis Argano, and asked if anyone knew of other Kris Kringles. Museum volunteer Margaret Feaster knows one special Santa Claus. Richard Pochman resides in Fairwood and volunteers with Starlight Children's Foundation, a group that aids children and families recovering from serious illnesses. In this photo, on a December visit Santa Richard—with his own fully grown beard—had just distributed Christmas gifts and then led many guests in carol-singing. Posing with Santa is a happy Logan Thomas Feaster.



## Join the Renton Historical Society Today!

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Your Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Please share your e-mail address with us: \_\_\_\_\_

Please send me a volunteer application form. (32/1)

Mail To: Membership Secretary, Renton Historical Society  
235 Mill Avenue South, Renton, Washington 98057-2133

Please Choose Membership Category & Any Donation You Wish To Make:

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  - Senior Individual (\$12) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Individual (\$20) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Senior Couple (\$20) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Family (\$30) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Patron Benefactor (\$100) \_\_\_\_\_
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  - General Fund Donation \_\_\_\_\_
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- In Memory of: \_\_\_\_\_

**Total enclosed:** \_\_\_\_\_



denotes former Society Life Member

# Obituaries Collected

denotes former Society member



(August 2008)

Lucille M. Baker  
 Floyd L. Benson   
 Mary Breda  
 Ron L. Colombi  
 Patricia M. DeLaurenti  
 Madeline Rockey Donckers   
 Roy J. Donckers  
 Hayes Evans, Jr.  
 Bernice Monson  
 Hoggard  
 Ylova E. McKenney  
 Roger J. Newton  
 George Vernon Phillips  
 Margaret Sewell  
 Kenneth A. Walls  
 Arnold "Coach" Young

(October 2008)

Patricia Roe Marsh  
 Mary Ellen MacPherson  
 Ebbe D. R. Mejlaender  
 Bernice Morrison  
 Nell Peters  
 John Ralston  
 Charles Trimm  
 Dorothy Carlson  
 Vanderford

(November 1-10, 2008)

Sue Carlson  
 Dorothy Frazier Leifer  
 Elvin "Al" Lewis  
 Lucy Pratt Ozbolt  
 Edwin Della Rossa

(Sept. 2008)

Jeanne H. Anderson  
 Wilhelmina "Billie" Crouch  
 Inez "Toni" Edwards  
 Doris Gifford  
 James G. Harries  
 Delores Jaslowski  
 Mabel E. Lundy  
 Chlorine E. Monnett  
 Michael H. Moses  
 Lloyd A. Telken   
 Gladys Wiemann  
 Vernon Wik

(October 2008)

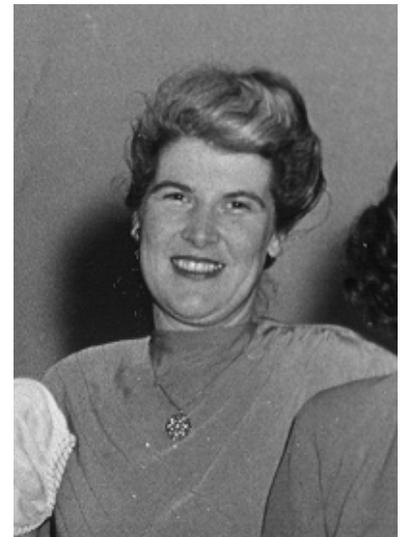
David "Dick" Albertson  
 William Bagley  
 Saraphine Collier  
 Dayle Garrison  
 Warren Jones  
 Jana Leupold Lackie

## Florence Culp's

### First Day at the Post Office

From the book *Coal to Jets*, pg 58

On the first day of Florence's job at the Renton post office in 1927, a woman came in with a sick, straggly hen with a shipping tag tied to one leg and left before Florence could get shipping information from her. Hundreds of day-old chicks were mailed in shipping cartons back then, but Florence didn't know what to do with a sick hen that was not even in a box. She didn't think it should go through the mail but being new to the job she didn't want to seem 'dumb' so she didn't ask anyone. She hid the hen in the back room and when night came she drove it to the Experiment Station in Puyallup and they said they would take care of it.



# Rentonians Remembered

**Jeanne Anderson**  
*Carrie & Greg Bergquist*

**Arlas Babcock**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**John Belmondo**  
*Joanne & Lee Gregory*

**Marie Belmondo**  
*Joanne & Lee Gregory*

**Floyd Benson**  
*Mrs. Mary Ann Kondro*

**Mary Margaret Breda**  
*The Bressan Family; Mario & Victor Tonda*

**Tony Carpine**  
*John & Eleanor Bertagni*

**Edwin Della Rossa**  
*Louise George; Florence Delaurenti; Gloria Duffey; Louis & Pamela Barei; Betty Sipila; Louise Bertozzi; Peter & Hazel Newing*

**Madeline Donckers**  
*Louise George; Florence Delaurenti; Gloria Duffey; Beth & Mike Potoshnik; Jean Tonda; Renton High School Class 1940*

**Doris Elerding**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**Dayle Garrison**  
*Richard & Corinne Lucotch; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard*

**Robert Gilligan, M.D.**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**James G. Harries**  
*R. Harlan Petermeyer*

**Robert Henry**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**Warren Jones**  
*Marian Sutton; Al & Shirley Armstrong; Genie & Don Shaw; Gwen Blue; Bernie & Fritz Pflughoft; Teri & Rod McCord; Pat & Dick Bowman*

**Dale Lamb**  
*John & Eleanor Bertagni*

**Dorothy Leifer**  
*Al & Shirley Armstrong; Ron & Sharon Clymer*

**Marina Luckey**  
*Zena Cochran*

**Mary Ellen MacPherson**  
*Betty Sipila*

**Margaret Manney**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**Violet Meakin**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**Michael H. Moses**  
*Ron & Sharon Clymer*

**Gordon Nielson**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**Roger J. Newton**  
*Greg & Carrie Bergquist*

**Lucy Pratt Ozbolt**  
*Louise George; Florence Delaurenti; Gloria Duffey*

**Mary Renkoski**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**Lloyd Telken**  
*Rosemary Grassi*

**Thomas Tobacco**  
*Katie Gilligan*

**Charles Trimm**  
*Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Al & Shirley Armstrong; John & Eleanor Bertagni*

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**Memorials  
\$100 & Over**  
**Fumiko Hoshide**  
*Lloyd Hoshide with Boeing  
Matching Gift*





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# In Hindsight...



*Above: Gerry's Little German Band," made up of members of Renton Local 360 American Federation of Musicians, date unknown. (#2006.049.001)*