



December 2011

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The Historic Melrose

By Sarah Samson

The Melrose has survived for 110 years at the corner of Wells and Walla Walla (now Houser) and is the last remaining of Renton's earliest saloon buildings. It survived the Great Depression, a devastating fire, and at least two plans to demolish it over the years. It has been a hotel, bar, pool hall, tavern, and is currently a steakhouse, the Melrose Grill. Throughout its many incarnations the Melrose has remained a popular fixture of Renton's downtown.



This image combines a historic photograph from our collection with a modern-day shot of the Melrose. Superimposing the old photograph over the new illustrates just how grand the Melrose once was and how lucky we are that an important piece of Renton history remains. To see this image in color, visit our website: www.rentonhistorymuseum.org. (Ghost image created by Graphic Designer Wil Samson.)

Masthead Image: Melrose Pool and Card Room, ca 1916. Tom Faull on left. (RHM# 1988.118.2709)

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Renton Historical Quarterly

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Renton, WA 98057
Phone: 425-255-2330
FAX: 425-255-1570

www.rentonhistorymuseum.org

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 Sandra Meyer, President



Everything is moving along at the Society. Fall brings with it things to reflect on and planning for the future. In October we held our annual fundraiser at the Renton Senior Center. I am very proud of the Fundraising Committee for all of their hard work, as well as the Board for their support of what was a lovely and successful evening. Many thanks to co-chairs Betty Childers and Andy Sparks for moving this effort forward. We had a record number of people attend the event and raised funds to support Museum exhibits.

Currently we have a really interesting family oriented exhibit called *Bigfoot is Probably Real*. What I found most educational were the stories of Bigfoot

sightings going back to the 1970's in some cases. I left the exhibit with an open mind and my jaw dropped as I listened to an actual 911 recording of a reluctant citizen who was conflicted between what he saw and what he stated to the operator. Does Bigfoot exist? While we may never know with certainty, the exhibit fuels your imagination.

An ad hoc committee has been meeting to make changes to the Museum's lobby consistent with the Museum Master Plan. We expect to update and reorient the existing entrance including new cabinets, fresh paint and, a new layout, making the area more inviting to the public. We expect to have the updated entrance completed during 2012.

We will be starting our next round of Museum Master Plan briefings in the coming weeks. This effort will continue through next year as we continue to collect feedback on the Museum's program changes currently being implemented, as well as the physical changes to the building that we hope to phase in as funding becomes available.

Finally, I want to thank outgoing trustees Rachel Vdolek and Don Gentry for their excellent service on the Board. Rachel served as Museum Committee Chair and as a member of the Fundraising Committee over the past three years, and Don was also an invaluable fundraiser worker. Thank you both for your service!

Renton Museum Report

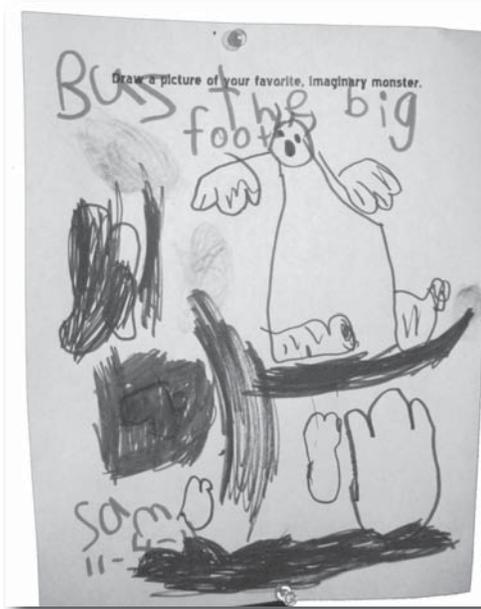
By Elizabeth P. Stewart, Director



Who are you, and why are you here? Those are questions the Board and staff of the Museum have talked a lot about recently. As we change exhibits more quickly and plan new programs, we have spent much more time wondering what people would like to see at the Museum, what questions they have about Renton heritage, and just what exactly makes them (YOU!) visit us.

If you've visited recently, you'll notice every exhibit has what they call in the museum business a "talk back" feature, some way for you to share your experiences, comments, or thoughts on what you've just seen. Our talk back methods

are pretty low-tech, with Post-its stuck to the wall or flags on a map or drawings pinned to a clothesline. We offer them as your chance to talk to us, but, more importantly, to one another, about what's significant to you about our city.



For example, since the theme of the *Journey Stories* exhibit was migration, we asked visitors to share their "journey stories" about moving to Renton. People described coming from Hiroshima, Japan; China; Morro Bay, California; Bremen, Germany, eastern South Dakota; New Hampshire; Colorado; and many other places. They towed trailers or packed their cars "to the gills"; some slept in their cars in church parking lots; some came because of "a mid-life crisis" and some came "because we thought it was better than L.A." One remembered that he "learned everything a boy needed to know" in Renton. Another shared that "it's not where you are, but who you're with," and one cross-country traveler warned: "Skip the Corn Palace."

These "journey stories" became a fun way for Renton museum-goers to talk to others about their lives and interests. The success of Facebook, Twitter, and other social media demonstrate that people have a hunger to tell their stories. NPR's Story Corps Project allows pairs of people to record brief interviews about their shared experiences; at the Museum, our oral history team does something similar, capturing interviews for the benefit of future researchers interested in the day-to-day lives of past Renton residents.

Some day we aspire to have more high-tech ways to learn about Rentonites' experiences, with video and audio available in our gallery. In the meantime, we'll keep asking you to share what you think, so that we can get a better sense of who you are and what you're thinking.

And of course, there's always the old-fashioned way: talk to staff while you're here or pick up the phone!

Liz Stewart

"The Historic Melrose" continued from page 1

"The Finest and Largest Hotel in the City"

Around 1900 early Renton resident Benjamin Atkinson returned home from his gold-seeking venture in Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush. His friend Tom Harries recalled that "Ben succeeded in quite a measure in his quest for gold."¹ Atkinson invested his new-found fortune in putting up a three-story wood building that became the Melrose Hotel and bar; construction was complete in 1901.



Above: The first known ad for the Melrose printed in the King County Weekly, July 31, 1901



Above: The Melrose soon after the addition was completed, 1909. (RHM# 2006.043.002a)

After only five short years of operation the Melrose faced the first attempt to demolish it. Ben Atkinson made public his plans to replace the Melrose with a brick structure. "It is the intention to tear down the Melrose, or at least remove the building to some other location," the *Renton Weekly* reported.² For some reason lost to history Ben's plan was never enacted. Later in 1909, however, the building gained an addition. The local paper described the improvements: "The Melrose hotel is being raised about three feet, and an addition will be put on in the front space made by the L. When finished it will be the largest and finest hotel in the city."³

Early on Atkinson delegated the duties of running the hotel and restaurant to Fred Uder, a German immigrant.⁴ Uder moved into the Melrose with his wife Isabella and their two young children. The children, Jerome and Grace, grew up surrounded by hotel employees, long-term lodgers, and transients. The 1909 Renton City Directory indicates just how popular the Melrose hotel was: 52 men, mostly workers at Denny-Renton Clay and Coal, called the Melrose home. The coal mine and other industries kept up a steady stream of business for the hotel, restaurant, and saloon. Uder employed seven people who worked in the hotel and restaurant including a cook, kitchen man, three waitresses, flunkey, and chambermaid.⁵ By 1914 the Uder family appears to have moved away from Renton, though Fred kept his hand in Renton business by operating the Renton Pure Food Store.⁶



Above: Grace Uder's 15th birthday party at the Melrose, October 1, 1912. Grace is on the far side of the table, third from left. Her father Fred is the mustachioed man standing above and right of her. (RHM# 1970.007.0048)

Soon after Uder left the business, for the first, and maybe only, time in its history the Melrose wasn't called the Melrose. In the 1914 Renton City Directory, it is listed as "Nichols and Atkinson," a saloon. Atkinson partnered with his brother-in-law James Nichols, who had previously tended the Melrose bar. The hotel portion of the business is inexplicably not listed in the directory.

"Candies, Cigars and Tobaccos. All Kinds of Soft Drinks."

Prohibition came early to Washington state in 1916. Suddenly the successful Melrose bar was no longer allowed to sell alcoholic beverages. It reinvented itself as the "Melrose Pool and Card Room." It advertised "All Kinds of Soft Drinks" and installed at least four pool tables. This new strategy must have succeeded in attracting patrons, as the Melrose continued to be a popular watering hole. During this time the Gregory Brothers operated the saloon. James Gregory, an Italian immigrant, is listed in the 1920 census as a poolroom proprietor; his brother remains a mystery.



Above: 1918 Melrose Ad in the Renton Bulletin

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Around the same time the Gregory Brothers took over the saloon portion of the business, Atkinson also stepped away from the hotel side. Theodore Stevens, a cook in the Melrose restaurant, took over the operations of the hotel in 1918. An announcement in the paper assured customers that "He will no doubt keep it up to the standard it has been, as he is an old time hotel man."⁷ Atkinson's well deserved retirement, however, was short lived. A scant three years later Atkinson again resumed day-to-day operations of the hotel.⁸



The next record we have of the Melrose is ten years later, in the 1929-1930 Renton City Directory.

Above: Ben Atkinson behind the Melrose bar, ca 1910. (RHM# 1985.051.2035)

With the onset of the Depression, one man, George Boyce, served as both the proprietor and cook of the Melrose Hotel and restaurant. Willis Wilson operated the the Melrose Pool Hall. In July 1930 Ben Atkinson passed away at the age of 66 of a heart attack.⁹ His wife, Mary, became the owner of the Melrose.

Fire!

Early in the morning the day after Christmas in 1931, disaster struck. The newspaper reported that fire early Saturday morning came near to wiping out the Melrose hotel building."¹⁰ The Renton Volunteer Fire Department fought to save the all-wood building. When the fight was over, burned woodwork, furniture, and fixtures left the Melrose severely damaged. The cause of the destructive fire is unknown.

Just one-sixth of the original building remained after the disaster. The top two floors were gone as well as the first floor restaurant. Only the saloon was salvaged. The original bar with its mirrored back (rumored to have been shipped around Cape Horn in South America), survived the fire. It remains a feature of the Melrose to this day.

Leaner, Meaner Melrose

The Atkinson family eventually sold the Melrose and the business changed hands several times between the 1940s and 1970s. During this part of its life it was known as the Melrose Tavern. Popular local boxer Boone Kirkman was part-owner of the Melrose briefly in the 1970s and added a sparring ring and punching bag to the décor.¹¹

In 1975 the Melrose faced the second attempt to demolish it. The City of Renton developed a downtown plan that included tearing down the Melrose and replacing it with an asphalt parking lot.¹² Regular patrons of the tavern were none too pleased when this plan was unveiled. Just as in 1906, the Melrose escaped demolition plans and continued its steadfast occupation of the southeast corner of Wells and Houser.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were a turning point for the Melrose. A new ownership group that included Armondo Pavone, a local restaurateur, took over the building.

They spent a considerable amount of money restoring the building inside and out, taking special care to retain historic elements of the structure.¹³ The formerly white exterior was painted with a more historic color palette including yellow, dark green, and maroon. When the Melrose Grill opened for business, historic photographs lined the walls paying homage to the stately old hotel, restaurant, and saloon.



Above: Melrose Tavern, 1974 (RHM# 1999.120.5415)

A Note on Historic Preservation

The Melrose joins the Snoqualmie Substation (SW corner of 3rd and Mill) and the Spencer block (north side of 3rd between Burnett and Williams) in the miniscule group of buildings in downtown Renton that are 100 years or older. The City of Renton does not currently have a historic preservation policy, and whether or not a historic structure survives depends solely upon the interests of the building's owners. Owners that treat historic buildings with respect and save them for future generations to appreciate certainly deserve a pat on the back. The Melrose is nearing 111 years of age; we hope it is part of downtown Renton for many, many more years to come.

¹ "Ben Atkinson Dies," Renton Chronicle, 31 July 1930, p.4.

² Renton Weekly News, 1 Dec 1906, p.1.

³ Renton Journal, 19 Feb 1909, p.1.

⁴ "The Melrose" ad, Renton Recorder, 1 Jul 1905, p.8.

⁵ 1910 Federal Census.

⁶ Bill from Renton Pure Food Shop to B. Z. See, 1930 (RHM# 1981.062.032)

⁷ Renton Bulletin, 21 Jun 1918, p.4.

⁸ Renton Bulletin, 22 Aug 1919, p.3.

⁹ "Well Known Pioneer is Stricken Saturday," Renton Chronicle, 31 Jul 1930, p.1.

¹⁰ "Melrose Hotel Has Bad Blaze Saturday," Renton Chronicle, 31 Dec 1931, p.1.

¹¹ "Time has been kind to Melrose Tavern," Valley Daily News, 25 Jul 1989, n.p.

¹² "Melrose for parking? Ol' tav's patrons don't like it," 14 Dec 1974, n.p. (vertical files, "Melrose," Renton History Museum).

¹³ "Renton's landmark Melrose Tavern undergoing renovation," Renton Reporter, 13 Jun 2001, p.6.

Volunteer Report

By Dorota Rahn, Volunteer and Education Coordinator



Dear volunteers and members of the Renton Historical Society,

The beginning of the school year is always a little slow in the Education Department. This year we have already implemented the Coast Salish Curriculum at Maplewood Heights Elementary. We have also planned the spring speaker program for 2012.

We will start with two programs in honor of Black History Month. *Distinguished Service—the King Legacy* reminds us about the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who organized non-violent protests in the fight for equity and peace. Jourdan Keith’s program will take place on Thursday, February 9 at 5:00 p.m.

On February 18 at 11:00 a.m. storyteller Eva Abram presents *A Series of Fortunate Events: The Charles Mitchell Story*. In this true story of Washington slavery, a young boy named Charles Mitchell comes to the Northwest and events almost lead to a possible international incident with Canada.

Lynne Iglitzin will present *Trailblazing Photojournalist: Margaret Bourke-White* in honor of Women’s History Month on Thursday, March 8 at 5:00 p.m. Bourke-White’s story shows a woman determined to realize her dreams--and is a compelling tale in the history of women and photojournalism.

In the program *Put this on the {MAP}: LGBTQ Youth in Washington State* on Thursday, April 12 at 5:00 p.m., Sid Jordan Peterson will present a video documentary project capturing the narratives of LGBTQ young people in Washington state. Peterson will examine the changing dynamics of gender and sexuality in our state. The audience will also learn about the filmmaking process.

Award-winning author and storyteller Naomi Baltuck will present empowering multicultural folktales and personal stories to entertain, teach, and heal in *He Can, She Can, We Can* on Saturday, April 21 at 11:00 a.m. This wonderful program is geared towards children, both “young” and “adult.”

Robert Horton will examine the underlying political and social anxieties that resulted in the alien-invasion scenarios of 1950s science fiction films in his presentation *Alien Encounters: Sci-Fi Movies and the Cold War Culture of the 1950s* on Thursday, May 10 at 5:00 p.m. Horton makes fascinating comparisons to movies today (including the 2005 War of the Worlds remake), demonstrating how pop culture always reflects its era.

As you can see, our speaker program offerings next year are so diverse that everyone can find something interesting. Look for a separate flyer which will be sent out in January 2012.

See you at the Museum!

Contributions

Julie Arndt
The Boeing Company Matching Gift Program
Joseph Bryant (towards Banner replacement)

Contributions of \$100 and Over

Inez Edlich
Roxanna Johnson
Alexis Madison & Brian Birmingham
Mark & Barbara Whitehurst
PEMCO Insurance



Contributions in Recognition

As a "thank you" and to honor DOUG LEVY who is celebrating his 50th birthday.
Terry Higashiyama

In appreciation to NANCY FAIRMAN and SHIRLEY PHINNEY for personal assistance.
Inez Edlich

Monetary Contributions to the Fall Fundraiser

King Parker
Alex & Norma Cugini
Steve Hanson
Mark & Barbara Santos-Johnson
Lay Chan

Join the Renton Historical Society Today!

Name: _____
Membership Level: _____
Business Name: _____
Address: _____
City:State: _____ Zip: _____ + 4 (_____)

Please make checks payable to the Renton Historical Society.

VISA/MASTERCARD # _____ Ex.Date: _____

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) _____
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- Senior Couple (\$20) _____
- Family (\$30) _____
- Patron Benefactor (\$100) _____
- Business (\$100) _____
- Corporate (\$100) _____
- Life (\$500) *One Time Only (partially tax deductible)* _____
- General Fund Donation _____
- Endowment Fund Donation _____

In Memory of: _____

Total enclosed: _____

Obituaries Collected



denotes former Society Life Member

denotes former Society member



- Frank Adderson 
- Gladys L. Anarde
- Alice Bucher 
- Blanche Elaine Campbell
- William Caniparoli
- George T. Cooper 
- Patricia Ann Diesso
- Mary Brown Puhich Fischer
- Helen Gasparich
- Dolores J. Hendricks 
- Norbert J. Husman
- Jacqueline Jassek Hyde
- David W. Irwin
- Beverly Jean Miller
- D. J. "Dinty" Moore 
- Raymond Nielsen
- Norma Nirk 
- Ann O'Brien
- Karen Dennis Olson
- Anna Owen
- Heddie Lopan Picardo
- Michael A. Rasmussen
- Richard Ray
- Mary Reid
- Layne G. Riley
- George Spendiff
- Ronald J. Smith
- Claude R. Stachowiak
- Theodore C. Taylor
- Joseph Upshaw
- Shirley Watson

New Memberships

- John & Bea Sherrick
- Adam C. Smith
- Robert & Dolores Halstead
- Ruth Capriles family
- Ed Cooks
- Gary Kawachi
- Sheila Olsen
- Mary E. Dunphy



Memorial Contributions

August 15 - November 15

Dave Acker

Larry & Jeannie Crook

Dan Arnone

Rachel Thomas

Charles Beresford

John & Bea Sherrick

Blanche Elaine Campbell

Carrie & Greg Bergquist

Bill Caniparoli

Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

George T. Cooper

John & Bea Sherrick; Bert & Evy Nord

Leo Crosariol

Rachel Thomas; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Mary Brown Puhich Fischer

Richard & Louise Major

James A. Forgaard

Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Lois Swanson Gannon

*Doris Beedle; Fred Sharp & Margie Kelly;
Shirley Dragin Moretti*

Wanda McLendon Kauffman

Linda McLendon Holmes

Mae Kokko

Robert Richter

Rick Kokko

Robert Richter

Shirley A. VanWolverlaere Luker

Peter & Hazel Newing

Dick Meldrum

Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Bob Moffat

Robert & Margaret Wicks

Raymond Nielsen

Renton High School Class 1944

Thomas Phinney

Ed Cooks

Tillie Starkovich Purcell

Shirley Dragin Moretti

Oscar Schmuland

Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Janelle E. Serpico

Alicia E. Serpico

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Jack Morrison

Dorothy McLendon Thompson

Linda McLendon Holmes

Martha Knutson Weber

Larry & Jeannie Crook

Robert (Bud) Winders

Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

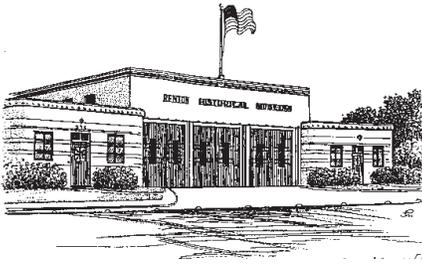
Memorials \$100 and over

Edith Ballestrasse

Rosemarie Fliseck

Norma Nirk

Bill & Eleanor Dixon



Renton History Museum
235 Mill Avenue South
Renton, WA 98057

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In Hindsight...



Lakeridge Elementary boys building an igloo, sometime in the late 1950s. Photograph by Emmons Williams. (#2010.015.219)