

RENTON'S HILLTOP COMMUNITY

Author's note: This article reflects research done to interpret the new Heritage Park, located at Union Avenue Northeast and Third Court Northeast. The Renton History Museum was called in to help the Heritage Park Task Force research the park property and its surrounding neighborhood, in order to capture its history for all those who will enjoy the park. Much more research remains to be done, and we will continue to collect whatever information, photographs, and memories people are willing to share. This article, then, reflects just a glimpse of the history that has taken place on "Renton Hilltop." We look forward to including further information in future newsletters, as well as in the park itself.

Newcomers to Renton are surprised by the number of small neighborhoods (and some not-so-small), each with their own distinctive character and ways of doing things. One such neighborhood is the area that recently found itself with a new park at its center, Heritage Park. Arranged along Union Avenue and bordered by Sunset Highway to the north and Maplewood Golf Course to the south, this area has historically been one of Renton's predominantly African-American neighborhoods. Before homes and businesses closed the distance, this area was far enough away from having a recognizable connection to the city of Renton, yet it was not quite Kenndale either. It was sometimes called "Renton Hilltop" or simply "the country" by residents who began escaping what they saw as Seattle's urban ills—or those of the segregated South—in the 1920s and 1930s. These families found in Renton what Americans through history have been looking for: a chance to own their own property and raise their children surrounded by neighbors in the truest sense of the word.

In the 1890s this land on the crest of the hill was far enough away from geographical amenities like rivers and the lake that no one much cared who owned it. The earliest maps show that in 1892 much of the land was owned by Native Americans such as "Indian Ben," "Indian Tecumseh," and "Indian Bill Rogers." These men also show up in territorial censuses and the Talbot Mine payroll.¹ Some of this land was also owned by the State of Washington for the benefit of schools. In April 1914 timber was harvested and sold to A. N. Fairchild, with the proceeds going to the school system.



The home of James and Mamie Smith, 1939. The Smiths built this house in 1918, and then added a smoke house, chicken house, and a garage. (Photo courtesy of Puget Sound Regional Branch, Washington State Archives, Bellevue Community College.)

Masthead photo: The home of Evelena Buckner, 1939. Evelena and her widowed mother, Amanda Bird, were among the first African Americans to settle in the Hilltop neighborhood. (Photo courtesy of Puget Sound Regional Branch, Washington State Archives, Bellevue Community College.)

Before 1910 African-American families had already begun purchasing property on the hilltop. James I. Smith seems to have been the first African American to arrive, sometime before 1910. Though he was surrounded by white farmers he must have found it a congenial place to live, because before long his brother Dougherty Smith purchased an adjoining five-acre parcel on the west side of Union near what is now Northeast Third Court. Both were born in Florida in the early 1880s, and both worked off and on for the coal mines. Dougherty Smith was a coal mine laborer for the Pacific Coast Coal Company around World War I. James was a mule driver in 1900—probably in the mines—and by 1920 he was a fireman on a stationary engine, a very responsible job that required ensuring the mine hoist could move men into the mine and coal out.

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This area would become a popular spot for African Americans working in the Newcastle mines; it was situated right off what was then sometimes called the "Renton to Newcastle" or "Renton to Issaquah" Road (now Sunset Highway). Robert Hart was another African-American mine worker. He and his wife Minnie, their daughter Ethel, and Minnie's parents lived on part of the property that is now Heritage Park. Robert was a fireman in the mines in 1910 and a coal

mine laborer in 1930. In addition, Henry Williams was a coal miner, Samuel A. Franklin was a coal mine engineer, and his son Samuel was a surface mine laborer; both Williams and Franklin owned their own property next door to one another.²



Many found working in the coal mines provided a good enough living to continually improve their properties on the Hilltop. James Smith, his wife Mamie, and their extended family started out in a one-story shingle house with an attic, but by 1939 he had added a garage, a brooder house for chickens, and a smoke house.³

For African Americans, however, coal mining was not a constant source of income; their ability to work depended on the mine operators' need for labor and their willingness to incur the hostility of white workers by providing jobs to non-whites. African Americans' inadvertent reputation as strikebreakers in towns like Roslyn and Franklin made some whites suspicious of working side-by-side with them. Because census records show that many African Americans described themselves as farmers or coal miners at different times, one can imagine that they would have gone back and forth between living off their land and working in the mines. James Smith was willing to spend money on constructing a chicken house and smoke house because of the extra income farming could provide when employment in the mines was uncertain.

Marcus Harding (#25) with a group of Newcastle miners, 1912. Many men lived on the hilltop and worked in the Newcastle or Issaquah mines. (Renton History Museum, #1983.076.1817, detail)

First Honey Dew School building (photo taken in 1939). (Photo courtesy of Puget Sound Regional Branch, Washington State Archives, Bellevue Community College.)



Part of the attraction of this area was the possibility of living off the land. The Hilltop's rural character allowed residents to make money by raising livestock, fruits, and vegetables and selling them, sometimes even as far away as Seattle. "Pop" Emmett Simms came to the area in the mid-1920s; he raised and sold vegetable from a horse-drawn wagon in the Highlands, but he was best known for his barbecue pit.⁴ Audrey Weathers remembered how the neighbors exchanged food and services. "We pretty well raised everything," she recalled, "We raised pigs, cows, chickens and that. Mrs Beaver... she had fruit trees. Mr. Hart, he did all the smoking. When you killed [a pig], he smoked [the meat]."⁵

The 1930s saw an increase in the numbers of African Americans living in this area of "the country." Beginning in 1929, the Depression exacerbated urban tensions in Seattle, not to mention urban poverty. Many saw Renton's countryside as an escape from these problems, yet still close enough to cities and towns that they could find employment. The Simms, the Franklins, and the Satterfields were three young families that relocated to Renton's countryside, where they were able to buy their own land, something that would have been more difficult, if not impossible, in Seattle. "Mother" Irene Grayson and her husband Alfred also moved out in the mid-1930s at her insistence; after her husband and son lost their jobs, she wanted to live someplace where they could raise their own food. After four years of payments, the Graysons owned ten acres and a log cabin they built themselves. Mother Irene was well-known for the founding of one of the first African-American churches in the Highlands. She died in 1995, a day after her 107th birthday.⁶



Caption: First grade, Honey Dew School, 1958. 2nd row, center; Steven Shropshire; 3rd row, far right: Ethel Moore and Stanley Harris; 4th row, 2nd from right: David Smith; 5th row, far left: Jimmy McNeil. (Photo courtesy of Al and Candis Talley)

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Between 1940 and 1950, the African-American population in Washington state exploded from 7000 to 30,000, thanks to the World War II employment boom in ship and aircraft manufacture and steel production.⁷ Boeing Aircraft Company was one of the employers that recruited African Americans in the South to live and work in Renton. Many lived in “the projects,” but those with enough money to purchase property chose the Hilltop. Audrey Weathers remembered that her parents and four brothers and sisters moved back and forth from their home in Seattle to their home on Union Avenue during the war, while her dad, Nathaniel Weathers, worked in the shipyards. As a child she and her friends watched Paccar test tanks on the hill north of Greenwood Cemetery. “They never said anything to us because we were just kids,” she recalled. “They used to leave big wheel tracks in the street and drive them up from there into the factory.... They used to shoot them off into some kind of hill.”⁸ Others who arrived in the 1940s included Al Talley and Clyde Coleman Barfield, who later would sell his property to the city to help make Heritage Park possible.

Clyde and Bernice Barfield arrived in the country in 1943. An employee of Howard S. Wright Construction Company for 35 years, Mr. Barfield was best remembered for his love of gardening. Neighbors recalled that Mr. Barfield was always willing to take anyone on a tour of his garden and no one walked away without some fresh vegetables. Mr. and Mrs. Barfield were both active in the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church.⁹

So much more of the story of this neighborhood remains to be told: What were the African-American coal miners lives like? Did the families who came here during the Depression have an easier time than in Seattle? What happened to the men when the World War II employment boom was over? What were the children’s experiences in Honeydew and other schools? What kinds of businesses did the residents of the Hilltop start? We look forward to continuing this research, with the help of those who live there!



PACCAR Sherman tanks being tested near the Hilltop, 1940s. (Renton History Museum, #2000.127.0967)

¹ The territorial censuses for 1887 and 1889 list two Tecumseh families living in Renton, and "Indian Rodgers" is listed on the payroll of the Talbot Mine in 1881, along with "Indian Joe," "Indian Jack," and "Indian Bill." Scrapbook #54, Talbot Mine Company ledger book, 1880-1881 ("Mining Ephemera" box), p.120, Renton History Museum.

² 1910 U.S. Census, Cedar River Precinct, www.ancestry.com. Kennydale was another convenient spot for African-American coal miners and their families. Marcus Harding, born in British Guiana, worked in coal mines in Newcastle and Roslyn, and ultimately gave part of his Kennydale property for the construction of the Full Gospel Pentecostal Missionary Church. "Marcus M. Harding, A Coal Miner," in "Renton Hilltop 20th Year Celebration, 1974-1994," program, Collection of Mrs. Lavelle Weathers Swanigan (copy in vertical files, Renton History Museum)

³ Property Record files, Puget Sound Regional branch of the Washington State Archives, Bellevue Community College, Bellevue, WA.

⁴ "Emmett Simms," in "Renton Hilltop 20th Year Celebration, 1974-1994," program, Collection of Mrs. Leona Williams (copy in vertical files, Renton History Museum).

⁵ Audrey Weathers Oral History, 7 March 2002, Renton History Museum.

⁶ Jan Hinman, "Irene Grayson: From Hard Times to Good," *Renton Record-Chronicle*, 21 May 1982; "In Remembrance of Mother Grayson," in "Renton Hilltop 20th Year Celebration, 1974-1994," program, Collection of Mrs. Lavelle Weathers Swanigan (copy in vertical files, Renton History Museum).

⁷ Esther Hall Mumford, "Washington's African American Communities," chapter in *Peoples of Washington: Perspectives on Culture Diversity*, Sid White and S. E. Solberg, eds. (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 1989), 77.

⁸ Audrey Weathers Oral History, 7 March 2002, Renton History Museum.

⁹ Obituary, Clyde C. Barfield, *South King County Journal*, 3 May 2002; Mrs. Leona Williams Oral History, 13 November 2006, Renton History Museum.

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