Food for Freedom, Vegetables for Victory

By Elizabeth P. Stewart

World War II required a united effort among Americans that had not been seen before or since, on the battle front and the home front. As hundreds of war workers moved here from around the country to build B-52’s for the Boeing Company, the war effort exploded Renton’s population and with it, the city’s urban quality. The war lifted Renton out of the Great Depression, but the population boom also ended many Rentonians’ close connection to their rural roots. Victory gardens briefly returned them to those roots, while contributing to the war effort.

As more men were drafted, U.S. farm production declined, at the same time that troops required more processed food. The federal War and Agriculture Departments called upon Americans to reduce the strain on farmers by growing enough food to feed their own families in gardens planted on any unused plot of land; these were called “victory gardens” to encourage individuals and families to contribute to winning the war. According to one estimate, the average American in the early 1940s consumed 1073 pounds of food each year. By the end of the war about 20 million Americans produced 40% of the food supply in their private plots in backyards and on public lands. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt set a good example by planting a victory garden on the White House grounds.¹

In 1943 the Renton Chronicle and the Renton Shopper joined the war effort by organizing a victory garden competition to stimulate would-be gardeners. Their motto was “Raise the Food and Pass the Ammunition.”² Mayor George Beanblossom and Dan Huntington, Service Superintendent for Hub City Chevrolet, were the first to sign up. The other 29 contestants included two Tondas (Eugenia and young Mario), Charles Mattioda, Sam Pellegrino, Lizzie Ovist, Charles E. Nystrom, George Pasco, David Harries, and Joseph Yurgolich, among others.³ Each contestant predicted that he or she would raise anywhere from 37 to 3000 pounds of fruits and vegetables in his or her garden; Sam Pellegrino boasted that he intended to raise tons of food, not pounds.⁴ The Boy Scouts, Boeing Co., and the men of the 778th M. P. Battalion, Company D also developed green thumbs for the war effort.⁵

Above: Students in Central School routinely studied agriculture, because farming was an integral part of Renton life early on. (#1966.076.0424)
President's Message
By Laura Clawson, President

As of this writing the Smithsonian Key Ingredients exhibit is packed up and off to yet another Museum on Main Street. Our own exhibit Sustaining a City is still on view and the museum will once again be filled with Renton stories.

Telling Renton stories involves a wide-range of people with an array of talents and skills who generously donate their time. Some are more apparent, such as the lively murals and exhibits painted by local artist Doug Kyes, but many people work behind the scenes. People, like former Trustee Bill Gaw, serve on the Endowment Committee, a nerve-wracking responsibility in this tough economic climate, making decisions that will preserve capital for future sustainabilty. Volunteers spend countless hours as docents, those knowledgable, friendly folks who show visitors the exhibits. CPA Jennifer Sharp interfaces with the tax accountant and the Board Treasurer, providing necessary and invaluable expertise in federal non-profit tax compliance. This is just a smattering, an inkling, of what it takes to have a museum in our city.

Lately the Board of Trustees has been concentrating on recruiting trustees, with good results. We use a matrix to identify thirty-three characteristics in five broad categories: affiliation, experience, demographics, fundraising experience, and neighborhood. Our goal is to mirror Renton’s diversity and to attract skills and influence needed for Board activities and responsibilities. This tool enables us to identify weaknesses on the Board and to be deliberate about filling that hole. In the last newsletter I described the Board’s committees, where the bulk of our work is done. If the Board has a weakness it results in a lack of committee work. The matrix we use has been very helpful in identifying and correcting such imbalances.

One such weakness, until last year, has been fundraising. We embarked on a Benefit Dinner. It was a success! And we’re having one again this year, the Second Annual Benefit Dinner on June 10. Every person who attends is one of those “in the background” people I mentioned above, without which we would not have a museum. Preparations are underway, tickets are on sale and we’re excited! It will be fun! More importantly, it will support the Historical Society and the Renton History Museum so that everyone has access to Renton stories.
Renton Museum Report
By Elizabeth P. Stewart

As I write this, we have just packed up Key Ingredients: America by Food to send off to its next stop in Metaline Falls, ending its six-week run at our museum. Hosting this Smithsonian exhibit—our first in 15 years—was a real boon for us. We had almost 1000 visitors during this period, most of whom had never been to the Museum before. Many came from Seattle, Federal Way, Olympia, Bellevue, Kirkland, and as far away as Everett and Bainbridge Island. The exhibit also provided the impetus for new partnerships with the Renton Food Bank, the city’s Department of Community and Economic Development, and Valley Medical Center.

Key Ingredients also gave us the chance to organize some stimulating events. Many of you came on opening day to meet chefs Tom Douglas and Thierry Rautureau during their live broadcast of KIRO’s “In the Kitchen with Tom & Thierry,” and many more participated in the Bite of Downtown.

One of our volunteers told me once that our speaker series are one of Renton’s little-known gems, and now I believe her. Our guest for the first event was Mark Winne, author of Closing the Food Gap: Re-setting the Table in a Land of Plenty. Mark discussed food insecurity in the U.S. and offered some real-world solutions that benefit farmers, consumers, and grocery owners. Our second event, Justin Bookey’s film 3 Feet Under: Digging Deep for the Geoduck, took a lighter look at local cuisine. The documentary used his father, a transplanted New Yorker who’s been digging clams for over 30 years, as an example of the passion for the elusive “gooey duck” clam. Finally, local chef and cookbook author Greg Atkinson provided a fascinating “cook’s tour” of the history of American cuisine, highlighting the uniqueness of Pacific Northwest food. Everyone who heard him speak left with restaurant recommendations and reading suggestions (and a powerful hunger).

These events were so engaging that we’re now looking for ways to expand the audience so that more folks can take advantage of what the Museum has to offer. To that end, we’d like to put together an Advisory Committee, a group of folks who might meet twice a year to make suggestions about topics, dates and times, appropriate speakers and performers, and how to grow the audience. If you would like to serve on this committee—free snacks and interesting conversation!—please contact Dorota Rahn or myself to sign up.

Thanks to all of you who came out to make Key Ingredients: America by Food a success at the Renton History Museum, and thanks to Humanities Washington and the Museum on Main Street program for making it available!
Even before the war, many Renton residents grew their own food, either to make ends meet or because they could not get their favorite produce in local stores. Mayor George Beanblossom reported that where he grew up in southern Indiana, “you had to raise your share of the beans or you didn’t get any beans.” Dusalina Cavaletto later recalled that “We raised practically everything we needed in the way of food… we had fruit trees, and raspberries, and strawberries, and currants, and gooseberries, and chickens, and sometimes rabbits. And during the Depression we had plenty to eat… We shared with everybody.”

Seventy percent of Renton’s victory gardeners were first or second generation immigrants to the U.S. They had escaped an agricultural depression and poverty in Italy, war and ethnic strife in Austria-Hungary and Macedonia, and underemployment and even starvation in Wales and Ireland. They brought with them their preferences for fruits, vegetables, and other foods little known in the U.S. They imported these foods when they could—the Piemonte Grocery was an important source for the olive oil, macaroni (we now call it pasta), and salami and sausages that Italians craved. When necessary, immigrants substituted foods more readily available in the U.S. Many grew their favorite produce rather than give up foods that reminded them of home.
Dusolina Cavaletto vividly remembered that her beloved teacher Florence Guiteau made an important observation about gardening in Renton that stuck with her. Miss Guiteau had told students that, “Renton didn’t amount to anything until the Italians came here. They taught us that it paid to plant vegetables instead of only flowers. That was the first time Renton had ever had vegetables.” A slight exaggeration, perhaps, but an important perception nevertheless. Renton’s first settlers—British and Welsh immigrants and their descendants—had focused their gardening energies on flowers, perhaps as relief from the dark stifling mines where many spent their days. Italians came with a different experience. In their gardening energies on flowers, perhaps as relief from the dark stifling mines where many spent their days. Italians came with a different experience. In their home country, the contadini—country people who were the largest single group of Italian immigrants to the U.S.—had grown food for others as tenant farmers, so it is no surprise that here they relished the chance to grow fresh fruit and vegetables on their own plots.

Naturally peoples’ victory gardens reflected their family’s food preferences. Although the most popular vegetables were tomatoes, beans, onions, and cabbage, Renton’s recent immigrants grew produce more familiar in their home countries. Italians introduced other Americans to such foods as plum tomatoes, herbs like parsley and basilica, and artichokes, among many others. The Chronicle editor gently teased those growing produce that was out of the ordinary, then went on to explain what these unusual foods were. George Pasco was just beginning to have luck growing what he called “Giant Macedonians” (also known as Greek or Armenian cucumbers) that he had grown back in “the old country.” On his hillside plot, so steep that it was “practically standing on edge,” Pasco also grew the only eggplants in town. In 1942 Renaldo Romiti bragged about his extra large Italian zucchini, and the Chronicle explained that these are “not something you play on—like a piccolo or flute.” Italian immigrants brought the zucchini to the U.S. in the 1920s where it first took root in California, so in the 1940s it may still have been a foreign vegetable to some Renton residents. Julius Jacobucci told the Chronicle that “you give an Italian enough of these zucchinis [sic] and he’ll get thru [sic] the winter all right.”

To encourage wartime gardeners, the Chronicle offered prizes for the nearest garden, the greatest yield from the smallest plot, the smallest, and the earliest producing. Judges J. B. Worden, County Agent, E. K. Arnold, Manager of Peoples’ Bank, and Alec Pelto, Manager of J.C. Penney, had a hard time awarding prizes, but ultimately it was indeed Sam Pellegrino’s garden at 508 Morris Avenue that won first prize. What started as a sandy lot became “the outstanding garden from the standpoint of mass production, planning, and of prime importance what can be done to a city lot.” Pellegrino reportedly raised two tons of food, including pea plants that were practically thirteen feet high. Mario H. Tonga, a senior honor student at Renton High School, singlehandedly raised enough vegetables to feed his family, “plus enough for canning and preserving.”

Victory gardens helped ease wartime food shortages, but as the war drew to a close many abandoned their victory gardens in favor of the new, more convenient supermarkets that had sprung up during the war. A new Safeway had opened on the site of the old Smithers farmstead in 1942, the second supermarket to come to town. But Renton’s victory gardens had a lasting effect on our dinner tables. The war effort revived interest in foods that many had enjoyed in their home countries, and encouraged neighbors to share. By introducing friends and neighbors to zucchini or pumpkin blossoms or eggplant, these victory gardeners made all our dinner tables more interesting.

4 “Solly Urges Larger Garden,” Renton Chronicle, 19 April 1945, p.1; “30 Gardens in Local Contest”; “To Raise Tons of Food, Not Pounds,” Renton Chronicle, 24 June 1943, p.1. (By 1994 the FDA estimated that every American consumed 2173 pounds of food per year, almost exactly double the estimate in 1942.)

Left: In August 1943 Tom E. Newton Sr. received a Certificate of Service award for helping with the harvest on a farm or in a processing factory. Supplying labor was another way that individuals could assist with wartime food production. (#2008.042.001)
Dear museum members and volunteers,

I would like to introduce you to an important curriculum project that the Museum Education Department has been preparing for a little over a year now. The project was made possible by a 4Culture Heritage Cultural Education grant and a Sam’s Club Foundation Community Support grant. Since 2006 the Renton School District (RSD) hasn’t had funds to bring its students to the museum. In part to compensate for the cancelled tours, the museum decided to develop an outreach program to bring history to schools. Our first effort is to teach third grade students about aspects of the economic, social, and spiritual life of the First People/Duwamish Tribe in what we now call the greater Renton area.

We recruited a team of professionals to help us with the ideas and details of this curriculum titled *The Life of Coast Salish Native American People of Central Puget Sound/Duwamish* before the Arrival of the White People. In April we ran a test of the program, after a year of consulting with Native American artist and storyteller Roger Fernandes; RSD Native Advisor Earline Bala; Cindy Pickens and Carolyn Stephens, third grade teachers at the Renton Park Elementary; Theresa Clymer, retired social studies specialist; and Carol Hawkins and Cindy Ensley, museum outreach docents.

Third graders at Renton Park Elementary had the opportunity to touch and “discover” Coast Salish objects such as a cedar bark hat, a cedar bark gathering basket, a cedar limb clam basket, models of river and salt water canoes, a cattail mat, and cedar bark ropes, all made by Duwamish artist Mary Lou Slaughter and her son Michael Halady. The students then presented their findings to their classmates. Next, museum outreach docents showed slides and talked about the past and present of the Coast Salish People. This presentation was followed by hands-on activities in which students reinforced their understanding of the importance of natural resources and environment to Coast Salish culture. Students also learned about Coast Salish spiritual life through stories recorded on CD by Roger Fernandes.

The pilot curriculum was a success. Teachers appreciated the fact they had exciting classes ready to run. Third graders were excited about being able to touch the replicas and figure out how they were used in the past. They also enjoyed hands-on activities such as making paper versions of Coast Salish canoes, vests, hats, houses, necklaces, and weaving.

With the success of the pilot program, we are now recruiting volunteers willing to be trained to take the program into classrooms beginning this fall. We hope that with the support of our members and volunteers we will be able to create more educational opportunities for students with more outreach programs.
Volunteer Department Update

The Volunteer Department made two substantial changes in May. The first change concerns scheduling greeters and the second change concerns the recruitment of a new volunteer.

As the education requirements of my position are expanding, I am pressed to give up some of my volunteer coordinator duties. Cindy Ensley, one of our greeters and outreach docents, has generously agreed to take over scheduling Saturday greeters.

She introduced herself to the museum greeters: “It will be my pleasure to assist Dorota with the scheduling of Saturday greeters. Although I have not been with the museum for long, I have learned so much of the rich history, have met some of the most interesting people and have made many new friends. I moved to Renton with my family just about 31 years ago from down south, Tacoma that is, where I was born and raised. My two wonderful daughters grew up, married and had their children here. My Grandson and little Granddaughter attend Hazelwood Elementary and my older Granddaughter attends ODLE Middle School in Bellevue. I'm so blessed to have them close by and of course see them often. And now I look forward to getting to know each of you better and I hope I will serve you well.” Having worked with Cindy, I know you will enjoy working with her, too!

Also, I would like to introduce our new volunteer, Jessica Kelly who is indexing unbound Renton newspapers from the 1900s to the 1920s. This project will create an invaluable tool for those interested in researching this timeframe.

Jessica told us about herself: “History has always been a passion of mine. I graduated from Western Washington University in 2003 with a BS in History/Social Studies. That love of history continues, even with my newest love… Sprout (womb name for my baby boy, due August 3rd). My husband, Jeff, and I have lived in Renton the past 3 years, but have been in the Maple Valley area for the majority of our lives. My other main interests include reading, hiking, volunteering with Boy Scouts, and scrapbooking.”

We are very excited to have Cindy and Jessica helping us in moving the museum activities ahead.

Welcome aboard!!!
The Summer of 1909, Revealed

Since February, a photo historian in Portland has been hard at work copying and preserving the Museum’s collection of 49 glass plate negatives. A grant from 4Culture made the preservation of the glass negatives possible. The negatives, donated in 2006, contain images representing a snapshot of life in Renton during the summer of 1909. It is fitting, then, that they have been resurrected to a usable form just in time for them to turn 100!

The summer of 1909 found Seattle and the surrounding towns celebrating the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (AYP), held on the campus of the University of Washington from June-October. The event was enormous, with more than 3 million people attending. The AYP featured a transcontinental car race, Suffragists, exhibits extolling scientific achievements, a midway called the “Pay Streak,” and villages of “primitive” cultures from around the world. Surrounding communities organized specific days at the Expo designed to promote the virtues of their particular towns. August 7th was “Renton Day.”

As a part of the grant, I am researching the businesses and people represented in the images. Many of the shops seen in the photos are old favorites of Renton lore, but a few are new to us. At the beginning of the research, it dawned on us that these images may very well be associated with the AYP. The coincidence of both occurring in the summer of 1909 and the fact that the images seem to be a quasi-encyclopedic record of Renton businesses, people, and houses, led us to believe that the images may have been taken specifically for AYP. Newspaper articles from the day indicate that someone was taking pictures around Renton, purportedly for use in a Chamber of Commerce booklet for Renton Day at the Expo. Paul Houser, Sr., however, later took out an ad in the paper on behalf of the Chamber disputing that fact and warning citizens of the scam. Could our images be the leftover photos from that ill-fated booklet?

Walling M. Horton operated the only known professional photography studio in Renton in 1909. Horton was not here long; he worked in Renton for, at most, six years. He remains our most likely suspect as the photographer responsible for our images. Neither Houser nor the Renton Journal, however, names the dubious photographer, and we will likely not be able to conclusively link the two. Research continues and we hope to be able to unravel the complete story.

Visit www.historylink.org for more information on the 1909 AYP. Visit www.ayp100.org for information on the events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the AYP.
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)

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235 Mill Avenue South, Renton, Washington 98057-2133

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

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In Memory of: ________________________________

Total enclosed: _____________

Contribution
In Honor Of
Ron & Sharon Clymer
50th Wedding Anniversary
Daisy Ward

Memberships
Thank you to all of you who have paid your 2009 annual membership dues. Your prompt response is appreciated. This will be the last quarterly mailed to those who are not current.

General Contributions
Boeing Gift Matching –
Glenn Anderson
Margie Conkle
Fred & Gloria Delaurenti
Barbara George
Ila Hemm
Pauline Kirkman
Mark & Kelly Malleck Family
Bea Mathewson
Ted & Gerry McLendon

Hazel & Peter Newing
Renton High School Class of 1964
Harvey Sandahl
Mark & Barbara Santos-Johnson
Jerome & Bettijane Shepard
Dennis & Kathleen Stremick
George & Frances Subic
Rachel Thomas
Elaine Wells
Wayne & Janet Wicks

General Contributions
$100 & Over
Stan & Rosemary Greene
Pearl Howard Wolf

In-Kind Contributions
Viking Sewing & Vacuum Center
Vacuum Cleaner
Pritchard Design
Food Exhibit Panels Design
Bill Collins
Window Blind for the front door
Rich Sweeney, Renton Printery
Key Ingredients Exhibit Posters
Cat’s Eye Group
Cost reduction of designing Annual Report

General Contributions
In-Kind Contributions
Viking Sewing & Vacuum Center
Vacuum Cleaner
Pritchard Design
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Window Blind for the front door
Rich Sweeney, Renton Printery
Key Ingredients Exhibit Posters
Cat’s Eye Group
Cost reduction of designing Annual Report
(February 15-March)
Marjorie Busby
Robert L. Connell
Judy Gregoris
Loretta Corinne Lucotch
Iola Monster
Sylvia (Brown) Sweet
Robert A Wraith

(April – May 14)
Clifton M. Anderson
George Banasky
Frank B. Bonnell, Jr.
Glenn E. Clow
Jay Stanley Ford Sr.
Kathryn (Gardin) Gilligan
Michael B. Johnston
Royce Lamb
Royden Albert Miser
Daisy (Beil) Morris
Jack Gordon Olsen
Charles E. Palmer
Ellen Klepach Sandbo
Ralph Woolman
Edith Petchnick Yergensen
## Rentonians Remembered

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<td>Robert Wraith</td>
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In Hindsight...

John Sedlacek’s Cigar & Tobacco Shop, decorated for Fourth of July 1909. From the Martin Bogdan Collection, recently printed and restored thanks to a 4Culture grant. (#2006.043.002) For more on this collection, see page 8.