

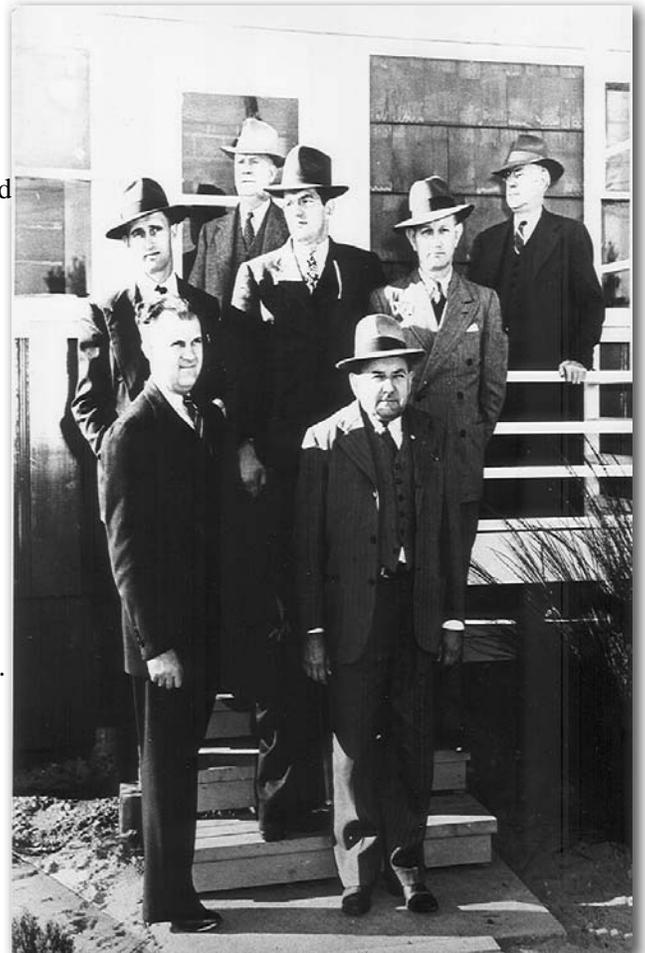
# Oral Histories and World War II

By Elizabeth P. Stewart

Many members may not know that the Renton History Museum has a dedicated team of volunteers who have been conducting oral history interviews for years. Nancy Fairman, Marian Sutton, Sarah Jane Hisey, Marian Schultz, Lorraine McConnaghy, James Wilhoit, Charles Custer, Steve Anderson, and Carrie Bergquist have collected over 100 oral histories since the 1980s, creating a rich collection of first-person insights into the life of our city. Some members of the oral history team recently suggested that we occasionally feature portions of these interviews in our quarterly newsletters, so that researchers and others would know what a rich resource this collection is.

These oral histories cover Renton history from its earliest coal mining and logging days through World Wars I and II up to the Feys' movie theaters and teenagers who cruised The Loop. Respondents talk about such signal events as the snowstorm of 1950, Harry Tracy's escape through Renton, and the flood of 1911. Although most are transcribed, we are only now entering them into our collection database with keywords for easy searching; the next step—we hope someday—would be to digitize the very fragile audio cassette tapes.

One of the richest areas of discussion is the explosion of Renton's population during World War II, and the challenges that went along with that. This subject serves as a good example of how oral histories provide insights that cannot be gleaned from other sources, like letters, newspapers, and other publications. First-person interviews also provide multiple perspectives on the same issue.



Above: Members of the Renton Housing Authority, 1942 (#41.3506)

*MASTHEAD PHOTO: Dusalina Cavaletto remembered that the Sherman tanks built at PACCAR were supposed to be a war secret, in spite of the fact that they routinely tested the tanks on the hill above Greenwood Cemetery. (#1997.038.0967)*

*Continued on page 4*



**Renton Historical Quarterly**

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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*

Greetings, Members!

February 8 was a historic day for the Renton Historical Society Board of Trustees. Most of us were there at City Hall, excited and perhaps a bit nervous. How would the Mayor and City Council respond to the completed master plan? We loved it; would they? Gyroscope's three consultants from Gyroscope Inc.—Maeryta Medrano, Don Pohlman, and Tim Phillips—had flown up from Oakland that morning, had presented their plan to the Board and Master Plan Steering Committee, and were about to make their final presentation to the Mayor and Council. This was IT.



I'm happy and thrilled to report that the presentation was enthusiastically received, concluding with celebratory congratulations all around. This was the culmination of months of hard work and everyone was pleased and inspired by the result. I want to thank Mayor Denis Law and the Renton City Council for generously providing the opportunity to bring this project to fruition. I also want to thank Terry Higashiyama, Administrator of the Community Services Department, for her participation and enthusiastic support. The City has been a valued partner over the years and this vote of confidence spurs us to ever greater accomplishments.

So, as you may have guessed, this is not an ending. It is a beginning. And beginnings can create their own anxieties.

In every issue of our newsletter, on the home page of our website, in every annual report is our mission statement:

***The Renton History Museum's mission is to preserve, document, interpret, and educate about the history of greater Renton in ways that engage diverse people of all ages.***

Our vision statement, also visible in everything we publish, is more concise:  
***Capture the Past, Educate the Present, Inspire the Future!***

Preserving, documenting, capturing, educating, inspiring is what we do. Telling Renton stories, linking past Renton to present Renton to future Renton is our core value. It is central to the Master Plan, it is central to the work of the Board of Trustees, it is the passion of the museum staff.

The mission of the Renton Historical Society is the same as it was in 1971 when its incorporation papers were drawn up. The community we call Renton, however, is vastly different from what it was in 1971. The challenge we face is in bringing our 1971 mission to the Renton of 2010, or 2020, or 2030. We now have a Master Plan to get us from there to here.

# Renton Museum Report

By Elizabeth P. Stewart

This month's President's Report mentions that our Museum Master Plan is nearly complete after six months of intense research, discussion, planning, and, yes, dreaming about what the Renton History Museum could become. If all goes



well, the Board will vote to approve the plan at the end of March, and then we'll launch our planning and fundraising efforts. Our June newsletter will explore the plan in detail, but in the meantime, I thought I might whet your appetite.

As part of our research, consultants from Gyroscope Inc. and I studied many other museums to learn how they've responded to the needs and interests of their visitors and members. We visited Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, nationally known

for involving Asian ethnic communities and youth in the creation of exhibits. We also saw an innovative traveling exhibit at the Frye Museum titled *Old Weird America*, in which artists interpreted themes in American history with fascinating results. One photographer showcased the variety of Lincoln impersonators in the U.S., and another artist built a square-dancing machine right in the gallery. A companion exhibit showed history-themed artwork created by homeless people.

One of our consultants, Don Pohlman, had helped start up the Science Gallery at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, and his experience bringing together science and art was instructive. The Science Gallery hosts highly interactive exhibits in which the public participates in the actual doing of science. In its three-month run, *Infectious—Stay Away!* attracted 45,000 visitors who, just by walking through the gallery, participated in a study about contagion and containment of disease. In its two years of operations The Science Gallery has hosted 500,000 visitors in two years in a museum not much bigger than ours. It was recently nominated for the 2010 European Museum of the Year Award.

What do these successful examples have in common? They are interdisciplinary, involving history and art or science and art in ways that speak to more people. They are interactive, offering visitors the opportunity to help make the exhibit. And they are aimed at creating and preserving new knowledge, whether about the life experiences of different people, or infectious disease, or what history means to the homeless. They expand the role of the Museum out into everyday life, and that seems like a wonderful opportunity for Renton.

*Liz Stewart*

## New Memberships

Michael Conkle family  
Julia Harding Goodwin  
Harriet Krog  
Mark & Kim Mehlhaff family

## New Life Memberships

Wesley & Velma Melville  
Shirley Phinney  
Nancy Fairman

## Membership Reminder

Membership renewal notices were sent out in November. Please check your membership card and if not paid yet, please respond to save the expense of sending a reminder. You can also call Daisy afternoons at 425-255-2330 or email [dward@rentonwa.gov](mailto:dward@rentonwa.gov) to check.



In December the Museum received a grant of \$5000.00 from the Muckleshoot Charitable fund. This grant will enable the Museum to bring Native American storyteller Roger Fernandes to every elementary school in the Renton school district, in conjunction with our Coast Salish curriculum. Watch for a longer report in our June newsletter.

Oral Histories and World War II continued from page 1

Many of the interviewees who remembered World War II Renton talked about the difficulties in finding housing, as new workers moved from distant states to work at Boeing, PAC-CAR, or other war industries. Jim Ashurst, former Renton Fire Chief who recently passed away, recalled this problem in a 2000 interview: “Several of the men that I knew and got acquainted with lived in more or less vacation trailers. It was all they could find.” New housing constructed with government funding in the Highlands relieved this pressure, but not everyone was happy with this solution. Ashurst remembered:

*“We had a fellow that worked in the tool room [at PACCAR] for a while. He didn’t last very long. He came from Switzerland and moved into one of the homes up there. I remember one morning he came to work all upset. Come to find out he and his wife had gone somewhere that evening. When they came back they couldn’t find their house.... He had been up almost all night looking for the house.”<sup>1</sup>*



*Above: Jim Ashurst remembered a co-worker who couldn’t pick out his Highlands home in the dark one night; the houses were too similar. (#41.3741)*

Because all the houses looked so similar, Ashurst’s co-worker and his wife could not remember exactly which one was theirs.

Another interviewee, Frank Conklin, managed the Renton Housing Authority during the war, so he was able to give an



*Above: Family behind their federal housing duplex in the Highlands, ca. 1942-1943. (#1998.050.4809)*

insider’s perspective on the influx of new workers. He recalled that on the eve of Boeing’s war-era expansion, Renton was a “tight community.” He believed that close-knit feeling resulted in resistance to the new residents, somewhat understandable because “the town was twenty-four or twenty-five hundred people, and we brought in ten thousand in the Highlands up there.”<sup>2</sup> In the churches and the service clubs, long-time Renton residents were sometimes disconcerted by the sudden presence of so many people they did not recognize. Boeing recruiters often referred to the new workers as “Okies,” or worse, which outraged Conklin; he remembered that even his own Housing Authority staff had to be called on their prejudices occasionally. His job as mediator was not always an easy one, however:

*“There was an antagonism between the [new] people and the community, basically, and you had to weed out the people in the Housing Authority working for you, who were antagonistic, and had to reach out and bend and pull the [new] people into you.”<sup>3</sup>*

Conklin saw good management of the Housing Authority as his contribution to the war effort, and part of that was ensuring that people treated one another with respect. “The people who came in maybe didn’t have the same advantages, but they were still people,” he believed.<sup>4</sup>

Conklin talked about the expectations of the new workers, many of whom were promised “all electric” homes, and were dismayed to find out that most of the houses were outfitted with coal- or wood-fired stoves. Highlands residents were also somewhat isolated, without cars or affordable bus service, so new churches were one of the first amenities that sprang up in the Highlands. In general Conklin had the highest regard for the Highlands residents, remarking that “the stories you hear about the housing projects, and these people not knowing how to conduct themselves as residents of a housing project—not knowing how to live—they’re just not true.”<sup>5</sup>

Dusalina Cavaletto, a Renton High School teacher during the war, also dispelled stereotypes about the new residents. When asked whether the children of war workers were less well-prepared, she replied that the teachers never noticed that. “We’d get some from another area who were ahead of ours,” she recalled, “And then we’d get others who were not, depending on the type of school district they came from.”<sup>6</sup> She did remember the housing project on the current site of Carco Theatre in particular as “a horrible mess,” and she felt sorry for those families. “So many people bunched together, people of all kinds coming here to work,” she said. “They were not nice [apartments], and of course they were not built for permanency.”<sup>7</sup>



Above: Portable classrooms were set up behind Renton High School in 1943 to keep up with the influx of new students. (#1980.096.1409)

Cora Upshaw, interviewed in 1987, knew a thing or two about antagonism. Her family came to Newcastle in 1898 when her African-American father and grandfather were recruited from East St. Louis as strike-breakers in the Black Diamond mines. They settled in the Renton area after the strike, and she remembered attendance at her little church in Kennydale revived with the influx of African-American families to the housing project. She worked briefly as a “Rosie the Riveter” at the Boeing Co. and knew people who lived in both the Highlands housing and Holly Park war housing in Seattle. From what she heard, Renton was more hospitable to African American workers than Holly Park:

*“Nobody wants to give up power or places to live or whatever, and it’s always a struggle for the one that is outside to get inside... Eventually they did move in [to Holly Park], but I know there were a lot of [black] people that lived in the Highlands.”<sup>8</sup>*

All the new war workers were as disruptive for the local black community as for the white. “I remember before the war you could stand down on Third and Pike and any black person... you’d see you would know,” she recalled. “[Once the war started] most of the people you see you never heard of them. And they probably never heard of you neither.”<sup>9</sup>

These kinds of information—what people were thinking, how they adjusted to new situations, how they treated one another—are the unique insights revealed by oral histories in the Museum’s collection. Many different perspectives help us understand history better, as not just a single narrative told by one voice, but the combination of many voices.

If you or someone you know would be interested in giving an oral interview, please contact the Museum.

<sup>1</sup> James F. Ashurst Oral History, 21 June 2000, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Conklin Oral History, 4 November 1984, p.11.

<sup>3</sup> Conklin Oral History, 4 November 1984, p.13.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Conklin Oral History, 9 December 1984, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Conklin Oral History, 4 November 1984, p.20.

<sup>6</sup> Dusalina Cavaletto Oral History, 17 March 1985, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Cavaletto Oral History, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Cora Upshaw Oral History, 31 January 1987, p.15.

<sup>9</sup> Upshaw Oral History, p.14.



# Volunteer Report

By Dorota Rahn, Volunteer and Education Coordinator

Dear museum members and volunteers,



The museum staff knows that we wouldn't be able to operate and serve our community without the involvement of volunteers. Our 65 volunteers, including 15 board members, committed 1,663 hours to the Museum in 2009, serving as greeters, docents, board members, helping document museum collections, recording oral histories, performing administrative work, renovating the Museum Annex, doing database entry and indexing, helping with exhibits and special events such as Renton River Days, and getting involved with many other activities at the museum.

We try to show everyone our gratitude every day. Special occasions such as Valentine's Day give us the opportunity to thank volunteers in a more tangible way. This year we held our Valentine's Luncheon at the museum on the day after. Collection Manager Sarah prepared her award-winning macaroni and cheese. Everybody gathered over salads prepared by Daisy and Liz, had a lot of macaroni and cheese, croissant sandwiches, and cake. We celebrated Inez Edlich's 90th birthdays and Bettijane Shepard's 88th birthday, in addition to Valentine's Day.

Everybody had a good time chatting and sharing news. Thanks Volunteers!!!

## Spring 2010 Speaker Program

Our Spring 2010 Speaker Program started on February 9 with a stunning re-enactment of Nettie Asberry by Eva Abram. Nettie Asberry was the only free-born African-American child in her family in the era of slavery. She came to Seattle in 1890 looking for a new life. Armed with a doctorate degree in music and love for her people, she committed her life to uplifting African Americans. She was involved in the events of the day, including the Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition, the fight against lynching, and the struggle for voting rights for women and Blacks.

We will celebrate 100 years of Women Suffrage and Women's Month at 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday, March 23 when two actresses, Barbara Collander and Toni Douglas (photo right), will present *May's Vote*. A century ago, prim and proper Emma Smith DeVoe and outrageous, flamboyant May Arkwright Hutton worked side by side to win the vote for women in Washington. *May's Vote* presents Emma and May from their respective childhoods through the noisy public struggle that ended with success in 1910. Their triumph demonstrates that we do not always have to agree in order to achieve a common goal.



Jack Hamann (photo left), author of the award-winning *On American Soil: How Justice Became a Casualty of WWII*, will present *Speaking Truth to Power: Modern Lessons from Historic Injustice* on Tuesday, May 4 at 5:00 p.m. Mr. Hamann's presentation traces the remarkable story of the reversal of a historic injustice. In 1944 at Washington's Fort Lawton, dozens of African-American soldiers were charged with rioting and the lynching of an Italian prisoner of war; they endured the longest Army court-martial of World War II. More than six decades later, the discovery of documents in the National Archives led to the reversal of their conviction and an unprecedented apology from the U.S. government.

We will have a special treat for children and adults when Lora Chiorah-Dye, the Artistic Director for LORA & Sukutai Marimba and Dance Ensemble, will present *Rhythms of Zimbabwe* on Saturday, April 10 at 11:00 a.m. According to Ms. Chiorah-Dye "There is no distinction between audience and performers in Zimbabwean culture. If you can walk you can dance. If you can talk you can sing!" Come and be a part of the fun as she engages families in storytelling, children's games, singing, and dances from Zimbabwe.



# From the Collections Department...

By: Sarah Iles, Collection Manager

## Storing Textiles



Some of the most beautiful and showy pieces of the Museum's collection are textiles. Wildly different in composition and size, textiles range from heavy and bulky to extremely delicate and fragile. You must take special care when storing textiles to make sure they will not be damaged by improper storage techniques.

There are 3 main ways of storing textiles: rolling, flat storage, and folded. Folding textiles is the least ideal. Folding creates creases and also can rip delicate fabrics. If textiles must be folded, all the folds should be padded to reduce the strain on the fabric. Flat storage is great, but it takes up a lot of space and resources. Garment boxes are expensive and they take up a considerable amount of shelving. Rolling textiles is often the most space- and resource-efficient manner in which to store textiles. Flat textiles such as quilts, linens, and tablecloths are ideal for rolling.



Above: Crazy quilt made of cigar silks woven silks, cotton, brocade and velvet in multiple colors (RHM#1996.005.009)



Above: The new textile rack partially filled.

Previously, the Museum had two rolled textile units located high up on the top of shelves accessible only by ladder. The units effectively stored the textiles, but their location made them very hard to access. As we renovated the Annex, the Burke Museum contacted us out of the blue and offered us a large textile rack they no longer needed. We jumped at the chance to receive this wonderful storage device and made the Burke very happy their old rack found a new home. Board member Larry Sleeth and volunteer Dennis Frink used Larry's truck and trailer to haul the disassembled rack down to Renton. Once they delivered the pieces to the Annex, volunteer Norm Abrahamson single-handedly reconstructed the rack. The new rack greatly increased our capacity to store rolled textiles and allowed us to get rid of our old shelf-top textiles storage units.

In early January UW intern Andrea Cohen began working on the Museum's textile collection. She cataloged and photographed nearly all of our flat textiles. Once she completed the cataloging, we transported the textiles to the Annex for rolling and storage. Rolling textiles is at minimum a two-person job. Without Andrea's help, the Museum would not have been able to fill up our wonderful new rack!



Above: Intern Andrea Cohen sews new labels on to textiles. She is a first year Museology graduate student at UW.

### General Contributions

(under \$100)

Joe & Marjorie Avolio  
 Jim & Char Baker  
 William Bauder  
 Doris Beedle  
 Gerald & Janet Bertagni  
 William & Patricia Borek  
 Karen Boswell  
 Helenanne Botham  
 Terri Briere  
 Harley & Cathy Brumbaugh  
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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

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General Fund Donation \_\_\_\_\_

Endowment Fund Donation \_\_\_\_\_

In Memory of: \_\_\_\_\_

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

# Obituaries Collected



denotes former Society Life Member

denotes former Society member



## November

Alan Brown  
 Gaius S. Buxton  
 Margaret J. Dugovich  
 Ray Erickson  
 Marvin G. Everts  
 Raymond C. Ewings  
 Gordon C. Mitchell  
 Norman Sundquist  
 Larry R. Weiss  
 Rudolph Zaputil

## December

John Bagnariol  
 Vincent A. Becker  
 Bette Williams Clark  
 Maxine E. Grayson   
 Lloyd Hall  
 Bruce E. Hisey   
 Clarence N. Jones, Jr.  
 Luceile B. Sullentrup  
 Mary Monaghan Williams 

## January

Ruth Richter Atkinson  
 Ellen Bennett Bailey  
 Robert L. Barrowman  
 DeAnn Businello  
 Richard Christensen  
 Katie Gotti Detrick  
 Molly Hightower  
 Arthur R. Kenyon  
 Elizabeth (Betty)



Laviolette 

Nellie G. Rutman  
 Robert Scoll  
 Encarnacion (Connie)



Tajon  
 Benton G. Williams  
 Alexandra (Sue)  
 Resoff Wood

## February

James F. Ashurst  
 Mary Ann Ewing  
 Clyde D. Smith

## Memorial Contributions (Over \$100)

### John Baxter

*Sarah Baxter, Jerry & Barbara Shel-  
lan; Dawn Crnich, Mike Johnson*

### Bruce E. Hisey

*Mrs. Robert Hendrickson*

### Mary Monaghan Williams

*Shirley, Tom, Tim, Tony & Debbie  
Phinney*

## (Over \$500) (Class of 1941)

Walt Dragin  
 Joe Zanga  
 Irma Zanga  
 Isaiah Cugini  
 Emelia Cugini  
 Teela Cugini

*Donation from Olga Azzola*



We would like to acknowledge the tragic death of Molly Hightower, granddaughter of one of our museum volunteers, John Hightower. Molly was tragically killed during the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti, where she was working with disabled and orphaned children. Molly was 23 years old.

We would also like to acknowledge the sudden death in October 2009 of Nancy Ward, daughter of the Museum's Administrative Assistant, Daisy Ward. Nancy was a friend and companion to her mother, and she will be much missed. Nancy was 49 years old.

# Rentonians Remembered

## James F. Ashurst

*Greg & Carrie Berquist; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard*

## Lee Poli Anderson

*Florence Murray*

## John A. Bagnariol

*Carrie & Greg Bergquist; Dan & Gloria Cartwright*

## Dorothy Bruce

*Harold Bruce*

## Virginia Shook Busato

*James & Frances Bourasa*

## Betty Williams Clark

*Gayle Jones*

## Ella Conklin

*Raymond Petermeyer*

## Bob Corey & Olive Corey

*Janet Henkle*

## Bill Daly

*Raymond Petermeyer*

## Katie Gotti Detrick

*Lynda DalSanto Maks; Ivona Little*

## Charles DuBois

*Raymond Petermeyer*

## Diane Ford

*Florence Murray*

## Roy Fournier

*Gertrude Shafar*

## Eva Goodwin

*John & Joyce Peterson*

## Ann Poli Hamlin

## George Hannah

## Louise Hannah

*Florence Murray*

## Bruce E. Hisey

*Don & Loraine Custer; Ernest "Milt" Swanson; Don Emmons; Gayle Jones; Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Paul & Nancy Duke; Ed & Helen Iddings; Coulon Morning Walkers; Bob & Roberta Logue; Marian Sutton; Mr. & Mrs. Don Camerini; Betty Sipila; Richard Lucotch; Mr. & Mrs. Bill Borek; Dave & Dolores Sullivan; Marilyn Tharp Clise; Don & Judy Gunderson; Ruth Parrott; Dale Hughes; John & Eleanor Bertagni; Robert & Gilda Youngquist; Shirley Brooks Patterson; Donna Blanton; Elaine Wells; James & Carolyn Fenner; Attilio Franceschina*

## Robert Hughes

*Rosemary Grass*

## Faye Kielgass

*Michael Kielgass, Don Kelly, Jim Roper, Dave Newport, John Giuliani Jr., John Ivonich, Dick Betcher, Frank Donafrio, Bill Maas, Woody Kelly, Jerry Nonis, Doyle Ford, Ron Schelke, Art Shaw, Bill Kielgass, Oden Family, Kendall Family, Theresa Calabro, Pam Smith, Linda Podriznik, Schmitt Family, Johnson Family*

## Bobbie Kolcz

*Lila V. Houser*

## Betty Laviolette

*Louise George*

## Marjorie Lotto

*Rosemary Grassi*

## Angela Malmassari

*Raymond Petermeyer*

## James Murray

*Florence Murray*

## Marilyn Neu

*Gayle Jones*

## Shirley Newing

*Hazel & Peter Newing*

## Gloria Nichols

*Raymond Petermeyer*

## Esterina Poli

## Barney Poli

## Dan Poli

*Florence Murray*

## Elizabeth Potoshnik

*Harold Bruce*

## Mike Potoshnik

*Fred & Fran Stray; Jean Tonda; McLendon Hardware; Harold Bruce; Renton High School Class 1940; Robert Richter*

## Sam Pozzobon

*Renton High School Class 1944*

## Douglas Pritchard

*Anne White & family; Renton High School Class 1944; John & Eleanor Bertagni*

## William Richter

*John & Eleanor Bertagni; Robert Richter; Al & Shirley Armstrong*

## Alex Rivily

*Donna Rivily*

## Nellie Morgan Rutman

*Frances Subic*

## Robert Scoll

*Wendell & Cleo Forgaard; Shirley Phinney; Don & Carmel Camerini; Richard & Louise Major; Jean Tonda; Mario Tonda; Victor Tonda*

## Laura Shook

*James & Frances Bourasa*

## Zelima Vidmar

*Rosemary Grassi*

## Nancy Ward

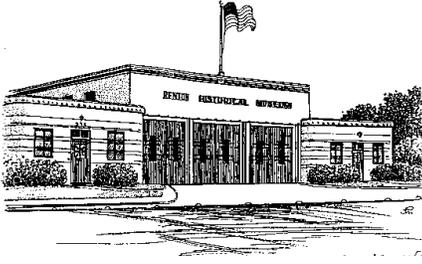
*Elizabeth P. Stewart; Sharon & Ron Clymer; Anonymous Donor*

## Larry R. Weiss

*Greg & Carrie Bergquist*

## Mary Monaghan Williams

*Jack & Gary Morrison; Marilyn & Bob Ragle*



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# In Hindsight...



*Caption: Margaret, William, and Annie Lewis, ca. 1898-1900 (#2000.127.8523). Annie's bright pink blouse is now in the Museum's collection.*