

Oral History Digitization Project

All In The Family

Oral history of Wesley, Frank & Harold Tonkin

Date recorded: July 21, 1993

Background: Wes, Frank, and Harold were the grandsons of James Tonkin, an English immigrant who opened one of Renton's first general stores. Tonkin Merchandise, located on a triangle block bordered by Houser Way, Williams Ave, and 4th Street, later became known as Tonkin Bros. Grocery after James passed away. Tonkin Bros. was run by James's sons: half-brothers William and Josiah Tonkin. (Josiah was the Wesley, Frank & Harold's father.)

The store owned by the Tonkin family occupied at least three different places in Renton throughout its history. The original property was vacated in 1915 when the store moved onto 3rd St. The original building was demolished and the property was donated to the City. In 1948 it became Tonkin Park.

This oral history is complicated. Three brothers, one wife, plus two interviewers (who also grew up in Renton) result in a cacophony of voices. There are points where as many as four people are talking at once and much of the tape has at least two conversations happening at the same time. (I sincerely pity whoever gets stuck transcribing this oral history!)

There are, however, tidbits of Renton history to be mined from this recording. The brothers discuss the early history of their family business:

Wesley: Well, I don't know, my dad...it's kind of a long story I guess. My granddad died, James, and then Uncle Bill worked at the coal mine...as a bookkeeper. (James's son and my dad's half brother.) Now when my grandfather died whether he willed Bill half the store, I don't know, but he got in the business. I think the original name of the store was Tonkin...

Frank: Merchandise, probably.

Wesley: Because when Bill got on there it became Tonkin Brothers.

Later on the interview turns and focuses on Frank's involvement in the restaurant industry. Frank was an early investor in Taco Time and owned the King County franchising for the restaurant.

Frank: About 1960, was a fella who worked for a dairy, a salesman...Taco Time started in Eugene, Oregon. Someone in Tacoma opened this one. So the salesman told me about it. I went down there and took a look at it. And I contacted the fellow who started it down in Eugene; Ron Frederick, his name was. At first I bought the franchise for King County. And then later I bought stock in the company. It was 30% of the stock in this company. So I...in '58 built a Taco Time...The building we built where it is on Rainier Avenue I built for Biff's 19 cent hamburgers. So it was about four years later that we made a Taco Time out of it.

Interviewer: How many stores do you have now? How many franchises?

Frank: Well the family worked out of this office about 25 stores. Not me, it's called Accord Incorporated. The Accord has about five stores; Matt has about four, I guess; Bob has three; Jim has about ten; my daughter and her husband have about nine. And we franchise about forty-some odd, all the way from Canada to Oregon.

Wesley Stanton Tonkin (1902-1995)

Frank James Tonkin (1907-2000)

Harold Arthur Tonkin (1912-1998)



Tonkin Merchandise, ca. 1909.
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