

Oral History Digitization Project

Inverted Triangle

Oral history of Ada Lou Wheeler

Date recorded: 1990

Background: Ada Lou Wheeler is the great-granddaughter of Erasmus Smithers, commonly recognized as the founder of Renton. Ada Lou was born in 1925, twenty years after Smithers died. Smithers married the widow Diana Gilman Tobin in Seattle in January 1857. They had three children: Ada, Edwin, and Frederick. Ada was one of the first white children to be born in Washington Territory in November 1857. She was sent to boarding school at a convent in Canada and later became one of Renton's first school teachers.

Many Native Americans, particularly Duwamish, were still in the area during Ada's childhood. She learned Chinook, the trader's dialect and told stories of Native Americans living on their land in the summers. Ada married Robert L. Thorne and had four children: Robert M., Herbert, Jeanette, and Vivian. Jeanette was Ada Lou's mother.

Ada Lou Wheeler did not pull any punches when recording her oral history. She gave a very frank description of her family members to say the least. One family member she discusses in depth is her grandmother, Ada Smithers Thorne.

She was an extremely domineering, possessive person. It is my feeling that she ruined her kids.

This is interesting because many of the accounts and rumors that survive speak of Ada Smithers Thorne's mother, Diana Smithers, in much the same way! Ada also told her grandchildren about the Duwamish:

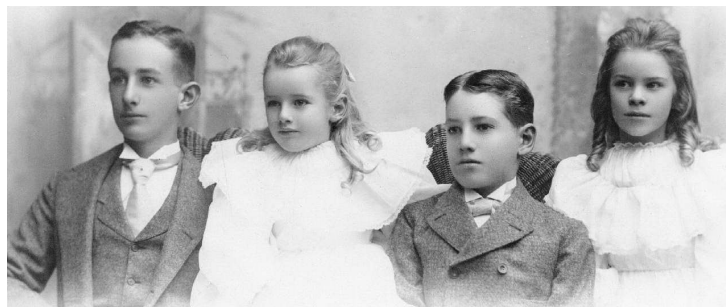
I remember Nana telling me that as a child she learned the dialect, the Chinook language which was the trade dialect, not an Indian language. They had a summer Indian camp on their land. [Diana Smithers] said that, somebody remarked that they should get them off the land. The Indians came there every summer to fish in the Black River. And she said oh, they're alright, they're no trouble at all. I thought to myself, well gee, it was their land first!

Ada Lou's only sibling John passed away in January 2012. Ada Lou is now the only living descendent of the Smithers family. By 1990 Ada Lou and John were already the only family members remaining:

Usually we had the whole family at our house: huge family gatherings for dinner using our good Bavarian china. Then gradually over the years the group got smaller and smaller as these members died out. John and I were the youngest in the family, and our family tree looks like an inverted triangle. It's nice in some ways, because you do get the money eventually. In other ways it's very lonely because there's just John and myself, and our holidays, I believe, are grim. We have no young children around.



Ada Smithers Thorne,
ca. 1878
(RHM# 1994.082.3060)



Ada Smithers Thorne's
children: Robert, Vivian,
Herbert, and Jeanette, ca.
1894. (RHM# 41.3152)