

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

