



“Renton in 1955” Reading Comprehension Questions

“Renton in 1955” describes the changes to Renton’s economy and physical landscape that occurred in 1955. In addition to an expansion of downtown businesses, the City built more schools to accommodate its growing population and planned roadwork that would shape the future of local transportation. Like people in many other cities across the U.S., Rentonites also created organized plans to evacuate in the event of a nuclear attack.

This activity is designed for readers in 7th grade and above. Questions can be used for discussion or as writing prompts. [You can find the original article from September 2015 on Renton History Museum’s Newsletters Page.](#)

1. According to the article, what were two factors that resulted in a second wave of explosive growth for Renton’s population and construction in the 1950s?
2. Between 1954 and 1955, Renton’s Downtown area underwent significant changes. Describe the expansion and movement of businesses during that time, providing specific examples.
3. Between 1948 and 1954, retail sales in Renton grew 49.1%. Local entrepreneurs decided to invest more in their businesses as a result of this economic growth. Name at least three individuals who opened or expanded their businesses in Renton in 1955.
4. In 1955, the Renton Municipal Airport made plans to spend \$1 million for an upgrade that included new runways and jet blast fences. What influenced this decision?
5. How did the Renton School District accommodate the increase in student population between 1942 and 1955?
6. Name two ways that roadways in Renton were expanded during the 1950s.



7. Commander Floyd Lawrence, Police Capt. E. W. Isackson, and Police Lt. Clarence Williams were members of Renton's Civil Defense Corps. How did they engage the community to create a plan to be used in case of a hydrogen bomb attack?

8. Public recreation in Renton was also expanded during this time period. Briefly describe two recreational amenities in Renton that got their start in the 1950s.

Essay Question: The 1950s in the United States were a period marked by economic growth and expansion, but also by mounting tensions in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (now Russia). Fear of nuclear weapons, such as the hydrogen bomb (H-bomb, as it is referred to in the article), changed the ways in which people lived their lives. How did fear of nuclear weapons affect life in Renton? What precautions were taken?

Creative Essay Question: Imagine that it is 1955 and you are a graphic designer. Mayor, Joseph Baxter has commissioned you to create three picture postcards that showcase the expansion taking place in Renton. Which places would you choose to display on the front of each postcard? Explain your reason for choosing each location, and write a brief caption that would go on the back of each postcard.



Answer Guide for Parents & Teachers

1. According to the article, what were two factors that resulted in a second wave of explosive growth for Renton's population and construction in the 1950s?

Two factors that led to growth in Renton's population and construction were the beginning of Boeing's production of jets for commercial travel—sometimes called "the jet age"—and the lifting of wartime restrictions on the economy and housing.

2. Between 1954 and 1955, Renton's Downtown area underwent significant changes. Describe the expansion and movement of businesses during that time, providing specific examples.

In 1954 Woolworth's department store opened its first self-service store in Washington state on 3rd Avenue South in Renton. In 1955 the J.C. Penney's that had previously been located at 715 3rd Ave moved next door to Woolworth's. Together these two stores remade the block of Third Avenue South between Wells and Williams, modernizing it by removing a few small wooden shops and Williams and Swanson Oldsmobile and Chevrolet dealers, which moved across the street to make room. Bartell's Drugs and People's Bank also opened new locations in Downtown Renton. Several other large employers also opened locations downtown.

3. Between 1948 and 1954, retail sales in Renton grew 49.1%. Local entrepreneurs decided to invest more in their businesses as a result of this economic growth. Name at least three individuals who opened or expanded their businesses in Renton in 1955.

Possible examples include:

Nick Jorgensen, proprietor of the Towne House Restaurant for sixteen years, opened his "dream" restaurant at 209 Williams, designed as a meeting space for local civic organizations.

Lily Hedberg took a chance on her dream business, opening Renton Mercantile in the old People's National Bank building in 1955.

Frank Tonkin improved his menswear store, the Toggery, in downtown Renton.

Hayden Williams and Frank Rhodes expanded and improved their auto dealerships.

4. In 1955, the Renton Municipal Airport made plans to spend \$1 million for an upgrade that included new runways and jet blast fences. What influenced this decision?

Starting in March of 1955, Boeing began receiving orders for its first commercial jet, the 707. First they signed a contract with the U.S. Air Force to provide a prototype. By October, Pan American World Airways, American Airlines, United Airlines, and Eastern Airlines had all placed orders as well. Due to these orders, the Renton Municipal Airport created an expansion plan to bring it into the jet age. Airport Manager William Gebenini stated that the improvements would make the local airport "one of the best equipped jet bases in the Pacific Northwest."



5. How did the Renton School District accommodate the increase in student population between 1942 and 1955?

The Renton School District poured \$5.5M into educational facilities between 1942 and 1955. A plan to complete work on 19 schools was put into motion. Twelve of the schools, including the new McKnight Middle School, were mostly completed by 1955. A census was conducted to make sure the schools received their fair share of government funding. Rudolph Seppi was assigned to oversee the many new school construction projects.

6. Name two ways that roadways in Renton were expanded during the 1950s.

Examples include:

Construction on the 2-A project, now known as I-405, began.

Work on a new Williams Avenue bridge and the widening of the Park Avenue North "bottleneck" were underway in the winter of 1955.

Plans to convert Second Ave, Third Ave, and Downtown cross streets into one-way streets were approved. Public concern delayed the start of the conversion to 1956.

7. Commander Floyd Lawrence, Police Capt. E. W. Isackson, and Police Lt. Clarence Williams were members of Renton's Civil Defense Corps. How did they engage the community to create a plan to be used in case of a hydrogen bomb attack?

Commander Lawrence, Captain Isackson, and Lieutenant Williams enlisted Renton's PTA to go house-to-house surveying families about their evacuation transportation needs. The team devised a plan that involved bussing students to meet their parents at a reception center in Ravensdale in the event of an emergency.

8. Public recreation in Renton was also expanded during this time period. Briefly describe two recreational amenities in Renton that got their start in the 1950s.

The Liberty Park swimming pool was built in 1955. It stayed in its original location for 15 years, demonstrating to the community the importance of public recreation for children.

The last available parcel of undeveloped Lake Washington waterfront was reserved for a future beach and park. This area would later become Gene Coulon Beach Park, named for the Superintendent of Parks.

Essay Question: The 1950s in the United States were a period marked by economic growth and expansion, but also by mounting tensions in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Fear of nuclear weapons, such as the hydrogen bomb (H-bomb, as it is referred to in the article), changed the ways in which people lived their lives. How did fear of nuclear weapons affect life in Renton? What precautions were taken?

Example Answer: Fears of an H-bomb attack prompted the City of Renton to plan for potential evacuations. Before I-405 was completed, the roadways in Renton were not capable of handling the huge influx of South Seattle refugees that would have resulted in the event of an evacuation. In addition,



a NIKE missile base was installed in 1955 in a location seven miles southeast of Renton, which made the need to plan for an attack a priority.

Feeling that physical and mental preparedness for an H-bomb attack were of the utmost importance, civil organizers took on the task of preparing the City for a possible evacuation. Renton's Civilian Defense Group, led by Commander Floyd Lawrence, Police Captain E.W. Isackson, and Police Lt. Clarence Williams enlisted the assistance of Renton's PTA to go house-to-house to survey families about their transportation needs in the event of an evacuation. A plan was developed which involved the Renton School District bussing students to Ravensdale where their parents could pick them up in the event of an emergency. The Seattle and King County Civil Defense Departments also released information with instructions to the public. Renton residents were flooded with instructions in different media. One poster, for example, warned "Evacuate: don't sit under the mushroom cloud."

Creative Essay Question: Imagine that it is 1955 and you are a graphic designer. Mayor Joseph Baxter has commissioned you to create three picture postcards that showcase the expansion taking place in Renton. Which places would you choose to display on the front of each postcard? Explain your reason for choosing each location, and write a brief caption that would go on the back of each postcard.

This creative essay gives students an opportunity to think visually and conceptualize a set of postcards. First, encourage students to reread the article, noting any places they might want to feature. Possible examples include any of the Downtown department stores or small businesses (pages 1, 5 and 6), the revamped Municipal Airport (page 6), or McKnight Middle School (page 7). Writing a caption for each will give students a chance to summarize what they learned about each location.

Examples of real-life postcards from this era to supplement this activity are available on the [Curricula](#) page of our website.

Supplemental Resources (all available at no cost)

The United States in the 1950s: Politics and Economy

***In the Suburbs* short film** - Made available to the public via archive.org, this twenty-minute video is a primary source that introduces viewers to idealized suburban life in the 1950s. Family life and postwar consumer culture are the focal pieces of this promotional film made by the editors of *Redbook Magazine*, which was aimed at young adults who were starting families. A full transcript is included on the webpage.

<https://archive.org/details/IntheSub1957>

The American Yawp Chapter 26: The Affluent Society - *The American Yawp* is an online, open-source U.S. history textbook developed by over 300 academic historians. This chapter gives an overview of the economy and political climate of the 1950s, including the postwar boom and population growth in the suburbs. It describes how federal housing programs and redlining contributed to inequality and segregation in U.S. cities, and the landmark civil rights cases of the era, such as *Briggs v. Elliott* and *Brown v. Board of Education*. It also covers topics such as gender roles, pop culture, and the Eisenhower presidency.

<http://www.americanyawp.com/text/26-the-affluent-society/>



Excerpt from Michael Harrington's *The Other America* - Although the 1950s were a time of economic expansion, 40-50 million Americans—about a quarter of the population—still lived in poverty. Harrington, an activist and editor, wrote about the “invisible poor” who went unacknowledged by the middle class and the “segregation of poverty,” in which the difference between poor and middle-class neighborhoods became more pronounced. His work was one of the catalysts for the national War on Poverty, a series of federal anti-poverty actions that were launched in the 1960s.

http://onlinecampus.fcps.edu/media2/Social_Studies/AP_Govt/Topic29/Resources/29_DB_Harrington.pdf

Critical thinking questions: Who is included in *In the Suburbs'* depiction of suburban life, and who is not pictured? Why do you think the filmmakers made this choice? How did the postwar economy change the way young adults chose to make purchases and raise their families? Why was the United States called “The Affluent Society” during the 1950s? Do you think this was a fitting description for the time period? Why or why not?

Expanding Roadways in the United States

Highway Challenge - This is a short promotional film touting the expansion of the Interstate Highway System as a result of the National Interstate Defense and Highways Act of 1956. It explains the expected benefits to drivers and the economy, as well as methods used to create highways.

<https://youtu.be/NPHe8ET33Hg>

From Herds to Highways: The Story of the US Interstate is a short documentary about the development of roadways in the United States. It provides a summary of events that led to the creation of the modern highway system, from the end of the 19th century to the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. It discusses some of the consequences of the highway expansion—some of which were intended, and some of which were not.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-15145271>

Critical Thinking Questions: Which of the two films is an example of a primary source? Is the purpose of each film to persuade or to inform? What makes you think so? What was the purpose of the National Interstate Defense and Highways Act of 1956? What were the lasting effects of the Act?

The Cold War

General Resources

The American Yawp Chapter 25: The Cold War – This chapter of the online textbook covers the lead-up to the Cold War following World War II, the division of Germany, the Korean War, the Arms Buildup, and the Space Race. It gives a detailed description of the effects of McCarthyism, as well as the evolving role of the U.S. in world affairs during the Cold War.

<http://www.americanyawp.com/text/25-the-cold-war/>



Duck and Cover film – This filmstrip, which blends animation and live action, was used to teach elementary school-aged students what to do in the event of a nuclear explosion.

<https://youtu.be/NjQM18JA9s4>

Our Nation's Defense film – This three-minute video shows examples of civil defense drills and explains how the U.S. armed forces were prepared to mobilize in case of an attack.

<https://youtu.be/Scsl2JSXVn8>

New Family in Town film – This film portrays a fictitious scenario in which an English family moves to an American suburb and builds a bomb shelter, eventually convincing their neighbors of the benefits of building their own.

<https://youtu.be/1ZbraaqBwtc>

Pacific Northwest Specific Resources

“The Impact of the Cold War on Washington” – This article explains the transition from a World War II economy to a Cold War economy in Washington State, with a focus on Boeing. It also discusses how the prevailing anti-communist policies of the era shaped regional politics.

<https://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Pacific%20Northwest%20History/Lessons/Lesson%2023/23.html>

“Nike Missile Bases: Washington State Cold War Defenses” – this article on *HistoryLink* gives additional background on the Nike Missile Program. It includes a list of locations in the Seattle area, and what they are used for today.

<https://www.historylink.org/File/9711>

Critical Thinking Questions: Describe the transition from World War II to the Cold War in your own words. How does a “cold” war differ from a “hot” war? How did the Cold War impact the economy and attitudes towards communism both locally and nationally? What were some of the precautions taken by adults and children in the United States against nuclear attacks? What purposes did civil defense films serve? Do you think they were effective? Why or why not?