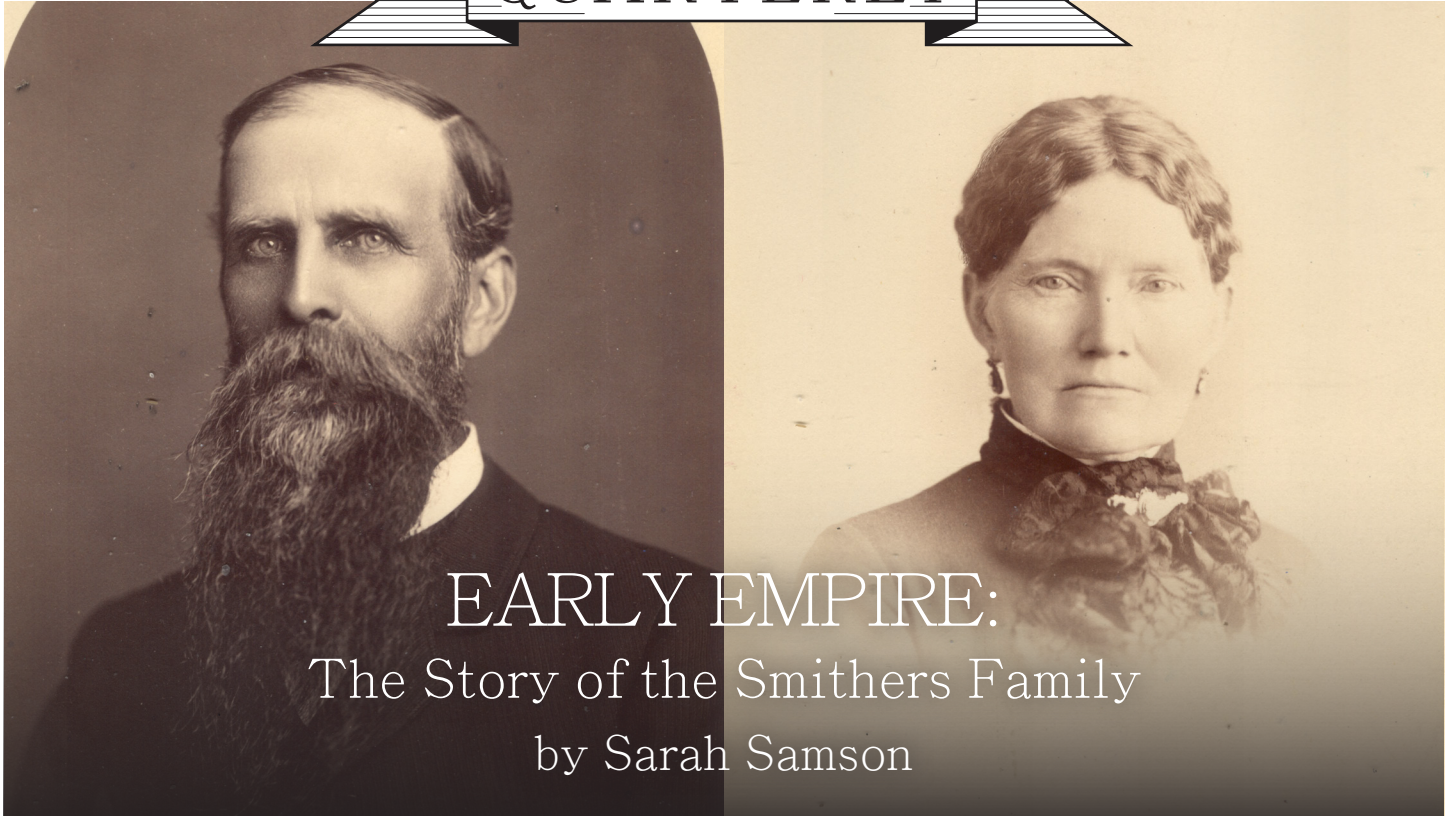


# RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Spring  
March 2014

QUARTERLY

Volume 45  
Number 1



## EARLY EMPIRE: The Story of the Smithers Family by Sarah Samson

For an untold number of years, the Duwamish called the land now known as Renton home. But that began to change with the promise of free land made by the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850. Whites streamed into the Pacific Northwest and the first white man claimed a piece of Renton as his own. The first whites in Renton didn't leave many traces; we have to piece their stories together from censuses, court records, and second-hand family legends. The names Tobin, Smithers, and Thorne are still present in Renton as street

and building names. Who were these people and why were they here? What was life like for them 160 years ago?

“THE WONDERS OF THE PUGET SOUND”  
Henry Tobin's arrival in the Pacific Northwest marked the beginning of vast change for the land and inhabitants of the area just south of Lake Washington. Tobin, hearing “of the wonders of the Puget Sound,” arrived in Washington Territory in April 1853 after leaving his wife

Continued on page 5

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2 *Deep Roots*  
| currently on Exhibit  
at RHM.



3 Museum Report  
| by Elizabeth P.  
Stewart, Director.



4 President's Report  
| by Theresa Clymer,  
Board President.



8 Visitor Experience  
| Report by Colleen  
Lenahan.



# DEEP ROOTS: STUDENTS EXPLORE RENTON FAMILIES

The Museum’s fourth collaboration with Renton High School takes center stage beginning in February 2014. Sophomore Honors English students, under the direction of teachers Derek Smith and Breanne Lawson, visited the Museum three times in October to learn and prepare for this exhibit. *Deep Roots* compares Renton High sophomores’ family experiences to those of Renton’s historic families. The exhibit features photographs from the Museum’s collection as well as the students’ own family portraits. Join us to see how students weave together the stories of today with the stories of the past!

From  
**FEBRUARY**  
 26  
 To  
**MAY**  
 26

## NEW EXHIBIT WILL FOCUS ON RENTON’S WOMEN

Since the beginning of our country, women have been fighting for equal representation alongside their male counterparts. It has taken bold, confident women to blaze a trail for later generations, each one expanding what society deems to be “acceptable” womanly pursuits. *Pioneers, Professionals, and Politicians: Groundbreaking Women from Renton’s Past* (June 3 – August 30, 2014) uses historic objects and photographs from the Museum’s collection to tell

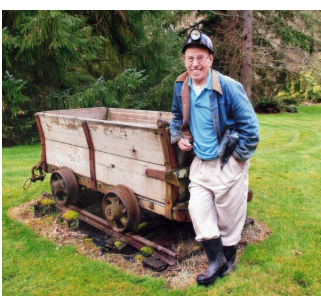
the story of how Renton’s women, both individuals and groups, helped make it the place it is today. While we cannot honor all of Renton’s influential women, we hope to capture the revolutionary spirit that unites them.



## MILT SWANSON’S LEGACY

Newcastle historian Ernest Milton “Milt” Swanson died on January 20, 2014, at the age of 95. Milt was a founding member and past President of the Newcastle Historical Society, a preservationist for the Newcastle Cemetery, and a collector and documenter of all things relating to Newcastle coal mining. Milt was unfailingly generous in sharing what he knew about Newcastle’s past, which was considerable; he regularly spoke with students, led

tours of Newcastle mining sites, and worked with volunteers and staff of other historical societies, including this one. His passion for heritage will live on through all those he inspired.





# MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,  
Museum Director

The month just past, February, has been designated Black History Month since the 1960s and the Museum has previously commemorated it with a variety of speakers about Harriet Tubman, slavery in the Pacific Northwest, race riots during WWII, the Civil Rights Movement, and more. This year we decided to commemorate Black History Month with something a little different: a musical performance by Global Heat that incorporated spoken word, rap, hip hop, and, yes, breakdancing in the Museum. The audience's overwhelmingly positive response made us think more deeply about what Renton's inclusive history really looks like.

Global Heat's performance used music to explore issues that divide us and ones that bring us together. MC Draze explained their performance to a mostly white audience: what an "MC" is and what they do, how breakdancing started, and most importantly, why some of us may find rap and hip hop music intimidating or scary. If we think it's hostile and hard to listen to, Draze said, it's because the young people who sing or speak it are "burning" with the desire to make themselves heard to a world that sometimes seems to ignore them. And, indeed, he and other rappers in the group shared very moving songs such as "We All Miss Our Fathers," about how much all kids need their fathers, and "The Hood Ain't the Same," about how gentrification impacts low income people of all races. Other songs, like "Contact" and "Water on the Moon," were beautiful interpretations of the values we all share: the need for human interaction and understanding.

As a group, the audience discussed Black History Month and what its purpose is. One visitor wondered aloud, "why do we need a special month for African Americans?" and another asked why Black history isn't better incorporated into American history all year round. Together the audience came up with a list of reasons to commemorate African American history: to acknowledge people whose contributions may have been ignored, to create a more accurate and inclusive American history, to provide historical role models for young people, and many more.

With over fifty people in attendance, the Global Heat performance was one of the Museum's most successful programs. In all other measures, too, this Black History Month program was off the charts. One attendee called it "a wonderful cultural event—bridging the gaps between generations, color, culture." If the Renton History Museum can bridge those gaps and educate about history, we have done our jobs well.



Elizabeth P. Stewart  
—  
Director



Draze in "The Hood Ain't the Same": "When you gut my community, it's hard to build a legacy."



Alejandro breakdances in the Museum.

## RENTON HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

Sarah Samson  
Graphic Design & Layout  
Karl Hurst  
City of Renton Print &  
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HISTORY MUSEUM  
235 MILL AVE. S  
RENTON, WA 98057

P (425) 255-2330  
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HOURS:  
Tuesday - Saturday  
10:00am - 4:00pm

ADMISSION:  
\$3 (Adult)  
\$1 (Child)



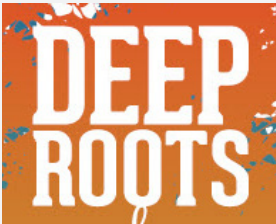
**CULTURE**

## UPCOMING EVENTS



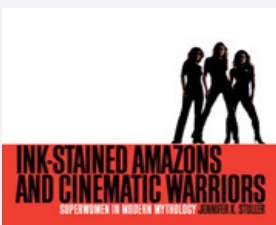
RENTON HISTORY  
MUSEUM OPEN HOUSE  
May 17  
10:00-4:00pm

Enjoy a turbo-charged free third Saturday: docent tours all day and hands-on activities for all ages!



DEEP ROOTS AND  
GOOD VIBES: FAMILIES,  
COMMUNITY, AND MUSIC  
OF THE PAST 150 YEARS  
May 22  
5:30-7:30pm

Learn about how families today aren't so different from those of Renton's history while being serenaded with musical selections from the past and present performed by local high school students.



INK-STAINED AMAZONS  
AND CINEMATIC  
WARRIORS: SUPERWOMEN  
IN MODERN MYTHOLOGY  
June 10  
5:30-7:30pm

Author Jennifer Stuller's program on pop culture women examines women's representations in media and women's roles as media makers.

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Theresa Clymer, President

The Museum's Board of Trustees has been working hard as usual during the past several months with a focus on re-drafting the Renton Historical Society's By-Laws. This activity was our effort to help refresh the level of understanding and to strengthen the overall function and efficiency of the Board. During this process the Board also revised our committee structure. The Board now works in four main committees in addition to the Executive Committee. These committees are: Board Development, Outreach, Events and Fundraising, and Finance. We have put four months of energy and effort into these changes which we are confident will result in serving the Historical Society more efficiently and will improve our level of effectiveness to the greater community.

The Board continues to look for ways in which they can be supportive of the efforts of the Museum and the Historical Society. In a very generous agreement the trustees have pledged to each donate a monetary gift annually to the museum above the required membership dues. An annual cash gift is standard operating procedure for most nonprofit Boards, and it will help provide a floor of support for Museum operations. In addition to this worthwhile gift, the trustees have made it a priority to attend as many museum functions and activities as they can. This would be above the monthly Board Meeting and Committee Meetings, as well as all the committee hours donated.

As you can see, the Museum Board is truly a giving group of people who care about our Renton History Museum. I am very grateful to work with this caring group and with the dedicated Museum staff. It makes my position as Board President most enjoyable.

If you are interested becoming a member of our Board, please contact the Museum for information. We currently have a few positions open and waiting to be filled. We especially need those who may have some background in law and/or fundraising, and we are always interested in those who want to give back to their community. Also, if you are interested in attending a Board Meeting, they are always open to the public. Board meetings are held at 5:30 pm on the fourth Tuesday of the month; please call ahead for the location. Come visit and see what new things are happening here.



Theresa Clymer  
—  
President



Trustees help the public learn more about the Museum.



Trustees get to exercise their creativity at Museum events.





## EARLY EMPIRE: The Story of the Smithers Family

Smithers' Landing on the Black River, ca. 1880. Several unidentified people float in a Duwamish-style canoe. (RHM# 1990.054.3150)

Continued from page 1

and baby boy in Maine.<sup>1</sup> He scouted the area, and by November, Tobin obtained two adjoining land donation claims covering 318 acres at the confluence of the Black and Cedar Rivers.<sup>2</sup> Tobin immediately partnered with other early white settlers Dr. R. H. Bigelow, Obadiah Eaton, and Joseph Fanjoy to form the Duwamish Coal Company in response to the discovery of coal on Bigelow's land.<sup>3</sup> In order to supply timber for the coal mine, Tobin, Eaton, and Fanjoy built a dam and sawmill on the Black River.<sup>4</sup>

Once established, Tobin sent for his wife Diana and their young son Charles. Twenty-six-year-old Diana Gilman Tobin left Maine sometime in 1855 and headed west with her young son in tow.<sup>5</sup> They travelled on a ship and over the Isthmus of Panama and finally, in June 1856, the weary travelers arrived in Seattle.<sup>6</sup> Their family reunion was not happy; Tobin was seriously ill and Native Americans had burned his sawmill to the ground during the Indian Wars of 1855.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear if Tobin was living on his claim when Diana arrived or if he was in Seattle. It seems unlikely

Cover photo:  
Portraits of Erasmus and Diana Smithers, ca. 1870 and ca. 1890, respectively.



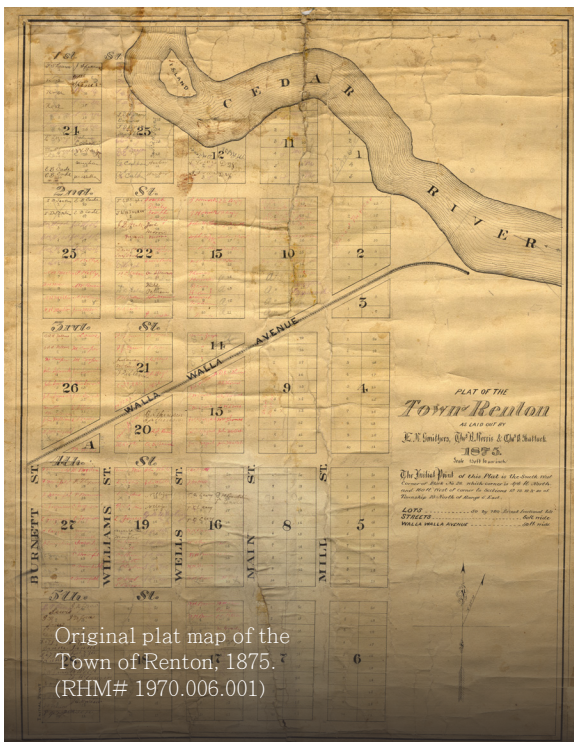
The original Smithers homestead on the bank of the Black River, ca. 1880. (RHM# 1990.054.3151)



his associates would have left him unaided. His illness progressed quickly and by August, Diana was a widow all alone with her young son in an unfamiliar land.

**“ONE OF THE VENTURESOME PIONEERS OF THE NORTH WEST”**

Erasmus Monroe Smithers of Virginia had already made his way west to Iowa when he paid \$50 to secure his passage to the Pacific Northwest.<sup>8</sup> He arrived in November 1852 and secured a land donation claim of 160 acres next to the Tobin claim.<sup>9</sup> It is unclear what intention Smithers, a bachelor, had for his land. Between 1855 and 1856, Smithers fought as a militia soldier during the Indian Wars.<sup>10</sup> After the fighting died down, Smithers met his new neighbor, the widow Diana Tobin. Diana, now the heiress of a sizable land claim, was a very desirable woman in a territory with few white women of marriageable age. For her part, Diana was in a rough spot: she was alone with her son and no income in what was, at that time, very much the Wild West.



Original plat map of the Town of Renton, 1875. (RHM# 1970.006.001)



The Smithers family's  
new home at present-day  
3rd and Rainier, ca.1892.  
(RHM# 1990.054.0114)



On January 8, 1857, Erasmus and Diana married in Seattle.<sup>11</sup> Their union brought together nearly 480 acres of prime real estate. The land was farmable, had access to two rivers, and also proved to bear coal deposits. Legend holds that Smithers discovered the coal seam on Renton Hill in 1873 while walking with local Duwamish man Jimmy Moses.<sup>12</sup> The story varies as to whether or not Jimmy knew of the seam and showed it to Smithers. The discovery of the seam meant investors and railroads were soon sniffing around looking to make a profit. Smithers quickly sold the property for the mine and also platted the new town of Renton on his land in the flats below the coal seam. The sale of property piece by piece, not farming, is really where the Smithers' fortune was born.

Smithers's new money elevated his social standing considerably. He was now a major player in the area and circulated in Seattle's social scene. Almost immediately Smithers landed a spot as a King County Commissioner, serving from 1874 to 1875.<sup>13</sup> Later Smithers also served as trustee of the Territorial

University of Washington.<sup>14</sup> At some point, Smithers became acquainted with Charles C. Terry. Terry was a member of the Denny landing party at Alki Point in 1852 and also opened the first store in what would later be called King County. Smithers and Terry's friendship apparently grew quite close; their daughters were friends and Smithers was listed as an executor of Terry's will in 1867.<sup>15</sup>

#### THE SECOND GENERATION

Initially the Smithers family lived in a single-story farmhouse nestled in a curve of the Black River. This home was referred to as "the old homestead" and was southwest of what later became Renton. It was at the homestead where Diana's son Charles and the three Smithers children, Ada, Edwin, and Fred, grew up. In 1875, Smithers used his new fortune to build a newer, "more pretentious" house just west of the newly platted Renton.<sup>16</sup> This house sat roughly at the present-day location of Safeway on the northeast corner of 3rd and Rainier.

Continued on page 10





Volunteers at the 2014 Volunteer Luncheon.



Global Heat, a hip hop music & dance group performs at the Museum.

# VISITOR EXPERIENCE REPORT

by Colleen Lenahan,  
Visitor Experience Coordinator



Colleen Lenahan  
—  
Visitor Experience  
Coordinator

As most of you may know by now, I am the new Visitor Experience Coordinator at the Museum. After first working with the Museum as a guest curator last year, I am very excited to now be a more permanent part of the Renton community.

In case you are wondering what a Visitor Experience Coordinator does, here is a brief explanation of my duties:

- **Volunteers** - recruitment, screening, placement, and maintenance of the Museum's volunteer force;
- **Public Programs** - all events offered to the public at the Museum or elsewhere;
- **Interpretation** - ways for the public to interact with the Museum's subject matter, both in its exhibits and online;
- **Education** - any of the Museum's activities pertaining to the relationship between Renton-area schools and the Museum's content; and
- **Exhibits** - research, writing, design, installation, and deinstallation of exhibits, responsibilities shared with Sarah Samson, Collection Manager.

After taking stock of everything, I went about identifying areas for improvement and, working with staff and volunteers, I formulated the following goal statements for the coming years:

## Volunteers:

1. Create and restructure volunteer opportunities to accommodate a variety of interests and commitment levels.
2. Create volunteer marketing and recruitment efforts that actively attract higher numbers of volunteers that are well-suited to our organization.
3. Create volunteer training that is consistent, effective, efficient, and replicable.
4. Evaluate and continue improving the volunteer engagement effort regularly.

## Public Programs:

1. Create public programming that consistently attracts a diverse audience.
2. Create programming that is intimately tied to the mission and current exhibit offerings of the Museum.

## Interpretation:

1. Work with Docents to set clear communication goals for each section of the museum and ensure that these goals are shared with all volunteers.
2. Give visitors a forum for discussing relevant history- and Renton-related issues.
3. Supplement the visitor's self-guided experience in the galleries with engaging materials.

## Schools:

1. Increase visibility and popularity of School Tours.
2. Form and strengthen ongoing, lasting relationships with area schools.
3. Create traveling Curriculum Kits for other grade levels and topics.

## Exhibits:

1. Continue offering a wide range of diverse exhibits that present the history of Renton in new and surprising ways.
2. Continue partnering with local area organizations and groups to bring diverse voices into the Museum space.

Overall, my vision is to give the visitors and volunteers more of a voice in the Museum and to give all people a variety of ways to interact with Renton's rich history. I want to do this to help the Museum support its mission to be a place where everybody feels welcome to explore, learn, have fun, and get inspired. I hope that you all will join me on my quest to fulfill these goals.



# MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

November 1, 2013 - February 21, 2014

Lee Anderson  
Florence Murray

Ken Baker  
Connie Baker

James Barei  
Pam & Louis Barei  
John & Eleanor Bertagni  
Larry & Jeannie Crook  
Wendell & Cleo Forgaard  
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Wil Samson Design



## CORRECTION

In the feature article *Home Away From Home: Vall'Alta Transplants in the 1900s* in the March 2013 issue of the Renton Historical Society & Museum Quarterly, I mistakenly wrote that Leno (or Lino) Azzola was the brother of Frank

Azzola. Frank and Leno were not brothers; Leno's brothers were Luigi, Battisto, and Antonio, and Frank's were Alessio, Lorenzo, and Joseph. Thank you to Leno's daughter, Olga Azzola, for pointing out this error. --Elizabeth P. Stewart

Continued from page 7

Charles Tobin was the first white child to live in the area. His upbringing was likely a lonely one as he lacked any siblings until he was five years old. Charles did not leave much of a trace other than sparse entries in census records. Once grown, he worked as a boatman, engineer, and farmer.<sup>17</sup> When he was nearly 30, Charles married Mary Harden.<sup>18</sup> Their marriage was short and childless; Charles died at age 33 in 1885.

Erasmus and Diana's first child, Ada, was born in Seattle in 1857.<sup>19</sup> She was surrounded during childhood by the many Duwamish who still lived along the Black River. She learned to speak Chinook, a hybrid language of Native languages combined with some French and English words.<sup>20</sup> Ada's writings indicate that her father's farm employed Duwamish who lived nearby in longhouses. She recalled that they "made wonderful canoe[s] and paddles of cedar."<sup>21</sup>

As a few other white families took up residence in the area, a school was built on neighbor Christian Clymer's property.<sup>22</sup> Addie Smithers, as she was known by family and friends, was one of the first pupils. She continued her schooling at a convent boarding school in Victoria, Canada and later attended the Territorial University in Seattle, making her a very well educated woman for the time.<sup>23</sup>

Edwin and Fred Smithers were Ada's younger brothers. They were both born at the old homestead (in 1861 and 1865, respectively) and attended the Clymer school.<sup>24</sup> They had a few more playmates than their older siblings as more and more whites streamed into the area attracted by jobs in the coal mine and other burgeoning industries. Their family's economic status, however, separated them from many of the later immigrants and shaped the path that each Smithers child took.

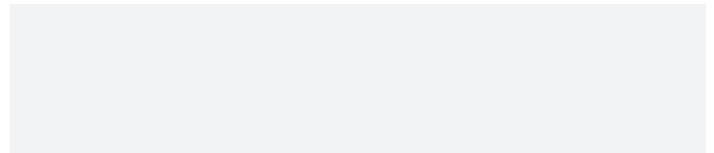
## POSTSCRIPT

The story of the Smithers family will continue in next quarter's newsletter, as we follow Ada, Edwin, and Fred's stories through adulthood.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Ada Smithers Thorne, *Smithers Geneological (sic) History* (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum), 1.
- 2 Copy of Land Donation Claim 0-486 (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum).
- 3 David M. Buerge, *Renton: Where Water Took Wing* (Chatsworth, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc, 1989), 22.
- 4 Buerge, *Renton: Where Water Took Wing*, 22.
- 5 Ada Smithers Thorne, *Smithers Geneological (sic) History* (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum), 2.
- 6 Ada Smithers Thorne, *Smithers Geneological (sic) History* (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum), 2.
- 7 Alan J. Stein, "Renton: Thumbnail History," 14 January 1999, <http://www.HistoryLink.org>; accessed 24 February 2014.
- 8 Ada Smithers Thorne, *Smithers Geneological (sic) History* (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum), 1.
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- 10 Buerge, *Renton: Where Water Took Wing*, 24.
- 11 Ada Smithers Thorne, *Smithers Geneological (sic) History* (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum), 2.
- 12 Buerge, *Renton: Where Water Took Wing*, 25.
- 13 Emily Lieb, "King County Commissioners," 25 September 2006, <http://www.HistoryLink.org>; accessed 24 February 2014.
- 14 Ada Smithers Thorne, *Smithers Geneological (sic) History* (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum), 1.
- 15 Clarence B. Bagley, *History of King County*, vol. 1 (Seattle: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1929), 72.
- 16 Renton Chamber of Commerce, *Renton: The City of Possibilities*, 1 Aug 1901 (RHM# 1994.053.001), 18.
- 17 Washington Territorial Censuses: 1879, 1880, 1881, 1883, 1885.
- 18 Tobin, Charles H. and Mary F. Harden, King County Auditor, Marriage License Registers, 1880-1894, Washington State Archives, Digital Archives, <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/>, accessed 19 Feb 2014.
- 19 Copy of Smithers family Bible (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum).
- 20 Ada Lou Wheeler Oral History, 20 May 1990, (Oral History Collection, Renton History Museum), 4.
- 21 Ada Smithers Thorne, untitled manuscript (RHM# 1997.009.003).
- 22 Angie Burt Bowden, *Early Schools of Washington Territory* (Seattle: Lowman and Hanford Company, 1935), 210.
- 23 "Oldest Native Of City Marks 80th Birthday," *Seattle Daily Times*, 3 November 1937, (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum).
- 24 Bowden, *Early Schools of Washington Territory*, 211.







## SAVE THE DATE: RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

Join us for the Annual Meeting of the Renton Historical Society and enjoy dinner with us! The meeting is open to Society members, prospective members, and museum volunteers. Introduction of new Renton Historical Society trustees, an update on the Museum Master Plan, awarding of the George and Annie Lewis Custer Award for Heritage Citizenship, volunteer awards, and raffle drawing will all be a part of this exciting event. Reservations required. Please RSVP by May 30 (425.255.2330). No regrets, please.

On  
**JUNE**  
 4  
 at  
**6:00 PM**

### MEMBERSHIP FORM

Please select a membership level:

**Basic memberships**

- Individual \$30
- Student/Senior \$20
- Family \$40

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- Benefactor \$75
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**Payment information**

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 235 Mill Avenue South  
 Renton, WA 98057

Phone: 425.255.2330

Fax: 425.255.1570

Email: [estewart@rentonwa.gov](mailto:estewart@rentonwa.gov)  
[rentonwa.gov/rentonhistorymuseum](http://rentonwa.gov/rentonhistorymuseum)

RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM  
235 Mill Ave. S  
Renton, WA 98057



Students at a May Day ceremony at Renton High School, 1932. (RHM# 1985.058.10859)