

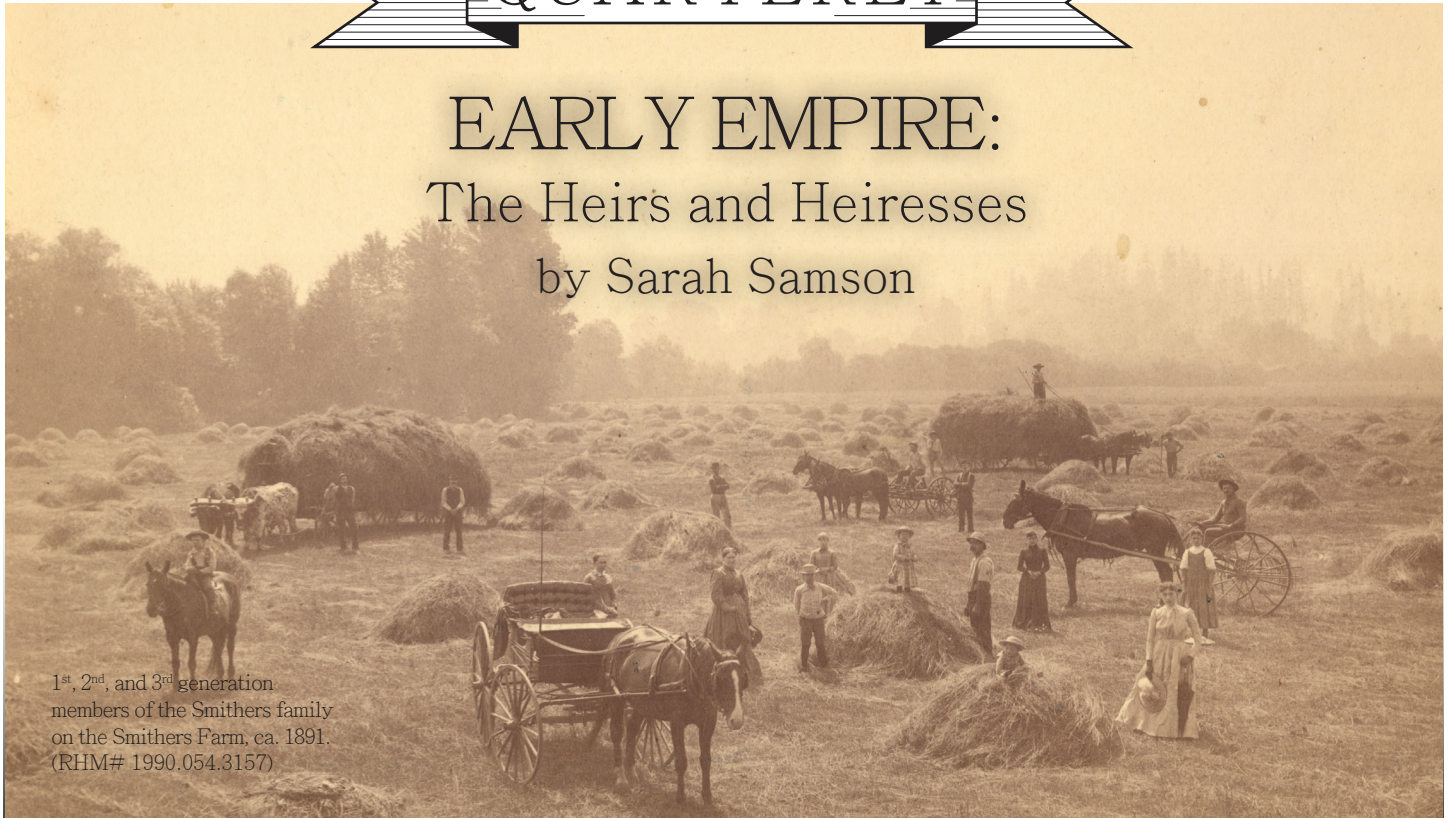
# RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Summer  
June 2014

QUARTERLY

Volume 45  
Number 2

## EARLY EMPIRE: The Heirs and Heiresses by Sarah Samson



1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation members of the Smithers family on the Smithers Farm, ca. 1891. (RHM# 1990.054.3157)

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the second of two articles tracing the history of the Erasmus and Diana Smithers family. In this article we follow the three Smithers children's stories through adulthood and briefly trace the lives of their descendants.

### THE SECOND GENERATION

The three Smithers children—Ada, Edwin, and Fred—grew up among relatively few white families on a

homestead in the valley between the Black and Cedar Rivers. All three children were educated; this was rare at the time, although less rare in wealthy families. The discovery of coal on their land and the subsequent sale of land elevated the Smithers family into the upper echelon of society in the greater Seattle area. The family moved into a grand new house and the children suddenly enjoyed a new way of life. They found that wealth, however, was no guarantee of a happy life.

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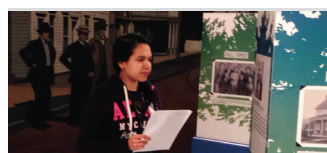
## Also In This Issue...



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3 Museum Report by Elizabeth P. Stewart, Director.



4 Visitor Experience Report by Colleen Lenahan.



8 Collections Report by Sarah Samson, Collection Manager.



# PIONEERS



# PROFESSIONALS



# € POLITICIANS

## Groundbreaking Women from Renton's Past

### PIONEERS, PROFESSIONALS & POLITICIANS: GROUNDBREAKING WOMEN FROM RENTON'S PAST

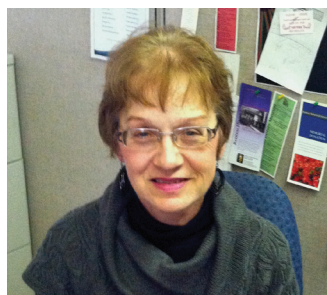
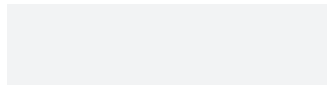
Since the beginning of our country, women have been fighting for equal representation alongside their male counterparts. It has taken bold, confident women to blaze a trail for later generations, each one expanding what society deems to be "acceptable" womanly pursuits. This exhibit showcases historic artifacts and photographs from the Museum's collection to tell the story of how Renton's women helped make it the place it is today.

From  
JUNE  
3  
To  
AUGUST  
30

### WELCOME, LAURIE!

When you have a chance, please come in and welcome our new Museum Office Aide, Laurie Lent. Laurie joined us in mid-April. She comes to us with extensive experience in office administration and customer service, including over seven years in the office at Foster Furniture. We knew we'd made the right choice when one of her references said she dreamed of a day when she could steal her away from us! Laurie

will be handling member services, donations, memorials, and all the other administrative tasks that keep the Museum running smoothly.



### AMAZONS AND WARRIORS

From Wonder Woman to Buffy Summers, Emma Peel to Sydney Bristow, Charlie's Angels to the Powerpuff Girls, superwomen are more than just love interests or sidekicks. In *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology*, pop-culture historian Jennifer K. Stuller explores how the female hero in modern mythology has broken through the boys' club barrier of tradition. Using comics, television and film, we discuss female

action and super heroines from the 1930s to present day. We examine women's representations in media, inspiring us to think deeper about pop culture, media, gender images and storytelling. The program is June 10 at 5:30pm.



# MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,  
Museum Director

Four years ago when we embarked on our Museum Master Planning process, the Renton History Museum had some stereotypes to overcome, and we're amazed at the progress we've made! In the challenging process of surveying opinions about the Museum, we heard a few Renton opinion leaders describe us as "inward-looking" and "disconnected from the community." Ouch! We quickly launched a campaign of reaching out to everyone who might work with us, by looking for areas in which our mission and needs overlapped with those of other organizations in Renton. A few of our partnerships:

- Our annual exhibit collaboration with Renton High teachers Derek Smith, Brea Lawson, and their students. For four years we have worked with Honors English sophomores and ARROW Magazine editorial staff on exhibits that bring a youth perspective to bear on historical topics like family, sense of place, and favorite objects. These students have lives as rich and difficult as our 19th-century forebears, and their willingness to share has given us new friends, new ideas, and an award!

- Our exhibit collaborations with Renton Technical College's ESL Program. The Basic Studies Department's desire to showcase student work at the Museum provided us with the opportunity to make new Renton and King County residents feel welcome and introduce their cultures to our visitors. We hope these ESL exhibits have instilled a greater tolerance and understanding in our community.

- Projects with the Renton Municipal Arts Commission. For those who think they're not interested in history, projects that combine history and art—like The Infinity Loop at the Renton Mine Hoist—offer the chance to enjoy what the Museum has to offer. As our city's only cultural organization with regular open hours, the Museum's collaboration with RMAC just makes good sense.

These alliances can be challenging and they are constantly changing, as we're learning. Derek Smith is taking a sabbatical year in 2014–2015, and RTC President Steve Hanson, a strong Museum supporter, will retire at the end of the year; changing personnel pushes us in new directions, and we'll be looking for STEM students, GIS people, and ethnic communities to work with in the coming years!

These collaborations are not only the right thing for a community museum to do, they represent a way to strengthen and improve our organization, by nurturing a diversity of opinion, by helping others meet their missions, and by introducing new people to Renton's history.



Elizabeth P. Stewart  
—  
Director



Museum staff with teachers  
Derek Smith and Breanne Robirds  
at the opening of Deep Roots.



RTC staffers Liz Falconer and  
Jodi Novotny at the 2010 ESL  
exhibit at the Museum.

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## RENTON HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

Sarah Samson  
Graphic Design & Layout  
Karl Hurst  
City of Renton Print &  
Mail Services

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## MUSEUM STAFF

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Museum Director  
Sarah Samson  
Collection Manager  
Colleen Lenahan  
Visitor Experience  
Coordinator  
Laurie Lent  
Office Aide  
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HISTORY MUSEUM  
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Tuesday - Saturday  
10:00am - 4:00pm

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

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CULTURE

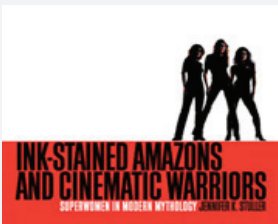
## UPCOMING EVENTS



### RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

June 4  
6:00-8:00pm

Join us for dinner, an update on the Museum, the George and Annie Lewis Custer Award for Heritage Citizenship, volunteer awards, and a raffle drawing!



### 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.



### RENTON RIVER DAYS July 25-27

Visit us at our booth in Liberty Park for children's activities and come to the Museum all week for free!

# VISITOR EXPERIENCE REPORT

by Colleen Lenahan, Visitor Experience  
Coordinator

In order to reach a younger generation of Rentonites, I formed "RenTeens," a Youth Advisory Council for the Museum. The purpose of the Council is to be our connection to the teenage community. The RenTeens will help us test out ideas, promote our exhibits and programs to their peers, and bring a younger voice into the Museum through a project of their own. The Council will also provide its members with community service, civic engagement, teamwork, and networking skills and experience.

So far the RenTeens have met twice. In our first meeting getting to know each other, the teens went into the galleries to look for things they found interesting, things they found surprising, and things they would like to know more about. I sent them home with a survey to ask one of their friends with questions like, "What does history mean to you?"

In our second meeting, we established goals and brainstormed what the group could do for its big project. Some of the ideas they came up with included a show of teen art from young Renton artists, a poetry club, and a history workshop for elementary school kids. They are exceptionally bright young people and I look forward to working with them more.

## ORAL HISTORY TEAM

Last month, the Museum held an Oral History Training with MOHAI's Public Historian, Lorraine McConaghy. The event drew volunteers and members from all over the Puget Sound. McConaghy demonstrated passion and vast knowledge in her training and in the techniques she espoused. The session closed with an exercise during which attendees shared their stories about personal photographs and objects. It was an incredibly moving experience that demonstrated the power of the human stories behind these items.

This training is part of a larger initiative to reboot our Oral History Team. Using the strategies gleaned from McConaghy's training we, as a staff, plan to standardize and formalize the Museum's oral history procedures so that we can maximize our capacity to collect the invaluable stories of Renton residents before they are gone.

We need more volunteers to be able to continue capturing Renton's living history in a more systematic way, so I hope that you will consider joining us on this journey. This is an excellent opportunity to get involved in a project that directly involves the community and does an immense service to the Museum and its historical collection.



Colleen Lenahan  
—  
Visitor Experience  
Coordinator

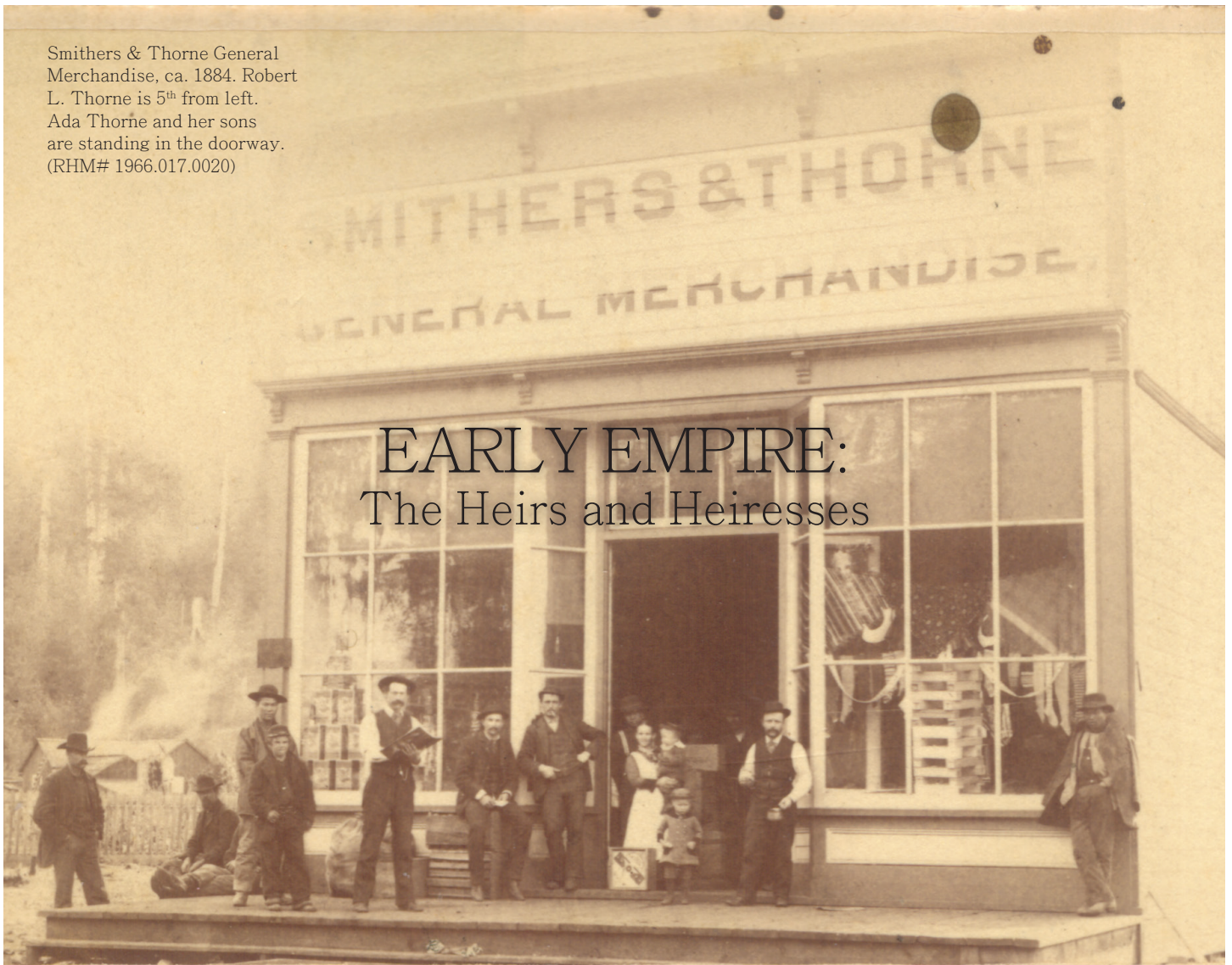


RenTeens explore the Museum exhibits.



Lorraine McConaghy explains the finer points of oral history.

Smithers & Thorne General Merchandise, ca. 1884. Robert L. Thorne is 5<sup>th</sup> from left. Ada Thorne and her sons are standing in the doorway. (RHM# 1966.017.0020)



## EARLY EMPIRE: The Heirs and Heiresses

Continued from page 1

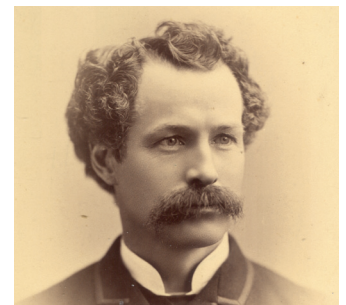
### ADA SMITHERS THORNE (1857-1940)

As a young woman Ada Smithers attended the Territorial University in Seattle. She put her education to use and became a teacher in Renton for a brief spell around 1875.<sup>1</sup> It was also around this time that Robert L. Thorne began courting Addie, as her family called her.<sup>2</sup> Not much is known about Thorne except that he came from New York and switched between working as a surveyor/engineer and a merchant most of his life. The couple married in 1878 at her parents' home.<sup>3</sup> Thorne partnered with his brother-in-law, Edwin Smithers, to form Smithers & Thorne General Merchandise in the early 1880s.<sup>4</sup> The store may have been located on Walla Walla Avenue (now Houser Way).

Ada and Robert had four children: Robert Maxwell "Max" (b. 1879), Herbert "Bert" Erasmus (b. 1882), Jeannette (b. 1887), and Vivian Diana (b. 1889). The children grew up in the grand new house located near present-day Safeway at 3rd and Rainier. Many photographs survive of the children at the big house. They are always shown especially well-coiffed and well-dressed, indicating their wealth.

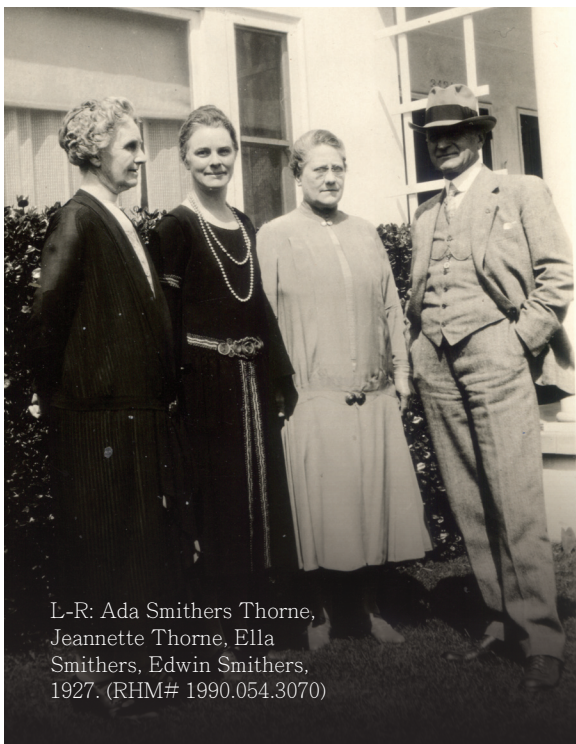
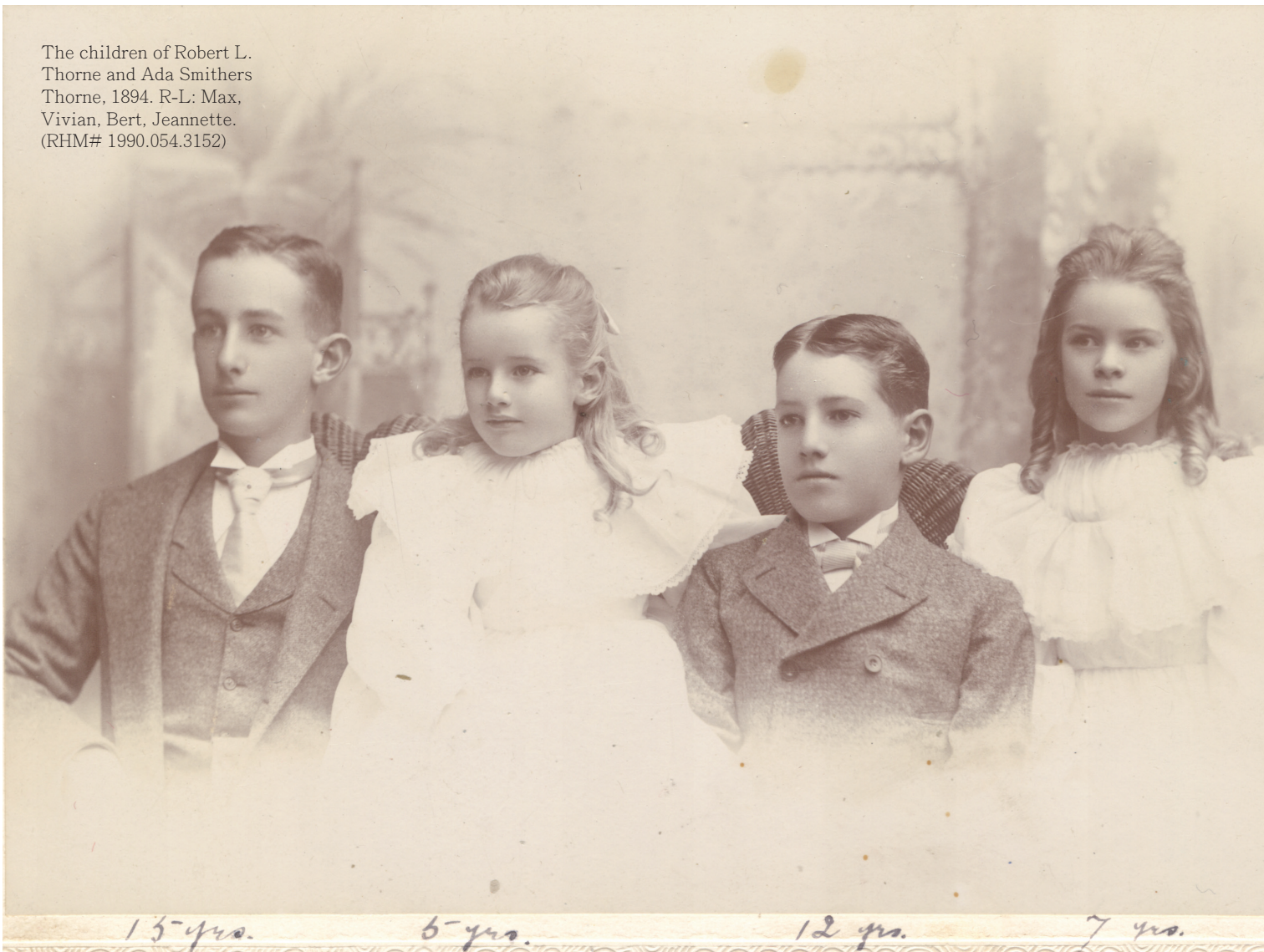


Ada Smithers Thorne, ca. 1878.  
(RHM# 1990.054.3060)



Robert L. Thorne, ca. 1878.  
(RHM# 1997.007.4291)

The children of Robert L. Thorne and Ada Smithers Thorne, 1894. R-L: Max, Vivian, Bert, Jeannette. (RHM# 1990.054.3152)



L-R: Ada Smithers Thorne, Jeannette Thorne, Ella Smithers, Edwin Smithers, 1927. (RHM# 1990.054.3070)

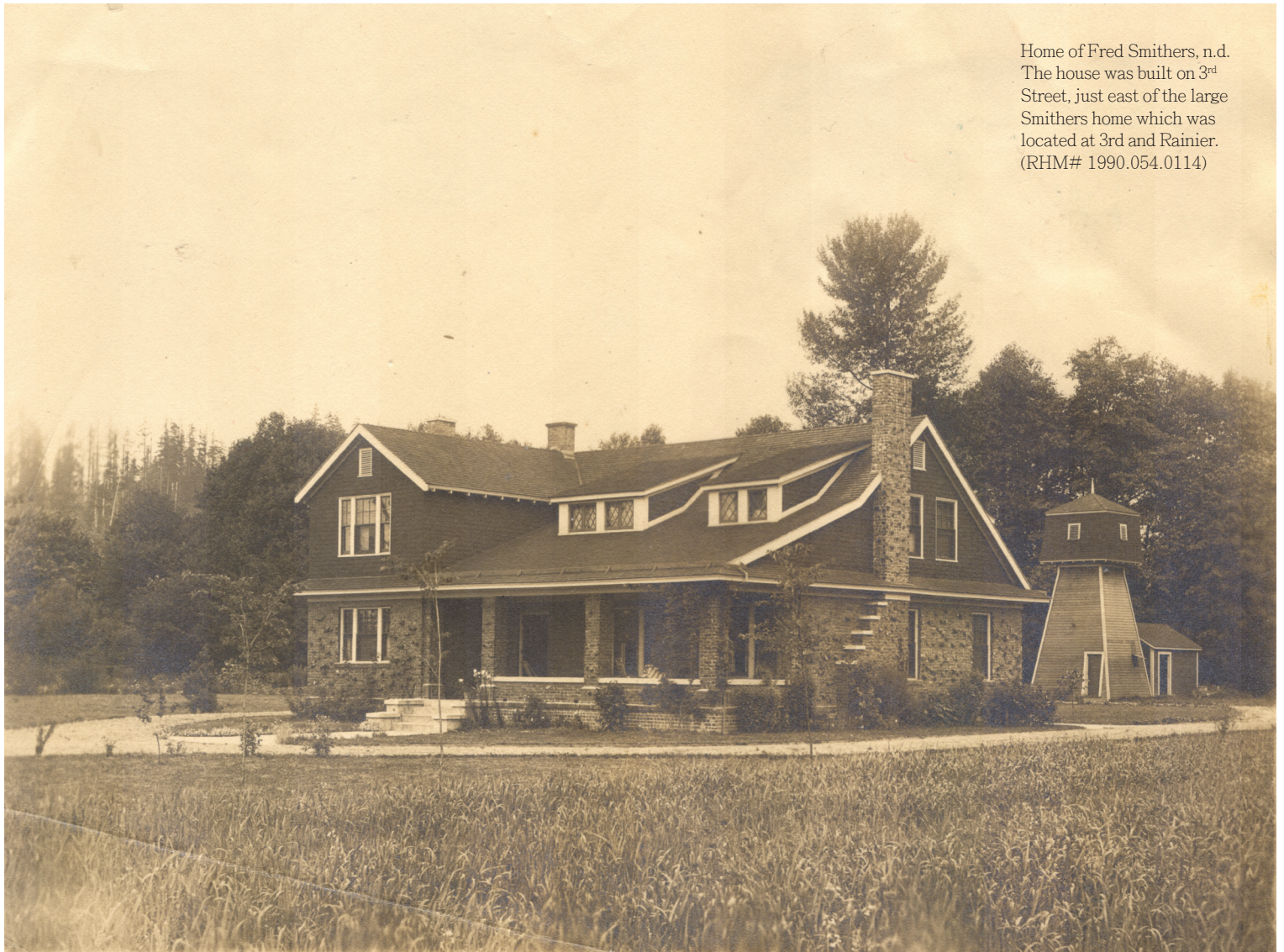
By 1900 Smithers & Thorne General Merchandise was defunct, and Robert was listed in the 1900 census as a real estate agent. It is very likely that this merely meant he was living off the sale of Smithers family property rather than actually engaged in real estate. A comment from Smithers family descendant Ada Lou Wheeler gives this theory credence. "Nobody had to work," she remembered. "Every time they needed some more money they sold another piece of property."<sup>5</sup>

Robert Thorne unexpectedly died of pneumonia in November of 1901.<sup>6</sup> Ada Thorne and all four children remained in Renton for some time, with the younger three still living at home in the big house. Max worked as a building contractor and Bert as a carpenter's helper.<sup>7</sup> Sometime between 1914 and 1919 the Thornes moved to Seattle, where Ada remained until her death in 1940.

#### EDWIN MONROE SMITHERS (1861-1937)

Like his sister Ada, Edwin attended the Territorial University.<sup>8</sup> He probably studied finance or a similar field, since his obituary indicates that he held jobs

Home of Fred Smithers, n.d.  
The house was built on 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Street, just east of the large  
Smithers home which was  
located at 3rd and Rainier.  
(RHM# 1990.054.0114)



like timekeeper and treasurer for railroad and mining companies. Census records list him as a merchant, shoe salesman, and coal salesman, however.<sup>9</sup> All the records indicate that he held jobs rather than relying solely on the family money to survive. He lived and worked in Renton, yet somehow Edwin managed to meet and marry Spokane heiress Jennie Ziegler. Jennie was the daughter of Louis Ziegler, a hardware businessman and one of the elite of Spokane.

Jennie visited the Seattle area in May 1885 and may have met Edwin then.<sup>10</sup> Their courtship was long-distance and/or short in duration; they married in September 1885 in Spokane. Both children of wealthy titans, the two seemed like a perfect match. The *Spokane Falls Review* touted Edwin as “an estimable young gentleman and worthy of the lady he has won.”<sup>11</sup> Their romance was cut harshly short just four months after marriage. Jennie died suddenly while the couple was visiting her parents in Spokane.<sup>12</sup>

With Jennie entombed in Spokane, Edwin left for home alone. For a while he was vice president of a

Seattle coal company before he headed north in 1898 during the Klondike Gold Rush.<sup>13</sup> After a brief time in Alaska, Edwin returned home to Renton, before finally moving to Yakima. There he met his second wife, Ella D. Heckman, a school teacher. Edwin and Ella married in 1902 and lived in Yakima before moving to California, where Edwin died in 1937.<sup>14</sup> They had no children. Ella later moved to Seattle and lived in the same apartment complex as her sister-in-law, Ada.<sup>15</sup>

**FREDERICK GILMAN SMITHERS (1865-1924)**  
The youngest child of Erasmus and Diana Smithers, Fred led a heady public life that was privately tumultuous. Fred does not appear to have gone away to college and as a young man he continued to live in Renton with his parents in the big house. Census records list no occupation for him; he was certainly being supported by family money. That changed in 1884, when Fred suddenly eloped in Seattle with Annie Dillon. She was 17; he was 19.

Continued on page 9



This waist is so small we cannot find a proper mannequin to display it.



The exhibit features Barbara Shinpoch, Renton's first female mayor.

# COLLECTION REPORT

by Sarah Samson,  
Collection Manager



Sarah Samson  
—  
Collection Manager

Our newest exhibit, *Pioneers, Professionals & Politicians*, tells the story of Renton's women. After scouring the Museum's collection, we realized that telling this story wouldn't be as easy as we thought. Research for the exhibit took more digging than most of our past exhibits, but we managed to unearth some great stories. We didn't have much trouble choosing photographs

for the exhibit, though there are certain women not represented in our collection. It was really artifacts where we ran into trouble.

How is it possible that we don't have artifacts in our collection to tell this story?! This refrain was heard at many an exhibit meeting. It is a sad fact that women are often faceless and nameless in history. Their lives and work often simply fade away after their death without any record they ever existed. Women, especially historically, have often dealt with the parts of life seen as ordinary or mundane, such as preparing food or cleaning clothing. The artifacts they use daily are not seen as anything special and are thus discarded. That is the main reason our collection is sparse in the area of women's history.



Ada Thorne's inscribed wedding ring will be displayed in the new exhibit.

We do have a sizeable clothing collection at the Museum and several pieces of it will be present in *Pioneers, Professionals & Politicians*. A fair portion of this collection was donated in the early days of the Historical Society and, sadly, by the time the Museum began professionalizing, much of the information about who donated the clothes was lost. This left us with many great garments representing the 1880s through the 1960s, but we have absolutely no idea who wore these clothes. Having that information—who wore the clothing and what their lives were like—allows us to make the collection come alive in exhibits.

We hope that visiting the exhibit will inspire people to think about preserving the history of the women in their families and perhaps that will lead to donations to our collection. But along with the artifacts and photographs themselves, we need the stories: Who owned this item? What was her life like? What was her experience in Renton like? The answers to those questions, alongside artifacts and photographs, are the building blocks of a great collection that we can use to create vibrant, intriguing exhibits.

So how did we solve our lack of objects problem for *Pioneers, Professionals & Politicians*? Well, you'll just have to come down to the Museum this summer to find out!



# MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

February 22, 2014 - April 30, 2014

Fred Bowen  
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Laureen Ross

Phyl Carroll  
Elizabeth P. Stewart

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Ninfa Gregoris  
Pamela Dean  
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In memory of Auntie Nee:  
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Robert Johnson  
Lucille Miller  
Nancy Monahan  
Laureen Ross

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CULTURE

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Décor Carpet One Floor & Home  
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Continued from page 7

Annie was the daughter of an Irishman working the coal mines in and around Renton; she was certainly not someone his parents considered a suitable match. They married at the St. Charles Hotel in Seattle on July 31, 1884, without the consent of either set of parents.<sup>16</sup> The young lovebirds lived happily together in Seattle with her parents for 3 ½ months before Margaret Dillon, Annie's mother, caught Fred sneaking out of the house in November. Fred's family had informed him that if he chose to stay married to Annie he would be disinherited and he apparently found the pressure irresistible. Margaret recalled telling him "you need not run away. But you may just go home." "Whereupon he commenced to cry," she remembered later in a divorce proceeding. "He is a very child-like person, and said himself he had no mind of his own."<sup>17</sup> The threat of losing out on the Smithers fortune was too much for young Fred; he went home to Renton.

Over a year after he abandoned her, Annie filed for divorce, stating that she had "married that boyish hoodlum for love" and not for money as was intimated during the trial.<sup>18</sup> Renton merchant Charles S. Custer testified in the divorce proceedings. Custer had

been privy to discussions between Erasmus and Diana characterizing the marriage as unacceptable due to Annie's lower class and lack of wealth. He also believed that Fred was "too lazy to do any work, as he never does anything except when obliged to." Fred had turned down a job as a clerk in a store in Newcastle after Custer had secured the job for him.<sup>19</sup> Fred was absent at the trial and the divorce was granted in 1887.



Fred Smithers (back row, bow tie), ca. 1908. (RHM# 1980.010.0966)

Fred moved on from this messy affair. In 1892 he married Ellen Owen, the daughter of another early white Renton pioneer, Dr. Abijah Beach.<sup>20</sup> Ellen was also divorced and had a twelve-year old daughter, Mary “Mamie” Owen, but apparently her status as Dr. Beach’s daughter made her more acceptable in Erasmus and Diana’s eyes. After his marriage Fred embarked on a campaign of public service. He served as Police Court Judge, City Councilman, and even Mayor for a term in 1912. His tenure as Mayor was quite successful, with the papers praising him for “seeing Renton put through some of her most important improvements...and retiring from the office of mayor with fully as many if not more friends than he had when he took the oath of office a year ago.”<sup>21</sup>

Fred and Ellen had no children together and lived in Renton in a large home next to the grand Smithers house. The family wealth allowed them to travel extensively, including one trip to Europe which the local papers reported was to last a year.<sup>22</sup> Sister Ada and her daughters also travelled to Europe and may have accompanied Fred and Ellen on more than one occasion. Fred retired from public service in 1921 and died in 1924 at age 58.<sup>23</sup>



Ellen Beach Smithers, ca. 1900. A divorcee with a child, she was Fred’s second wife. (RHM# 1981.117.1511)



Mary “Mamie” Owen Thorne, ca. 1900. Fred’s step-daughter, she married her cousin, Max Thorne. (RHM# 1990.054.3156)

## ADA’S DESCENDANTS

With Edwin and Fred remaining childless, only Ada Smithers Thorne provided heirs for the family fortune. Three of her four children gave Ada five grandchildren, but that is where the family tree ends; the entirety of the fourth generation either died young or remained childless.

Max Thorne, an architect, married his first cousin by marriage, Mamie Owen, and had two children, Thelma and Robert.<sup>24</sup> Max passed away in 1941, outliving his mother Ada by only one year. Bert Thorne had no known profession and is listed in one census with his occupation as “own income,” indicating that he may have been living off the family fortune.<sup>25</sup> He married Ruth Farrar in 1908 and had a son, Robert Converse Thorne, in 1909.<sup>26</sup> Bert’s life, however, turned tragic: by 1910 his wife and son were no longer living with him and in 1911 his baby boy died.<sup>27</sup> Around this time he accepted a job as purser on a Pacific Coast Co. coal steamer, during which he contracted an unnamed illness.<sup>28</sup> Bert passed away in 1915 at the age of 32.

Ada’s daughters, Jeannette and Vivian, both became nurses. In 1920 they were working at hospitals: Jeannette as the Assistant Superintendent of Nurses at Seattle Children’s and Vivian in a medical laboratory.<sup>29</sup> Jeannette’s career was cut short in 1922 when she married George C. Wheeler. She and George had two children, Ada Lou and John. Vivian lived in Seattle all her adult life and never married.

## POSTSCRIPT

Almost the entire Smithers family is buried at Lake View Cemetery in Seattle. There is a family plot in the southwest portion of the Seattle “pioneer cemetery” marked by a huge obelisk. (Photo on page 12.)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Angie Burt Bowden, *Early Schools of Washington Territory* (Seattle: Lowman and Hanford Company, 1935), 210-211.
- 2 Transcript of Alura Brown’s journal Vol. 1, (Brown Family History file, Renton History Museum), 14.
- 3 Thorne, Robert L. and Ada Smithers, King County Marriage Records, 1855-1990, WA State Archives, Digital Archives, <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/>, accessed 19 Feb 2014.
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- 5 Ada Lou Wheeler Oral History, 20 May 1991, p.2 (RHM# 1991.113.001).
- 6 Thome (sic), Robert Laurence, King County Death Register, WA State Archives, Digital Archives, <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/>, accessed 3 Mar 2014.
- 7 1909 Renton City Directory, p. 314.
- 8 “Death Takes E. M. Smithers,” *Seattle Daily Times*, 21 Feb 1937 (Obituary Collection, Renton History Museum).
- 9 1883 Washington Territorial Census, 1900 Federal Census, 1910 Federal Census.
- 10 Personal correspondence, Jennie Ziegler letter to Uncle Jake, 25 Jun 1885 (Smithers Family History file, Renton History Museum).
- 11 “Mated,” *Spokane Falls Review*, 3 Oct 1885.
- 12 “Death of an Estimable Lady,” *Spokane Falls Review*, 30 Jan 1886.
- 13 “Death Takes E. M. Smithers,” *Seattle Daily Times*, 21 Feb 1937.
- 14 Smiters (sic), Edwin and Ella Heckman, Yakima County Auditor, Marriage

- Records, 1896-2008, WA State Archives, Digital Archives, <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/>, accessed 3 Mar 2014.
- 15 Ada Lou Wheeler Oral History, 20 May 1991, p.1 (RHM# 1991.113.001).
- 16 Smithers, Frederick G. and Annie M. Smithers, Divorce, King Frontier Justice, 18 March 1886, p. 5.
- 17 Smithers, Frederick G. and Annie M. Smithers, Divorce, p. 6.
- 18 Smithers, Frederick G. and Annie M. Smithers, Divorce, p. 14.
- 19 Smithers, Frederick G. and Annie M. Smithers, Divorce, p. 17.
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- 23 Smithers, Fred G., Washington State Death Records, WA State Archives, Digital Archives, <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/>, accessed 4 Mar 2014.
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- 25 1910 Federal Census.
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- 27 Thorne, Robert Converse, Washington State Death Records, WA State Archives, Digital Archives, <http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/>, accessed 27 Feb 2014.
- 28 “Herbert Thorne Passes,” *Renton Herald*, 28 May 1915.
- 29 1920 Federal Census.



## WHAT WILL YOUR LEGACY BE?

Your donations to the Renton Historical Society's Endowment will make it possible for us to meet our mission of documenting, preserving, and educating about Renton's rich history. When planning your estate, please consider a gift of cash, real estate, insurance, or other financial instruments, which can lower your tax burden and leave a legacy for your community. Consult with your estate planner or our Edward Jones representative, Shane Klingenstein, for more information.

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RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM  
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Smithers plot at Lake View Cemetery in Seattle.