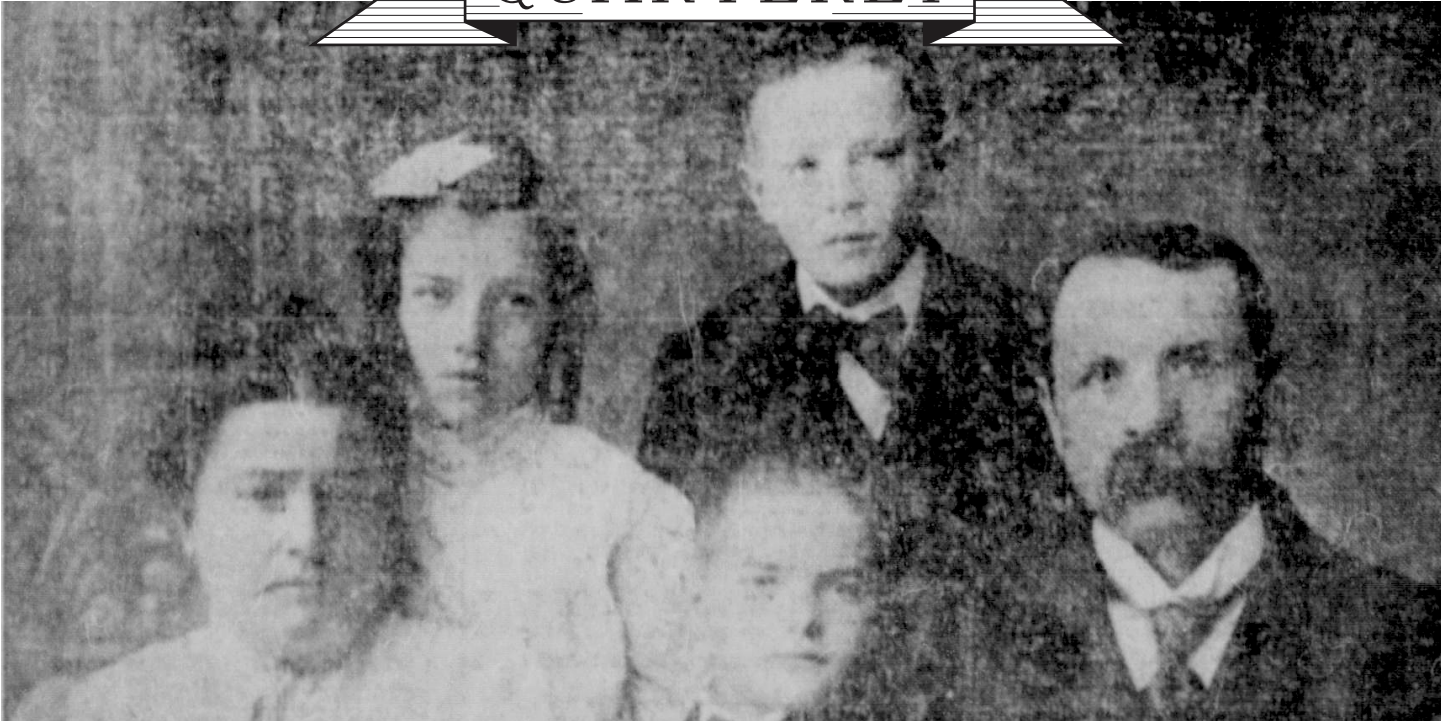


RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Spring
March 2016

QUARTERLY

Volume 47
Number 1



A FIENDISH DEED: PART I by Sarah Samson

The May 29, 1906 murder of Elsie Millhuff rocked Renton to its core. No Renton papers survive (that we have found) from 1906. This story was pieced together using Seattle and other newspapers, Renton City Council minutes, census records, city directories, and oral histories. The following is the first of a two-part account of the mystery of Elsie's murder.

A special thank you to Reed Millhuff, Jr. for assisting me in research and sharing his family history and photographs with me.

RENTON IN 1906

Originally settled by white men because of its fertile river valley location, Renton grew up during its first 50-some years into a healthy, business-diverse little town. Having finally incorporated as a city in 1901, Renton was celebrating its five-year anniversary and was on its second mayor, J. Edward Jones. The population numbered less than 2,000 residents.

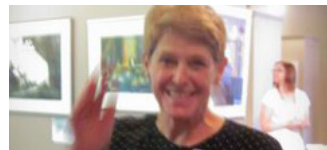
Small industries were the main employer in town, with Renton Coal Mine, Denny-Renton Clay & Coal Co., and Renton Glass Works as hives of activity. Most of town was concentrated

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at RHM.



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Board President.



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| by Mark Mulder, Public
Engagement Coord.

BIRTH *Life* & DEATH



BIRTH, LIFE & DEATH

Book your tours now and don't miss your chance to see this fascinating exhibit! Doctors followed the westward expansion across America. Renton's first doctor, Dr. Abijah Beach, arrived in 1883. As Renton quickly grew he was followed by many hardworking men and women who took care of the masses. *Birth, Life & Death* illustrates the story of Renton's rich medical history including Dr. Adolph Bronson, Nurse Olive Guitteau, Dr. Charles Dixon, Dr. Hugh Adams, Nurse Gertrude Adams and more. It features numerous historic photographs and antique medical tools and uniforms, most on display for the first time!

From
DECEMBER
8
To
MAY
21

IMPROVEMENT CONTINUES!

We'll be undertaking a complete renovation of our museum lobby and offices this spring, thanks to the City of Renton, 4Culture, the First Financial Northwest Foundation Fund of the Renton Community Foundation, and donors to the Bill & Terri Briere Fund. The result will be a new, more attractive, and more educational intro to the engaging exhibits in our gallery. Our office renovation will include a new floorplan, new furniture, a new storage

solutions and new carpet. The front of the building will also receive a small make-over with a new awning, signage, and banners. We will try to minimize disruptions to our schedule, but watch Facebook for changing hours. Donations still gratefully accepted!

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&
FOLLOW US ON
TWITTER

THANK YOU, LAURIE!

Our Museum Office Aide, Laurie Lent, left us in February to move to Aubrey, Texas (near Dallas) to be near her daughter and grand-kids. She's living in a development so new that the USPS couldn't decide on her address! Laurie had been with the Museum for two years, doing a fantastic job greeting visitors, keeping track of memberships and donations, and making the office run smoothly. Laurie very

much enjoyed working with our volunteers on Saturdays and will miss them. While we look for a replacement to fill Laurie's very capable shoes, we may be a bit slower in responding, so please bear with us. We miss you, Laurie!



MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,
Museum Director

You've seen the headlines: "10,000 Baby Boomers Retire Every Day in the U.S." Born just after midnight on January 1, 1946, New Jersey's Kathleen Casey-Kirschling was known as "America's First Baby Boomer"; her retirement in 2011 signaled the avalanche of retirements that will reshape everything about the U.S., as we Baby Boomers make way for new ways of doing things. The 76 million people born between 1946 and 1964 certainly had an impact, both positive and negative, from (initially) overcrowded schools to new suburbs and shopping malls in the 1960s to women's liberation in the 1970s to today's concerns about an overloaded health care system.

We're already seeing the effects here at the Renton History Museum. Experts tell us that those who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s will want to volunteer differently. They'll want to work on short-term projects, and then take time away to travel or serve another nonprofit. They're reluctant to commit to the ongoing responsibilities of becoming Board members or tour leaders. Some of this is true, and we're already trying to craft new volunteer assignments that will appeal to the groundswell of retirees who we know want to give back to their communities. Even as some of our volunteer needs don't change—the requirement that we have trustees to provide regular oversight, raise funds, and help educate the public, for example—we are excited about the possibility of so many healthy, educated, community-minded seniors with extra time on their hands.

One of the Museum's VIPs (very influential partisans) just retired from the City of Renton, and we want to acknowledge her stewardship of the Museum in the past almost-ten years. Community Services Administrator Terry Higashiyama left the City of Renton in February to pursue her second life. As the head of the Community Services Department—and my boss—Terry tirelessly promoted the best possible quality of life for Renton residents, in its museum, parks, and so many other areas. Terry championed museum initiatives to anyone who would listen, and she gave us good ideas and strategies when we needed them. If, as Woody Allen said, 80% of success is just showing up, Terry was 110% successful, because she showed up *everywhere* for *everyone*—that is the depth of her caring, involved approach to life.

If Terry Higashiyama is an example—and we believe she is—we can all only benefit from the unleashing of the creative energy, spirit, commitment, and knowledge of this new class of seniors. It's up to all of us to figure out together how to harness their drive as a force for moving the Renton History Museum forward into the future.



Elizabeth P. Stewart
—
Director



We don't know who qualifies as Renton's first Baby Boomer, but if you have a candidate, let us know.



We wish you well Terry!

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Karl Hurst
City of Renton Print &
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Museum Director
Sarah Samson
Collection Manager
Mark Mulder
Public Engagement
Coordinator

RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM
235 MILL AVENUE S
RENTON, WA 98057

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HOURS:
Tuesday - Saturday
10:00am - 4:00pm

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



CULTURE

UPCOMING EVENTS



PROMISED LAND SCREENING

June 11

4:00-6:00 pm

Join filmmakers Sarah & Vasant Samudre to screen their new documentary which follows two tribes, the Duwamish and the Chinook, as they fight for the restoration of treaty rights.



TOO HIGH AND TOO STEEP: RESHAPING SEATTLE'S TOPOGRAPHY: AUTHOR'S TALK WITH DAVID B. WILLIAMS

June 14

7:00-8:30 pm

Author David B. Williams explores the dramatic human intervention that remade the landscape of Seattle and Renton, too, in the cities' first century.



CURATOR'S TALK: SARAH SAMSON ON *FROZEN IN TIME*

July 14

6:00-7:30 pm

In conjunction with our *Frozen In Time* exhibit, Collection Manager Sarah Samson discusses the extensive research done on the Museum's collection of 1909 glass plate negatives.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Stefanie McIrvin, President

Spring is finally around the corner and with it brings opportunities for positive change. The Board of Trustees is hard at work planning several upcoming events to keep the Renton Historical Society and Museum moving forward. First is our annual board retreat in March, which is a great opportunity for trustees to get to know each other and our individual strengths. Perhaps even more importantly, the annual retreat allows us to leverage those strengths to create lasting, positive change. This year our meeting will take place at the Kent Historical Museum, giving us the opportunity to get out into the community and see how another, similar museum functions. We'll be discussing ways we can improve our fundraising efforts, as well as what it means to develop and support a high-functioning board.

Also this year we will be revising the Museum strategic plan. The plan is revised every five years and is meant to be our guiding document – it tells us where we want to go and how we're going to get there. Not only does it drive our goals forward, but it helps to narrow those goals into smaller, achievable objectives. Each objective gets us closer to meeting our action plan. At the upcoming board retreat we will brainstorm ideas for the strategic plan and thereafter an ad hoc committee will be formed to work on drafting the new plan. Our goal is to have the new plan finalized by the end of the year.

Lastly, this spring we are actively recruiting talented, community-oriented people to serve on the board. We simply cannot continue to do the work the Museum needs with the small size of our current board. And if we truly want to make positive changes and expand the Museum's offerings, we are going to need more people to help. We're currently looking for board members to assist with strategic planning, fundraising and investment oversight, events planning, construction oversight, board development and education, and membership development. If you, or someone you know, is interested in volunteering please let us know. And please pass along the word that we are looking for new trustees.

Thank you for your continued support of the Renton History Museum!



Stefanie McIrvin

—
President

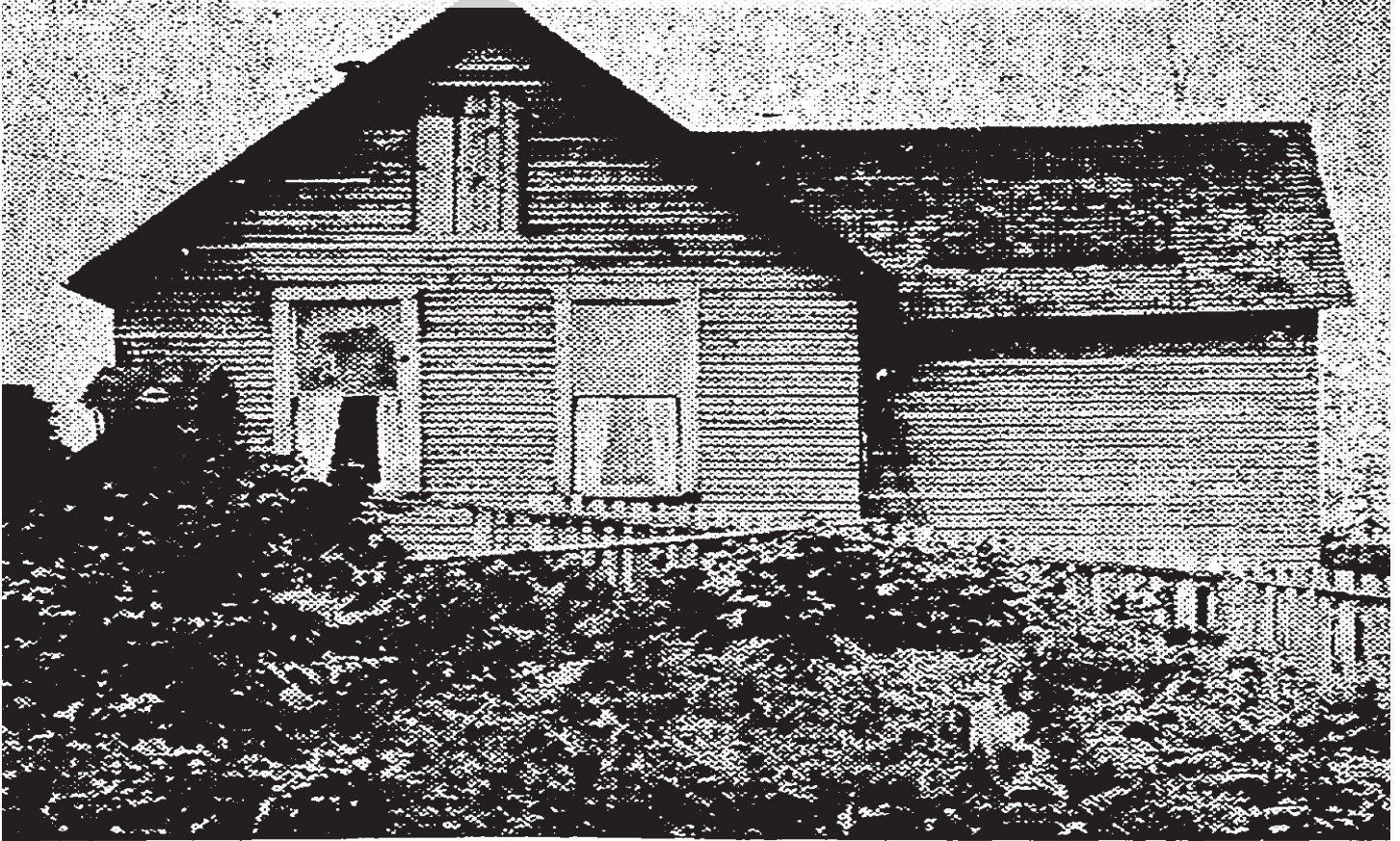


Trustees Stefanie McIrvin, Kim Sweet, Laura Clawson, Sandra Meyer, and Betsy Prather at the 2015 Annual Meeting.



Trustees Stefanie McIrvin, Lisa Wivag, and Vicki Utterstrom doing outreach at Renton River Days.

A FIENDISH DEED: PART I



(*Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.3)

The Millhuff home near Renton.

Continued from page 1

in a 6 x 7 block radius that covered the northeast section of today's downtown Renton. The upper part of Renton Hill and all of North Renton were so sparsely populated that they were not included on the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps. Given Renton's meager population several areas in town remained undeveloped; some were already abandoned by men who had moved on.

The Millhuff family came to Renton in 1901. Previously a coal miner in Cumberland, Washington, forty-eight-year-old William Millhuff secured work in the mines of Renton. He and wife Bertha, a Finnish immigrant, had a daughter and two sons: Elsie (age 11), George Washington (age 9), and Reed Marion (age 7). The Millhuff family lived in a small wood-frame home on Renton Hill.¹ The family kept a cow, presumably for family use. On the evening of May 29, 1906, Elsie, just three weeks after her eleventh birthday, went out looking for their cow.

Farm animals in 1906 were largely free-range, like the Millhuffs' cow. Homes along Main Street had fenced yards to keep the cows herded through town off their property. It was not unusual for a cow to wander off, nor was it unusual to ask an eleven-year-old girl to go find it and bring it home. Children during that time period had a level of responsibility and freedom that is uncommon today.

Cover photo:
The Millhuff family, L-R:
Bertha, Elsie, Reed (front),
George, and William Millhuff.
(*Seattle Star*, 31 May 1906, p.1)

A vast crowd gathered near the edge of the field where Elsie's body was found. (Seattle Star, 31 May 1906, p.1)



Posse guarding Elsie's body while waiting for the coroner. (Seattle Daily Times, 31 May 1906, p.3)

Sometime during her search for the wayward cow, Elsie went missing. Her absence was immediately noticed, and her mother brought her father into the search as soon as he got off shift at the mine at 11:00 p.m.² The town rallied, searching through the night. Just over twelve hours after they began searching for her, local mercantile owner Henry McKnight found Elsie's body in a shallow grave near the bank of the Cedar River. Miner Phil Marlotty remembered in 1978 that "they shut the Renton Coal Mine down and all us miners went to look for her. We searched everywhere and we finally located her on Cedar River right below the Park Bridge."³ Today known as the Bronson Bridge, this bridge was one of only two links between Renton and North Renton. The bridge was near an old abandoned barn in a pasture where Elsie was last seen.

Elsie's murder was a brutal one and police surmised sexual assault was the motive for the attack. Drs. Adolph Bronson, Charles Dixon, and Abijah Beach testified to the nature of her wounds: a blow to her skull caused a hematoma; her neck was sliced open nearly ear to ear; and her spinal cord was severed at the base of the skull. A stab wound to the heart was judged to be the cause of death.⁴

As news of Elsie's fate spread, fear rippled through the townspeople and previously free-range children were locked in their yards or kept indoors all day.⁵ The *Seattle Daily Times* reported that "Renton people are aroused to a pitch of fury never before equaled in the history of the little coal mining town."⁶ The rival paper, the *Seattle Star*, added that "[b]usiness is almost entirely suspended, and the streets are dotted with groups



discussing every idle rumor that springs up.”⁷ Before Elsie’s murder the only agitation of this level was when murderous fugitive Harry Tracy briefly holed up near Renton in 1902.⁸

CSI: RENTON

The case immediately drew wider attention, first in Seattle and later across the whole western United States; headlines about the search for Elsie’s killer were splashed across the *Seattle Daily Times*, *Seattle Star*, *San Francisco Call*, and *The Salt Lake Herald*. The authorities, headed by King County Sheriff Lou Smith, quickly zeroed in on the last people to see Elsie alive: her friend Marie Connelly and local paperboy Thomas Nelligan, Jr.⁹ Elsie had stopped by Marie’s house around 9 pm, asking about the missing cow. While Elsie was there, Tom stopped by to give Marie some hawthorn flowers. Tom and Elsie then each went on their way, with Elsie never to be seen alive again.¹⁰

Fourteen-year-old Tom Nelligan was, by all accounts, a well-known and well-liked local boy. The Nelligan family had a long history in Renton, having arrived in 1881. Thomas Sr. and his wife Ellen, both Irish immigrants, had five children; Thomas Jr. was their youngest. Like Elsie’s father William, Thomas Sr. worked mainly as a coal miner, although he also worked briefly as a gold miner and laborer.¹¹

Young Tom “had a good reputation in Renton,” one newspaper reported. “He [was] naturally backward and retiring, with something of a girlish disposition.”¹² He was questioned by law enforcement and the prosecutor’s office, who found numerous inconsistencies with his story. Did he have a knife the

night of the murder? Which direction did he go upon leaving the Connelly home? Were the clothes he was wearing the same he wore on the night of Elsie’s murder? What time did he get home that night? During his lengthy interrogation, Nelligan’s answers reportedly changed and sometimes clashed with the statements of Marie and other witnesses.¹³

Nelligan was arrested and jailed on May 31st after intensive questioning. “I will have to admit that I told several conflicting stories to those who interviewed me... because I was excited and confused,” stated Nelligan. “There were a half a dozen officers talking to me at the same time, and I was so muddled that I couldn’t think half the time.”¹⁴ After calming down and collecting his thoughts, Nelligan gave a statement to the *Seattle Daily Times*: “When I left the Connellys [sic] I saw a girl about three blocks away that looked to me like Elsie Millhuff, but I was not certain that it was she. The place where I saw her, I think, is about six blocks from the spot where her dead body was found. She was then just turning the corner to enter the road running past the cow pasture along the river bank, near where the body was found. This girl wore a short red coat, a blue sailor hat with two white ribbons and carried a stick in one hand and a handkerchief in the other.”¹⁵

A coroner’s jury was held June 1st to determine the official cause of death and debate Nelligan’s guilt. The jury was made up of six Renton men, with druggist Fred Brendel as foreman.¹⁶ Marie Connelly was one of the witnesses. She contradicted Nelligan’s testimony, saying that after Tom and

Continued on page 10



RenTeens Vanessa Pacheco, Cassie Dozier, Kelly Chhor, and Oscar Locke stand in front of their newly installed exhibit on Williams Ave S.

RENTEENS REPORT

by Mark Mulder,
Public Engagement Coordinator



Mark Mulder
—
Public Engagement
Coordinator

The RenTeens hit the ground running in 2016! The very first meeting of the year had the group installing the exhibit *Renton's Changing Identity* at the corner of 3rd and Williams. This exhibit was researched and written by the RenTeens during the 2014-2015 school year. It explores the differences between downtown Renton and The Landing, using historic and contemporary photographs as well as interviews with fellow high school students, Renton History Museum volunteers, and members of the community. The exhibit is located at 306 Williams Ave S in the windows of the old Hong Kong Kitchen, and can be visited any time, day or night. Please stop by and check it out the next time you are downtown!

Currently the RenTeens are working on a project that will look at Renton during the Cold War. They are still in the research phase, and are digging deep into how Rentonites coped with Cold War fears. From Boeing and PACCAR emergency procedures to home fallout shelters and Civil Defense programs, the RenTeens are exploring all the ways in which the Cold War tensions of the 1950's and 1960's played out on a day-to-day level. This project will take them to the archives of the Museum of Flight in Seattle. The group has been invited to tour the library and archives, as well as the Exhibit Department and the museum itself. This will be a fantastic opportunity for the RenTeens to experience the same research conditions in which professional writers and researchers work, and to spend some time seeing how other museums work.

If you have any information, memories, artifacts, or photos about the Cold War era in Renton and would like to share them with the group, please contact me at mmulder@rentonwa.gov. I know the RenTeens would love to hear from you.

If you or someone you know is or knows a Junior High or High School student aged 13-18 that would like to join the RenTeens, we are always looking for new members. RenTeens students work with artifacts, conduct research, and have a say in the stories that RHM tells, and how we tell them. It's never too late to get involved, so don't hesitate to get in touch!

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November 16, 2015 - February 15, 2016

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Continued from page 7

Elsie had each left her house that she saw Tom walk down the road that led to the abandoned barn, the same direction that she had seen Elsie go.¹⁷ Despite the discrepancies in testimony, the jury found no evidence that Nelligan was the killer and he was released.¹⁸ The County Coroner, Dr. F. M. Carroll, agreed with Nelligan's discharge. He told the *Seattle Daily Times* that "he [did] not believe the boy could be guilty of the murder" and instead believed that some sort of "degenerate" was to blame.¹⁹

The *Seattle Daily Times* and *Seattle Star* vacillated wildly in their characterizations of Nelligan, with the *Star's* reporting bordering on sensational. After initially splashing his name and photograph across their front pages and portraying him as almost certainly the one who committed this "fiendish deed," the newspapers quickly proclaimed his innocence once Nelligan was released after just a day in custody. One reported that "the discharge of Tom Nelligan... on motion of the State's attorney, after a hearing before the Coroner's jury, will satisfy a vast majority of the people—as scarcely no one believed for a moment that the young fellow had any part in the murder of the little Millhuff girl."²⁰ Joe Wood, long-time Renton resident and business owner/volunteer fire chief, echoed this sentiment, saying "we cannot believe that Tom Nelligan is the murderer of Elsie Millhuff. It was such an atrocious crime that we cannot conceive of it being done by a boy who has been so well and favorably known as Tom."²¹

LAID TO REST

Elsie was laid to rest in Mt. Olivet Cemetery on June 1st, the same day Nelligan was released. From the small Millhuff home on Renton Hill, the coffin processed to the Methodist Episcopal Church and from there to Mt. Olivet. Again the town ground to a halt as "[b]usiness was suspended, the schools closed, and the mines... gave forth no sound of activity."²² "Our school is filled with sorrow since the cruel murder of little Elsie Millhuff. No more will we see her playing happily about the school grounds, nor will the teacher and pupils of the third grade number her in their ranks," said thirteen-year-old Melba Butler, a school-mate of Elsie's at Central School.²³ Elsie's classmates pooled their pocket money and purchased flowers for her grave.

Elsie's headstone reads:

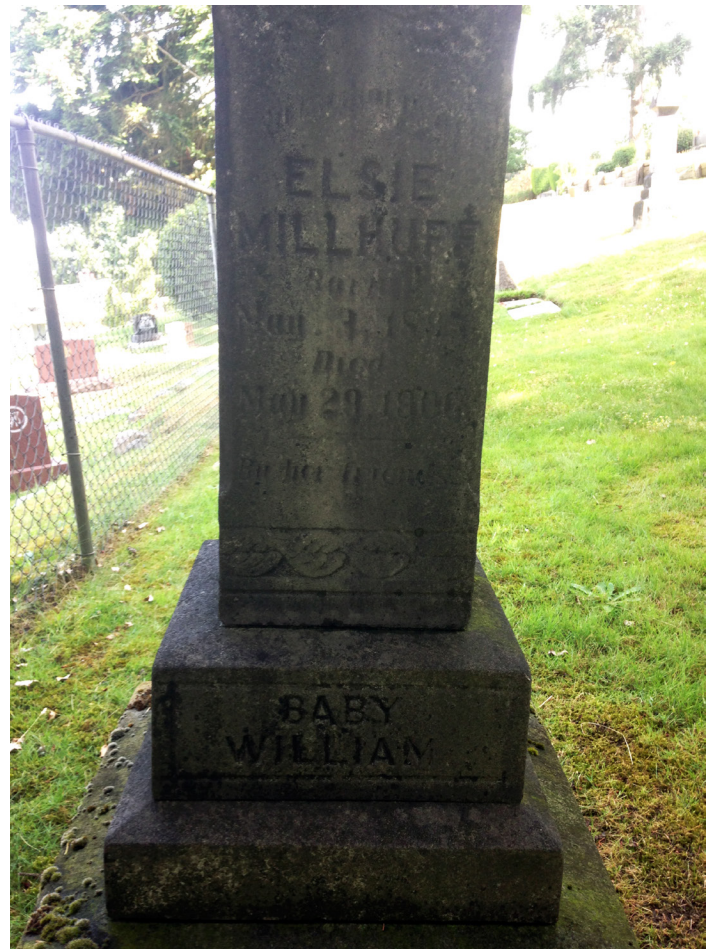
In memory of
Elsie Millhuff
Born
May 3, 1895
Died
May 29, 1906
By her friends

The atmosphere of fear and distrust that had settled over Renton after the discovery of Elsie's body remained. Rentonites awaited answers to their questions: Who could have done such a thing? And how can we protect our children?

"A Fiendish Deed, Part II" will be printed in our June 2016 newsletter.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Nelligan Denies Knowledge of Crime," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.3.
- 2 "Nelligan Denies Knowledge of Crime," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.3.
- 3 Phil Marlotty and Frank Story oral history, recorded in 1978 (RHM# 1978.036.004).
- 4 "Killing Of Girl Was Crime Of A Fiend," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.13; "Inquest is Held Over Millhuff Child," *Seattle Daily Times*, 1 Jun 1906, p.1.
- 5 "Killing Of Girl Was Crime Of A Fiend," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.13.
- 6 "Killing Of Girl Was Crime Of A Fiend," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.13.
- 7 "Tom Nelligan Held As Suspect In The Elsie Millhoff [sic] Murder Case," *Seattle Star*, 31 May 1906, p.1.
- 8 A convicted robber and murderer, Harry Tracy escaped from the Oregon State Penitentiary in early June 1902. He spent the next two months crisscrossing the Pacific Northwest evading and murdering law enforcement along the way. In July he holed up in a house near Renton for a day and barely escaped once he was discovered. Renton men were a part of the posse who went after him. Tracy remained on the run until August 8 when he shot himself in Eastern Washington once he realized his capture was imminent.
- 9 "Nelligan Denies Knowledge of Crime," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.3.
- 10 "Nelligan Denies Knowledge of Crime," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.3; "Tom Nelligan Held As Suspect In The Elsie Millhoff [sic] Murder Case," *Seattle Star*, 31 May 1906, p.1.
- 11 1892 Washington Territorial Census; 1900 Federal Census; 1901 Seattle City Directory.
- 12 "15-Year-Old Boy Arrested For Murder," *Wenatchee Daily World*, 1 Jun 1906, p.1.
- 13 "Inquest is Held Over Millhuff Child," *Seattle Daily Times*, 1 Jun 1906, p.1.
- 14 "Nelligan Denies Knowledge of Crime," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.3.
- 15 "Nelligan Denies Knowledge of Crime," *Seattle Daily Times*, 31 May 1906, p.3.
- 16 King County Archives, Coroner Death Record, v.5, p.569.
- 17 "Inquest is Held Over Millhuff Child," *Seattle Daily Times*, 1 Jun 1906, p.10.
- 18 King County Archives, Coroner Death Record, v.5, p.569.
- 19 "Inquest is Held Over Millhuff Child," *Seattle Daily Times*, 1 Jun 1906, p.1.
- 20 "The discharge of Tom Nelligan...", *Seattle Daily Times*, 2 Jun 1906, p.6.
- 21 "Increase Reward For Child's Slayer," *Seattle Daily Times*, 3 Jun 1906, p.1.
- 22 "Elsie Millhuff's Body Is Laid In The Grave," *Seattle Daily Times*, 2 Jun 1906, p.5.
- 23 "Renton School—Melba Butler, Reporter," unknown Seattle paper, 10 Jun 1906.





SAVE THE DATE: RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

Join us for hors d'oeuvres and activities as we celebrate another year of participation with the Renton Historical Society and the Renton History Museum! The meeting is open to Society members, prospective members, and museum volunteers. Introduction of new Renton Historical Society trustees, 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 June 3. No regrets, please.

On
JUNE
 8
 at
6:00 PM

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Please select a membership level:

BASIC MEMBERSHIPS

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

SUSTAINING MEMBERSHIPS

- Benefactor \$75
- Patron \$150
- Business/Corporate \$175
- Life membership \$750

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation! Your donations help us provide new exhibits and exciting programs.

Donation: \$ _____

Name: _____

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PAYMENT INFORMATION

Visa or MC #: _____

Exp. date: _____

Signature: _____

Please make checks payable to the Renton Historical Society.

Renton History Museum
 235 Mill Avenue South
 Renton, WA 98057

Phone: 425.255.2330
 Fax: 425.255.1570
 rentonhistory.org

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



From
MAY
31
To
AUGUST
26

After nine years of research, the Renton History Museum is finally able to exhibit its collection of 49 rare glass plate negatives with 70 images of the city's businesses and residences identified through dogged historical detective work. In 1909 photographer Walling Horton went door to door to capture the city's aspirations, perhaps for exhibit at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. Enjoy this glimpse of our city in its youth and the maps and other resources that reveal it. Exhibit made possible by a grant from 4Culture.