

RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

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QUARTERLY

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SEWING MACHINE SERVICE: 75 Years And Counting

by Barbara Horton

Sewing Machine Service is a small family-owned business that resides on the path to everywhere at 315 Main Street in Renton. As people zip by, they may see the Seahawks banners painted on the windows. They may enjoy the mural on the backs of the building that is updated from time to time. What they may not realize is that Sewing Machine Service (SMS) is a serious destination that has offered services unlike any other operation in the Pacific Northwest. Few small businesses survive for 75 years, let alone maintaining operations in their original location, in the original core of downtown Renton; Sewing Machine Service has the distinction of being one of those.

THE EARLY DAYS

The property occupied by SMS today is one of fifteen properties of Block 15 that was originally platted in 1875 by Erasmus M. Smithers, Thomas B. Morris, and Charles B. Shattuck. These plat block designations are still in use to this day.

In the city's earliest years Block 15 was home to many hospitality establishments, including the Third Rail Saloon and Restaurant on the site of today's SMS.¹ A Welshman named David Morgan Jones was the taxpayer on the property from 1905 through 1935. At some point this structure was torn

Continued on page 5

Also In This Issue...



2 Last chance to view
| *A History Of Renton*
| in 75 Objects!



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



4 Fundraising Report:
| History-Making
| Party 2017.



8 Collections Report
| by Sarah Samson,
| Curator.

A HISTORY OF RENTON IN 75 OBJECTS



This is your last chance to relive poignant moments in Renton history illustrated by 75 iconic artifacts and photographs from our collection! Curated by a team of University of Washington Museology graduate students, *A History of Renton in 75 Objects* brings some crowd favorites out of storage and back into the limelight. They are exhibited alongside newer acquisitions on display for the first time! Featured stories include the Duwamish, coal mining, WWII, Longacres, Roxy Theatre, and Triple XXX root beer.

From
MAY
30
to
JANUARY
20

NORMA LOU JONES (1925-2017)

Past Renton Historical Society President Norma Lou Jones passed away on August 28. As a Renton librarian and a Pied Piper Preschool teacher, Norma Lou exemplified the spirit of the early Renton Historical Society, a can-do group of educators determined to preserve the city's history for future generations. But she also had a sense of fun. Norma Lou and her husband Stan were among

the Seattle Mariners' first season ticket-holders, and she was known among Mariners' fans as "The Bell Lady" for vigorously ringing a cowbell during games. Thank you, Norma Lou, for all you did for Renton history!



WANTED! YOUR FAMILY'S WWI STORIES

In commemoration of the end of "The Great War," the Museum is preparing a unique exhibit about Rentonites on the battlefield and the home front from 1917 to 1918, and we need your family's stories! We know that Renton men and women served as nurses and soldiers, chased submarines in the Navy, cut timber in the Spruce Squadron, built ships in Bremerton, and even returned to Europe to volunteer in the Italian

Army—now we need the info to tell their stories. If you have photos, objects, or other items relating to a Rentonite during WWI, please contact Curator Sarah Samson at ssamson@renton.gov or 425.255.2330.



MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,
Museum Director

Businesses and history: sometimes they seem to inhabit two different worlds. Businesses strive to be forward-looking and future-oriented, especially in a technological era. When global change is speeding up exponentially, what business has time to look back at the past, even their own? Even nonprofits barely have time to collect and document their own histories, never mind reflect on them.

We recently hosted a fundraiser for Allied Arts of Renton, on the occasion of the publication of their quinquagenary—50 years—history, *Allied Arts of Renton: The First Fifty Years, 1964 - 2014*. Local author Barb Nilson spent several years compiling the organization's history, no easy task despite the fact that Allied Arts kept meeting minutes, newspaper clippings, photos, and other documents relating to its ongoing activities. The result is a comprehensive look at the activities and influence of one of the city's most significant arts organizations, a key to understanding Renton's cultural landscape.

Similarly, our feature this month traces the history of a longstanding Renton business, Sewing Machine Service. Using oral history interviews and newspaper research, guest writer Barb Horton traces the development of a local service with a regional reach, one that has been affected by global developments in the economy. Barb's research demonstrates that, no matter what came along, Sewing Machine Service rolled with the punches, regrouped, and kept on sewing. This glimpse inside one Renton establishment reminds us that commerce affects local people—as customers, suppliers, workers, and business owners—and that we are all subject to the larger forces of history, for better or for worse.

National and international debates about taxes, immigration, the minimum wage, and trade agreements have real impacts on Renton people; that is undoubtedly why they are so hotly contested. But sometimes our inability to look back and learn from the past, whether we're too busy or don't have the information at hand, means we're making decisions without crucial information. Sewing Machine Service was as affected by the opening of new opportunities for women as they were by NAFTA, but does that mean that we should have resisted both? These are historical issues worth thinking about and learning from.

One of the strengths of the Renton History Museum is that we are able to examine the effects of these large historical forces on local people and organizations. In fact, that's the nature of *our* business: to ensure that local stories are being captured and told, for the greater understanding of all of us.



Elizabeth P. Stewart
—
Director



Allied Arts of Renton's 50 years.



Renton businesses are a microcosm of the effects of larger economic forces. (RHM# 1991.007.9275)

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CULTURE

UPCOMING EVENTS



EMERALD STREET: RACE, CLASS, CULTURE, AND THE HISTORY OF HIP HOP IN THE NORTHWEST”

February 24

11:00 am-12:00 pm

Led by author and professor Daudi Abe, discover the history behind not only the Northwest’s Grammy-winning rappers, but its world champion break dance crew, its world-renowned clothing designers, the grassroots organizations dedicated to community service and education, and more!



HEAR MY VOICE BY LIVING VOICES

March 3

11:00 am-12:00 pm

How long was the fight for women’s suffrage? Join the 72 year battle that won half of America’s citizens the right to vote. Follow the story of a young woman and her personal struggle between the expectations of her family and her dreams.



LA CAUSA BY LIVING VOICES

March 31

11:00 am-12:00 pm

In the late 1960’s a new movement changed the lives of Latin American farm workers who fought for civil rights, battled racism and indecent working conditions. Experience this important chapter of history through the eyes of one young woman.

FUNDRAISING REPORT

On October 17, 2017, the Renton Historical Society held our ninth annual dinner auction, a History-Making Party, at the Renton Senior Activity Center. With 110 guests in attendance, we hosted an evening celebrating Renton’s history of innovation and creation and the Renton History Museum’s role in preserving that history. As an event, it was a relaxed opportunity for Renton’s history-minded people to renew their ties; as a fundraiser, it was our very best ever!

The members of the Board of Trustees work for months to make these events unique and fun, with the support of tens of businesses and donors from around the Renton area. A special shout-out goes to trustees Lynne King and Patricia Carroll, who expertly headed up the Events Committee. Aunt Dottie and her nephew Aaron provided stellar entertainment, as guests looked over the silent auction items and had a delicious dinner prepared by Nola’s Boutique Events. Special thanks to the staff of the Renton Senior Activity Center and Service Linen Supply for their annual donation of linens. As always, students from the Renton Youth Council and Hazen High School DECA kept the event moving smoothly.

The Dessert Dash was a big winner this year, earning 60% more than last year’s desserts. Raise the Paddle donors were also feeling generous; we earned 75% more this year in pledges and donations than in 2016. Donations from the silent auction—featuring beautiful donated baskets and creative upcycled furniture items—also surpassed 2016.

The result was a record-breaking \$12,355 in funds to support the Renton History Museum’s mission to document, preserve, and educate about our city’s history. These funds cover the cost of two temporary exhibits, or nineteen weeks of staff salary, or our speaker fees for an entire year. The incredible generosity and belief in our mission on the part of donors, members, volunteers, and local businesses make it possible for the Museum to continue to make sure that people who have a burning desire to learn about Renton history have a place to go!

Thank you for all the help you give, and if you’d like to be involved in fundraising for the Renton History Museum, please contact Museum Director Liz Stewart.



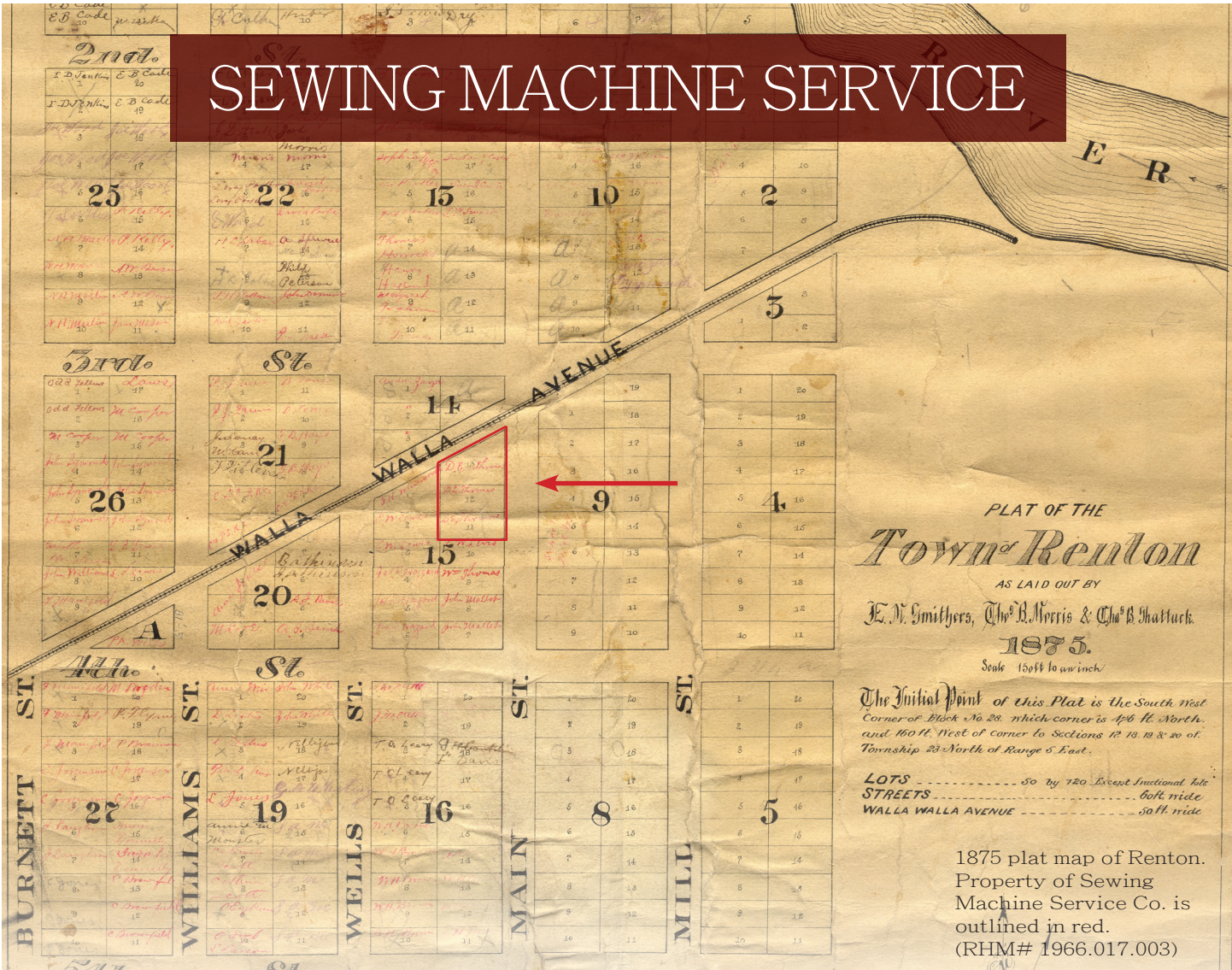
City Councilmember Ryan McIrvin handles Dessert Dash duty for his table.



A raffle winner celebrates!



Renton Youth Council provided excellent dinner service to the event’s guests.



SEWING MACHINE SERVICE

Continued from page 1

down. The current structure was built in 1927.²

The addition of this new structure in 1927 may have encouraged a neighborhood shift from hospitality to service and general community support, including such businesses as the Renton Pure Food Shop (at Main and Walla Walla, now Houser Way), M. B. Staires, Radio Dealer (901 Walla Walla), Demmer Furniture (909 Walla Walla), and U.S. Junk, the predecessor to McLendon Hardware (319 Main St). South Renton was also growing, with many new homes springing up, full of residents who needed services nearby.³

Sometime in the 1930s Julian M. Button established and operated the Singer Sewing Machine Company in the storefront he leased at 315 Main Street. Button was the son of Arch I. Button, veterinarian and head of the Renton Animal Hospital. Julian was born in Kent, WA in March 1914. He later migrated to Hawaii to work at Aloha Land Investment Corporation and he passed away there in January 1976.⁴

THE FORMATIVE YEARS (1942-1960)

Button sold the “Singer Sewing Machines Company” business, as it was then called, to William O. Schram in 1942. Schram changed the name to “Sewing Machine Service.” The emphasis

Cover photo:
Sewing Machine Service Co.,
1953. (RHM# 2006.039.11855)



Sewing Machine Service Co. at the Seattle Home Show, 1952. Bill Schram is seated, second from left. Russ Henry is standing, fourth from right. (RHM# 2006.039.11849)



Bill Schram at Sewing Machine Service Co., ca. 1940s. (RHM# 2006.039.11845)

on service was intentional. During WWII brand new machines were non-existent. Parts and supplies were also scarce, so the company turned to services, such as rebuilding and electrification of old treadle machines, to maintain the business.⁵

Bill Schram was born in Chicago, Illinois on May 6, 1908. Before coming to Seattle, he was known as something of a hustler who traveled from town to town gambling and playing billiards. He became an employee of the national Singer Sewing Machine Company and began traveling the country, eventually settling in the Seattle area with his first wife, Ione. After their divorce, Bill met his second wife, Virginia, at the race track. They married in 1950 and she became the accountant for SMS. Virginia had an important effect on the business and on the community. Among other innovations, she initiated the installation of murals on the back of the building.⁶

After the war, when new sewing machines became available again, the Schrams began selling additional brands, including Necchi and Domestic (later rebranded as "White"). In 1949 the company stopped selling the Necchi line and became the Washington state Pfaff sewing machine distributor. Russell Henry later remembered the Pfaff machines as "what really got the ball rolling."⁷

In 1951 SMS hired Russell E. Henry. He was born on December 1, 1928 in southern California. While serving in the Navy during WWII, Henry was stationed in Washington state. He met his wife here and decided to stay



Inside of Sewing Machine Service Co. after a remodel in 1953. (RHM# 2006.039.11859)

when he was discharged. Henry had been a finish carpenter and was very good at working with his hands. When he was first hired, he did sales and repairs back in the day when the machines were only straight stitch. The introduction of zigzag stitching capability in the domestic machine market was an important innovation in the early 1950s. Henry made home sales calls to demonstrate the machines; the visits provided the opportunity for sales to home sewers. Usually the first visit was made during the day to the wife, then he made a second trip in the evening when the husband was home, to seal the deal. Henry had a reputation for being fair and accurate.⁸

In 1953 SMS hired Ivey C. Looper. He had been a head mechanic for Union Special, a company that produced high-end industrial apparel manufacturing machines. He was a pivotal employee who helped to diversify the SMS business model from “domestic only” sewing machines to include “industrial” sewing machines, creating the business model that persists at SMS to this day. He was known as a sincere and devoted employee. Although he had little tolerance for the oversight of youngsters, he would spend hours teaching anyone who would pay attention.

In 1958 the Schrams bought the building from Williams and Swanson for \$58,000.⁹ With the domestic/ industrial business model in place and the acquisition of the building, the business was prepared for the 1960s and beyond.

THE ESTABLISHED YEARS (1960-1977)

Bill and Virginia Schram were divorced in 1962. Though

divorced, they continued to own and operate the business together, even after Virginia married Harry Fraley in 1964. Russ Henry rose through the ranks and served as Assistant Manager during the 1960s; when Bill became terminally ill, Henry became the official Manager in 1972. Bill died on August 14, 1974. Upon Virginia’s death in 1979, the business transferred to her second husband Harry. Harry already had a career in real estate, so he left the operation of the business to Henry and staff. As the business grew, they sought part-time help through Renton High School that brought the three Waffle brothers into the business. The youngest of these brothers, Cevin Waffle, made his career at SMS.¹⁰

THE EVOLVING YEARS (1977-1995)

No business can survive without adjusting to the business climate of the time. As department stores and malls became ubiquitous, the home sewing machine market was driven by people who made clothing to save money and as a creative outlet. As industrial machines became more sophisticated, store-bought clothing became a better value. The industrial line of machines was a strong seller for SMS during this period, as domestic customers, mostly women, took to the workplace and domestic sewing machines went into closets.

On January 1, 1994, the North American Free-Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect. Sewing Machine Service’s sales percentages at that time were around 90% industrial and 10% domestic. When NAFTA eliminated trade barriers

Continued on page 10



Clyde Hayes & Melba Burrows swimming in Lake Washington, 1916.



Burrows & Hayes families at Thanksgiving, 1916.

COLLECTION REPORT

by Sarah Samson, Curator of Collections & Exhibitions



Sarah Samson
—
Curator

One of the most interesting parts of my job is witnessing what stories from our past manage to survive in the form of artifacts and photographs. Earlier this year Michael Hayes donated Clyde Hayes Sr.'s photograph album along with some loose snapshots, totaling about 150 photographs. The bulk of the photos were taken from 1915-1917 and feature both the Hayes and Burrows families.

Clyde Hayes was one of fewer than 100 students attending Renton High School during the years of 1915-1917. He lived on a farm on the west bank of the Black River just northwest of Renton High School, near today's intersection of Airport Way and Rainier Ave. (There is a short road named Hayes Place SW there today.) His father and mother, John E. "Jack" and Musetta, ran greenhouses and a gravel pit on their farm.

Clyde's photo album contained many photos of places he spent time: the Hayes farm, Renton High School, Mt. Rainier, and the Burrows Pleasure Resort. The Burrows Resort (and family home) was located north of Clyde's family's farm, along the same west bank of the Black River.

The reason Clyde spent a lot of his time at Burrows Pleasure Resort was a classmate named Melba Burrows. Melba was two years younger than Clyde, but they both graduated in the Class of 1917. (People attended school when they were able in those days, which resulted in a much wider range of ages within graduating classes than today.) Melba was also friends with Clyde's younger sisters, Violet



Jack Hayes' 82nd birthday party, 1952.

and Cleo, who were both in the Class of 1918.

Clyde and Melba were clearly "courting" while in high school, but they didn't get married until two years after they graduated. We have no firsthand accounts of their romance, but the photographs definitely tell a story of young love. Clyde's photo album includes images of their adventures together; it is a much more personal collection than the typical formal portraits that survive from the early 1900s.

Clyde's photos also preserve a lost way of life at the south end of Lake Washington, as rural life gave way to progress. Clyde and Melba's families both lived and worked by the Black River and were directly impacted when the Montlake Cut caused the river to dry up in 1916. Dependent on the river to provide fishing excursions for their patrons, the Burrows Resort had to close when the disappearing Black left their docks high and dry. The Burrows family sold the land and by 1920 they were living in North Renton.

The two families became further enmeshed when Clyde's father Jack married Melba's mother Martha in 1934 after they had both been widowed. The Hayes family lost their land during WWII when the airport expanded for the war effort. Clyde's father Jack maintained a home in Renton until he died in 1962.

These photos track the family's growth over time. The Hayes and Burrows celebrated Thanksgiving together in 1916. This early event was the forerunner to a long tradition of family gatherings. Though they spread out and some moved away, the family continued to return to Renton periodically to mark life events. The last large gathering pictured is Jack Hayes' 82nd birthday party in 1952.

MEMORIAL DONATIONS

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IN-KIND DONATIONS

Dan & Laura Clawson



Continued from page 7

among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, manufacturers could more freely move production to countries with lower wages. As manufacturing was being outsourced to other countries, industrial sewing also moved offshore. The industrial sewing machine market tanked, and SMS had to regroup again.

THE RECENT YEARS (1995-present)

In 1995 Russ Henry retired and Cevin Waffle became the manager of SMS. He and his wife Shelly purchased SMS from Harry Fraley in 1998. They began a new journey at a challenging time in sewing history, in the midst of a simultaneous decline in industrial sales and flagging interest in domestic machines. The time was ripe to bring in a high-quality line of machines, as quilting and fabric artistry became the rage in hobby circles. Sewing “for fun” had become a national pastime. In 2000 SMS made a major change and became a dealer of Berninas, a high-end, Swiss-made domestic sewing machine line.

The Swiss Bernina line brought SMS under Cevin Waffle full circle, as he was descended from Swiss immigrant Hans J. J. Weible, who immigrated to the U.S. sometime during the early 1700s. As Waffle says of himself, “The nut doesn’t fall too far from the tree.”¹¹ Today SMS serves customers throughout the western region and Alaska with its unique blend of high-end domestic and industrial sewing equipment. They also provide service to all the old sewing machines in closets that deserve to get back to work making fun things!

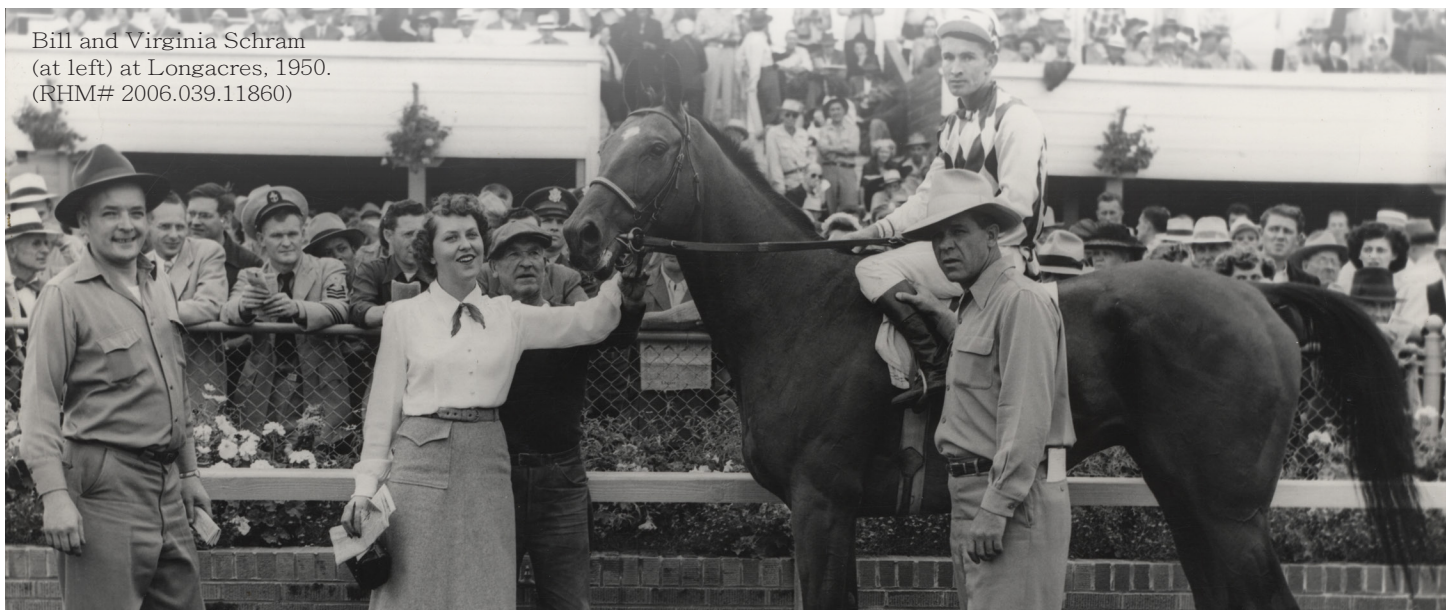
Virginia (Schram) Fraley, 1979.
(RHM# 2006.039.11863)



ENDNOTES

- 1 1909 Sanborn Fire Insurance map, Renton.
- 2 Parcel and Land Data for 315 Main Ave. S, King County Department of Assessments, at <http://blue.kingcounty.com/Assessor/eRealProperty/Detail.aspx?ParcelNbr=7231501345>, accessed 21 November 2017.
- 3 1929 Renton City Directory; Polk City Directory for Honolulu, 1969, 1970, 1971.
- 4 Advertisement, *Renton Chronicle*, 5 November 1942, p.4.
- 5 The history of SMS’s later years is shaped by two oral histories with Cevin Waffle, one with Russ Henry taken on July 11, 2006 and another taken on October 11, 2017. (Collection of the Renton History Museum.)
- 6 “William O. Schram,” obituary, *Renton Record-Chronicle*, 16 August 1974,

- p.4; Author’s conversation with Renton artist Jerry Lee.
- 7 Cevin Waffle and Russell Henry Oral History, 11 July 2006 (Collection of the Renton History Museum).
- 8 Cevin Waffle and Russ Henry Oral History, 11 July 2006 (Collection of the Renton History Museum).
- 9 Hayden Richard Williams and John H. Swanson teamed up in 1931 to open a Chevrolet dealership, one of Renton’s first car dealers. Williams & Swanson was a Renton fixture until its closing in 1972.
- 10 Cevin Waffle and Russell Henry Oral History, 11 July 2006 (Collection of the Renton History Museum).
- 11 Cevin Waffle Oral History, 11 October 2017 (Collection of the Renton History Museum).



Bill and Virginia Schram
(at left) at Longacres, 1950.
(RHM# 2006.039.11860)



BLACK & WHITE

When do you wear black? When do you wear white? From its beginning fashion was always more complicated than simply putting clothing on our bodies to protect us from the elements. Trends in black and white clothing, and their associated meanings, differ between communities and throughout time. Join us to learn about three trendsetters in black and white fashion: the church, Queen Victoria, and Coco Chanel. The black and white fashions featured in the exhibit were worn by Rentonites from the 1870s all the way up to the 1960s. The exhibit will also delve into how black and white photos color our view of history. Most of the artifacts have never been displayed before; you do not want to miss this exhibit!

From
JANUARY
 30
 to
MAY
 19

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RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM
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IN HINDSIGHT...



Train on Main Street in the snow, 1916. Renton Hill is on the left. (RHM#2012.022.003)