

# RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Summer  
June 2013

QUARTERLY

Volume 44  
Number 2



Renton Cash Grocery, ca. 1903. The Harries family stands in front of the building that was their store and home. (RHM# 1998.063.4796)

## 5-ALARM FIRE ERASED HISTORY:

The Life of the Harries Building

by Deanah Watson

Seattle University student of Public Affairs

(Policy Pathway: Urban Studies)

**T**his article was adapted from a research paper written by Deanah Watson, a student at Seattle University, based on research in our collection. Due to space constraints we have included her sections on the history of the Harries Building. Her full paper is available to the public at the Museum.

### THE HISTORIC THIRD & WELLS BLOCK

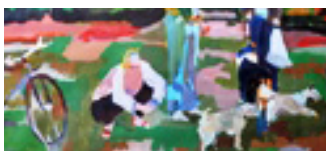
Renton's downtown core was established in the late 1800s, before which time it was a river valley settled by the Duwamish Tribe.<sup>1</sup> Coal mining began in the 1860s. The coal

industry continued to develop, along with brickworks, logging, and a network of railways. Locally-mined coal provided fuel for firing the clay bricks at the Renton brickyard. These features meant Renton was equipped to become one of the providers of Seattle's bricks for the rebuild after its devastating 1889 fire.<sup>2</sup>

New construction was spurred on by rapid area growth in the first decade of the 1900s. A retail store at Third and Wells served as the first regular meeting place for Renton's

Continued on page 5

## Also In This Issue...



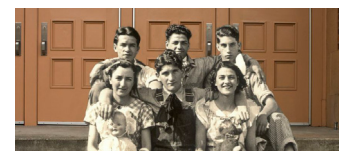
**2** *Defining Spaces*  
| Currently on  
Exhibit at RHM.



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



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



**8** Special Feature  
| by Candace Willmore,  
KHS Student.

*Defining*

S P A C E S

# Picturing the Places That Shape Us

## DEFINING SPACES: PICTURING THE PLACES THAT SHAPE US

Visit the Museum now to see the first gallery showing of visual art from the City of Renton Collection. The exhibit features many pieces often not seen by the public. Guest Curator Colleen Lenahan uses the City's collection to explore how art enhances our sense of place. The exhibit is a collaboration between the Renton History Museum, the Renton Municipal Arts Commission, and the University of Washington Museology Graduate Program.

From  
JUNE  
4  
To  
AUGUST  
31

## MUSEUM WINS AKCHO HERITAGE EDUCATION AWARD

The Renton History Museum received a Heritage Education Award on April 23 from the Association of King County Heritage Organizations (AKCHO) for our 2012 exhibit, *Two By Two: Students Reinterpret Renton History*. *Two by Two* was the Museum's second collaborative effort with Renton High School teacher Derek Smith and his students. The exhibit used historic objects, students' special mementos, and student essays to explore Renton's history from the perspective of Renton

High's diverse student body. The AKCHO awards ceremony was held at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, where Museum Collection Manager Sarah Samson accepted the plaque for the Museum. Derek Smith and three of the participating students—Kanishk Shukla, TaiJae Davis, and Hang Bui—also attended. To give attendees a taste of the exhibit, Hang Bui read her moving essay comparing children in historic North Renton with her childhood memories of Vietnam.

We are very proud to be acknowledged by our peers in the museum field! Thank you, AKCHO, and a special thanks to our partners at Renton High School!

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FOLLOW US ON  
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# MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,  
Museum Director

I am truly excited that this issue of the quarterly newsletter features contributions by two students who have been working with the Museum. Both of these bright young women are enthusiastic about what they can learn from history, both are approaching the topic from their own unique perspective, and both thought to come to the Renton History Museum and ask us to help get their questions answered.

Candace Willmore is a senior at Kentridge High School, in her third year of photography classes, and she had the bright idea to use historical photos as the jumping-off point for her “Then and Now” photo-illustrations. Candace and her mother spent many hours one Thursday going through the Museum’s collection of historic photos to find just the right images for her concept. For each illustration, Candace set out to combine historic photos with her own present-day images to create a layered look at the past and present of locations throughout Renton. Candace particularly likes to put historic people in present-day locations, as if their ghosts lingered on in that place. Her work is thought-provoking and makes us see the places we pass through every day in a new light.

Deanah Watson, who is just completing her degree in Public Affairs at Seattle University, came to the Museum for assistance with an Urban Studies paper. Deanah wanted to use one block in Renton as a microcosm for challenges that cities face; her idea was to explore the history of the Wells Avenue block between Second and Third Streets. Using the Museum’s maps, vertical files, and City Directories, as well as other City of Renton resources, she began to focus in on one sad story, the devastating 2009 fire that destroyed the Harries Building. The result is a fascinating story of urban building up and tearing down across one century of Renton’s history.

These two students are just two of the many students we have come to know lately. We’re now in our third year of collaborative exhibits with students from Renton High School, who have worked with our historic objects and photos to bring a fresh perspective into our main gallery in exhibits like *Among Friends: Renton High’s 100 Years* (2010, with ARROW Magazine editorial staff), *Two By Two: Students Reinterpret Renton History* (a 2012 AKCHO Award-winner), and *I Am Here: Students Find Themselves in Renton* (2013).

We’re honored to have these students want to work with us on projects that use history to better connect them to their communities, and we hope that they will stick with us in the future as together we grow the next generation of history-minded Renton residents.



Elizabeth P. Stewart  
—  
Director



Renton High School students  
learning about how exhibits are  
created at the Museum in 2011.



Renton High School students  
visiting the Museum in 2012.

## RENTON HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

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

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RENTON  
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RENTON, WA 98057

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

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



**CULTURE**

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Theresa Clymer, President

## UPCOMING EVENTS



### RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

June 5  
6:00-8:00pm

Come and enjoy a barbeque dinner for members, prospective members, and volunteers.



### DEFINING SPACES EXHIBIT OPENING

June 13  
5:30-7:00pm

Be among the first to view our new exhibit featuring the City of Renton's art collection, guest curated by UW Master's student Colleen Lenahan.



### RENTON RIVER DAYS

July 26-28  
Visit us at our booth in Liberty Park for children's activities, and come to the Museum all week for free!

First, I would like to express how very proud and excited I am that the Museum has been recognized by the museum community with an Award of Excellence from the Association of King County Heritage Organizations (AKCHO). This recognition was earned for the exhibit, *Two by Two: Students Reinterpret Renton History*, an exhibit that was a collaborative achievement between the Museum and Renton High School students.

The Board has had several accomplishments these past few months. We are in the process of approving new membership rates and benefits. A brand new museum brochure is also in the works and will be coming out soon. In addition, we are one step away from initiating a Site Rental Policy for use of the museum space.

Our Lobby Renovation Committee has moved the project one closer to a new lobby. Architect and past Historical Society Board member Robert Bonner has created a set of elevations and drawings for the planned improvements, and we are moving forward the search for grant funding.

The Board of Trustees did institute an Annual Giving requirement for Board members. This is a big commitment from our Board Members and will help further support our Museum. Let me thank the Board of Trustees for this generous action, this is very much appreciated.

In addition let me thank all of our faithful volunteers for everything that they do. We are always grateful for your service and loyalty to our museum.

You should have already received your invitation to our June 5 Annual Membership Meeting. The Board of Trustees is looking forward to visiting with each of you, sharing a BBQ dinner, and celebrating our accomplishments together. I hope you will plan to join us.



Theresa Clymer  
—  
President



2013 AKCHO Heritage Education award presented to Renton History Museum and Renton High School.



## 5-ALARM FIRE ERASED HISTORY

Jack Harries and Charles Higdon with the grocery delivery cart for Renton Cash Grocery, ca. 1905. Owner Thomas Harries kept the business in the family: Jack was his son and Charles was his son-in-law. (RHM# 41.0600)

Continued from page 1

earliest Catholic citizens, who were Irish and Slovenian.<sup>3</sup> The burgeoning parish was likely the church home to many of Renton’s Italian residents, whose population was significant enough in the area to warrant postmaster Thomas Harries’ attention. A 1920 article in the *Seattle Daily Times* describes how, after noticing the number of Italian surnames on his delivery routes, he began learning to speak Italian from community members. He gained enough exposure to the language that when World War I erupted, he was equipped for service in the Alps through the YMCA in Italy. For his service he earned the honor of knighthood from the Italian court and the *Seattle Daily Times* article at home lauded him with the headline “Renton Ex-Postmaster a Knight Receives High Honor From Italy!”—he was the only known American to receive that recognition.<sup>4</sup>

### THE HARRIES BUILDING

When Renton’s postmaster was knighted, the article celebrating his honor also gave a good description of the Harries’ family home life in Renton.<sup>5</sup> With all his outstanding honors, his letters home only discussed his five children. He seemed to be more concerned with his far-away home life than trying to achieve war heroism. Renton was his home and



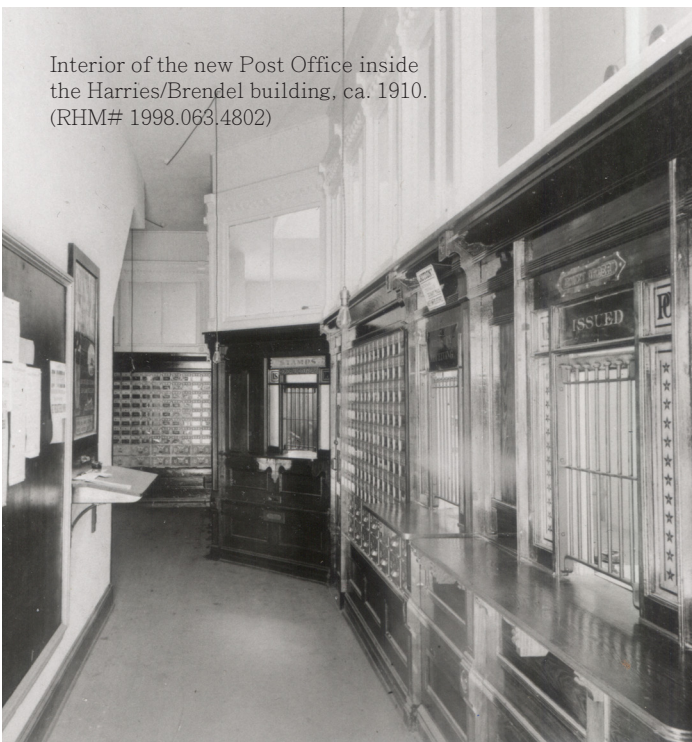
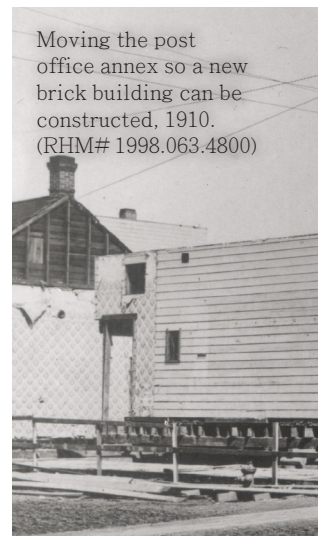
Thomas Harries, ca. 1915.  
(RHM# 1998.063.4801)



Earliest known photo of Thomas Harries' store, ca. 1900. L-R: Police Chief Jake Mazey, Henry Edwards, Martin Swift, Tom Harries. (RHM# 1982.036.1548)



Moving the post office annex so a new brick building can be constructed, 1910. (RHM# 1998.063.4800)



Interior of the new Post Office inside the Harries/Brendel building, ca. 1910. (RHM# 1998.063.4802)

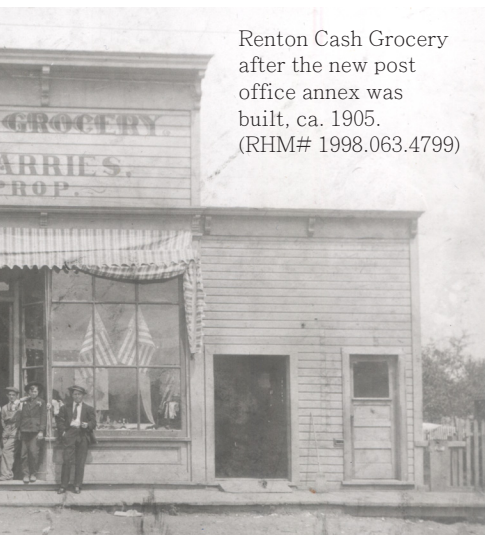
when he did finally return, he resumed his service as postmaster until the 1930s, when he opened a real estate and insurance office.

The first image of the Harries residence, taken in 1900, is a wood frame structure with glass panels on their retail storefront. The signage in view advertises the grocery store they owned as well as a small crowning sign which reads "Renton Post Office." The family residence can be seen at the back of the structure.

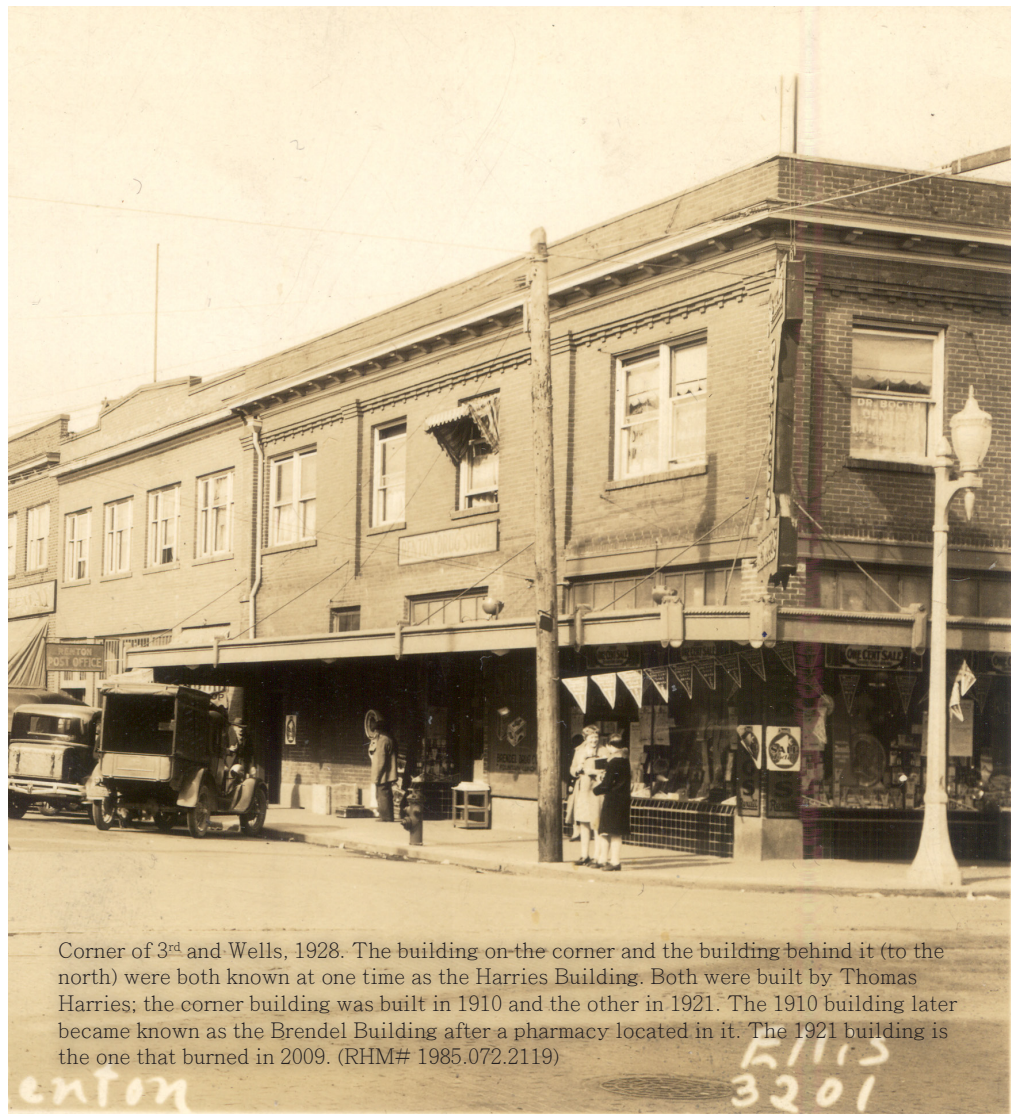
Thomas Harries' obituary explained that the real estate and insurance business remained his occupation for about ten years, until his death on July 18, 1945.<sup>6</sup> His wife is named beneficiary, although records are ambiguous as to who assumed ownership of the building.

#### THE VACANT LOT

The downtown neighborhood achieved its current recognizable form in the earlier half of the 1900s when its signature mixed-use masonry buildings were constructed. Some of the first brick buildings in Renton still stand along Wells Avenue, such as the 1910 masonry structure currently housing St. Charles Place Antiques and the 1909 Brendel Building at the intersection with Third (dated according to



Renton Cash Grocery after the new post office annex was built, ca. 1905. (RHM# 1998.063.4799)



Corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Wells, 1928. The building on the corner and the building behind it (to the north) were both known at one time as the Harries Building. Both were built by Thomas Harries; the corner building was built in 1910 and the other in 1921. The 1910 building later became known as the Brendel Building after a pharmacy located in it. The 1921 building is the one that burned in 2009. (RHM# 1985.072.2119)

the King County Department of Assessments). The Brendel Building is now home to Common Ground Cupcakes.

Since the 1960s the city has expanded from the valley into the surrounding hills but as historic photos reveal, its brick-veneered commercial core has managed to retain much of its aesthetic identity. The view of Wells Avenue just northward of its intersection with Third remained virtually the same until a fire in 2009 destroyed one member of its row of buildings. Unfortunately, that year the brick-veneer structure known as the Harries Building burned down, and according to KOMO News it threatened to take the entire block before firefighters brought the blaze under control.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the poor condition of the Harries Building vacant plot and the structures still existing around it, locals value them for their historic connection to Renton's past. While locals and owners take pride in the buildings the sentiment is unsupported by official designation.<sup>8</sup> According to Elizabeth P. Stewart, director of the Renton History Museum, only three locations in the city are registered landmarks. Renton does not have any historic preservation ordinances in place to inventory or help protect its historical assets.

The Harries Building was an integral part of Renton's oldest area and now its absence has impact on the

surrounding built environment. Its physical connection to the buildings on either side has left substantial scarring where corridors once merged. The damage to the Brendel building (on the lot's south side) created a gaping hole at the end of its upstairs hall where the second floor remains exposed to the elements. The destruction of the Harries Building has lasting impact and, as evidenced by the visible damage to surrounding structures, may possibly lead to the loss of more buildings on the block.

While the news referred to the Harries Building as a historic "century-old" building, an official property record card on file with the Puget Sound Regional Archives shows it as being built in 1921. Its slightly younger age should not undermine the significance of the building's loss to the community.

#### THE COMMUNITY COURTYARD

The current vacancy at the Harries lot, blocked off by a chain-link fence, forms a gap in the landscape along Wells. If the street were a smile, the absent building here would be a gap of a missing tooth. The gap offers curious passersby a peak-a-boo glance to the backs of some of Renton's oldest

Continued on page 10



Seniors on the steps of Renton High School in 1934 superimposed over the current school steps. (RHM# 41.1373 & photo by Candace Willmore)

# SPECIAL FEATURE

by Candace Willmore,  
Kentrige High School  
Student

**H**istory is often told through words in a book. Readers can gain a sense of what life used to be like through first hand accounts or research by historians. Photography, however, provides visual history, a true glimpse into the past.

Viewers are able to see what the words are describing because a photograph captures a moment in time. Being able to capture and record a fraction of a second in a way that tells a story, or becomes a work of art, is why I enjoy photography.

I began taking photography classes as a sophomore at Kentrige High School. Now, as a senior in my third year of the photography program, I have combined my passion for photography and interest in history to create “ghost images” of Renton.

To create these images I use Photoshop to combine a historic photograph with a current digital photograph that I have taken in the same location as the historic image. Renton historic images date back to the late 1800s and visually document the growth of the city of Renton. Changes are apparent in the appearance of the city and the lifestyle of the people living in Renton. The accumulation of many small changes overtime has transformed Renton.

By creating “ghost images” I show how Renton once looked, as well as what we see today in the same image. This project shows how Renton has evolved through both architectural changes and lifestyle changes, such as clothing and cars. Working on this project has helped me to visualize and better understand local history. The most intriguing part of the project is seeing what has changed, and what still remains today from the history of Renton.

See another of Candace’s ghost images on page 12.



# MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

February 15, 2013 - May 10, 2013

Richard Bisiack  
Christine Grubestic

Rose Camerini  
Linda Mathewson Aitken  
Mr. & Mrs. Allen Armstrong  
Mr. & Mrs. Don Camerini  
Gene & Judy Craig  
Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Rose Marie Gamba Carnexif  
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Ernest G. Christiansen  
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Sarah Jane Hisey & Howard Nelson

Bert Custer  
Gene Aitken & Linda  
Mathewson Aitken

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Gene Aitken & Linda  
Mathewson Aitken

Maxine Gamba  
Paul & Nancy Duke  
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Tom & Margaret Feaster  
Louise George  
Ila Hemm  
Beatrice Mathewson  
Daisy Ward

Evelyn (Plute) Johnson  
Robert & Gilda Youngquist

Gayle Jones  
Mr. & Mrs. Allen Armstrong  
Gayle's Walking Friends  
Shirley Moretti

Shirley (Lotto) Skagen Llewellyn  
Wendell & Cleo Forgaard

Vivian & Bill Lovegren  
Bert & Evy Nord

Virginia Lucke  
Sarah Jane Hisey & Howard Nelson

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James Williams  
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Living Memorial  
Association of Kennydale  
Renton Firefighters  
Benevolent Association

# IN-KIND DONATIONS

Chuck's Donuts  
Common Ground Cupcakes  
Margaret Feaster  
Pabla Indian Cuisine  
Wil Samson Design

# NEW MEMBERSHIPS

Judy & Larry Calibuso  
Paul Dromgoole  
Lee & Marilyn Ford  
Claudette M. Lorimor  
Liz J. Menzel

# MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS CORRECTIONS FROM MARCH 2013

Jack LaValley  
Pauline Kirkman

Margaret Jean (Williams) Loe  
Florence Delaurenti  
Gloria Duffey  
Louise George

# LIVING THE DREAM, NEW ELL EXHIBIT

*Living the Dream* presents the dreams of English Language Learners (ELL) from Dimmit Middle School in the Renton School District. The District offers ELL classes for students K-12 whose primary language is not English. ELL students at Dimmit Middle School contributed their individual stories for this exhibit. They arrived from different countries and continents with their own unique aspirations.



All of them share the same challenge, however: to learn English so they can fulfill their dreams. Stop by and see the students' work!

# SATURDAY GREETERS NEEDED

Are you interested in history and enjoy helping others? Then volunteering to be a Museum greeter might just be for you! Volunteer greeters are a vital part of the Museum team and help us keep our doors open to the public on Saturdays. If you are

interested in applying to join the team, please contact Volunteer & Education Coordinator Dorota Rahn at 425.255.2330 or by email at [drahn@rentonwa.gov](mailto:drahn@rentonwa.gov).



Continued from page 7

buildings and their haphazard communal courtyard, which is a gravel parking lot with outdoor seating areas scattered around the lot's perimeter. It is not much to look at, but it does provide hints at the community life shared by the store and rental occupants housed there.

It is also possible to imagine the history of this old Renton block while standing where its buildings' backs are turned toward the visitor. A rough brick wall still bears the marks of a long-removed sign for A-1 Vacuum and Locksmith, which used to be located on the bottom of the tiled Harries Building. It is no longer on the Third and Wells block—it has relocated at least three times since the fire destroyed its headquarters. It was displaced, along with the Comic Den (now reopened elsewhere as the Comic Hut) and the Harries boarding room tenants who were assisted by the Red Cross when their homes were destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

Even five years later locals still express nostalgia over the razed Harries Building. Such sentiments were apparent in the Museum's last exhibit, *I Am Here: Students Find Themselves in Renton*:

*The Harries Building on 3rd and Wells Street was a very cool comic store during my childhood, and this is where me and my brother would go and buy comics.*

## ENDNOTES

1 [Hill Williams], "Dig Unearths Good Duwamish Life," *Seattle Daily Times*, 7 October 1979, p. 111.

2 City Planning Commission, *Population Report – Renton Urban Area*, p. 11.

3 [Lou Corsaletti], "Plan for Renton Garage is Revised," *Seattle Times*, 11 November 1967, p. 4.

4 "Renton Ex-Postmaster a Knight Receives High Honor From Italy," *Seattle*

*Daily Times*, 15 February 1920, p. 15. Prior to his outstanding service in the First World War, Thomas Harries and his wife settled in Newcastle, directly from Wales. In 1898 they relocated their young family to Renton. Following a short venture prospecting an (unsuccessful) Alaskan gold claim, he put down roots in Renton to make his living as a merchant and postmaster of Renton. "Mrs. Jane Harries, Renton Resident for 58 Years, Dies," unidentified newspaper, February 1957, (RHM#1966.007.112).

5 "Renton Ex-Postmaster a Knight Receives High Honor From Italy," *Seattle Daily Times*, 15 February 1920, p. 15.

6 "Harries, Renton Ex-Postmaster, Leaves \$40,000," *Seattle Daily Times*, 27 July 1945, p. 21.

7 "5-Alarm Fire Guts Historic Renton Building," KOMO News, 11 June 2009, retrieved from: <http://www.komonews.com/news/local/47885037.html>

8 "5-Alarm Fire Guts Historic Renton Building," KOMO News, 11 June 2009, retrieved from: <http://www.komonews.com/news/local/47885037.html>

9 "5-Alarm Fire Destroys Historic Renton Building," KIRO-TV, 12 June 2009, retrieved from: <http://www.kirotv.com/news/news/5-alarm-fire-destroys-historic-renton-building/nDRtY/>.

## CORRECTION

In the March 2013 piece on Vall'Alta transplants in the 1900s, I indicated that Leo and Maria Gotti's name was sometimes spelled "Gatti." It is true that newspapers and other sources occasionally misspelled the Gottis' name, but my article continued that problem. The correct names are: Leo and Maria, Phil, and Oliver were all "Gotti" and had never been "Gatti," even in Italy. Thanks to Lee Gotti—grandson of Leo and son of Oliver—for the correction. -*Elizabeth P. Stewart*





## SAVE THE DATE: RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY 6<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL BENEFIT DINNER AND SILENT AUCTION

Get your tickets now for the Annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction on Wednesday, October 9, 2013 at the Renton Senior Activity Center. The event will feature a silent auction, fantastic meal, entertainment, and will be hosted by an emcee. Please support the Renton History Museum by celebrating Renton's past and promising future! Call the Museum at 425.255.2330 to reserve your space now!

On  
**OCTOBER**  
 9  
 At  
**6:00 PM**

### MEMBERSHIP FORM

Please select a membership level:

- Individual—\$20
- Family—\$30
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- Life membership—\$500
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- Senior—\$12
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Please consider making a donation to the Renton Historical Society.

Your donations help us provide new exhibits and exciting programs!

Donation: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to the Renton Historical Society.

Visa or MC: \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Renton Historical Society  
 235 Mill Avenue South  
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[www.rentonhistorymuseum.org](http://www.rentonhistorymuseum.org)

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



Ghost image combines the ca. 1922 Grand Theatre with the present-day storefront in the same location. See page 8 for story.  
(RHM# 1974.014.0689 & photo by Candace Willmore)