

RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Winter
December 2020

QUARTERLY

Volume 51
Number 5



"THEY SAID I COULDN'T WIN" Renton's First Woman Mayor

edited by Elizabeth P. Stewart

One hundred years ago, white women all around the nation celebrated their new right to vote; many Washington women had gotten the vote a decade earlier. Still, it took 69 more years before Renton elected its first woman Mayor, Barbara Shinpoch (1931–2005). She served from 1980 to 1988. In honor of all women voters and our new woman Vice President, we thought we'd share selections from an oral history we conducted with Mayor Shinpoch in 1999; the interviewer was Nancy Fairman. Mayor Shinpoch candidly shared many of her joys and challenges as a woman in a leadership position—many of these will sound familiar to you today.

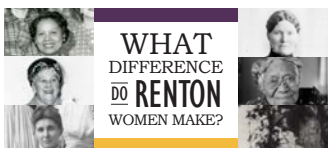
ENTRY INTO POLITICS

Nancy: Why did you first become interested in Renton politics?

Barbara: My husband [A. N. "Bud" Shinpoch] and I volunteered. We had friends who had a handicapped child. That started it all, the Renton Association for Handicapped Children. We discovered that since our children were not afflicted in any manner that we could go to Olympia and lobby and be very effective, more so than the parents of handicapped kids.... We met politicians and we loved them,

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WHAT DIFFERENCE DO RENTON WOMEN MAKE?



A lot, it turns out! We're celebrating the centennial of national women's suffrage by exploring the extraordinary lives of Renton achievers. Many Washington women gained the vote in 1910, just a few years after Renton became a city and a decade before women in the rest of the country. But women did not wait for the vote to make changes. Learn about these extraordinary Renton women's accomplishments in building and supporting hospitals, libraries, schools, and churches; pressing for civil and human rights; fighting poverty; and generally making Renton the city it is today. Check out the online portion of this exhibit on our website: rentonhistory.org!

Open through
MARCH
2021

MUSEUM CLOSED AGAIN

Per the newest Stay Safe—Stay Healthy proclamation from the governor, the Renton History Museum is now closed until at least December 15. We were grateful to be open for about two months. That allowed our visitors a chance to see three new exhibits: *Hometown Teams*, *Renton Sporting Triumphs*, and *What Difference Do Renton Women Make?* (*WDDRWM*). The good news is that *Renton Sporting Triumphs* and

WDDRWM will still be on display into 2021. While we wait for it to be safe to welcome you back again, please check out the online portion of *WDDRWM* on our website, rentonhistory.org.



JANENE SESTAK (1966-2020)

We are sad to pass on the information that long-time volunteer Janene Sestak passed away in October. For many years Janene was a smiling face at the museum, helping with both greeting and leading tours as a docent. Her enthusiasm and kindness were infectious and those lucky enough to have had a tour with her had a special experience. Janene stepped away from volunteering at the museum when she joined the City's Non-Motorized Transportation Advisory

Committee, another cause she was passionate about. Though she was no longer actively volunteering with us, Janene continued to regularly visit the museum and remained a supporter until her final days.



MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,
Museum Director

What a year 2020 has been! You know all the bad things that have happened, so I thought I'd dwell on (almost) all the good things. In a development highly appropriate to the centennial of national women's suffrage, in Kamala Harris the country elected its first woman Vice President this month, as well as its first Black Vice President and first of South Asian descent. In her victory speech, she remembered all the women who had challenged barriers before her, saying "*I reflect on their struggle, their determination and the strength of their vision... I stand on their shoulders. While I may be the first woman in this office, I won't be the last. Because every little girl watching tonight sees that this is a country of possibilities.*"

In that spirit, in this month newsletter we are sharing selections from an oral history with Renton's first woman Mayor, Barbara Shinpoch. In 1999 she talked with interviewer Nancy Fairman about the special burden she felt as a "first," but also the incredible support she felt from other women. She faced challenges specific to her gender, but her determination to get things done carried her through two terms. She built on the experiences of local women politicians before her and she left a legacy for the next woman Mayor, Kathy Keolker.

If electing a woman Vice President is the only extraordinary thing we achieved this year, that might be enough. But in the midst of the worst pandemic since the Spanish Influenza of 1918, we have accomplished other things. We have discovered the power of technology—social media, Zoom, Skype, and FaceTime—in alleviating our lockdown isolation, as many of us participated in remote meetings, birthdays, book clubs, and maybe even Thanksgivings. We have learned that work does not necessarily have to take place in an office, that many of us can be just as productive (or even more) from home. We have rediscovered how much we need other people: our long awaited get-togethers with family and friends; our chance encounters with neighbors; our shared volunteer and community experiences. Most importantly, we now know more about the lives of essential workers—medical professionals, teachers, delivery people, warehouse workers, factory workers, food service workers, etc.—and how much we need them.

As we slowly recover from this pandemic, let's hope we can apply these insights to innovate new ways of doing things that create more happiness for more Americans. If we can do that, it won't have been a wasted year.

In the meantime, please know that the Renton History Museum team remains on the job, documenting this historic time. And we're wishing you a holiday season that restores your energy, health, and joy.



Elizabeth P. Stewart
—
Director



Barbara Shinpoch sitting at her desk in the Mayor's office, 1987. (RHM# 2019.007.019)



Renton's second woman mayor, Kathy Keolker, ca. 1990s. (RHM# 2019.007.019)

RENTON HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

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RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM
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RENTON, WA 98057

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HOURS:
Wednesday - Friday
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CULTURE

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Colleen Lenahansen, President

We are coming to the close of what has been one of the hardest years in collective memory. The novelties of quarantine life have long since worn off, and a dark and uncertain winter lies ahead of us. As you probably know by now, Governor Jay Inslee's November 15 restrictions have once again closed the Museum's doors until December 15.

The Museum staff and board are doing all we can to ensure that the Museum will continue to thrive for years to come. We know that the future is going to look a lot different than the past, but we also know that the Museum, like all of us, will adapt and find a way through this challenging time.

We need the support of you, our community, now more than ever. Because of COVID-19, we were unable to host our annual History-Making Party fundraiser this fall, which is a significant blow to the Museum's annual budget. With the Museum's doors closed to the public, we also have lost out on revenue from admissions, tours, rentals, programs, gift shop sales, and more.

The Board is committed to our staff and the amazing work they do to showcase the past, present, and future of our beautiful city. We have made the 2021 budget adjustments necessary to ensure that our staff stay on the job and that the Museum continues to provide educational and entertainment resources to you, the public we serve. But if next year is anything like 2020, the path forward will be new, uncertain terrain.

As we think about the things we are grateful for and the things that make us all proud to call Renton our home, please consider giving what you can to support the Museum this season. We are asking for your support in two ways: with your time and with your treasure.

JOIN THE BOARD

The Board of Trustees is a group of nine dedicated individuals who meet once a month to determine the strategic and financial direction of the Museum. We are thrilled to welcome two new members to our group this year: Staci VanderPol and Amy Elizabeth Gorton. We are always welcoming new members. If you are looking for ways to stay engaged in your community during quarantine, the Board of Trustees can be an excellent option for you! We are currently meeting 100% remotely until it is safe to meet in person again. We will hold a virtual retreat in February to examine our strategic plan for the years ahead. Creative and enthusiastic individuals welcome!

DONATE TO THE MUSEUM

We are holding a fundraising drive for the month of December, beginning with Giving Tuesday. We know that for many of you, finances are tight this year. We ask you to give what you can, if you are able, whether it's \$1 or \$100.

We miss you, and we look forward to seeing you in person again when the Museum reopens! Stay safe and healthy this holiday season.



Colleen Lenahansen
—
President



"History Smiles"

History is not always a source of smiles, but this year we all need that, so the Renton History Museum is working extra hard to bring you uplifting stories of resilience, recovery, and fun. We promise to be unflinching when it comes to the controversial, difficult, or challenging aspects of the past—as we always have—but we can still find moments of inspiration to carry us through adversity. (RHM# 2014.026.820)

"THEY SAID I COULDN'T WIN"



Renton's first woman mayor, Barbara Shinpoch, 1980. (RHM# 2019.007.021)

Continued from page 1

and we found out you could get something done down there.

I started by campaigning against [mayoral candidate] Don Custer [in 1963] because I thought he was too young. He was 27. The day he got elected he appointed me to the Library Board. We have been good friends ever since. I was on the Renton Housing Authority. I was the first woman. A woman [Tillie Cole] ran the place, but I was the first woman on the board. Then on the arts commission and the optional municipal code committee. That was my real introduction to city government. That's when the state legislature revised classes of cities and you could make a choice how you wanted to go. The council appointed a group of 10 or 12 of us to take a look at this. Then I was on the LEFF board, which is Law Enforcement / Fire Fighters disability business. I went from one volunteer or appointed office to another. I had no intention of ever running. I just liked doing it.

Barbara's husband, Albert N. Shinpoch, was a Washington state legislator for 15 years, as well as heading up several agencies under Gov. Booth Gardner. But it was Barbara's own efforts in the Renton community that got her noticed as a potential Councilmember. Barbara served for years on various

Cover photo:

Renton's current and former mayors at the dedication of Coulon Park, 1982. L-R: Don Custer (1964-1969), Charles Delaurenti (1976-1980), Barbara Shinpoch (1980-1988), and Avery Garrett (1969-1976). (RHM# 2007.035.075)



Mayor Barbara Shinpoch with City Council, ca. 1982. Back row (L-R): John Reed, Richard Stredicke, Nancy Mathews, Thomas Trimm, Earl Clymer, Robert Hughes, Randall Rockhill. Councilmember Mathews served from 1981-1993.



Hattie Butler, ca. 1920s. Butler wasn't just Renton's first women Councilmember, she was also the first woman Councilmember in the state of Washington. (RHM# 1981.102.1519)

committees, including helping to organize Renton's League of Women Voters chapter as early as 1958. She had chaired several levy campaigns for the Renton School District and served as a top strategist in County Councilmember Mike Lowry's 1975 campaign. She was appointed to the Renton City Council by then-Mayor Charles Delaurenti in 1977 and then ran for her seat unopposed in 1978. In 1979 she ran for Renton Mayor and won by 7%.

RENTON WOMEN IN OFFICE

Barbara: I was approached by delegations from the Fire Department, the Police Department, and the union of civilian employees, to run for mayor. "Are you out of your mind? They have never elected a woman and they won't." They had had one woman on the city council in 1919. Her name was Mrs. Henry [actually Hattie] Butler. She lasted about four months and there is no information on her at all. I don't even know her first name.... In 1958 a lady named Jeanette Dahlquist literally doorbelled the entire Highlands and won a seat on a 12-member council. Pat Seymour Thorpe in the mid-1970s was elected. Since then there have always been a minimum of two women on the council. [But a] Woman mayor? Unheard of. I was very reluctant to run.

Nancy: Simply because you were a woman?

Barbara: Because the three male council members told me I couldn't win. That really aroused my competitive instincts.



Councilmember Kathy Keolker, Pearl Reed, and Mayor Earl Clymer, 1992. In the 1980s Mayor Shinpoch called together church leaders to address the hunger issue in the community. Pearl Reed stepped up and the Salvation Army Food Bank was born. Keolker later became Renton's second woman mayor. (RHM# 2019.007.040)

I was educated by the League of Women Voters. I met some dynamic women who made a difference. This was right on the cusp of the whole women's movement. NOW magazine was being published. I benefitted a lot from that. Older women in this town gave me coffee hours.... Their attitude was: "It's about time we had a turn." That had never occurred to me. They were militant. They got on the phone and called all their friends. I spent \$4,000 and won easily. I couldn't believe it... I always knew if I got beat people would say, "well, you poor thing, you were a woman and you shouldn't have run anyway." Your ego is so involved. You're afraid you'll humiliate your children.

Barbara had a few examples of political women before her and she lists here many of the women Councilmembers she knew. Hattie Butler, a well-known Progressive in town, had won her term on City Council in 1918 as a write-in candidate; she served in 1919 – 1920. Jeannette Dahlquist (1962 – 1967) and Patricia Seymour-Thorpe (1976 – 1978) preceded Shinpoch on Council, and she also served with Margaret Proctor, the City's first Black Councilmember (1978 – 1979). During Shinpoch's campaign she discovered that what worked for male candidates also worked for her: a well-organized constituency of supporters ready to get out the vote.

THE MAYOR'S FIRST CHALLENGE

Barbara: Snow was my first civic responsibility. I was sworn in about midnight. I went to work the next morning and it started to snow. Then it really started to snow. It made me

very nervous. I called the State Patrol and asked them how the roads were and did they have any advice. They said, "If you can get your people home, do it, so they are not out on the highway at 5:00 tonight." I immediately sent a memo to each department and said to go home, except the Fire Department, the Police and I guess we kept the Public Works people. Those people were out of that building so fast! It was later explained to me the union contracts meant we had to pay them anyway. Then I turned the radio on and the first thing I heard was "Taking their cue from the Mayor of Renton, the following cities have sent their employees home." I thought, "Oh, God, I have only been the mayor for eight hours and I slept for seven of them. I am going to have to be a little more circumspect in my decisions."

There isn't any place to go to learn that stuff. Every mayor in the city, with a single exception, has come from the ranks of the council. That transition is not easy. You are a councilmember and you get involved, but you haven't a clue what is involved day-to-day in the operations of the city.

Mayor Shinpoch took office in the midst of the biggest snowstorm in 30 years. Blizzards and other disasters were just one of the challenges that kept her up at night. Once she learned it cost \$25,000 an inch to clear the city streets, she dreaded winter weather. "When my little grandchildren clapped their hands and said, 'Oh boy, snow!' all I could think of was the budget."

DEMANDS OF THE JOB

Barbara: I loved every minute of my job. I got there early in the morning and left late at night. My husband understood. My kids were grown by then. I loved it. I felt useful and excited and could hardly wait for the next day. I didn't take a vacation in the eight years. I was sort of like a bookkeeper who had finagled the books and I didn't want to leave.

The mayor's job in Renton by law is to participate in all the social, civic and political events of the city, and then run it. That meant every bar mitzvah and fly-up in scouts and little league ball games and 50th anniversaries and funerals. People were so miffed if you didn't come. It was hard to do. I thought we needed a full-time city manager, a full-time professional, and then let the mayor do all the civic things. I went out on the talking circuit. People were so nice. They said, "we really like this information, and if we ever need a City Manager we'll let you know."

Nancy: What influence did Boeing and PACCAR have with the city at that time?

Barbara: They were tremendously influential in that they were our tax base: Puget Power, Boeing and PACCAR. I was a little dismayed at their lack of civic participation, but they finally came around... Boeing was on an upswing then, too...

I was a little appalled. I took my budget over to them a few times when they were on a big hiring program. I said, "What about transportation and housing?" They said they were not in the ground transportation or housing business. The legislature allowed cities to impose an increase in sales tax and we needed it desperately. I went to Boeing and said we are going to do it. They said they couldn't support it. I said, "Then how about an increase in the B&O tax?" They said we'll support a sales tax. It worked! Our city council was the first one in King County to pass the tax and it made headlines. I told them, "You wait. Every mayor is in the same position as I am. Within two months they will all be on board." And they were. Our group showed courage.

Taking office in a period of high inflation and state and federal government deficits, Mayor Shinpoch was in a tough position when it came to providing city services. Mayor Shinpoch was an advocate for a City Manager form of government, but she made do with an "Administrative Assistant," Mike Parness, who she said worked as hard as any City Manager. (Renton created the position of Chief Administrative Officer in 1998.) In 1982 Renton was the first city in King County to reluctantly take advantage of an opportunity to add a half-cent local sales tax to help close the city's \$700,000 deficit, at the same time as the state legislature phased out a property tax on business inventory that had substantially added to the city's tax base.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Barbara: I found the city employees really were public servants, the uniforms, the Water Department, everybody. They cared. They took great pride in what they did.

I was in the middle of the affirmative action thing. There were two women department heads when I came. I elevated another one to department head status. My woman finance director died. My personnel director, a woman, became very ill and had to leave. I couldn't replace them because I was in a competition with Metro and the Cities

of Seattle and Bellevue... Women could write their own ticket in government. I didn't have very much luck replacing [women]. I needed a Fire Chief and a Police Chief. I think there is a woman Fire Chief in Mercer Island now [1999]. We had no female takers at all, nobody who was qualified.

We didn't have a lot of minorities employed either. We made a special effort to do that. One of those backfired. We hired a Black woman who was fully qualified in the Finance Department. The way the room was built, before they invented those miserable cubicles, she was right there to greet people that came in. About two weeks later, coming to a council meeting in the evening, there she is in overalls scrubbing the floor. "Betty, what happened?" She said, "The truth of it is I make more money working the night shift and my mother can take care of the children." Here I thought I'm being wonderful and it's good for the city—I didn't think about what was good for her. We did wind up hiring non-Caucasians comparable to the population.

Affirmative Action in the 1960s through the 1980s was a set of policies designed to increase opportunities for people excluded from employment on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. Renton's population in 1980 was about 31,000, 13% of which were people of color; today the city's population is 103,000, with 35% people of color.

HOW GOVERNMENT REALLY WORKS

Nancy: As Mayor what were some of the other serious problems?

Barbara: People. There were a lot of people in this city at that time that saw the mayor's office or the city government as the arbiter of quarrels with their neighbors. I couldn't believe that. Fences and hedges and dogs. I got pretty fed up with that... I must have had three phone calls a day about social security. I would try and explain that the city government has nothing to do with that. Then you get an irate person on the other end of the line saying, "You are just giving me the run-around."

I couldn't believe how many high school kids came in and couldn't name their United States Senator or Congressman. I was appalled. I talked to every Renton school at least twice in the eight years. I never found a student who wanted to be a politician or a fireman. They weren't interested in government at all. That bothered me.

The best thing I did: We found out how many people were homeless and needed food in this community. I called representatives of all the churches together. We met in the library to see what we could do about it. City Hall had a big wire basket and people would put tuna fish and coffee and other food donations in it. I was treated to the spectacle of churches fighting with one another, who was going to serve the poor. A woman from the Salvation Army, Pearl Reed, stood up and said, "You get the food and I will make sure the hungry get it." That is exactly what happened. Pearl Reed put it together and she got volunteers to run it, and they are still doing it.

With years of volunteerism behind her, Mayor Shinpoch was uniquely suited to bring people together to address community needs, even in a time of straitened resources. In 1982 the City

Continued on page 10

MEMORIAL DONATIONS

August 16, 2020 - November 15, 2020

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In celebration of Lynne
& Mike King's 50th
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GIVING TUESDAY

We're celebrating "History Smiles" for Giving Tuesday this year, sharing photos from the past that can lift our mood and inspire us during this difficult time. Please consider donating to our fundraising campaign on Facebook or sending us a check in the mail. We hope you all stay safe and have a happy holiday season.



LIKE OUR NEWSLETTERS?

We've heard from you that the feature articles in our newsletters are the main motivator for memberships so we're now sending an extra newsletter to Sustaining Members (Benefactor, Patron, Business, and Life) in February as a thank you for their level

of support. If you want to receive five newsletters per year, consider upping your membership when you renew this month! Sustaining Members also receive invitations to special behind-the-scenes events not open to the general public. Make sure you're not missing out!

Continued from page 7

of Renton formed a partnership with the Renton Salvation Army chapter to help build a new facility at 211 Morris Ave. S. to serve as a food bank. That partnership continues today.

ON THE JOB TRAINING

Barbara: The city has changed dramatically.... You can now see in the city many people of color where you didn't see them before. We have a lot of Vietnamese people. When I was running [for office], I had a request from the Filipino community to meet with them. I thought, "Filipino community, who are they?" There were about 200 professional families in the Rolling Hills area. They were pharmacists and accountants. They were wonderful people. They invited my husband and me to a dinner at the Doubletree [Hotel]. We sat with the Filipino Ambassador to Vancouver, British Columbia. At midnight three or four policemen came in and got him and his wife. It was the night [Filipinos] overthrew [President Ferdinand] Marcos.

We affiliated with Nishiwaki, Japan, a textile-producing municipality with a forty-member city council... Delegations from Nishiwaki arrived frequently bearing elaborately wrapped gifts which were displayed in City Hall, the Main Library, and the Senior Center. We relied on the State Department to guide us in matters of protocol. The only awkward incident in over eight years occurred when I was disinvented to visit the Mayor of Nishiwaki. He and his entourage came to Renton and were feted royally. When it was time to reciprocate, he wrote a heartfelt request that I not come to Japan, explaining his culture could not overcome the fact that I was a woman, and the difficulties involved in their [then] rigid society precluded entertaining a female office holder appropriately.

Renton's intercultural organizations—the Sister City affiliation and the Filipino American Teachers Association—were designed to increase cultural understanding, provide learning opportunities, and create business and educational partnerships. Delegations from Renton and Nishiwaki and the city's Mexican Sister City, Cuautla, have traveled back and forth to one another's cities since 1969 slowly decreasing the chance of cultural misunderstandings like the one Shinpoch refers to.



MAKING HISTORY

Barbara: While I was in office 15,000 people petitioned to keep the "Porn King" [Roger Forbes] out of the Renton Theatre. \$800,000 and two years later we won a suit at the Supreme Court. We could zone to contain; we couldn't deny the business.

I had been on the library board for years. The business of freedom of access for adults was important to me. Plus, by the time we went through all the court business, everybody had their own VCR at home and could rent their porn movies and didn't go to the theatres anyway. Besides, the Porn King had more money than the city did. Fifteen thousand people were happy. They were doing it for God, and a couple of council members were, too. The rest of us were doing it because we felt we had the right to zone. A lot of people consider that a big success. We could have built a new Henry Moses pool for that money or fixed the underpass on Shattuck.

During Mayor Shinpoch's term, Roger Forbes purchased the Renton Theatre in downtown Renton and planned to show sexually explicit movies there. Citizens for a Quality Community formed to oppose Forbes' plans and they pressed the City of Renton to shut him down. Zoning restrictions were the City's only legal option, but Forbes resisted and the case ultimately went to the U.S. Supreme Court. At issue was whether cities could restrict free speech by zoning XXX theatres out of certain areas. In City of Renton vs. Playtime Theatres, the Court found that cities did have that right. For feminists like Mayor Shinpoch, the issue was complex; she believed that free speech permitted the making and exhibiting of such movies, just not everywhere.

SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL

Barbara: I had so much help. People wanted me to succeed, women especially. That wasn't a burden but a little scary because I thought if I fall on my face it will be a long time before they elect another woman.

When Mayor Shinpoch finished her second term in 1988, one reporter observed that "all around, people are praising her wit, charm and influence." As for her, she took it as "a personal and social triumph... that people rarely comment on the fact that she [was] a female mayor."¹

ENDNOTES

1 Mark Matassa, "Barbara Shinpoch Ends Tenure as Renton Mayor," *Seattle Times*, 4 January 1988, p.B1.

Left: City Attorney Larry Warren and Mayor Shinpoch celebrate the City's win vs. Playtime Theatres in the Supreme Court, 1986. (RHM# 2019.007.009)



FACING THE INFERNO

The Wildfire Photography of Kari Greer

COMING SOON: FACING THE INFERNO

The effects of wildfires, which are becoming more far-reaching due to global warming, are drastic. Smoke from wildfires has national impact. And the fire season now extends nearly year-round. In 2015, 10.1 million acres burned in the U.S. Locally, increased wildfire activity means summer skies change from azure blue to hazy brown. The goal of this project is to help propel an even broader understanding and public conversation of this volatile dynamic. This dynamic exhibit features over 50 photographs taken by Kari Greer, a photographer for the National Interagency Fire Center based in Boise, Idaho.

From
JUNE
15
to
JULY
24

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RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM
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Renton, WA 98057

IN HINDSIGHT...



Snow at the museum, 2019.