

# RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Spring  
March 2013

QUARTERLY

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Number 1



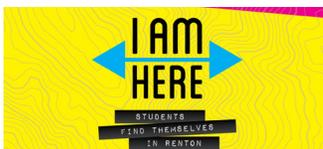
## HOME AWAY FROM HOME: Vall'Alta Transplants in the 1900s by Elizabeth P. Stewart

**A**uthor's note: In January I received a forwarded email from the Office of the Mayor of Renton, asking if I could help do some research. The request was from the former Mayor of Vall'Alta, Italy, inquiring about the many residents of his village who emigrated to Renton at the turn of the twentieth century. Mayor Capelli provided a list of surnames. That question became the jumping-off point for this piece. Much more research remains to be done, but the story thus far is so fascinating that I wanted to share it.

1907 represented the high water mark of Italian immigration to the United States, literally; between the 1890s and 1914, one-fourth of all Italians got on steamships for other countries. The combination of environmental collapse, agricultural depression, and a political system unable to cope with these challenges left Italians no way to support themselves.<sup>1</sup> In the north of Italy in the province of Bergamo was the *frazione* of Vall'Alta. Vall'Alta was located in the Lombardy region, historically one of the richest and most populous of Italy's twenty regions.

Continued on page 5

## Also In This Issue...



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| Currently on  
Exhibit at RHM.



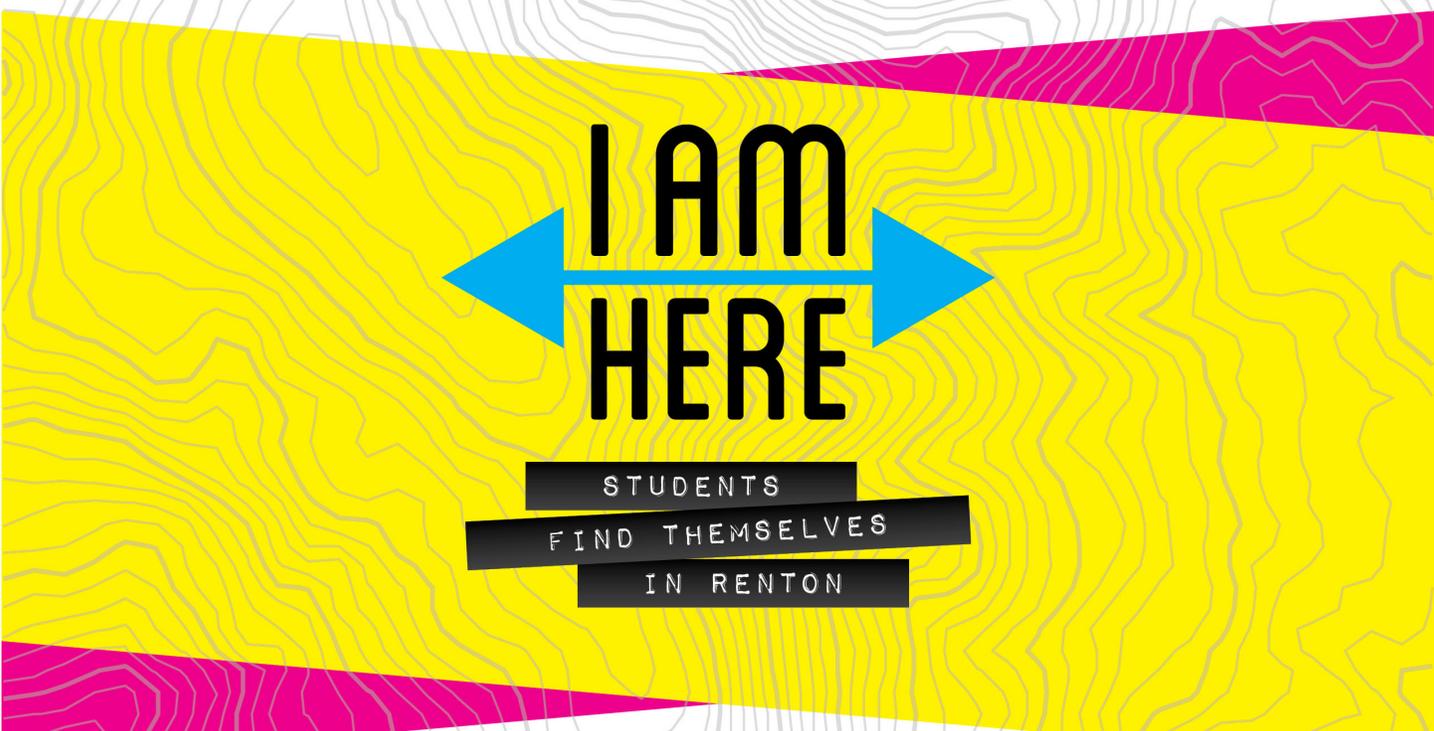
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# I AM HERE: STUDENTS FIND THEMSELVES IN RENTON

Our third collaboration with Renton High School students, this exhibit explores students’ sense of place, using their own essays and photographs. The exhibit represents entirely their work, the result of three months of research, thought, writing, revising, and visualizing. The Museum’s mission is to help forge a stronger link between Renton residents and the place they live in. Come learn about the places that make Renton special to these teens!

From  
**FEBRUARY**  
 12  
 To  
**MAY**  
 25

## ROSE C. CAMERINI (1916-2013)

One of the Museum’s most steadfast volunteers, Rose Camerini, passed away on January 30, 2013. Born in 1916, Rose was a lifelong resident of Renton. She graduated from Renton High School in 1936, after which she worked for Puget Power and as a secretary at McKnight Middle School and Hazen High School. She was also active in the Renton High Alumni Association.

With her gentle voice and a twinkle in her eye, Rose was a greeter and a tour guide for

Museum’s third-grade tours for many years. Though Rose was petite in stature, she made a big impact here and we will always be grateful to have known her.



## ROSEMARY GREENE (1927-2013)

We are very sad to acknowledge the death on February 18, 2013 of one of the Renton Historical Society’s past Presidents. RoseMary Greene—along with Ernie Tonda and Stan Greene—was a driving force behind the Museum’s organization. RoseMary and Stan organized the Museum’s collections, in particular creating a library for generations of researchers. She led 3<sup>rd</sup> grade tours and designed exhibits until her retirement from volunteering after the *Century to Century*

exhibit celebrating Renton’s centennial. RoseMary had a profound impact on the preservation of Renton’s heritage, a lasting legacy. Our thoughts go out to her husband and family.



# MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,  
Museum Director

Some of our research projects this month reminded me how dependent we are on the historical record. We rely on obituaries, government records, maps, photos, newspaper clippings, and primary documents like letters and memoirs to answer people's questions, write articles, and create exhibits. Without these sources there is so much we don't know about people in the past.

This is particularly true for women, who tend to disappear from government records. With historically fewer rights and responsibilities of citizenship, female citizens' lives are usually absent from economic and legal transactions. One of our richest sources of information about people in the past, draft records, documented men's home address, age, birthplace, current employment, next of kin, and disability; the WWI draft card can usually answer a myriad of questions about any given man. But of course women were exempt from the draft.

Women were also invisible from censuses before 1850, as census takers recorded only basic information about the head of household and number of residents. Beginning in 1850, census takers began including detailed information about women and children. In 2010, however, participants filled out only a short form, with more detailed information collected from a random sample of residents. This means that census records from 2010 will not provide even the basic personal data about women now available in the censuses from 1850 to 2000.

So when we're researching a particular woman, we may have only her marriage record and obituary to assist us; where those are non-existent, it as if a particular daughter, sister, wife, and mother never existed at all. Without a historical record, when memories cease, so does a person's life and impact.

On January 25 during the One Night Count of the homeless population, a team of volunteers found a 60-year old woman who had died of hypothermia near Rainier Avenue and I-90. The Medical Examiner identified her as Kathryn Ann Blair. The M.E. was able to track down her family and friends, one of whom wrote a beautiful tribute about Ms. Blair. Her best childhood friend described an artistic person who loved to write and draw, but began to drink as schizophrenia overtook her in her twenties.

Without this loving friend, Ms. Blair's life might have vanished. Seattle City Councilmember Sally Clark, who happened to be on the team that discovered the body, wrote of the experience: "Everyone has a story. Sometimes the story helps us focus on our similarities and fragility. Sometimes the story helps us make a little bit of sense out of something seemingly senseless." Everyone does indeed have a story, and at the Museum we hope to ensure that we preserve as many stories as possible.



Elizabeth P. Stewart  
—  
Director



Mrs. Springsteen and her cow, Beauty, 1912. Her first name is lost to history. (RHM# 1997.080.10598)



This woman is also unidentified. Her portrait was in a scrapbook donated by a contractor demolishing a home on Tobin Street in 1986. (RHM# 1988.053.10702)

You can read Kathryn Ann Blair's story at <http://clark.seattle.gov/2013/02/06/one-night-count-3/>

## RENTON HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

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

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235 MILL AVE. S  
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P (425) 255-2330  
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HOURS:  
Tuesday - Saturday  
10:00am - 4:00pm

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



# CULTURE

UPCOMING  
EVENTS



A WORLD OF SWEETS IN  
WASHINGTON STATE

March 21  
5:00-6:00pm

Anthropologist and avid traveler  
Julia Harrison invites you to  
savor the ways in which sweets  
show how we celebrate, adapt,  
and interact.



AMERICAN INDIANS IN  
CINEMA

April 18  
5:00-6:00pm

Seattle-based scholar Lance  
Rhoades challenges our  
preconceptions and raises  
questions about identity,  
stereotypes, and film that have  
no easy answers.



THE END OF THE TRAIL:  
HOW THE WESTERN  
MOVIES RODE INTO THE  
SUNSET

May 9  
5:00-6:00pm

Movie critic Robert Horton  
explores how the dramatic  
changes in Westerns in the  
1960s and 1970s forced us to  
look critically at our own myths.

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Theresa Clymer, President

The beginning of a new year is always a busy time for the Renton Historical Society, as we prepare the Museum's operating budget, assess the success of our fundraiser, and generally plan our next year's work. At the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, as a Board we began discussing how to deepen our commitment to the Museum. Over the past few years the Historical Society's Board has been stepping up our game, looking for ways to better serve the community and to help the Museum be bigger and better. We've been doing more Board training and going out of our way to recruit trustees with skills and knowledge that we need.

In our latest step, we agreed as a Board that we should all make a significant annual donation to the Museum's operating fund. An annual gift is standard operating procedure for most nonprofit boards. By giving this donation, in addition to the donation of our time and talents, we as trustees hope to demonstrate how dedicated we are to the success of the Museum. And when we ask you to give, you will know that we have already "put our money where our mouths are."

We're working on some fun things, too. The Membership Committee is exploring new membership levels and benefits that we hope will grow our numbers in the years to come. The Museum Committee has developed a rental policy for our Museum space. And in February we held our twice-annual Volunteer Luncheon. Both the staff and the Board cannot begin to thank enough our fantastic group of volunteers. We feel very lucky to have each of you. Every one of our volunteers helps support our museum in a variety ways. Your dedication makes it possible to reach many of our community members and share the History of Renton. We could not accomplish our mission without you. Thank you!

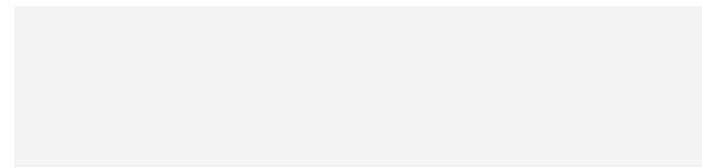
Finally, in preparing a nomination for the Renton High School Wall of Honor I recently needed to locate some information and historic facts, which gave me the opportunity to do some research at the museum. I can report that with the help of the staff, it was easy to find the information I was looking for. The museum is well-organized and has a wealth of facts stored in the archives. The staff is so knowledgeable we had the research done in a very short time. It was also lots of fun. Please remember all the services the museum offers to you and they are there to help with any of your research needs.



Theresa Clymer  
—  
President



Renton History Museum volunteers.





# HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Pacific Car & Foundry workers, 1936. Former Vall'Alta villagers included John Usibelli (1st row, 3rd from left); Oliver Gotti (2nd row, 6th from left); Lindo Breda (4th row, far left); Philip Gotti (4th row, 2nd from left); (RHM# 1985.084.2152)

Continued from page 1

The Italians who settled in Renton were almost exclusively from Italy's northern provinces: Piemonte (the Delaurenti and Baima families); Friulia Venezia Giulia (Franceschina, Rosa); Veneto (Pozzobon); Liguria (Pistorosi); and Lombardia (Cugini, Azzola, and others in this article).<sup>2</sup> Situated on the border with Switzerland, Lombardy's residents benefited from economic and political association with the rest of Europe. Industrial development in Lombardy outstripped that in the southern provinces and literacy rates were higher.

In terms of numbers of immigrants, Renton reflects the nationwide trends. Territorial censuses for 1880 and 1889 show only two Italians living in Renton; by 1910 there were 267 Italians.<sup>3</sup> The huge wave of Italian immigrants frightened Americans into writing legal restrictions aimed at controlling the flow. After 1885 American companies were barred from recruiting workers in Italy, but new immigrants had to have jobs lined up to be admitted. Because of this, Italians who came here had to rely for employment on either the exploitive *padrone* system—in which a labor boss found a man a job but took a percentage of earnings—or friends and family.<sup>4</sup>

Northern Italian immigrants not only brought with them their slightly greater resources, they also brought their strong ties of family, dialect, and village customs. One or two brothers

Caption for cover photo: Vito Poli, the gardener for Renton School District, at Renton High School in 1954. (RHM# 1983.077.1818)



Zaffira and Lino Azzola pose with their daughters Mary and Olga, ca. 1928. (RHM# 1988.111.2688)



Lino Azzola ready for customers at Azzola Tavern, 1937. (RHM# 1988.111.2689)

tended to settle in a place with plenty of employment, and pave the way for cousins, uncles, brothers, and, much later, wives, daughters, and mothers. Even those immigrants who were “birds of passage”—temporary sojourners who intended to return home—preferred to surround themselves with people who shared their culture.

At the turn of the century 78 percent of Italians who came to the U.S. were men, and they tended to band together to support one another.<sup>5</sup> Among the first Vall’Alta emigrants to make Renton their home was Battisto Cugini. In 1910 Battisto headed up a very full household comprised of his wife, Katina Gatti Cugini, and son James; three brothers-in-law, Enrico, Pietro, and Stephano; and seven male boarders, all from their village. The brothers Gatti were all Denny-Renton Clay & Coal brickyard laborers. The boarders—single and married, ranging in age from 18 to 36—all worked at the brickyard or for the railroad. Battisto himself was a wheeler for the brickyard.<sup>6</sup>

A few blocks away from the Cuginis’ North Renton home was Frank Azzola’s household on North Williams Street. Frank lived with his three younger brothers: Alessio, Lorenzo, and Joseph. The four had left Italy together in 1909 and by 1910 they were working together at the Denny-Renton brickyard. The Azzola brothers shared the house with three other recent Italian



Renton Hill Italian Ladies Birthday Club, 1952. Vall'Alta immigrants included Esther Poli (far left) and Ambrosina Breda (third from right). (RHM# 1988.555.2792)



Gladding McBean Yard Crew, 1936 — 1937, including four Vall'Alta immigrants, Vito Poli (2nd row left); Leo Gatti (2nd row, 2nd from right); Primo Capelli (standing, 2nd from left); and Pete Gatti, (standing center). (RHM# 41.2073)

immigrants, Franquilo and Pasqualli Fleibelli and Nicola Guiga. All were brickyard workers, although Frank and Joseph had the more skilled but unpleasant job of stoking the fires in the kilns.<sup>7</sup> These households were just two of many Renton homes occupied by young Italian men alone.

It took these men a while to put down roots, but those who decided to stay worked hard to make good. Two years after the four Azzola brothers left their village, brother Lino Azzola joined them. As soon as he arrived, Lino had a job as fireman at the brickyard, probably thanks to his family ties. He became a naturalized citizen in December 1918, while a soldier at Camp Lewis. A year later he applied for a passport to return to Vall'Alta for "urgent family interests."<sup>8</sup> Just twenty-two when he arrived in the U.S., Lino waited ten years before choosing a wife. He returned to his hometown with his fiancée in 1920 and again in 1947 after he and Zaffira had married and had a daughter. By 1930 he was a farmer living on Talbot Road, with Zaffira and his daughters, Olga and Mary; Olga later recalled fruit orchards, a dairy barn with 40 cows, chicken houses, and cabins for hired help.<sup>9</sup> He developed the property into a residential development called "Azzola's Country Villa," and by 1937 he had become a co-owner of Azzola's Tavern on Main Avenue.<sup>10</sup>

The 1920s represented a period of success for the

new immigrants from northern Italy. Alessandro "Alex" Cugini arrived in Renton sometime after he immigrated in July 1921. He married Josephine Belmondo in September 1926, the same year he became a naturalized citizen. His brother Constantino "Tino" Cugini followed in 1927, and together they developed a series of successful businesses. Alex parlayed his talent as a logger—his first American job—into ownership of Barbee Mill, while Tino was proprietor of Cugini Court and a mining/logging contractor in the 1940s.

By 1930 the numerous households full of Italian men had given way to more traditionally American single-family situations. On High Street, Grant Street, and Beacon Avenue on Renton Hill, numerous families created a mini-Vall'Alta. The families of Angelo Usibelli, Victor Poli, and Leo Gatti lived next to Yugoslavian families like the Musgas and Scots like Charles and Elizabeth Faull. "In that time I'd have to say that the hill was probably 60 percent Austrian and 40 percent Italian, so it all got mixed up," Andrew Gigli remembered in 1987. "The Italians disappeared, the American or the English became part of it. It was just one big ball; it didn't seem like any different."<sup>11</sup>

In twenty years the villagers from Vall'Alta had made Renton their new home, and not just a home away from home.

Endnotes on page 10



Interns Clare Tally-Foos and Seema Gajria with some of the artifacts they have inventoried.

# COLLECTION REPORT

by Sarah Samson,  
Collection Manager



Sarah Samson  
—  
Collection Manager

Collections work at the Museum has been moving forward at a fierce pace since the New Year began. New faces and new projects are rapidly changing the state of collections here for the better. Three interns have joined the collections team: Niki Ohlandt, Seema Gajria, and Clare Tally-Foos.

Niki, a second year graduate student in Museology at the University of Washington (UW), is tackling our registration filing system. She is fundamentally changing the way we organize our collections paperwork; she is changing us from a donor-based system to one based on accession numbers. Her work brings us up-to-date and in accordance with best practices in the museum field. The project is not without its headaches; Niki is attempting to reconcile 45 years' worth of paperwork! In two months Niki has already cleared up some important mysteries about where certain artifacts and photographs originated.

Our other major project is an on-site inventory of all our artifacts in storage at the Museum, a project funded by a grant from 4Culture. A team of two interns, Seema and Clare, are sorting through everything, box by box. Both Seema and



Intern Niki Ohlandt with the accession files.

Clare are first year graduate students in the Museology program at UW. They have six rows worth of shelving to go through, artifact by artifact. They have already uncovered one hazardous artifact, a tin full of black gunpowder. After consulting with the Renton Police Department, we got to keep the tin after the contents were safely emptied out by the Port of Seattle Bomb Squad. When Seema and Clare finish we will finally have a complete picture of what artifacts we hold in our collection and where each of them is located. To learn more about the project, you can check out the News page on our website where Seema and Clare are blogging about their discoveries.

One of the resources we lack the most here at the Museum is people. Interns from the UW Museology program are invaluable to us. They come to us with training and experience, and they are able to complete projects for the Museum that we would never be able to accomplish without their help. The students receive on-the-job training, credits toward their degree, and experience for their resumes. In 2004 I was the first intern the Museum hosted from the Museology graduate program. Since then the Museum has hosted ten more interns from the graduate program and two from the certificate program. We hope to host many more interns in the future and to keep our relationship with UW thriving.

# MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

November 15, 2012 - February 15, 2013

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Mario Tonda

## THE 50<sup>TH</sup> WEDDING ANNIVERSARY OF DON & LORAIN CUSTER

Wilma Dallosto  
Madeline Zanatta

## NEW MEMBERSHIPS

Tom & Marcy Adelman Family  
Elizabeth Bradley Family  
Michael Bishop & Monica Hayes  
Dennis Conte  
Wendy Flores  
Margie Lindberg  
Jeff Rockwell  
Liz & Robert Sandstrom  
Mamie Thirion  
Richard Wagner

## IN-KIND DONATIONS

Martha Bray  
Jeff Merrill  
Wil Samson Design



Continued from page 7

(ENDNOTES)

1 David L. Nicandri, *Italians in Washington State: Emigration 1853 – 1924* (N.p.: The Washington State American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1978), 18.

2 Research for *Sustaining A City* exhibit.

3 1880, 1889 Territorial Censuses; 1910 Federal Census for Renton, all available on Ancestry.com.

4 Nicandri, *Italians in Washington State*, 18.

5 “Italian Immigration,” Digital History, accessed on 25 February 2013 ([http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/italian\\_immigration.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/italian_immigration.cfm)).

6 1910 Renton census. “Gatti” was sometimes Americanized to “Gotti.” Leo and Maria Gatti’s children were known as “Gotti.”

7 1910 Renton census. Other groups of Italian men included: Camille Gaspari’s home with two boarders; Angelo Romita and his three “partners”; Pietro Vitoni and his six “partners”; Annie Hartman’s boardinghouse with her exclusively Italian clientele of fourteen boarders; Joseph Bravi and his two brothers; Ciro Zilli, his brother, and partner; Mike Guisano and his two brothers; Giacomo Breda and his nine boarders; Eugene Remoli and his seven partners; Ferro Morrish [sp?] and his seven boarders; Antonio Donisio and his three partners; Antonio Shimagt and his four partners; Gataro Paulon [sp?], his wife, four young children, his brother, and two lodgers; John Gomorare and his five partners, all Delaurenti brothers. If the spelling of these names seems outlandish, it is because census takers had difficulty spelling with Italian names.

8 Lino Azzola, Application for Passport, 7 October, 1919 (U.S. Passport Applications, Ancestry.com).

9 Notes for #1988.111.2688.

10 Homer Venishnick Oral History, 29 June 1989, p. 15 (Oral History Collection, Renton History Museum).

11 Andrew Gigli Oral History, 31 March 1987, p.6 (Oral History Collection, Renton History Museum).

## WELCOME OUR NEW OFFICE AIDE!

Cindy Ensley joined us as our new Museum Office Aide this past fall. Cindy has been involved with the Museum for several years in a volunteer capacity, even winning our Volunteer of the Year Award in 2010 for her work on our Coast Salish curriculum. Cindy has worked in numerous offices, for the Renton School District, the Renton Police Department, and Bellevue College. Cindy’s friendliness and professionalism brightens our office and

keeps us on track with our many projects. We look forward to having her with us for a long time!



## VOLUNTEER TREASURER NEEDED!

The Renton History Museum is looking for a Volunteer Treasurer to serve on the Board of Trustees. The Treasurer is a volunteer position responsible for creating quarterly financial reports and for working with the bookkeeper, Budget Committee, Endowment Committee, investment representative, and tax preparers on day-to-day financial needs, long-term planning and fundraising, and tax preparation. The Treasurer should have good accounting/bookkeeping skills, including knowledge

of QuickBooks; some knowledge of federal, state, and local taxes; an attention to detail; and a willingness to learn about nonprofits. This position is a great opportunity to help the Renton History Museum succeed, build your resume, and work with a great group of community-minded trustees! Please contact Museum Director Liz Stewart by email ([estewart@rentonwa.gov](mailto:estewart@rentonwa.gov)) or by phone (425.255.2330) to apply!

## MEMBERSHIP DUES REMINDER

The dues notices were mailed in November and over 150 members have not yet paid their 2013 dues. Please pay your dues and save us the expense of second notices. You can call Museum Office Aide Cindy Ensley at 425.255.2330 in the afternoons and she will be happy to check your membership status. This quarterly has a printed form with the membership categories listed. As the notice in November stated, this is the last year to lock in your membership at current rates through 2014. Don’t delay!

## VOLUNTEER BROWN BAG MEETINGS

The Museum’s volunteers have a representative body which acts as a link between them and the museum staff. Current members of the Committee are: Janet Christiansen, Nancy Fairman, Margaret Feaster, Ila Hemm, Sarah Jane Hisey, and Shirley Phinney. Please join the Volunteer Committee on the second Thursday of every month for a brown bag conversation—bring your questions about Renton history, the Museum, volunteering, and anything else to share with other Historical Society folks!

### Volunteer Brown Bag Meetings

*(bring your bag lunch)*

Where: Renton History

Museum Research Room

When: Second Thursday of each month at 12:00 p.m. beginning on March 14.

R.S.V.P. Please call Dorota at 425.255.2330 by noon the day before.





## SAVE THE DATE: RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

Join us for the Annual Meeting of the Renton Historical Society and enjoy a barbecue dinner. The meeting is open to Society members, prospective members, and Museum volunteers. Introduction of new Renton Historical Society trustees, and update on the Museum Master Plan, awarding of the George and Annie Lewis Custer Award for Heritage Citizenship, volunteer awards, and raffle drawing will all be part of this exciting event. Reservations required. Please RSVP by May 31 to Cindy Ensley at 425-255-2330 or [censley@rentonwa.gov](mailto:censley@rentonwa.gov). No regrets please.

On  
**JUNE**  
**5**  
 At  
**6:00 PM**

## MEMBERSHIP FORM

Please select a membership level:

- Individual—\$20
- Family—\$30
- Benefactor—\$100
- Life membership—\$500
- Business—\$100
- Senior—\$12
- Senior couple—\$20

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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.

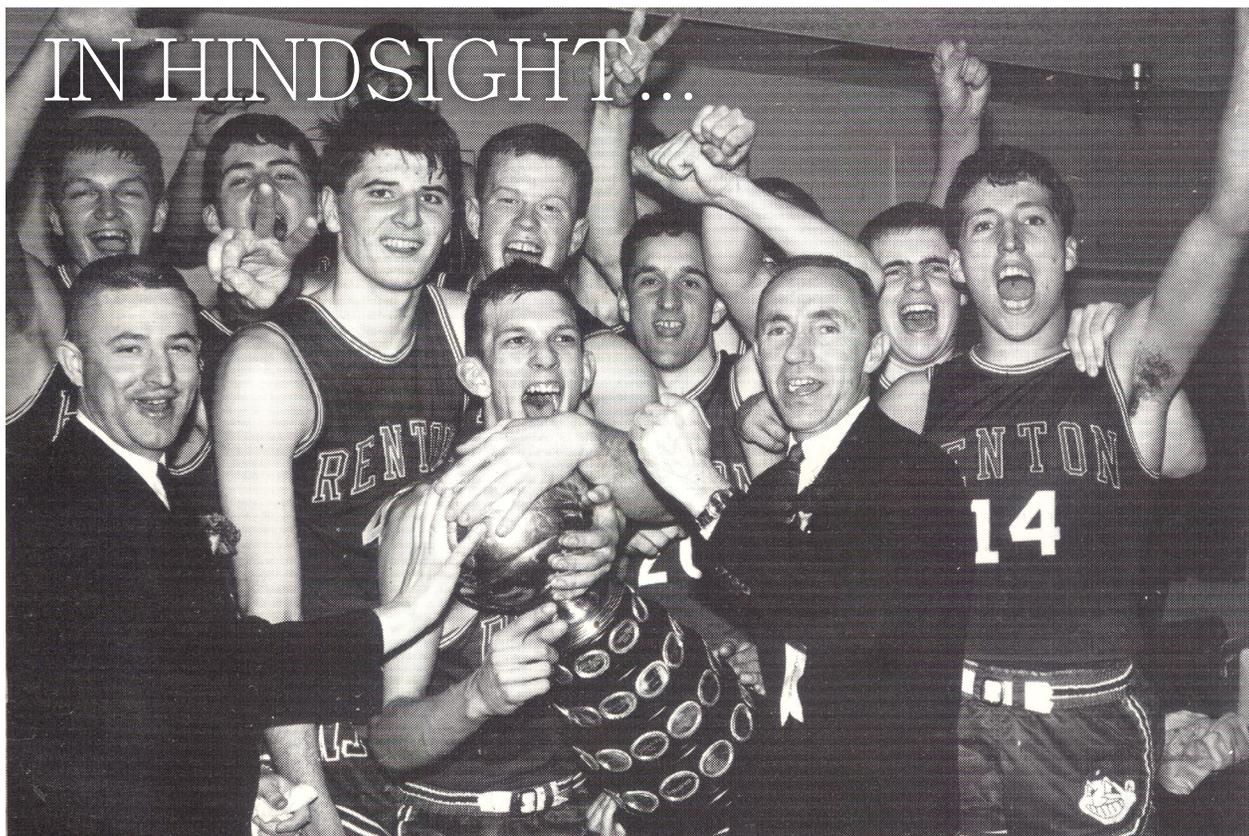
Visa or MC: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Exp. date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



Renton Historical Society  
 235 Mill Avenue South  
 Renton, WA 98057

Phone: 425.255.2330  
 Fax: 425.255.1570  
 Email: [estewart@rentonwa.gov](mailto:estewart@rentonwa.gov)  
[www.rentonhistorymuseum.org](http://www.rentonhistorymuseum.org)

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



The Renton High School's Boys Basketball team last won the State Championship in 1967. They are making another run for the trophy this year...Go RHS! (Photo from the 1967 Illahee.)