V is for Veterans
- by Nancy Dulaney

Today’s Veterans Day had its beginnings in the United States when in November of 1919, President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation to honor the end of World War I. It stated, in part, “...the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country’s service and with gratitude for the victory....” It had been one year since hostilities had ceased and an armistice had been called to end The Great War.

In earlier times, local war veterans were honored with a Memorial Day parade in downtown Seattle. Parade grand marshal Colonel Charles Lawton Thompson, pictured above in white rider’s gloves, escorted Colonel William Frederick aka “Buffalo Bill” Cody, veteran of the Union Army Cavalry and the Indian Wars. Riding to the left is David Clinton, “D.C.”, Brown, of Columbia City (previously councilman, town marshal, and acting mayor). The Seattle Star reported, “Flowers were showered on the heroes of the civil war who marched to the strains of their old battle hymns....” (6/1/1914)

The dignitaries also attended services held later that afternoon at the Grand Army of the Republic cemetery in Capitol Hill, established in 1895 for American Civil War soldiers; i.e., the Union Army, Union Navy and the Marines. The GAR was a national fraternal membership-based organization.

Both Colonel Thompson and Private Brown would later be buried at the GAR cemetery. D.C. Brown was commander of the John F. Miller Post, No. 31, of the GAR in 1907.
and in 1914 was on the committee in charge of the parade program. His wife Arlettie volunteered with the Miller Post Women’s Relief Corps and her simple gravestone lies next to her husband’s in the cemetery. D.C. Brown had served three years in the Civil War and was wounded in 1864 per his obituary.

As an aside, American activist “Mother Jones” attended the labor parade held that afternoon in May as well. Not known for fancy hats herself, in her address to the crowd she proclaimed, “If women would decorate the outside of their skulls less and put something inside, there would be no militia.” (The Seattle Star, 6/1/1914)

Three years later, on April 6, 1917, the United States officially entered World War I against Germany. Eighteen-year-old Enumclaw native Roy Keeley enlisted on April 20, and was headed for the western shores of France aboard the transport ship President Lincoln in December of that year.

In June of 1919, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer published an American Roll of Honor reporting for Northwest soldiers and Roy Keeley’s name appears in the Slightly Wounded category. Military records indicate Private Keeley had been at U.S. Army Base Hospital 64, in France, prior to his transport home in June 1919. This hospital was designated for gas and infected surgical cases. He then spent time at Fort Bayard Hospital, in New Mexico, according to the U.S. Census until his discharge in February 1920. This hospital is known for its treatment of soldiers with tuberculosis.

In June of that year, Roy and Mary were wed at Mary’s childhood home on Ferdinand Street in Columbia City. The ceremony was officiated by Reverend Raymond Espy, founder of Findlay Street Christian Church in Hillman City. Mary’s Womach grandparents had brought the family to Southeast Seattle in about 1890 and her parents built their family home where Columbia School now sits, in about 1901. Roy had been raised in a farming community and returned to Enumclaw with his new wife to farm and raise their family, though Mary returned to her parents’ home for the birth of their first child, Dorothy.

In June 1954, the United States Congress, with the support of President Dwight Eisenhower, changed the name of Armistice Day to Veterans Day and November 11th became the federal holiday to honor all servicemen and women of American wars. While Washelli Cemetery in north Seattle extended an invitation to their Veterans Day program “May Peace come to all” that year, a Rainier Valley newspaper ran the headline, “Local Men Off to Korea” as the Cold War had taken hold.
Honor Roll

We thank our generous supporters for their donations received between April 16 and November 1, 2021!

Please contact us with any corrections or omissions at 206-723-1663 or email office@rainiervalleyhistory.org.

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Echoes of Garlic Gulch
- by Eleanor Boba

“Our church was Mount Virgin church. We had several Italian grocery stores at Atlantic Street, Italian pharmacy, Italian barbershop. The residents were mainly east and west of Rainier Avenue going all the way up to Beacon Hill. As far south as – oh, a little south of McClellan Street. We had the ballpark. We had the Vacca Brothers farm. And we had the Italian language school here, at Atlantic Street.”

Thus did baker and businessman Remo Borracchini describe the neighborhood of Seattle’s North Rainier Valley that came to be called Garlic Gulch due to the large number of Italian families settled there.

Little Italy

The main wave of Italian immigrants to Washington’s “shores” came at the turn of the 19th century. Many came to work in the coal mines in South King County; others were farmers who set up truck farms in the Rainier and Duwamish Valleys. By 1910 some 2,000 Italians congregated in Rainier Valley. They were not always welcomed by the existing population; language, cultural, and religious barriers led to stigmatization and discrimination.

A sociology graduate student at the University of Washington, Nellie Roe, wrote her 1915 thesis on “The Italian Immigrant in Seattle.” Despite clear biases in her narrative, we can thank Roe for hand-drawn images of the North Rainier area, including this one labeled “Part of Worst Italian Section – below Jackson Street.”

While poverty and overcrowded conditions may have been the norm in Garlic Gulch during the early years (as it is in many immigrant communities), the Italians worked hard and created a vibrant community centered on institutions such as Our Lady of Mount Virgin Church and School. For several decades beginning in 1911, Mount Virgin and revered priest Father Ludovico Caramello were the heart of the Italian community in Seattle.

Long-time resident Ralph Vacca recalled:

The church in the Italian community, at least in that generation, was the center. And Father Caramello was God in America. You could take a string or measuring stick and go out whatever distance from Mount Virgin Church and there would be a lot of Italian names and families.

Small grocery stores sprang up to serve the Italian families, as well as the German and Greek families that were also a part of the social fabric. Families that may have originally lived with friends and relatives in ramshackle houses and boarding houses built sturdier homes, planted vegetable gardens, grape arbors, and fruit trees, and often added Italian traditions such as wine presses and bocce ball courts.

Winemaking was an important tradition and the center of many family and community celebrations. “Sometimes the wine was good and sometimes it wasn’t,” remembers Croce.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is tempting to see those early days through a rosy hue. Bill Ferrari recalled:

It was a fantastic neighborhood. It had different cultures of people. There were Italians, there were Jewish people, Japanese, Chinese. All mixtures within the neighborhood. Anglo-Americans, a few of those. But everybody got along.

The pillars of the Community

If Mount Virgin was the spiritual heart of the Italian community, Borracchini’s was its stomach. The popular bakery and Italian delicatessen was a part of Seattle’s culinary scene for nearly a century, beginning with a small delivery business in 1922 and continuing in 1938 with a huge retail establishment designed to look like an Italian villa. The specialty cakes and imported delicacies were enjoyed by generations of Seattlites, not just Italians.

But Borracchini’s was not alone in achieving lasting renown. A relative late-comer, Oberto Sausage Factory, was founded in 1953 on Rainier Avenue; John Croce began selling Italian and Greek specialties out of his car to a city hungry for a taste of home – in 1971 he founded Pacific Food Importers on the edge of the Rainier District. The New Italian Café, opened in the early 1930s, was a gathering spot at the hub of the community, Rainier Avenue and Atlantic Street. Add to these culinary institutions a macaroni factory, several Italian barbers, an Italian druggist, and a singing shoemaker and you have the ingredients for a thriving ethnic community.

The children of Garlic Gulch were sent to Italian School, an after-school program designed to teach them the language and reinforce the culture of their parents. Lucy Salle remembered the experience:

I went there a couple of years at least. I must have been about seven years old. A friend of mine from the neighborhood went with me and
COVID-19 pandemic.) And now Mount Virgin Church teeters on the brink of closing and perhaps demolition as the Catholic Archdiocese makes difficult decisions for the allocation of scarce resources.

Remnants of the gulch can be found if you know where to look. Here and there are plum trees, fig trees, and grape vines planted by the early Italian families. The Atlantic Street Center’s 1927 Italianate style building stills stands on South Atlantic just at the edge of the vacated portion of that street. The agency has adapted to the needs of new immigrants. And, Florentine style Mount Virgin still occupies its own little gulch in the shadow of the Mount Baker lid, although it has been decades since it served a predominantly Italian congregation.

Change is inevitable. Demographic and landscape transformation is part of the urban dynamic. While tempting to look back at an era with fond nostalgia, we must also accept the present with all its assets and failings, and perhaps celebrate the multi-cultural community that is North Rainier Valley today. Garlic Gulch is gone, but the ever-changing immigrant-built city lives on.

All quotations are taken from oral histories in the collection of the Rainier Valley Historical Society.
What’s new in the Archives!


• 2021.003- Tim Raetzloff donated 12 photos of the Raetzloff Family’s photos of Rainer Valley.

• 2021.004- Mary Charles donated several items related to Rainier Valley including a mantle clock from pioneer Elsie Charles, Rainier Beach High School football pins made by John Charles, and American Embassy Beijing baseball cap and jacket owned by Gary Locke when he was the United States Ambassador to China.

• 2021.005- Mack Junior donated a film projector that was used at Franklin High School.

• 2021.006- Nancy Graves Langford donated a Grayson & Brown turpentine bottle that was used at the Columbia newspaper.

• 2021.007- Teresa Anderson donated many pieces of Franklin High School memorabilia including alumni newsletters, Franklin Tolos, reunion memory books and the FHS Schematic Design Report from the 1980s as well as FHS PTA scrapbooks from the 1920s and 1957.

• 2021.008- Rory Sweet Burks donated a digital scan of a photo of a Black woman from the early 1900s which reads on the back “Mrs. Anderson of Rainier Valley - A Wonderful Friend!”

• 2021.009- Kirsten Harris-Talley donated an oral history as part of our ongoing project to collect oral histories from the LGBTQ+ community in Rainier Valley.

• 2021.010- Jo Lynn Aumoeualogo donated fifteen yearbooks to us including Franklin High School Tolos from 1937-47, Rainier Beach High School Valhallas from 1968-1973 and three 50th Reunion booklets from the FHS class of 1946, 1947 and 1948.

• 2021.011- Destyn LaPorte donated 9 photographs of her grandfather Menzo LaPorte and his wife Ruth Watling LaPorte as well as a cookbook from the Ruth Circle at Columbia Congregational Church in 1957.

• 2021.012 Laura Gibbons donated an elementary school project poster, “Columbia City: A Colorful Neighborhood” created by her daughter Diana Keyes Gibbons.

Menzo LaPorte’s surprise 40th birthday party. His wife, Ruth Watling LaPorte, asked guests to dress as children.
In memory of RVHS longtime supporters Don Bearwood and Jean VelDwyk

Don Bearwood and Jean VelDwyk sat across from each other at our last RVHS Founder’s Dinner in 2019. They were no strangers, having grown up a few blocks apart in the Lakewood-Seward Park neighborhood. Their contributions to local history are invaluable. Each shared their neighborhood memories and photographs with us. Don and Jean are missed.

Hillman Heritage Bell News

The bell has been sandblasted, stabilized, and primed for paint by Flamespray NW. Our “Call for Artists” has closed and an artist has been selected! Cathy Fields, a mural artist based in Hillman City, is working on renderings for the mural on the bell. Cathy has lived in Hillman City for 50 years and is experienced in public art, including mural projects in Rainier Valley. The mural will depict the history and diversity of Hillman City. The bell was stored at Industry Space Seattle thanks to John Bianchi, until its recent move to Cathy Fields’ art studio on Orcas Street. Thank you Tim Burdick, Antonio and Pedro for moving the bell.

We have commissioned a base for the bell and are working on a historic plaque to be placed on it. Carla Davis Hanson, property owner of the Flour Box in Hillman City, has agreed for the bell to be installed on the property. The bell’s new location, Rainier Ave. and S. Findlay St., is a block away from where it came from, the M. E. Church. We thank Dorothy Driver and Joan Neville for their generous donations toward the additional costs of the bell project.
Rainier Valley Historical Society's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret and share the history and heritage of Rainier Valley and its people and to engage public involvement in and appreciation of its diverse cultures. Our geographic boundaries are from Dearborn Street on the north to the city limits on the south, and from I-5 to Lake Washington.

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