

# PERSONAL STORIES OF TACOMA'S HISTORIC HILLTOP



## Gail Cameron

When I was growing up here family was family. I started at St. Leo's and then I transferred to McCarver when I was missing my family and my friends. My experience here up on the Hill was exciting growing up. It was safe, the environment was safe. Everyone knew everyone and if you got in trouble your momma knew about it before you got home because everyone knew everyone. I've seen a lot of changes on the corner of MLK there used to be a barber shop, a laundry mat and taverns where my father used to hang out, as you call a soul food restaurant and the churches Rev. Critendon's body shop was on the corner.

When I went to McCarver right across the street was a candy shop and it was the most popular place in town and I used to get credit for candy. I can't remember her name but the owner was the sweetest lady and she would let us build up to a dollar and she would never let us go past a dollar, and I remember one year we were going on a field trip to Mt. Rainier and I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade my mother packed my lunch and it was something I didn't want I so I went to the candy store at that time candy was no more than a penny or 5 cents and I got myself a sack full of candy. And on the way to Mt. Rainier I had this great big old bag of candy, and everyone on the bus wanted a piece of candy I wasn't giving away any candy, they had to buy my candy and it was like a store on the bus. I had the goodies for them to eat on the way and it was fun.

I remember having block parties here. I remember at McCarver we used to have after school dances and it was called teen time. We used to have talent shows at McCarver after school it was an exciting time a fun time.

We used to have a basketball team but the best was the football team and the cheerleaders and my cousin was the queen cheerleader one time. No matter how many games we played MacIvey, Gauld didn't matter; all that mattered was to beat Jason Lee. It was enough to just beat Jason Lee.

I've seen the changes at St. Joseph's Hospital. I was born there. My home church was on the corner of 17<sup>th</sup> and I and I watched it move from 17<sup>th</sup> to over on the east side. The church is 128 years old here in Tacoma. I still have family that live here on J street and MLK we have a long family history up here on the hill. I see a lot of good changes. I see a lot of people not afraid to come out and sit on their porch. Sitting and barbequing. I see people coming out and walking again. They can feel safe here up on the hill.

I grew up on 19<sup>th</sup> and Yakima, I remember we used to have a forest and we called it monkey vine. My mother lived on 19<sup>th</sup> and Yakima for 66 years they should have named the street after her -ha. When we would leave school all the kids used to go down there and you'd have a cigarette you snuck from your dad or your mom, and that was the place to meet up. If you were cool or you were tough that was the place to be and it was fun. We used to play hide and go seek and kiss the boys in there but it was the place to be away from the eyes of teachers and parents brothers and sisters would say they were gonna go home and tell mom you kissed a boy in the monkey vines it was great fun.

It snowed a lot here back in the early sixties, and seventies.

My favorite place to go sledding was on 19<sup>th</sup> street because back then they used to block all the streets all the way down to Pacific so everyone in the neighborhood down to 25<sup>th</sup>, but 19<sup>th</sup> st. was the spot. Cardboard, inner tubes, even your jacket. Anything you felt like you could get on and slide all the way down. The thing of it was that from 19<sup>th</sup> street you'd have to go all the way down to Pacific. So if you could do that you had the respect of everyone during the snow time. It was fun.

At my home, where I grew up. I never knew what it was to go to a store. My mother provided everything we needed. We fruit trees vegetable trees and the most beautiful flower gardens you ever wanted to see. I hated working in them during the summer time. But overall it paid off to see how beautiful it was. I used to watch my mother make that bootleg wine out of the big barrels out of the grapes she put in there and the house would be stinking. But I guess it was the best tasting wine, because my daddy sure liked it.

I grew up alone. My sister was 22 years older than me. And my brother is 21 years older than me. We used to have a club going on up here and it was called the J Street Jutters. It was a fun club we had our dolls and tea sets and if you got a stick of your mom's lipstick it was really the bomb, it was cool. And we used to come up to the park. That's when McCarver had the pool and we used to come and sit around with our dolls like we were at the beach. and all the little boys would be talking and we have on our lipstick and just be ignoring them, soaking it all in and the little boys would be throwing water on us and we'd just brush it off. It was cool back then.

I went to Gaulf for middle school and I really didn't know anyone there I really didn't have friends and I felt like I was taken away from all of my friends, and I just went through the motions at school. And I got to come back on this side of the hill and I thought once I came back my mother was going to let me go to stadium. I was wrong. I ended up going to Lincoln and I was devastated.

140 family member here in Tacoma



## Morris McCullum

I've been up here 35 years at 4 locations. I was back east and then I had an opportunity to come out here with a gentleman who had been out here before. The building was for sale and I was in retail. I came out here in 1958 and bought the K Street Department Store at 1124 MLK which is where I'm at Today. What goes around comes around.

When I came out here and bought this department store here at this location K Street was a very vibrant neighborhood for 7 or 8 blocks - there wasn't a hole in the wall that wasn't retail.

We had a theater, grocery stores electric shops furniture stores restaurants, and it was composed of a lot of retail businesses. In fact we were the second largest retail center in the city of Tacoma. Downtown being the biggest. And of course the mall came into existence and things but when I first came up here I encountered a lot of drug activity. But I lived through it. At one time our section was the worst in crime now we're the best. K Street was a very vibrant neighborhood, business district and had a big medical center behind here. No St. Joes and Tacoma General have increased their footprint and are still building. We're going to have a community health building across the street here, as part of the medical corridor.

We have a lot of beautiful homes here. There are many vibrant neighborhoods and they take care of their places but the concept of the city in general thinks it's a bad area up here but in reality it's not.



## Harold Moss

K Street was really pretty vibrant at the time; you know people had businesses that were where your stores were. Of course stores (grocery stores) were quite different then your supermarkets today. Most of them you'd go in and they'd get the stuff of your list and pull it from the shelves and that sort of thing. Meat markets were alive and well. They cut the meat right there. Poultry and that sort of thing. They'd pretty much gone out of the business of having live poultry at that time. Mother would go in and feel the breast of the chicken and all that and say I'll take this one and they'd go out kill it and de-feather it or whatever they call it. So the business district was close and very good and there were very (at that time) very few black businesses in that area. The things that I remember most were like Harold Meyers Drug Store at the corner of I think 11th and K St. that was one of the big operations there.

It was an old neighborhood when we got there, that was in 1950. It had its churches and businesses.

I recall is that there were just really few vacancies it was a shop in every store front and your needs were pretty much answered that way. If you wanted to get to a larger vegetable market you'd go downtown. And there were open markets all over the place where the vendors would be standing there with their wares and groceries all laid up neatly. You'd buy what you needed, sacked it,

caught the street car, and went home.

Of course St Joe's was the biggest thing in the area, it was beautiful, a landmark. It was a working area. Well we had a lot of taverns that was the other land mark. There was a theater there and bakeries, lots of bakeries. People baked bread and went and bought fresh bread. And you'd stand there and be amazed watching the bread slicer cut the bread up.



## Greg Tanbara

I was Born in 1953 in Seattle while my dad was doing his residency up there at children's hospital's a pediatrician. My mother grew up in Tacoma near Downtown on 17<sup>th</sup> and Fawcett street. My earliest memories of the Hilltop My father started his practice in 1955 and he used to have an office on what used to be called, The Tacoma medical Center which was a little group of brick buildings, between J and 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> L/M. My mother's family was from here they had a dry cleaning business in Tacoma. I remember running around the medical center as a kid. I also remember the Harold Meyer drug store which was on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> and MLK at that time it was K street. We did Christmas shopping up there and all sorts of things I bought my first camera up there. Went there to get prescriptions filled. On the corner of what's now Brazil and Martin Luther King was one of the first supermarkets, the Food King. We used to do all of our shopping there. It was really a retail area. He started his practice up there. I think it was the same year Mary Bridge children's hospital was established. There was no children's hospital there before in Tacoma.

As kids we used to just roam around up there and when I was in High School. I went to Stadium hs and a lot the students were up from k street also. And at that time there was also the Paulson's furniture and appliance store and that was an interesting place to be and I think I bought my first stereo up there. I would go up there with mostly my folks and my cousins. There was also a small drug store up there in the medical center. I think there's still a pharmacy up there it was one of the small brick building son the corner there. I think my father would just about every day go in there and I remember him taking me there and I was just fascinated because when they made you a cherry coke they mixed it they would throw in the coke syrup and in would go the carbonated water and then they'd throw some cherry syrup and then they'd mix it and boy that stuff was good. And I work for the health department now and I'm sure it wasn't that healthy but It tasted really good.

In those days it seemed like every one of those doctors' offices up there it seemed like they had an aquarium. And I tried to have an aquarium but the fish were always dying. There was no air conditioning in those offices and it was hot, it was really hot. At least in my father's practice there were a lot of people from the neighborhood that would come in. My father practiced for about 53 years and he stayed in the Hilltop area the whole time. He had a couple of different offices, on 19<sup>th</sup> and MLK and now his group is located in the Baker building which is across the street from Multicare. That was something he decided. One was because it was close to the hospitals but another was because he was very interested in that community up there.

My father has had a couple of projects but one of them was working on health care clinics for people who didn't have health care and the second one was in the hilltop, a bunch of volunteer nurses and doctors would come and work at the clinic, and I remember one Tacoma general's head pharmacist Richard Driskell would volunteer on e or two nights a week and help dispense drugs and in the early days they would just gather whatever they could like samples and that sort of thing, but I thought that was really cool. My mother told me that while they were starting up those clinics in the late sixties they pretty much knew right away that a lot of those people coming in were going to need to get specialty care, and so he talked to Bob Yamashka who was running the Tacoma community house and asked him if he would host a meeting and about 50 physicians were willing to take referral from the m and not charge them clinic. The feelings I get from when I was young was that the people up there are really interested in each other and the names that you'll hear like Alberta Canada and Mary Harper and those folks were really very dedicated people in that community and I think they end up being that way because the community is very interested in doing stuff for each other.

I lived on Tacoma Ave for about 4 years and we lived in what was the Japanese Language school for the Japanese community and that was a building that was probably built in the 20's some time. It was a pretty large 3 story building built on the hill. There were classrooms there an auditorium or assembly hall and there were teacher's quarters for the head teachers and that's where we were in those quarters. The Japanese community built that because they were interested in their children getting some formal training in the japans Language So every day the Japanese children would have to go to public school and all of them were American citizens and then they'd go to Japanese language school for classes there, but it also served as a place where the Tacoma Buddhist Japanese community and the Methodist Japanese community would come together and do some things together and a lot of my mother's family friends are associated with that school and went to church there. While we there the Japanese community in Tacoma was pretty much gone, because most of them did not return after World War 2.

When I was a kid I always thought of Hilltop as a place where my father worked and spent a lot of time. When I was young I always thought of it as a second place where I could go and people knew who I was and I could go and get to see interesting stuff like emergency rooms and hardware stores. There was a lot of retail going on up there it was like the old main street the storefronts were narrow but deep one after another with neon signs and restraints and small cafe's and that sort of a thing, bars there were a lot of people up there. I think the neat parts of that community outweigh the stigma that the 80's left, with the crypts and bloods up there. Its one of my favorite places to do business is up there I think there's a lot of hope and there's a good spirit in the area.

The Food King was the first store that I had ever seen with automatic doors and back then they had a pressure pad so you would step on a pressure pad and the door would swing open. And my sister was really small maybe to or three and she wasn't heavy enough to trip the door and she would step on the pressure plate for people.



## Laura Jensen

The Valhalla Hall also served as a venue where social gatherings and events would take place. Normanna Hall was also an important venue for both the Scandinavian Community and other communities on the Hilltop. In particular, dances were popular at Valhalla Hall and Laura Jensen's mother was a pianist in the Gord Family Orchestra, which played at the hall through the depression, and in 1934 became the choir leader for the Order of Runeberg. The Gord Family Orchestra played a mix of Scandinavian and popular dance band music. While they were playing, they would have signs by the stage to tell the audience what the next dance would be, such as the Foxtrot.

Her mother was also the piano accompanist during a choir tour to Finland organized by Leonard Svedberg, a prominent member of the Scandinavian community of Tacoma, in 1930. A delegation of choir members from the Northwest traveled to the western coast of Finland where they were well received, but they would be prevented from returning to Scandinavia again until many years after World War II.

Laura fondly recalls the lodge and especially one particular memory from the hall:

"One brighter, whiter memory was the third floor banquet room, a couple of times - I am sure it wasn't only one time, I was at a banquet that the order to Runeberg put on in the Valhalla Hall. Then we would go up in the third floor banquet room, and I remember there was a lot of light that flooded that room. There were a lot of windows there, and it was just a very, very day lit experience. Very interesting to be there."

Laura's father was also a long time member of the Hilltop community, serving as a pharmacist at the Economy Drug Store on MLK Way for nearly a decade. She recalled him taking the bus to work and how this made a lasting impression. For 22 years, she has walked, biked, or bused everywhere she wants to go. Using alternative transportation and bypassing car ownership has served inspiration for her art. Comparing the bus system now to then, she spoke of the improvements in accessibility and ease of use, including the addition of bike racks, kneeling buses, and transit centers. On this last topic, she says,

"They didn't have transit centers. If you were going to make a connection, it was just yourself on the street at a bus stop. You can still do that at many places, but now you can wait and make a connection at transit center and that is a lot better. It is surprising how much more likely you are to make the connection when it is at a transit center than if you were just you getting off somewhere and waiting at a stop. You could miss it pretty easily. It is a big improvement."

Looking towards the future for the area, she thought "that most people would want the very best, the very greenest" be included in the plans in order to preserve wild-life and ensure that people are able to continue gardening in Hilltop: "I know that people want to be able to foresee the gardens that they have as having the kind of future that matters". She feels strongly that open space and public parks should play a prominent role in the MLK area.



Laura Jensen was born in Tacoma General Hospital, and her church life and family's active membership in the Valhalla Hall brought her frequently to the MLK area. The Valhalla Hall was one of the center points for the Scandinavian community in Tacoma, and especially on Hilltop. Located at 1216 Martin Luther King Jr Way, then known as K St, the Valhalla Hall served as a gathering place and venue for social events. One of the many groups that met there was the Order of Runeberg, which was founded in 1920 in Wisconsin to celebrate Swedish-Finnish culture and traditions. Laura's family, with strong connection to Finland from her grandmother's side, were members of the local Order of Runeberg and performed in the choir. The choir began in 1913 at the home of Laura Jensen's great-grandfather, John Malm. Laura Jensen, a published author, wrote a poem entitled *Corsage* about her memories of serving on the kitchen committee when she was young at Valhalla Hall.

The freezer holds only a few things. Fewer as it makes its ermine muff of frost, as it becomes time, and overtime, to defrost. The shelves hold a few things. At the back

on the lowest slab with the margarine, my withered corsage, red carnation: I dressed in black, and went on the bus to a motor hotel downtown, where were gathered

members of the Order of Runeberg. My never reveal their secrets; but we learned none as we settled the kitchen of the Valhalla Temple, spread tables with paper from a heavy roll,

laid the cups together, a field of rocks on the counter, layered the sandwiches on thick platters. Or if someone forgot, we were asked to button up and run down the block for Half & Half.

As we walked past the locked dance hall we peered through the cracks into the big dark there, then down the stairs to the street, past the tavern, the closed shops, empty window of a bakery,

to the Food King, holding the money in a pocket in a warm shut fist. Later an older woman you could trust released the fragrance from the can of coffee,

it rose to the high ceiling, she spilled some into cheesecloth, twisted the ends and lowered the white into the speckled boiling pot. Not long after that, the meeting would end.

At the motor hotel, on a rolling board were pictures of the Order of Runeberg. I found myself there, a small blonde, her face turning inward, her hand on her mouth.

And the house I lived in, my grandma on the porch long before I was born - her guitar, her white blouse. The occasion was the forming of the chapter of the Order of Runeberg.

That night I talked. To my sister, to my mother. Fingering the fringe of her flowered shawl. My carnation, a twenty-five-year carnation was red. That night I did not dance.