

## MLK Intern Project – MLK Oral History

Collecting stories from people provides an outlet for citizen participation in shaping the future through communicating their memory of the past. “While the story is usually fragmented,” Portelli, (1997) argues, “what is spoken has probably never been told in that format before.” In addition, interview format can also enhance authority and self-awareness of narrator (Portelli 1997).” In the authority and self reflection of those that were interviewed a consistent theme of the MLK/Hilltop being a once vibrant area emerged. There were also many remarks made communicating the importance of reconciling retail and residence in preserving the character of the community. St. Joe’s was consistently referred to as an important landmark both physically and experientially in the lives of those who live there. Membership in various organizations as well as preservation of the buildings where those groups met were also important themes.

Below are brief backgrounds of some of those who have helped to shape the MLK area:

**Gail Cameron** – Born at St. Joseph’s Hospital in 1947, she started at St. Leo’s and then transferred to McCarver when she missed her family and friends. Her experience here up on the Hill was exciting growing up. It was safe, the environment was safe. 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 MLK, there used to be a barber shop, a laundry mat and taverns where my father used to hang out. Rev. Crittendon’s body shop was on the corner. There 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. 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. 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 have 140 family member here in Tacoma, it’s a beautiful place, and it’s still a place to raise your family regardless of what people say.

**Ivory Crittendon** – Moved to Tacoma in 1952 after returning from the Korean War. In 1959 he started in the hilltop, and spent most of his time on 23<sup>rd</sup> and K Street with the DiPolita Body Shop. He was the only Italian at that time that had a body shop. And so they worked as partners for 5 years until he got his own body shop in 1963. In that time he found a lot of fatherless children who were



drug addicts and gang members and drug dealers. He was able to provide for and adopt many of them. He continues to invest in the area through the properties he owns, the church he pastors, and the school he organizes. Many current neighbors came because of the school, but what they found out was that this is a beautiful neighborhood.

The spirit is right. I would like to see Martin Luther King Street dressed up just like Downtown, and those streets. You cannot help people when you've got them in a depressed area.

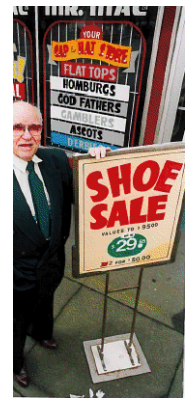
**Greg Tanbara** – Grew up around the Hilltop area where his father had a medical practice. He was born in 1953 and his mother grew up in Tacoma, near Downtown on 17<sup>th</sup> and Fawcett.



My earliest memories are of the Hilltop. My father started his practice in 1955 and he used to have an office in what used to be called The Tacoma Medical Center, which was a little group of brick buildings between 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> and L & M Streets. When he was young he always thought of it as a second place where he could go and see familiar faces and interesting stuff like emergency rooms and hardware stores. There was a lot of retail going on up here, it was like the old main streets with narrow, deep storefronts one after another with neon signs and restaurants and small café's and bars. I think the neat parts of that community outweigh the stigma that the 80's left, with the crips and bloods up there. It's one of his favorite places to do business.

There's a lot of hope and there's a good spirit in the area.

**Morris McCollum** – Moved to Tacoma in 1958 to start a retail clothing store. He's been up here 35 years at 4 different locations. I was back east and then had an opportunity to come out here with a gentleman who had been out here before. I bought the K Street Department Store at 1124 MLK, which is where I am today – what goes around comes around. But when I came out here and bought this department store 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. There was a theater, grocery stores, electric shops, furniture stores, restaurants. It was composed of a lot of retail businesses, in fact, it was the second largest retail center in the City of Tacoma.



At one time the area was the worst in crime now it's the best. K Street was a very vibrant neighborhood and business district and had a big medical center behind here. St. Joe's 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. So many still think that it's a bad area up here, but in reality it's not.

**Laura Jensen** – Laura Jensen was born at 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 Street, 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 connections to Finland on her grandmother’s side, were members of the Local Order of Runeberg and performed in the choir.



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. 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. In 1934 she 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 in 1930 to Finland organized by Leonard Svedberg, a prominent member of the Scandinavian community of Tacoma. A delegation of choir members from the Northwest traveled to the western coast of Finland where they were well received. Unfortunately, they would be prevented from returning to Scandinavia again until many years after World War II.

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 as 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. 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 wildlife 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.

**Harold Moss** – It was an old neighborhood when we got there, that was in 1950. It had its churches and businesses. I recall that there were really just a few vacancies; it was a shop in every storefront and your needs were pretty much answered that way. If you wanted to get to a larger vegetable market you'd go downtown.



K Street was really pretty vibrant at the time, people had businesses and that's where your stores were. Most of them would get the stuff off your list and pull it from the shelves. Meat markets were alive and well. They cut the meat right there. So the business district was close and very good and there were, at that time, very few black businesses in the area. The things that I remember most were Harold Meyers Drug Store at the corner of 11th and K Street, that was one of the big operations there.

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 streetcar, and went home. Of course St Joe's was the biggest thing in the area, the only thing sticking up high enough and it was an old red brick building. But 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.