

NEIGHBORHOODS SOUTHEAST SEATTLE COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT

South Beacon Hill

By Mikala Woodward

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Seattle's Beacon Hill, a ridge running south from the Jose Rizal Bridge to the city limits, ends in a wrinkled wooded slope. Today South Beacon Hill is a quiet residential neighborhood with dramatic views of Rainier Valley and Lake Washington to the East, and Georgetown, Boeing, and Harbor Island to the West. On the eve of WWII, this sparsely populated area was covered in forests and fields, farms and meadows. In the sixty years since, industry and urban density have grown up around it, freeways have hemmed it in, and traffic noise has assaulted it from sky above and earth below. But the steep slopes that have isolated it have also protected it, and pockets of its old rural character can still be found today.

"Woods all the way to the airport"

Bob Griffin grew up on South Beacon Hill in the 1930s and '40s. "It was woods all the way to the airport, all the way on down," he says. At the bottom of the southern end of the hill, a marshland would fill with water in the winter and freeze. "It wasn't deep -- there'd be grass sticking up out of the ice in places, but we skated there a lot!"

Doris Leavens (then Doris Miner) arrived in 1939. On her part of the hill, there were "not nearly as many trees. It was all farmland, grassland, meadows. There were cows and horses. This street [Mars Ave] was a cow path. There were apple orchards - by the time we came they were literally abandoned. But they still produced fruit." To the East, she says, "the Girl Scouts went camping in the wilds of Holly Park! We pitched our tents next to a stream, with a little waterfall."

Tom Rockey's father worked as a meat cutter, but they also had a small farm on South Beacon in the '30s and '40s: "Basically we were farmers. We planted a big vegetable garden and had fruit trees all over the place. We had four coops of laying hens, and then dad wanted to get into raising fryers. We built a whole row of chicken houses down behind the house. Mom worked her butt off like a slave - we all did." The community was close-knit, partly

because it was so isolated: "You had to go down to Rainier Beach or Columbia City or Hillman to run into the next congregation of people."

Bob Griffin and his friends took advantage of the lack of traffic in those days. Back then Beacon Ave was just one street, with no median. The road was paved with smooth asphalt, "much smoother than concrete," says Bob. "We used to roller-skate on Beacon Avenue. We'd play hockey all day. And once in a while there'd be a car, but the traffic was so light, you could play for two hours before another one would come along."

Early Infrastructure

In the 1920s City Light started buying up property along the length of Beacon Hill for a transmission line that was built in the 1930s. "I was fairly young at the time," says Tom Rockey, "but I remember when City Light bought that right of way. Then they built one line, and a few years later they built another line. They were bringing the Skagit transmission lines down through Renton and on South. The first line was built when we were fairly young kids, and I remember climbing the tower part way up -- maybe most of the way up. It was a big thrill, you could get way up there in the air!"



Above: Even in 1959, the landscape under the powerlines retained its rural character.

Below: The replacement of the Beacon Ave pipeline, 1941. Seattle Municipal Archives Photos



Tom also remembers when they City took out the wooden stave pipeline that carried Cedar River water down Beacon Avenue and replaced it with a steel pipeline in 1941. "That goes all the way down to Jefferson Park and the reservoir there."

All Downhill From Here

Because it was so sparsely populated, South Beacon Hill didn't offer much in the way of services or commercial activity. Bob Griffin: "Where the Aloha market is now [7762 Beacon Ave S.] it was Anderson's market then. There used to be a little gas station there too. We used to go up to the gas station, and Mr. Anderson would let us pump gas. That was focal point in the area." Without a significant business district of its own, the residents of South Beacon depended on connections to other communities for entertainment (beyond the thrill of pumping gas!), employment, shopping, and services.

Bob Griffin again: "There weren't many activities up here, no clubhouse or anything, so we kids used to go down to Pritchard Beach, before it became an official swimming beach - there was no bathhouse or floats. And then we would ride our bikes all the way down to Seward Park. Or, we would go down over the hill to Boeing field. At that time, before the war, there were no fences. You could walk all over Boeing field and go in the hangars. We got to know a couple of guys who were putting fabric on the planes and we would go in and help them do this and that. That was our routine."

To the east was the Rainier Valley. Tom Rockey's family shopped at Harris Market at the foot of Waters St. in Rainier Beach, and attended St. Edward's Church in Hillman City. The Rockeys were Italian (the name was originally Roccio), and they sold their eggs and poultry to other Italians down in the Rainier Valley. "Pretty much every weekend we would take a trip thought the Italian community taking eggs and poultry and rabbits out there. All that community used to buy food from us."

People living on South Beacon Hill would also venture north to Beacon Hill's Junction, where 15th Avenue intersected Beacon Hill. Here they could find a movie theater, an ice cream parlor, and the famous Wickham's Pie shop, among other attractions. "Yes, we'd go up there and get a malt," says Bob Griffin.

"[Cleveland High School] kids would yell at the kids from Franklin, and they'd yell at us."

Wickham's Pies aside, South Beacon Hill's most important neighbor was Georgetown. The connection to Georgetown goes back to the 19th century, when Georgetown was a pioneer community independent of Seattle. The Comet Lodge Cemetery, located on the slope of Graham Street, was founded in 1895 by the International Order of Odd Fellows to serve the people of Georgetown. Cleveland High School started life as Georgetown High, and moved up the hill in 1926. "The older pupils carried their books from Georgetown School," says the school district's official history, and "marched over the Lucile Street Bridge, and up the hill in a parade to the new building." Many Georgetown kids attended Cleveland over the years, and the school maintained its ties to its old neighborhood. Says Doris Leavens, "our [Cleveland High] choir used to sing at the TB hospital in Georgetown at Christmastime."

Doris and many other South Beacon residents found Georgetown more convenient to get to than North Beacon. "The Beacon Avenue Streetcar didn't come this far south, so we went downhill to the Georgetown Streetcar." Bob Griffin's family "did our grocery shopping in Georgetown, at the Safeway. It's the Kelly Moore Paint place now."

South Beacon residents also worked in Georgetown - at the Rainier Brewery, or at the nearby Boeing plant.

Because of the topography of Beacon Hill and the railroad tracks along its West side, access to Georgetown and other points West was limited



*Albro Bridge Construction, 1931, before and after.
Seattle Municipal Archives photos*

to the bridges that crossed the rails. Doris lived in Georgetown for her first year in Seattle. She attended Cleveland, which at that time went from 7th to 12th grades. "Coming from flat Wisconsin, to climb up the hill from Georgetown to Cleveland was mountain climbing for us. We walked up the Lucile Street Bridge. It was reeeeeally rickety."

In 1931 the Albro Place bridge was constructed. Bill Mallow describes the route east on Albro in the days before I-5: "Fifteenth Avenue went straight down hill, past Cleveland. Then you took a sharp right turn onto the railroad bridge, and you were on your way to Boeing."

"It all changed during the war"

This rural, sleepy South Beacon Hill - abandoned orchards and frozen marshes, horse farms and hen houses, rollerskating in the street -- would mostly vanish in the coming decades (though pockets of it have persisted to this day). The first big changes happened in the 1940s, when South Beacon Hill's proximity to Boeing and its views of the industrial area below gave its residents front row seats to Seattle's wartime Home Front.

Doris Leavens: "It all changed during the war. There was an anti-aircraft gun right across the street here, with an encampment of 20 or 30 soldiers. The gun was camouflaged. And there were barrage balloons" to keep enemy planes from flying overhead. Bob Griffin remembers the barrage balloons and anti-aircraft guns too. "We used to go talk to all the soldiers. Many of them were from the south - they all had these drawls and everything. The moms around here would bake the soldiers caked and pies, and we would take them over there. So we were friends with all the soldiers on the anti-aircraft guns."

The small community of Japanese truck farmers in the valley below South Beacon Hill didn't have the opportunity to befriend the barrage balloon brigades. As kids, Bob Griffin and Doris Leavens didn't really grasp the injustice of Executive Order 9066 or the internment that followed, but they both remember when the Japanese kids at Cleveland vanished. Says Doris:

I was such a dumb kid, I didn't know they were Japanese. Coming from Wisconsin, I just never thought about it. We had not seen black people - they were in the National Geographic! I was so dumb. The day they had to leave, I went to school, and I could not understand why attendance

was so bad. We were told it was for their benefit, that it wasn't safe for them here, there was so much feeling. It was all propaganda, but we believed everything they told us. Down by the Olympic Hotel, there was a big showcase display by the bus stop, a series of pictures -- it was supposed to tell you the difference between Chinese and Japanese. I studied those pictures every day. But I still can't tell by looking.

Doris's brothers all joined the Navy. Their mother, who "never wasted a penny," bought a flag with a star on it to display in her window when her first son enlisted. When her second son joined up, she bought a flag with two stars. That way, when the third son enlisted, she could just put both flags up and have her three stars proudly on display without having to buy a third flag. Mrs. Miner got all her boys back safe after the war, but other mothers were not so lucky. Bob Griffin's class at Cleveland High School collected money to buy forest land in Issaquah that would be preserved as a memorial to their fallen classmates.

The Boeing plant was famously camouflaged during the war, with a fake neighborhood built on the roof, and the runways painted with camouflage patterns as well. The company ramped up production during the war - and even before. In September of 1939 the company employed 3,000 people. In July 1942, that number had jumped to 10,000 - and five months later, when the U.S. officially entered the war, 30,000 people worked at Boeing.

Many South Beacon residents were among those 30,000, of course. Doris's father brought his family to Seattle because he loved planes (he worked at the airport in their small Wisconsin town, and built his own plane from a set of instructions in Popular Mechanics magazine) and he knew Boeing was hiring. "He had made five dollars a week in Wisconsin. Boeing paid him \$100 a month," says Doris.

Boeing's expansion dominated the landscape to the west. To the east, the war's impact could be seen in the sudden appearance of 900 units of defense worker housing at Holly Park. Construction began in 1941, and the development opened August 1, 1942. The effect on the surrounding community was immediate - Van Asselt Grade School's enrollment jumped from 120 in 1942 to 675 in 1944. Holly Park also housed the first significant population of African Americans in the South Beacon Hill area. Bob Griffin remembers only one black family in the neighborhood in his day, but Clifford Holland said "there was a high percentage of blacks" there when he was growing up at Holly Park in the 1940s and '50s.

The war changed the landscape to the north as well: soldiers and sailors on leave gathered at a USO recreation camp south of Jefferson Park that included (among other delights) a gymnasium, canteen, roller rink, and merry-go-round.

Doris enjoyed this aspect of the war: "The bus was full of sailors and soldiers. The only problem was, I was a little young yet. My cousin came to live with us for a little while - she was a year older, more the right age for them. She had pictures lined up on her dresser of all the sailors and soldiers she went out with. Whenever one of them would propose to her, she'd turn that photo face down... and every night she'd go down the line of pictures and kiss each one goodnight!"

At the end of the war, the USO facility was closed, and in 1948 the site was dedicated for use as a veterans hospital. Construction began the following year, and the first patient was admitted to the new facility on May 15th,



Property of Museum of History & Industry, Seattle

*Above: Veteran's Hospital dedication ceremony, 1948.
Below: Veteran's Hospital completed, 1951.*



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1951. The VA hospital was expanded in 1967, and again in 1985. It remains a dominant feature of Beacon Hill's landscape, traffic pattern, and local economy.

1950s & '60s: Postwar Boom Years

In the 1950s, Boeing continued to boom. So did Seattle, and with it - in its own quiet way - South Beacon Hill. Says Doris, "Boeing Plant 1 closed, and Plant 2 expanded. We built our house, we were busy. The economy was good." The population of South Beacon had doubled between 1940 and 1950, and this increased population could now support more business activity. A business node sprang up at the corner of Columbian and 15th; it included two groceries (a Tradewell at 4351 15th Ave S. built in 1947, and another market at 4341 15th Ave S. built in 1946), and the Serbian Hall. Serbian Hall, built in 1949, was a social hall where dances and parties were held through the 1960s; it is now a church. In 1960 a gas station was built on the south side of the intersection; in the years to come it would become MacPherson's produce stand, still a neighborhood landmark.

This small commercial district joined a gas station and market at Graham Street, and the Anderson's Market further south, as South Beacon's neighborhood businesses.

In the midst of such prosperity and growth, South Beacon's rural character began to seem less bucolic and more like the result of neglect. In 1952 a troop of girl scouts (little sisters, perhaps, of the young ladies who had camped out in the wilds of Holly Park) petitioned the city to improve Lucile Street between 19th and 20th. They sent shocking photos of themselves struggling through the mud in white boots. The immediate effect of their petition is



"These boots were white," Seattle Municipal Archives Photo

unknown, but a concrete staircase now traverses the muddy slope between 18th and 20th.

The construction of I-5 in the 1960s had a tremendous effect on South Beacon. "While they were building I-5, traffic was diverted up this way," says Doris. "At the shift change at midnight, there'd be all these cars bumping down the road." The new freeway was completed in 1965. It improved access for some residents, but it cut others off further. Views were affected, and some residents were awakened by the sounds of freeway traffic every morning. In some cases, the freeway leveled whole neighborhoods. "They wiped out a lot of houses when they built I-5 and changed Swift Avenue," says Doris Leavens.

The 1960s also marked the beginning of a significant demographic shift on Beacon Hill. In terms of actual numbers, the population was relatively stable between 1960 and 1990 - rising just enough to necessitate the building of two new elementary schools - Dearborn Park on Orcas Street and Wing Luke on Kenyon - in the early 1970s. But its racial makeup changed completely.

Bob Griffin remembers Italians and other European immigrants (Belgians, Swiss, Germans, and Norwegians) living in the neighborhood when he was young - but other than a few African Americans and Japanese families, everyone was white. By 1960 census tracts 117, 118, and 119 -- the tracts that make up South Beacon Hill -- were 88%, 78%, and 89% white, respectively. The northernmost tract was 1% Negro and 10% "Other" - presumably Asians, though the census did not specify in those days. It was also 6% Italian - Tom Rockey's former customers, no doubt. The middle census tract, which included Holly Park, was 14% Negro, and 8% Other - many of these non-whites lived at Holly Park, which was converted to public housing after the war. And the southernmost census tract on Beacon Hill was 3% Negro and 8% Other.

In 1980 Whites were the minority in all three tracts. African Americans outnumbered them in the southern tracts - again, probably due to the presence of Holly Park and other public housing projects there. The rest of South Beacon Hill's population (36%) was made up of Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Samoans, Native Americans, and Koreans.

In 1975 the Chinese Baptist Church moved from Chinatown to Orcas Street on Beacon Hill, an area where 7% of the residents were Chinese. Fifteen years

later, nearly one in four residents of the census tract surround the church were Chinese, and another Chinese Church had opened 2 blocks east on Orcas.

The Vietnam War had already brought more wounded and psychologically traumatized veterans to the VA hospital; in the late '70s and '80s its aftermath brought Southeast Asian refugees to Beacon Hill. Boat people from Vietnam, tribespeople from Laos, and Cambodian refugees all came to Seattle, and many settled on Beacon Hill and in nearby Holly Park. Some of them took up small-scale farming in community gardens. Others opened bakeries, pho shops, nail salons, and other businesses. Commercial centers would eventually develop to serve these thriving Southeast Asian communities - Viet Wah at Graham, King Plaza at Othello.

Relations among all these groups have been relatively peaceful, though there have been tensions between teens of different races: a 1974 P-I article entitled "Beacon Hill: Seattle's ethnic crazy quilt" reports "there is not much conflict between the various ethnic groups... But there is some aggressive competition among the younger residents, particularly blacks and the children of foreign-born Chinese - who are asserting their right to be respected both as individuals and as members of ethnic minorities." But (the article goes on to explain) even in the absence of outright hostility, the cultural differences and lack of trust between different groups made it hard to come together to address neighborhood issues.

Getting Organized

In the 1970s and '80s South Beacon residents were able, with some support, to organize and advocate for their community on a range of issues, including infrastructure improvements, density of development, and freeway and airplane noise.

In the late 1970s, community organizer Jim Diers, working with the fledgling South East Seattle Community Organization (SESCO), helped gather support for the replacement of the Lucile Street Bridge. The bridge had originally been built by the railroad, which no longer had an interest in seeing it maintained, and the City had declined to take responsibility for the needed repairs. With SESO's help, says Diers, "six hundred neighbors and union members marched across the rickety Lucile Street Bridge to a meeting with

elected officials, where they demanded that the failing structure be replaced." In the end these activists were successful. The City replaced the bridge, and the railroad company kicked in to defray the cost.

In the 1980s, the Beacon Crest Citizens Organization, a group SESCO had also helped to create, fought to block construction of 78 condo units on a steep slope at Beacon and Graham. The BCCO objected to the project's density, and also had concerns about a poorly planned access road that they felt would be unsafe.

South Beacon Hill residents who lived near I-5 worked for seven years to get a sound barrier installed to shield their homes from traffic noise. The barrier was finally built in 1985. Airplane noise was - and is - a more difficult problem to deal with. As air traffic at Boeing Field and SeaTac increased, the noise on South Beacon's west side reached intolerable levels in many homes. A 1979 Seattle Times article starts out "Ed Flickinger's one-acre 'spread' at 1929 S. Orcas would be real country living, if he and his wife wore earmuffs." Flickingers's backyard sound levels peaked at 75-100 every five minutes when a plane flew overhead. The article goes on to describe "homes in which normal conversation must be conducted at the shout level, churches in which sermons must be halted until low-flying planes pass over, and Cleveland High School classrooms in which teaching and learning are affected by constant noise."

The Beacon Hill Community Council's Noise Abatement Committee was hard at work, fighting for soundproofing standards, training for pilots, and decibel monitors at Boeing Field. Their campaign included phone calls and letters to the FAA, the airports, the mayor, and the county council, along with several, comic songs:

Oh give me a home
Where the airplanes don't roam,
And no one can hear the free-way
Where seldom is heard
The big silver bird
And the skies are not noisy all day

Four years later, a similar article appeared, suggesting the committee's efforts had not been entirely successful: though new standards had resulted

in quieter engines for commercial planes, noise levels for freight planes were not restricted.

1990s: Community Investments

The 1990s saw South Beacon Hill's population rise by 2,100 or 12%. This growth was fueled by the Asian community, as the number of white and African American residents fell slightly over the course of the decade. In addition to a rising population, the neighborhood saw a number of changes to the landscape around the turn of the 20th century.

In 2000, the school district constructed a new facility for the African American Academy at Beacon and Rose, bringing the school back to the Southeast after several years in Magnolia. Cleveland High school was completely renovated in 2007: the 1927 building was reconstructed and new buildings were added to the site to accommodate a "small schools" model.

Holly Park, the wartime housing turned public housing on the east side of Beacon Hill, was redeveloped into NewHolly, a mixed-income community with a community center, parks, gardens, and a library. The project began in 1996 and was completed in 2002.

Finally, the Comet Lodge Cemetery, final resting place of 200 Georgetown settlers and South Beacon Hill neighbors, was cleaned up and restored. A group of Cleveland High School students researched the cemetery's history in 2002 and participated in its revival. One of them, Rodolfo Castro, described the state of the cemetery in 1999:

The cemetery was in horrible condition. Blackberry bushes occupied almost every open space available in the cemetery. On top of that, vines smothered the trees and garbage littered the area. Only one path was visible, which had little dugouts in the brambles where homeless people would inhabit. Headstones were pushed to the south end of the cemetery due to bulldozing in the past. Only around seven headstones were left standing in the same position out of the original 200. The rest were either buried underneath the dirt, backhoed to the southern end of the cemetery, or stolen. The cemetery wasn't looking good and was in desperate need of restoration.

Restoration attempts by private individuals had ended badly, but they did bring the site to the attention of King County, who, it turned out, had been

the cemetery's legal owner all along. With help from County Executive Ron Sims, public and private money was secured to restore the cemetery. Rodolfo described the results: "Today the appearance of the cemetery has no recollection of past destruction and damage. Grass now covers the formerly dirt-inhabited territory and dozens of trees have been planted to enhance the appearance of the burial grounds."

CONCLUSION

In 2009, Light Rail stations opened on North Beacon Hill and at Rainier & Othello. Like I-5 in the 1960s, light rail has improved access for some South Beacon residents, while disrupting the lives of others. The Light Rail is expected to attract more residents to the area, many of them young, white, and relatively well-off. Transit oriented development around both stations may bring the kind of density that some residents have fought, but that others feel will benefit local businesses and increase the neighborhood's vibrancy. The area will almost certainly lose more of its undeveloped space to housing and commercial development.

As we have seen, the rural character of South Beacon Hill has gradually eroded since the 1930s, when the first major infrastructure project came through the neighborhood: City Light's transmission lines. The power lines may have marked the beginning of the end for farms and orchards and "real country living" on South Beacon Hill. But they have also provided a kind of protected open space for the continuation of rural activities that have been completely wiped out elsewhere. Generations of kids have played in the tall grass under the power lines, and Tom Rockey was surely not the last youngster to climb one of the towers for a better view. The horse farm owned by Tom's neighbors was still operating in 2008 - the Sferras exercised their horses under the powerlines. Even the farming tradition has been revived by Southeast Asians and other gardeners who grow vegetables in several P-Patches up and down this greenbelt.

The construction of the Light Rail line triggered changes to this empty space. Sound Transit needed a place to put all the dirt it was taking out of the tunnel under Beacon Hill: the fill was shaped into mounds under the powerlines, with an asphalt trail curving among them. The asphalt path has tamed the wild, rural feeling of the space, but it has improved access to this



2010 view of City Light transmission lines on South Beacon Hill, showing VA hospital in the distance on the right, and a P-Patch garden on the left. Photo by Mikala Woodward

newly created landscape. As biker Jesse Vernon described it on The Stranger's blog, "it feels like a secret world tucked in the middle of the city. Starting on Beacon Hill, it transports you to Kubota Garden via Ireland. Or New Zealand. Or some other place with rolling green hills I've never been."

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