bellingham then & now

murder
prostitution
& war

p.14
p.22
p.4
We’ll be the first to admit our cover’s a little sensational. It might even smell desperate. But when we said we were planning a historical issue, we received what you might call scorn. The nerve.

Fortunately, murder, prostitution and war aren’t just heavy-handed buzzwords we chose so you would pick up the magazine (although that’s true, too)—they fit the bill.

Thirty years ago this January, the notorious Hillside Strangler killed two Western students in a series of murders tracing back to California. Circa the early 1900s, sweet Fairhaven boasted the best brothels in town (the Horseshoe did, too, but we all saw that coming). And if that’s sounding a tad seedy, flip to page 18—did you know Fairhaven has the largest antiquarian bookshop in the PNW?

Dusty history-book stigma, be gone!

Sincerely,

Ciara O’Rourke
Editor in Chief

Cover Photo from 1950 by Jack Carver courtesy of Whatcom Museum of History & Art.
A HUGE thank you to Jeff Jewell for all his work providing the majority of the historical photographs.
Correction from the previous issue: the three trees co-owner’s name is Dann Warick.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A LESSON IN WAR</td>
<td>Megan Claflin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>BUILDING FAIRHAVEN</td>
<td>Colin Simpson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>DOWN DEVIL'S ROW: MARKING FAIRHAVEN</td>
<td>Coral Garnick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>CATCHING THE HILLSIDE STRangler</td>
<td>Erin Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>A LIFE FILLED WITH STORIES</td>
<td>Julia Waggoner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>STREET SMARTS: MAKING SENSE OF BELLINGHAM'S ROADS</td>
<td>Yuki Nakajima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>COLLECTOR'S CACHE</td>
<td>Peter Pearsall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>PAINT THE TOWN RED: BELLINGHAM'S BROTHELS</td>
<td>Kassidy Vietti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>OLD BRICK HEART</td>
<td>Alissa Vanden Berghe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>HATEFUL HISTORY</td>
<td>Julia Waggoner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
David Imburgia’s understanding of the American Civil War does not rely on faintly recalled lectures or disputed dates overlooked in textbooks. Imburgia’s memories of the War Between the States are more personal.

Captain David Vernon Imburgia is the acting Commander of the 15th Alabama Infantry Company G, a group of Civil War re-enactors centered in Bellingham.

Imburgia, a 59-year-old with a wiry build, sharp eyes and a steady, eloquent voice, is a nine-year veteran of the group. In 1999, the soldiers of the 15th Alabama Infantry invited him to participate in a battle at Hovander Park in Ferndale, Wash. Imburgia says he wanted to know what it might have felt like to be a soldier in the Civil War.

"The 15th Alabama was gracious enough to allow me to sample the experience," Imburgia says. "And they gave me a uniform, a rifle and a little bit of training, and let me go out onto the field with them."

Imburgia felt excitement as he charged forward on the grassy field, his rifle wobbling precariously in his hands, toward an opposing line of men. Imburgia’s stern face creases with heavy thoughts; he sighs and says he was awed by the courage the soldiers must have possessed.

"To be a soldier in the Civil War, to stand shoulder to shoulder with your friends and brothers and to shoot at other men and be shot at," Imburgia says, pausing. "I was impressed."

Members of the 15th Alabama Infantry are from all walks of life. The 70 members reside in Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Canada with multiple families participating. Members range from young children to men and women in their 80s. Outside of his role as commander, Imburgia is a financier who owns his own company and passionately teaches tango.

Jerry Shiner, an infantry 1st Sergeant and self-proclaimed right hand to Imburgia, says the camaraderie shared between the members mirrors the relationships true soldiers shared. He describes his close friendship with the Captain in its simplest terms.

"Well, I get up early and make the Captain his coffee," Shiner says. "We all know the Captain can’t function without his morning cup."

Shiner chuckles and Imburgia continues the joke with his own retort.

"Yeah he is out there in the morning rubbing two sticks together for a fire," Imburgia says. "Secretly he’s just got his Coleman stove stowed away in his tent."
All humor aside Imburgia, Shiner and the other re-enactors devote themselves to their craft. Members assume a variety of military and civilian roles including blacksmiths and seamstresses. Some members even portray doctors and perform faux surgeries and amputations.

Members’ abilities to transform the past into reality depend greatly on their historical accuracy. The 15th Alabama relies on old patterns to sew uniforms and clothing—dresses complete with hoopskirts and bonnets. When a group of soldiers are marching in their blue wool jackets, tarnished gold buttons glinting feebly in the sun, the effect is convincing. A person can believe they are looking back in time, observing the bustle of camp activities.

For the truly spirited members of the group, original blueprints for cannons help craftsman to recreate the 2,000-pound iron rocket-launchers of the 18th century. Four or five men rally around the monstrous gun, heaving it forward bit by bit toward the enemy line before it sinks into the soggy turf. When fired, a sonic wave of thunder knocks the breath out of onlookers and spits a four-foot-long torrent of sparks and smoke.

Imburgia says he once stood in a cannon’s line of fire. The cannon shot only gunpowder, no shell, so Imburgia walked away from the blast unharmed, but shaken.

“I realized that 150 years ago, with a shell loaded in that cannon, I would be no more. That part was sobering,” Imburgia says. “The whole idea of the personal and impersonal death these powerful weapons dealt is sobering.”

To ensure safety both on and off the battlefield all troops undergo training and adhere to strict safety procedures. The homemade weaponry is inspected by Imburgia or Shiner and must pass the tedious checklist created by the Washington Civil War Association, the parent club to all Civil War re-enactment clubs in Washington. Even in the excitement of battle, infantry re-enactors know that if their gun misfires three times they are required to "play dead" until the weapon can be fixed.

Tom Peloquim, Chairperson for the WCWA, says he is proud of the associations untarnished safety record. Besides the rules governing weaponry, the WCWA also enforces an age requirement for members who want to participate on the field. The WCWA’s goal is to re-enact a war without casualties and so far it has been a successful campaign.

“We have been lucky and haven’t had many injuries,” says Peloquim. “Occasionally someone will fall from their horse or trip in a hole, but we have avoided anything too serious.”

During multiple day events the 15th Alabama camps onsite, leaving their homes and vehicles behind for campfires and canvas tents. Members dawn their costumes and transition their mindsets to their 18th-century counterparts. A few devout members choose to adopt the name of a deceased family member who served in the war. For example, in battle Shiner is Josiah Henry Newton, his ancestor and a Civil War casualty.

A few years after becoming a re-enactor Imburgia traveled to Tennessee to visit historic battlegrounds. There he met a young woman and the two struck up a conversation about the Civil War and Imburgia’s re-enactments. Excitedly the woman
“I remember being in the infantry line and here is the guy I had coffee with an hour ago and watching him pretend to be shot dead, and I remember feeling, ‘Wow he’s gone. He was next to me this morning and now he’s gone.’”

explained how her family still cherished the memory of their great-grandfather who had fought and died in a battle Imburgia acted in.

Inspired by the woman’s story, Imburgia offered to adopt her grandfather’s name as his Civil War character. And so, Captain David Imburgia became Captain J. D. Brock.

“For years they sent me letters, copies of hundreds of letters that their great-grandfather had written to his family” Imburgia says. “The whole family told me they were honored that their great-grandfather would live again.”

Finding deep personal connections, doorways into the past, is what lures many members to Civil War re-enactment. At the end of the day, when crowds disperse, the actors are left to their campfires and conversations. The band will strike up a waltz, coarse notes permeating the scattered groups, inspiring gentlemen to offer their hands to the ladies for a dance. Imburgia says that in the dark, all modern distractions fade and a person can find themselves back in 1861, on a summer night during a brief moment of peace.

“In the evening, re-enactments are enchanting,” Imburgia says. “People, they build their fires and cook their dinners; they’re talking and sharing this common experience. We are building camaraderie and feeling. We are building a brotherhood; a brotherhood of arms.”

Shiner says he still gets chills when he recalls the re-enactments where he was transported in time. At Hovander Park, Shiner says he appreciates the absence of anything modern—the absence of anything that might disrupt the historic ambiance.

“I remember one morning standing in formation and I looked
down the line at the long row of men and women in uniform,” Shiner says. “Facing the river I felt a light breeze, heard the birds chirping and saw the flag flying. For an instance it was real and I was truly there.”

As the re-enactors build new relationships with each other and with themselves they are forced to confront the grim reality of their circumstances. In the Civil War, 622,000 Union and Confederate soldiers were killed. One-third of Confederate soldiers never returned home. Thousands of veterans were left with amputated limbs, missing eyes and ears or died from disease and infection.

The brutality and cruelty of war is a present overtone in re-enactments. Imburgia says one of the primary questions spectators ask him is whether or not farmers allowed their pigs to eat the bodies of dead soldiers after battle.

“It’s true,” Imburgia says.

Imburgia may re-enact war, but his philosophy on the subject is paradoxical. A veteran himself, Imburgia is an outspoken anti-war activist and spent his earlier years participating in anti-war rallies and marches. Imburgia says re-enacting only helps support his ideologies. While acting as a soldier, Imburgia experiences the true chaos and unbridled emotions of war.

“I remember being in the infantry line and here is the guy I had coffee with an hour ago and watching him pretend to be shot dead, and I remember feeling, ‘Wow he’s gone. He was next to me this morning and now he’s gone.’ ”

Aside from re-enactments, the 15th Alabama Infantry also hosts living-history events. On May 8-9 of this year hundreds of fifth-and-eighth-graders from Whatcom County schools watched in awe as actors portrayed a variety of Civil War characters. At one station students examined the soldiers’ camps and learned that 12 full-grown men slept in an 8-foot by 6-foot canvas tent. At another station students formed ranks and practiced firing volleys at their opposing classmates. Intermittently the sounds of students’ shrieks and subdued screams interrupted a presentation as the deafening roar of cannon fire reverberated through the grounds.

Imburgia says he considers himself an educator more than a re-enactor. In a skit performed by Imburgia and Shiner, the two men depict two friends, one man a Southerner and the other a Northerner. Students watched as the friends argued, their opposing opinions on war turning them into enemies. In a shocking moment of reality, students watched as the two friends took aim and fired on each other. Friends became soldiers and soldiers killed friends. These were living breathing men and they died, Imburgia says.

“When history comes alive [the students] have a chance to make all these boring lectures suddenly mean something,” Imburgia says. “Once one part of history comes alive all of it tends to come alive and the lessons of history then speak to us.”

The American Civil War is re-enacted in at least five different countries including Australia, England, France, Denmark and Germany. Now 143 years after the Civil War ended in 1865, hundred of thousands of people make the pilgrimage to historic battlefields; they touch the hollowed grounds and hear the words of re-enactors ringing out against the now empty fields. They seek an experience, hoping to learn from the past. For Imburgia and the members of 15th Alabama re-enacting is more than a lesson in history, it is a lesson in family and humanity. It is a lesson in life.
Before it burned down in 1936, the Crystal Palace was a grand cast-iron and glass exhibition hall in London's Hyde Park. The Palace was 990,000 square feet and featured live palm and elm trees reaching up to its glass domed ceiling 108 feet high.

Local developer Ken Imus thinks Fairhaven could use a Crystal Palace. And as eccentric as it may sound, the man knows Fairhaven.

Imus, owner of the land-developing company Jacaranda Corp., started buying property in Fairhaven in the 1970s when the area was run-down and underdeveloped. He owns many of the historic buildings and helped usher in a controversial wave of gentrification that has made Fairhaven what it is today. But Imus says because of an increasingly bureaucratic city-planning process, and what he calls "anti-growth sentiment," he stopped developing three years ago—and doesn’t plan to start again.

"I love building," says the 82-year-old Imus. "And I want to keep building, but maybe not here."

Imus works in his office off Harris St., a refurbished old bank building with thick mahogany walls and tiled ceilings. Blueprints, papers, books and building plans decorate the office as he reclines behind his large oak desk. Through a giant, half-arch window to his right rests the iconic intersection home to Village Books, A Lot of Flowers nursery and the English double-decker bus sheltering Jacci’s Fish and Chips.

It was a completely different intersection before Imus adopted the area. When he started buying up property there in the early 1970s, many referred to it as "the Haight-Ashbury of the North."

Gordy Tweit, a former pharmacist at the Fairhaven Pharmacy, says the buildings were worn-down and few and far between. The taverns, shops and other business there were catered mostly to the college and counter-culture crowd. Unkempt weeds, wild grass and blackberry brambles grew, unlike the clean of the trees and shrubbery flourishing around Fairhaven today.

"It wasn’t that those in Fairhaven didn’t have an interest in improving it," Tweit says. "We just didn’t have the money."

What Fairhaven did have was Imus.

The son of a carpenter, Imus grew up in the Depression and developed a strong work ethic. After returning home from a non-combat World War II Navy stint, he got a job at a Ford dealership in California, eventually working his way up the ranks of Ford's auto empire. He used the profits from the dealership to buy real estate, and in the early 1960s started building in Texas, Hawaii and the Bay Area.

Driving through Fairhaven in the late 1960s, his wife saw the old Marketplace building (now Sycamore Square), with boarded windows and only a tavern and a small lunch counter to its name.

"Look Ken," she said. "There’s a building for you."

A year and a half later, Imus bought it for $150,000. Hoping his development of the building would raise the value of property around it, he began purchasing the surrounding lots.

"It was a longshot," Imus says. "It just seemed like a good idea. I never envisioned it being so prosperous."
Imus started renovating the area to make it more conducive for families, but his plans were unpopular. After evicting a few local taverns, an effigy was hung for Imus: coveralls stuffed with newspaper, wearing a straw hat, hanging from a lamppost by a noose. Imus was not deterred.

As development continued, he took a special interest in the buildings’ architecture. He and his wife traveled to Europe to wean inspiration from Austrian cities like Vienna and Salzburg. He collected notes and photographs, determining what worked, and what didn’t.

“One time I was in London,” Imus says. “And my cab driver happened to be really into old buildings as well. So, he took me around all day, and I snapped about 101 pictures.

“My wife was mad because she was only in 2 of them,” he says.

He began buying salvaged pieces from older buildings and reusing them in Fairhaven: Doors, stained glass windows, spiral stairs, bronze boxes, wood trim, light fixtures, coat hooks, and hinges. He eventually had to rent a 7,000-square-foot warehouse to store it all in—whenever Imus started a new project, his architect sifted through the treasures for use in future buildings.

All the while, Imus was still working at the car dealership. He would fly on Friday nights to continue working on his “project,” then fly back to California on Monday morning to go to work. He rarely pre-leased buildings; rather, he developed a project when it felt right.

“It was a love affair,” he says. “I was emotionally vested. It was something I believed in.”

His son Brad, who moved to Bellingham in 1978 to help manage Fairhaven, said it took a long time for the area to flourish—in fact, it was almost 25 years before it was economically viable.

“It was a slow-growth thing,” Imus says. “But we just wanted to convince people about it, for them to say, ‘Wow, Fairhaven’s on the water. It’s surrounded by the three richest neighborhoods in Bellingham.’ This can be prosperous.”

When Village Books set up shop in 1980, the neighborhood perked up. More than anything, Imus says, local merchants deserve credit for Fairhaven’s florescence.

As more businesses moved in, Imus developed more infill buildings—usually small, one- or two-story projects to accommodate the growing demand.

“If it wasn’t for Kenny, Fairhaven would have been bulldozed,” Tweit says. “I am sure of that. Things were already down, by fire or by falling apart. Kenny actually saved the place from destruction.”

In 1997, Imus retired from the auto business and moved up to Fairhaven full time. The area was blossoming at the time, and Imus said at one point he owned every building he could see from his office’s half-arch window.
State Normal School changes its name: to the State Normal School at Whatcom to fit with the city’s new name of Whatcom.

Beck’s theater opens: A two-year construction project finishes. “Foxy Quiller,” a comic opera, sells out opening night with 2,200 attendees bringing in $25,000.

But Imus’s success lost its quick pace. He struggled getting projects started. Permits were taking longer to process, and the city was rejecting more and more of his plans. By the time he got a permit to start working on a building, there would be new statutes in place and he would have to bring the building up to code.

John Lindh, a plans examiner for the city, says planning and building in Bellingham has changed since Imus first arrived. When Lindh first came to Bellingham in 1969, only one building inspector regulated the town and building codes were less enforced. For safety’s sake, the state building codes have a stricter reign over Bellingham architecture. Lindh also says Fairhaven is unique because original landowners registered it as a historic district, specifically so ultra-modern, 1950s- and ’60s-style renewal projects wouldn’t pop up.


Imus says he never intended to alter Fairhaven’s historic landscape, but the registration still caused enough complication for him to stop building and start selling his property. In the last four years, he’s sold the Village Books building, the flower shop, a block in front of the Bellingham Tennis Club, the Waldron building and the hotel property directly north of it.

An anti-development sentiment is facing Fairhaven, Imus says. “Dad is used to life in simpler times,” Brad says. “He could go to any town and have a harder time building. Things have changed.”

Despite his cease in development, Imus still retains a chunk of property in Fairhaven—some of it visible from his office overlooking Harris and 11th St.

“[Fairhaven] started out as a hobby,” Brad says. “It was an excuse to get back to Bellingham. He never meant it to be a big business; it was a project. And it was more personal than anything else he’s done.”

Brad says his father isn’t building in Fairhaven anymore, but he’s not abandoning the town either.

“My dad’s job now is to look over Fairhaven,” Brad says. Currently, Imus is focusing his development energy out in the Birch Bay/Blaine area. But for a man with his sights set further north, there is still one lingering project he wants for Fairhaven: the Crystal Palace.

Postcards, pictures and plans of the English Crystal Palace litter his office. It remains, for Imus, a dream. He knows it’ll be development hell, but he feels it can be a perfect fit for Fairhaven.

“I’ve got a gut feeling, and gut feeling is how I work,” Imus says. “How far could it go? Right now it’s just a dream, but that’s how things get built. The marketplace was a dream. Hell, all of Fairhaven was a dream.”

He’s talked with Trillium Corporation about a joint venture, and has offered the land up for anyone willing to take over the task of building it. If anything, he wants to see it built if not for himself, for Fairhaven.
“[Fairhaven] started out as a hobby. It was an excuse to get back to Bellingham. He never meant it to be a big business; it was a project. And it was more personal than anything else he’s done.”
Harris Avenue History
Two young women walk down Harris Avenue as the sun sets on Bellingham Bay. After passing the row of businesses, one of the girls notices something to her left. Turning her head to get a better look she stops, does an about-face, stares at the ground and erupts into laughter. "What the heck," she yells to her friend a few feet ahead. "No Chinese allowed beyond this point, 1898-1908.' Come look at this!"
However, another sign grabs her friend's attention.
"Here is where Mathew was cut in two by a streetcar - 1891," she yells. "What are these?" They spend the next ten minutes running down Harris Ave. reading off more plaques and speculating about the stories that inspired them.
It's the reaction Tyrone Tillson was hoping for when he installed 45 historic markers with information dating as far back as 1500 B.C. He wanted to catch people's attention with the plaques, and share his passion for Fairhaven's history with everyone, says Penny Tillson, Tyrone's widow.
Tyrone fell in love with Fairhaven's rich history when he moved here to attend Western in 1959. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in philosophy, he poured all his energy into learning everything he could about Fairhaven's past, Penny says.
"Every small town has its excitement," Penny says. "Fairhaven just has so many layers, once you get started investigating its past you can't stop—it's so deep; so full. It hooks you."
In 1988, the Old Fairhaven Association (OFA) received a $5,000 grant for citizens to use to make community improvements. Tyrone thought the sidewalk markers would be a quaint, casual way to call attention to Fairhaven's history, Penny says.
The OFA received another grant in 1994. With the extra funding, Tyrone was able to add the 20 historic markers south of Ninth Street, including the 'Chinese Deadline' that catches so many people's attention, Penny says.

Chinese Deadline - No Chinese allowed beyond this point
1898-1908
In the 1890s the world's largest salmon cannery was located at the end of Harris Avenue in Fairhaven. A Chinese man named Goon Dip was hired to contract 600 other Chinese men to work at the cannery. Because Fairhaven residents weren't accustomed to seeing Chinese people, there was an unspoken law that the Chinese workers weren't allowed north of Seventh Street. However, after a few years the Fairhaven community was accustomed to the Chinese workers, and disregarded the Deadline, Penny says.

Dirty Dan's Cabin
1853-1883
Daniel Jefferson Harris, aka Dirty Dan, was a whaler from New England who founded Fairhaven. When he arrived in Washington in 1853, he named the area he landed in after Fairhaven, Mass. Known for wearing red long-johns, one boot, one shoe and a crooked hat, he earned the moniker Dirty Dan when living on the beach with pigs that dug clam shells for him. When people started showing up in Fairhaven for the lumber and the coal, he platted the land and sold it, Penny says.
"It's good to have a legend. Vancouver has Gassy Jack and we have Dirty Dan," Penny says. "It's good to put a human face on things, and the more character they have, the better."

In 1901, a man by the name of J.G. Bollong found a dead body. After inspecting the body, the town marshal determined the man had committed suicide by blowing himself up with a stick of dynamite that he had in his pocket. The body was placed on the corner of 10th and Harris, "Dead Man's Corner," for others to identify. From that point on, the corner was to identify dead bodies, Penny says.

Unknown dead man
displayed here
1901
In 1904, a man by the name of J.G. Bollong found a dead body. After inspecting the body, the town marshal determined the man had committed suicide by blowing himself up with a stick of dynamite that he had in his pocket. The body was placed on the corner of 10th and Harris, "Dead Man's Corner," for others to identify. From that point on, the corner was to identify dead bodies, Penny says.

Dirty Dan's Cabin
1853-1883
Daniel Jefferson Harris, aka Dirty Dan, was a whaler from New England who founded Fairhaven. When he arrived in Washington in 1853, he named the area he landed in after Fairhaven, Mass. Known for wearing red long-johns, one boot, one shoe and a crooked hat, he earned the moniker Dirty Dan when living on the beach with pigs that dug clam shells for him. When people started showing up in Fairhaven for the lumber and the coal, he platted the land and sold it, Penny says.
"It's good to have a legend. Vancouver has Gassy Jack and we have Dirty Dan," Penny says. "It's good to put a human face on things, and the more character they have, the better."

Unknown dead man
displayed here
1901
In 1901, a man by the name of J.G. Bollong found a dead body. After inspecting the body, the town marshal determined the man had committed suicide by blowing himself up with a stick of dynamite that he had in his pocket. The body was placed on the corner of 10th and Harris, "Dead Man's Corner," for others to identify. From that point on, the corner was to identify dead bodies, Penny says.

Dirty Dan's Cabin
1853-1883
Daniel Jefferson Harris, aka Dirty Dan, was a whaler from New England who founded Fairhaven. When he arrived in Washington in 1853, he named the area he landed in after Fairhaven, Mass. Known for wearing red long-johns, one boot, one shoe and a crooked hat, he earned the moniker Dirty Dan when living on the beach with pigs that dug clam shells for him. When people started showing up in Fairhaven for the lumber and the coal, he platted the land and sold it, Penny says.
"It's good to have a legend. Vancouver has Gassy Jack and we have Dirty Dan," Penny says. "It's good to put a human face on things, and the more character they have, the better."

In 1904, a man by the name of J.G. Bollong found a dead body. After inspecting the body, the town marshal determined the man had committed suicide by blowing himself up with a stick of dynamite that he had in his pocket. The body was placed on the corner of 10th and Harris, "Dead Man's Corner," for others to identify. From that point on, the corner was to identify dead bodies, Penny says.

Dirty Dan's Cabin
1853-1883
Daniel Jefferson Harris, aka Dirty Dan, was a whaler from New England who founded Fairhaven. When he arrived in Washington in 1853, he named the area he landed in after Fairhaven, Mass. Known for wearing red long-johns, one boot, one shoe and a crooked hat, he earned the moniker Dirty Dan when living on the beach with pigs that dug clam shells for him. When people started showing up in Fairhaven for the lumber and the coal, he platted the land and sold it, Penny says.
"It's good to have a legend. Vancouver has Gassy Jack and we have Dirty Dan," Penny says. "It's good to put a human face on things, and the more character they have, the better."

Bellingham riots: Hundreds of white men mob the waterfront barracks, forcing East Indian immigrants, mostly Sikhs, from the local work force. Many were beaten and robbed while authorities turned a blind eye.

Institution changes its name... again: State Normal School at Whatcom changes to State Normal School at Bellingham after Whatcom and Fairhaven vote to incorporate Bellingham.
Jailhouse Boat Here -
giving prisoners whiskey
meant 25 days on chaingang
1890
The first jailhouse in Fairhaven was a broken down scow beached and anchored above the tide line in the lagoon on Sixth Street. Before the County Council came up with the arrangement, the town sheriff would take prisoners home with him and handcuff them to his kitchen stove for the night. The McGinty, a cramped, four-celled barge incarcerated men couldn’t even stand up in, was used as the jailhouse for a year until a new jail-firehouse was constructed, Penny says.

Junction Saloon - nothing of interest happened here
March 17, 1893
The Junction Saloon, on Fourth and Harris, is where the Fairhaven marshal would park his wagon when the railroad workers showed up for their weekend drinking. The marshal would wait outside the saloon for the fighting to start, and when it did, he would load the men into his wagon and take them to the jailhouse for the night to sleep it off.

This marker is the only one with a complete date, but Penny says the day and month, March 17, don’t actually correspond to the date the saloon was erected. Penny calls it the Tillson Family Secret. One day, she’ll tell people what the date means, she says, but not yet.

Unknown Saloon
1890
In the spring of 1993, one of the saloon historic markers was stolen. Under the saloon’s name, the caption said, “Mr. Noel wore a dress and welcomed the guests.” Mr. Noel was the greeter at the saloon, and because he was a transvestite, he was usually wearing a dress, Penny says.

The Tillsons found the missing block across the road in the creek, so they went home, grabbed a shovel and reset the stone in the sidewalk. The block went missing again a few days later, but that time, they were unable to locate it.

“Someone, somewhere, has a very large paper weight,” Penny says. “They must not have liked Mr. Noel very much.”

Throughout his years researching Fairhaven, Tyrone collected more than 20 banker boxes of its history, now in storage. Tyrone hoped to have his work copied and bound, so other history connoisseurs could access it easily. He planned to give a copy to Western, the state archives, the museum and the library, Penny says.

“Ty and I never wanted this history to be lost; having it all in storage is a waste,” Penny says. “We want people to have access to it. It’s time to tell the whole story.”

It has been six years since Tyrone passed away, but everyday she drives through town, Penny is reminded of his contributions to the community.

“Now that she is retired, Penny plans to bind and distribute Tyrone’s research among the community like he wanted.”

After inspecting the body, the town marshal determined the man had committed suicide by blowing himself up with a stick of dynamite that he had in his pocket. The body was placed on the corner of 10th and Harris, “Dead Man’s Corner,” for others to identify.

Penny Tillson lies next to a plaque commemorating a Fairhaven saloon from the late 19th century.

To learn more visit klipsun.wwu.edu and check out “Forgotten Riots: A Shameful Past.”

Snowstorm: 42 inches of snow dump across Bellingham in two weeks.
Jan. 12, 1979 was an unusually cold day for Bellingham. One a caring owner wouldn’t leave their pet outside in. Meowing and clawing uselessly at the door, the hungry cat stalked back and forth. The neighbors looked on from the safety of their warm homes, worried about the well-loved cat and the owners who, until then, had always cared for it. A hungry cat, left outside, was the first indication all wasn’t well.

Karen Mandic, 22, of Bellevue, and Diane Wilder, 27, of Bremerton, were both Western students and employees at Fred Meyer.

The evening of their disappearance, Mandic and Wilder took an extended dinner break from Fred Meyer to watch an Edgemore home while Mandic’s former coworker, Kenneth Bianchi, installed security alarms as a guard with Whatcom Security Agency.

The absent cat-owners were the serial killer’s newest victims. Months later, Bianchi would be tried by a jury and convicted for the murder of the two women and five others in southern California—Bellingham police had finally captured the elusive Hillside Strangler. More than half of the Bellingham police force aided the investigation. Thirty years after their murders, the case is still the largest, farthest-reaching, most complex and compelling crime to ever hit the Bellingham community.

Bellingham Police Chief Terry Mangan had spent two and a half years on the Bellingham Police Force when he received a phone call Jan. 12, 1979 from a Bellingham State Patrol commander whose son’s girlfriend, Mandic, had gone missing.

“That was enough to warrant a feeling that something was wrong and my little alarm bells went off,” Mangan says. “I took Captain Schenck with me to the girls’ address. When we got there, things were not right. The apartment looked like they had just gotten back from the grocery store, and hadn’t put everything away. The cat was out and hungry and the neighbors said they always took good care of the cat, and this was a cold January day. It looked like people had left planning only to be gone for a short time and Wilder’s car was missing.”

It was sufficient evidence for Mangan to start the intense investigation. After receiving a search warrant, Mangan found the name and phone number of Bianchi in the women’s apartment.

The previous day, Mandic had told her boyfriend she was going to help house-sit while Bianchi changed the alarm system on the home, Wilder was to go with her. Bianchi’s employer, Whatcom Security Agency, did not have the job on record in their files.

The Bellingham Police called a search for the missing women through Whatcom County. Bellingham police enlisted the help of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the sheriff’s department, coast guard and air patrol to look for Wilder’s vehicle. At least

“Bellingham police had finally captured the elusive Hillside Strangler. More than half of the Bellingham police force aided the investigation. Thirty years after their murders, the case is still the largest, farthest-reaching, most complex and compelling crime to ever hit the Bellingham community.”

(above and right) Kenneth Bianchi as he gets his mug shots taken by the Bellingham police department in 1979.
While in an LA jail awaiting trial, Kenneth Bianchi corresponded with Veronica Compton, a writer and playwright who wanted to understand the mind of a killer. Bianchi and Compton started a relationship that led to her returning to Bellingham with plans to commit a copycat murder to exonerate Bianchi. After meeting a woman at Coconut Grove Sports Bar & Grill and then convincing her to come back to Shangri-La Downtown Motel, Compton tried to strangle her with an extension cord before the woman escaped.

“Bianchi was sent down to LA, while he was in jail in LA he met this girl, her father was a newspaper editor, serial murderer fan, actress groupie, he manipulated her. She came up to Bellingham and tried to carry off a murder and leave a tape that made it look like we had the wrong person. The plan failed in that the victim didn’t die but called 911. Compton was arrested when she went to change planes in Seattle convicted of 1st degree attempted murder sentence to the women’s prison in WA State. She escaped, armed with a 9 mm pistol,” according to police reports.

According to Nolte, Compton is now

Veronica Compton, writer and copycat.
Nolte, after spending many hours interviewing Bianchi, realized early on he had something to hide. “During the first interview it appeared that he was smooth, intelligent, but a pathological liar. He was also the number one suspect from the beginning.”

Half the police force was out searching, former Bellingham Detective Fred Nolte says.

“At 5 p.m., I got a call that the car had been spotted in an undeveloped cul de sac in Fairhaven,” Mangan says. “Through the back of the hatchback you could see the bodies of the two girls.”

Police picked up physical evidence within the car and in the house Wilder and Mandic went to watch. Evidence indicated the murders occurred in the house and the bodies were then driven to the isolated area. The markings on the bodies showed the women were killed by strangulation using a wire or cable from behind.

Both Nolte and Mangan agree the murder motive was revenge for the rejection Bianchi felt through Mandic’s refusal to date him.

“He did not accept rejection from females at all: it angers him greatly,” Nolte says. “He then decided to punish Mandic by killing her. In the process, she demanded that Wilder go with her to the home. He decided not to back down and killed both of them.”

Had Chief Mangan not been familiar with details from the Los Angeles strangling occurred during a four-month period from late 1977 to early 1978, he may not have made the connection between Bianchi and the Hillside Strangler. Prior to working in Bellingham, Mangan had worked as a police officer in California. During that time, Mangan became familiar with the Hillside Strangler case and had met the father of an earlier victim. The Hillside Strangler taskforce flew up to Bellingham to view the victims’ bodies at the morgue and, although the LA police believed the California murders were executed with an accomplice, the similarities between the two cases were unarguable.

“This whole thing started to come together and look like it was related,” Mangan says. “The women were found in a trunk of the car and so was the last LA victim.”

The evidence pointing to Bianchi began stacking up as his alibi unraveled.

Nolte, after spending many hours interviewing Bianchi, realized early on he had something to hide.

“During the first interview it appeared that he was smooth, intelligent, but a pathological liar,” Nolte says. “He was also the number one suspect from the beginning.”

1941  College attendance drops: The United States enters World War II and attendance at Western Washington College of Education drops nearly 50 percent.

1946  College enrollment increases: Enrollment increases 100%. More male freshmen than female enroll for the first time at Western Washington College of Education as many returning soldiers take advantage of the G.I. Bill.
No one could have guessed the handsome, social, young family-man Kenneth Bianchi could be capable of murder. Yet, Robert F. Brown of Bellingham claims, through a vision, he knew Karen Mandic and her roommate were in serious danger a week prior to their deaths.

Brown told Fred Nolte premonitions compelled him to warn future victim Mandic.

In the case report, Brown describes the premonition occurred when he went to the Fred Meyer store Mandic worked at to pick up his daughter.

"There was something peculiar about the girl checker nearest the main doors. I had a tingling feeling burning in my breast—tunnel vision—then like a voice, 'That girl is in danger.' Strong impression comes very rapidly—trembling. Exclaim 'oh, no' without knowing just why. Like a voice much stronger, 'Some guy will attack her.' Again exclaim 'Ooh, No-o' more loudly. A couple passing by asks, 'Are you alright?' I know for sure this is true and real. I look at the girl again—as in a vision. She looks absolutely dead—hollow eye sockets, complexion gone, casket shape around her, as if she is lying in it. This means the guy attacking her, will kill her. No way can I leave this store without telling her, no matter what," according to Brown's statement.

Brown told police he spoke to Mandic that evening at Fred Meyer, but she did not heed his warnings. This compelling confession only adds to the mystique and sensationalism of the Hillside Strangler case.

How can Brown's premonition be explained? Bellingham Police Chief Terry Mangan, who doesn't recall Brown's statement, chalks it up to the attention and publicity surrounding the case.

"We had dozens of claims from all kinds of seers and prophets that claimed to know something about the case," Mangan says.

"People come out of the woodwork especially in high profile cases. I've seen a lot of that in my 40 years of crime work. They think they know what is happening, where to find the body, so you take the report and file it away."
The walls are a deep marigold, the cement steps leading up to the front door are surrounded by leafy green bushes, and wind-chimes hang from the front porch. A fluffy off-white cat lounges on the welcome mat, ready to escape inside through a missing pane at the bottom of the glass door at the first sign of a visitor. Before Gyngr Schon comes out to invite the guest in, seemingly alerted by the cat as much as the doorbell, the only sign that this house is The Old London Bookshop is a British flag covering the front window. Inside, the building is like nowhere else. Valencia Vigil, a friend of Schon, says it’s like a place out of the works of Charles Dickens.

Though Schon lives there, The Old London Bookshop is anything but a typical home. It is the largest antiquarian bookshop in the Pacific Northwest, offering some 50,000 rare books for sale to collectors, museums and other rare-book dealers. Schon sells a few books each month, though some months she doesn’t make any sales at all. For 20 years she ran the business with her husband Michael,
until he passed away at the end of March, leaving her unsure of what the future holds for her and her literary home.

Every wall of Schon’s 17-room house is covered with wooden shelves crammed with the pristine spines of books that vary in age from the sixteenth century to modern day and in subject from crime fiction to travel, science fiction, philosophy and the occult. But for a book-lover like Schon, not everything in the shop can be for sale.

“My William Blake set will be buried with me,” Schon says. “If I were wealthy and a collector I’d be a William Blake collector. I’m not wealthy and I have to make my living selling books, so I have one thing I treasure.”

As she gives the grand tour of her store, Schon smiles behind large, round glasses, her eyes rimmed with dark and faintly purple liner. Her wrinkled face peeks out from between the swirls of her matching crocheted cap and robe, both striped with bands of periwinkle, white and lavender. Her frame is small and hunched, and she gasps slightly for breath when she speaks or climbs the steep, red-carpeted stairs to the second floor of the shop.

“Hello, Chester,” Schon says to the orange tabby awakened from his nap when she opens the door to the modern first editions section. He’s curled up on one of a pair of armchairs wedged between the bookshelves in this room where she does most of her day-to-day living. Chester and the fluffy white cat from the doorstep are just two of the four felines Schon lives with in the bookshop.

The store is only open by appointment, in part to protect the condition of her books, in part so Schon can focus on the work of finding clients and acquiring books, but she welcomes visitors who call ahead.

“She’s such a nice person and just a dear,” Vigil says. She works at the Lynden’s antiquarian bookshop, Antiquariat Botanicum. “Kind and yet with a sharp mind—and those two qualities don’t often go together.”

Schon and her husband worked toward opening their own bookshop for a decade before moving to Bellingham in 1988 and converting this gold Victorian into a store. Schon was employed as an executive secretary during those years in Pasadena, Calif., doing temp jobs so she could attend book sales and add to the couple’s collection. They both loved books from an early age and soon after they married in 1975 they decided to try to make a living doing what made them happiest: acquiring books.

“When we met we both had large private libraries,” Schon says. “When we joined together it was rather dangerous because we just fed off each other’s habits.”

Evidence of those habits covers the store in more than books. Each room holds a genre of books and artifacts that add to its ambience: African baskets in the travel section; a Sherlock Holmes-style cap and coat in the crime fiction section; an “Alice in Wonderland” chess set in the fantasy and science fiction room.

Schon’s husband loved chess and collected history- and literature-themed sets for sale in the store. He played chess as well, often with Michael Elmer, who owns Michael’s Books in downtown Bellingham.

“Michael Schon was a quirky, old-style professor who studied books and enjoyed them immensely,” Elmer says.

He was also a devoted husband through more than three decades. Schon’s voice breaks and tears well up in her eyes as she talks about her husband and her plans. She asked Elmer to continue referring buyers to her and wants to keep the shop open, but she says she doesn’t know how long she’ll be able to continue alone in her house full of work, memories and books.
James Copher, flipping through a 100-year-old map of Bellingham, handles it gently. The streets and buildings, neatly written and patched on each leaf, visually reflect Bellingham’s congested history. Copher, reference archivist of Washington State Archives, doesn’t react as the map starts coming off in pieces.

Bellingham was divided in four different towns when this map was made: Fairhaven, Sehome, Whatcom and Bellingham. In the 1890s, the four cities joined to become the City of Bellingham in 1903. According to a City of Bellingham ordinance on Feb. 8, 1904, the City Council passed 106 street name changes after the merger to eliminate duplicates.

Jeff Jewell, photo archivist at Whatcom Museum of History and Art, says the city renamed streets to be more consistent but by the time of the merger, realtors platted areas for residential development and gave streets whatever names they wanted. As the time went by, the areas filled in, and the street names became inconsistent. Jewell says the street name used to change five times within half a mile when people drove down the same street.

Muddled name changes weren’t the only problem. All Bellingham streets are laid out on grid system, but the streets didn’t line up well at the town boundary when Bellingham merged with Fairhaven.

“That is the reason for the ‘S-shaped’ in the road at the North of Fairhaven. It is most noticeable on 12th and 13th streets,” says Glenn Eastwood, President of Whatcom County Historical Society.

Because of the numerous name changes, the order of Bellingham streets has patterns. The best example is the York Addition, south of St. Joseph Hospital, Jewell says. When the First Addition, south of the York Addition, was built, the west to east streets were renamed in alphabetical order from Cornwall Avenue, formerly Dock Street. Downtown Sehome streets were also in alphabetical order until Dock Street changed to Cornwall Avenue. All streets that run east to west of Dean Street (an extension of Railroad Avenue) are a state’s name, such as Texas Street and Ohio Street, Jewell says.

Until 1926, State Street was named Elk Street when the Bellingham Herald built its current digs. The Herald’s general manager held a lot of power in the community during the time, and the Herald changed the street name because it could, Jewell says.

In 1853, Henry Roeder and his business partner, Russell Vallette Peabody started a sawmill business on Whatcom Creek. Henry Street and Roeder Avenue come from Roeder’s name, and Roeder named two streets after his children so that Roeder named streets “Victor” and “Lottie.”

“Henry’s wife was Elizabeth so what do we have here?” Jewell says while pointing at a park on the map. “There is an Elizabeth Street, and right here is Elizabeth Park.”

The unknown meanings behind other street names and patterns may loom in the future, but the mystery might just complement an interesting history.
At the corner of 12th and Harris Street in Fairhaven is a small, homely drug store. Some might say it possesses “character.” Besides having opened its doors nearly 110 years ago, there is nothing outwardly remarkable about the place.

Modern medicines line the shelves. Electronically-filed prescriptions are dispensed in opaque paper bags. Most major credit cards are accepted. But underneath Fairhaven Pharmacy, in the clammy basement with concrete floors and pale incandescent lighting, the building’s ample history is on display.

A cement stairwell outside the pharmacy’s 12th Street entrance leads down to Gordy Tweit’s multifaceted museum. Along the walls, floor-to-ceiling glass cabinets filled with archaic pills, salves and remedies gleam dully; a half-dozen more waist-high cases hold all manner of pharmacological bric-a-brac. Past the drugs are shelves and shelves of other Bellingham miscellanea, including a near-complete set of Western’s short-lived yearbook, Klipsun.

“It’s a shame they stopped making those,” says Tweit, who also collects annuals from all the local high schools. “They’re a great way to visually chronicle history.”

A retired pharmacist and lifelong Bellingham resident, Tweit, 81, started amassing sundries in his teens, when he began work as a delivery boy for the Fairhaven Pharmacy in 1941.

“Most of it went into storage for decades,” he says. “It wasn’t until the late 80s that I began taking things out of boxes to start figuring out how to put it on display.”

After a two-year stint in the Navy, the lanky son of Norwegian immigrants attended the University of Washington from 1948 to 1952 to become a pharmacist. He would take the train back to Bellingham every weekend to work at the pharmacy.

“I love this stuff—I still find reasons to be here almost every day,” says Tweit, who retired in 1991 after a nasty accident nearly took his life: falling down a flight of stairs in the dark, he broke his neck and lay bleeding on the floor, alone.

“I basically saved myself,” he says, staring at his hands with brown, bespectacled eyes. “I realized my neck was broken, so I stabilized it, slowly climbed the stairs, and called 911.”

Now he limits himself to simple tasks in the pharmacy and acts as a tour guide every Friday from 1-4 p.m., opening the basement’s doors to all.

“Doing this keeps me out of trouble,” Tweit says. “When you get to be almost 82, you don’t want to burn yourself out.”

Leaning over a glass case, he locates a thick roll of wafer-like pills.

“Young man, take a look at this,” he says. “This is one of my favorite brands.”

A large, white capital “P” stands out against the faded pink wrapper. The alliterative title reads, “Dr. Williams’ Pink Pills for Pale People”—an iron pill for anemics, circa 1930.

At around 3 p.m. others begin trickling in, softly knocking on the door before greeting Tweit heartily. A pair of 20-something Western graduate students from the history department. A Bellingham writer who leafs through the archival stack of photo albums, working on a new book. Three middle-aged men and their friend from Alaska, eager to see Tweit’s collection.

Like a clichéd small-town pharmacist, he knows almost all their names. It’s no stretch of the imagination to picture Tweit 50 or 60 years ago, writing prescriptions, chatting with regulars and weighing doses on an apothecary scale. This is his milieu; the pharmacy, his life.
PAINT THE TOWN RED.

BELLMINGHAM'S BROTHELS

The old Albany Hotel, on the corner of Cornwall and Chestnut in the 1940s.

August 4, 1988

Bellis Fair Mall opens.
As the doors are pushed open, a powerful aroma of greasy burgers and fries winds its way to the street from inside the restaurant. Through the dim lighting, locals who have been visiting for more than thirty years can be seen sitting hunched like gargoyles on the barstools.

Not even a rowdy group of college students giggling nearby shakes the concentration from their lined faces as they munch on their meals. Old, brown tile floors darkened with years of wear lay depressingly beneath customer’s feet. Through the restaurant’s haziness, a narrow, steep staircase near the back of the restaurant can be seen leading up into darkness. Beyond are rooms that were long ago quite familiar with a seedy part of Bellingham’s history.

At 122 years old, the Horseshoe is the oldest restaurant in Washington, Idaho and Oregon. But back in the day, paying customers could get more than a hot meal; sex was also on the menu, and sold behind closed doors on a regular basis.

Residents are often surprised that brothels were common in Bellingham. At the peak of prostitution’s reign, roads such as Holly Street and Harris Avenue, now considered a charming Bellingham locale, were in fact where “women of the evening” would stand every night, flaunting themselves to prospective customers.

“Bellingham now is nothing like what it was at the turn of the century,” says Curtis Smith, author of *The Brothels of Bellingham*. “Bellingham was a logging, mining and fishing town. There were so many men coming, it had a huge impact on everything.”

In the early 1900s, there were few jobs for women, and even fewer respectable ones. For the most part, a woman could be a waitress, a maid or a schoolteacher.

Smith says the jobs paid 50 cents per hour, whereas working in a brothel could pay $5 to $10 per trick. Especially if a woman worked in a crib, where getting the man in and out quickly was the point—she could make more than enough to survive.

To speed things along even more, girls were known to lay an oilcloth on the bottom half of their bed. Usually made of canvas or linen, an oilcloth was a piece of fabric coated in oil to repel water—so that loggers and the fishermen, wouldn’t have to take off their boots.

“It was a sanitary kind of thing,” Smith says, laughing.

When the city charter was established in 1903, Bellingham laid out the boundaries of the red light district. The district, complete with actual beaming red lights, began at the intersection of Holly and Bay Street.

Despite being an ‘open secret,’ residents’ tolerance for the brothels waned.

“Everyone knew what was going on, but no one talked about it,” Smith says. “There was a rationalization of justifying it and taking it however they could.”

The drama climaxed during the 1920s, when there was a moral outrage against the brothels and the red light district. Police tried controlling the businesses by taking down women’s names in an effort to keep track of them.

Health checks for the women became a weekly occurrence and the prostitution business was restricted to the brothels instead of out on the streets.

To appease the public, the police would occasionally perform raids on the brothels—sometimes giving notification beforehand. Some of the women were arrested and fined $250.

“It was just the cost of doing business,” Smith says. “It didn’t stop them from doing anything. After they paid, they would go right back to work.”

Dating back to almost the beginning of the town’s history, prostitution and the brothels played an immense role on the social and economic framework of the community. But even today, the influence of prostitution and the Bellingham brothels is exemplified every year at Western Washington University.

The drama climaxed during the 1920s when there was a moral outrage against the brothels and the red light district.

Police tried controlling the businesses by taking down women’s names in an effort to keep track of them.

Karen W. Morse appointed as Western Washington University’s President.

Olympic pipeline explosion: The Olympic pipeline ruptures and spills 276,000 gallons of gasoline into Whatcom and Hannah creeks, killing three people.
The Boston Hotel, photo from a 1920’s Tulip Festival parade, on the Northeast corner of Railroad and Holly Streets, where the Pita Pit is today.

(right) The Gordon, photo from 1949, on the East side of Railroad Avenue, near where Bob’s Burgers & Brew is today.
(below) The Don & Ramona, photo from the 1920’s, on the West side of Railroad Avenue—where the Helena Hotel is now.

Earthquake: A 6.8 magnitude earthquake, centered near Olympia, causes several hundred thousand dollars in damage to buildings in Whatcom County.

February 28, 2001

Population of Bellingham reaches 75,150 residents.

2006
Little is known about this woman who bequeathed a six figure sum to Western, but they must have been talking about her when the term “hooker with a heart of gold” was coined.

“It's obvious that she cared not only about the students who attended the university here, but for higher education,” says Mark Bagley, senior director in Foundation.

According to the Western Foundation, a sector of the university that deals with private donations, there is currently $125,000 in endowment funds; money that cannot be spent or given out. The money is then invested by the board of directors. Whatever money is made is put into a separate fund that may be used for the loan. Currently, there is $14,668 in that fund.

“As a loan, it's been historically one of the loans with the highest default rate, meaning most students can't pay it back in time,” says program assistant in the loans and collections office in Old Main, June Fraser Thistle. “But the Joy Stokes loan is only given out during the summer and it's usually a last resort for a student who has no other way to afford going to school.”

Though the donation was made 30 years ago this year, it becomes obvious how far-reaching the brothel's effect was in Bellingham. Although some may be embarrassed by Bellingham's shady past, in reality prostitution was an industry that spurred the economy into making the town become what it is today. It seems apparent that the city of subdued excitement may not have been so subdued after all.

It was commonly believed that young female students had to turn tricks in order to pay for tuition.

Bellingham rated as one of 11 cities having the cleanest air: The American Lung Association names Bellingham one of the cities with the cleanest air for the sixth year in a row.

Mother Earth News names Bellingham, WA one of “8 Great Places You’ve Never Heard Of”
On Sept. 6, 1899, 88 students and six faculty members walked through the large doors of the Main building on New Whatcom Normal School’s campus. Back then, Bellingham was two separate cities, New Whatcom and Fairhaven. Tuition was free and it cost approximately $14 per month to rent a room near campus. Inside the massive structure, students could find a gymnasium, labs, classrooms and an assembly hall.

Five name changes and 109 years later, New Whatcom Normal School is now known as Western Washington University and the Main building is Old Main. Additions and renovations may have changed its structure and layout, but the heart of Western remains inside the school’s oldest and most recognizable building.

“[Old Main] is the great mother to the rest of school,” says Jeff Jewell, photo archivist at the Whatcom Museum of History and Art, and a 1984 Western graduate.

Construction of New Whatcom’s first building finished in 1896 and the building sat empty for three years before enough money was raised to furnish and start the school, Jewell says.

Alfred Lee, the building’s well-known architect, also designed Whatcom’s old city hall—now the Whatcom Museum.

Today, thousands of students traverse Western's campus and tuition is drastically more expensive, but keeping Old Main in top condition is very important to the university, says Tim Wynn, Western’s Director of Facilities Management.

Until 2002, Old Main was covered in non-native and highly invasive English Ivy that was deteriorating the concrete of the building, Wynn says. In some areas the ivy was four feet deep and had squirrels and other animals living in it.

To preserve the building, Wynn says the ivy had to be removed—much to the dismay of many alumni who feared it would detract from the collegiate look. But after pulling the ivy off the building, Wynn and the alumni were surprised at what they found under more than 100 years of ivy growth.

“The details of the building won them over,” Wynn says. “It has a wonderful presence.”

Wynn says the building’s age presents difficult challenges to improvements and remodels, due to old pipes and missing blue prints from earlier remodels.

Even though the maintenance can be difficult and many times expensive (the ivy removal and repairs alone cost more than $1 million), Wynn says it’s important to maintain Old Main’s look for many generations to come.

Jerry Flora, Western’s seventh president who served from 1968 to 1975, understands the significance of keeping the building looking the same way it has always looked.

“There has never been a student at Western that hasn’t seen Old Main, or been inside,” Flora says. “And, I don’t know about other people, but I get chills walking by that building.”

Back in the 1950s when Flora started teaching science at Western, he had an office on the fourth floor, before Old Main had an elevator.

At that time, the only place faculty could smoke on campus was in the basement of Old Main, which was referred to as “Old Mange,” due to the smell. Flora fondly remembers the many trips he made up and down the four flights of stairs to smoke his pipe.

Even though the times have changed and campus has grown since Flora sat in the president’s office, Old Main is still the hub of Western’s administrative process.

Since 1899, Western’s presidents have come and gone, new buildings have been built, and each year more and more students come to Western’s campus, but Western supporters, such as Flora, believe it is Old Main which has held the campus together, acting as a sense of stability to all who pass around her.
More than 700 men and women in white robes with pointed hoods marched downtown Bellingham one May evening in 1926. They followed a float emblazoned with the words “The Gateway to America,” where a woman stood dressed as the Statue of Liberty in KKK costume. Thousands of onlookers crowded the sidewalks to watch this parade of the Whatcom County Klan.

This march of Ku Klux Klan members was not an isolated event in Bellingham history. The Klan burned crosses on top of Sehome Hill and threatened people of color, Jews and Catholics. Then-mayor John A. Kellogg welcomed the KKK to town in a speech at the Klan’s 1929 Washington state convention in Bellingham.

Jeff Jewell, a photo historian at the Whatcom Museum of History and Art, says some locals challenged the Klan, especially J. J. Donovan, a prominent Catholic businessman who helped build Bellingham in the late 1800s. The KKK aimed to drive out Catholic schools in the Pacific Northwest.

In 1926, the Klan wanted to march in Bellingham’s Tulip Time Festival Parade to prove themselves a part of mainstream society. The town was divided about KKK ideology, so the Klan’s search for legitimacy caused controversy. The debate grew so intense that three organizers threatened to quit their posts if the Klan float was allowed in the parade. At the last minute Donovan, deadlocked officials, and public scrutiny pressured the KKK into withdrawing.

But, that would not be the last of the KKK’s pursuit of public acceptance. Around 9 p.m. on May 15, 1926, the Klan marched through Bellingham after a picnic in Cornwall Park. Marchers started off to the sounds of fireworks exploding at Forest and East Holly Streets and wound their way throughout downtown, led by five men on horseback. Along with a Lynden klanswoman dressed as the Statue of Liberty, three members of the original Civil War-era Klan rode atop the float. Thousands of spectators “jammed the thoroughfares to glimpse the unusual spectacle,” according to The Bellingham Herald. The Klan’s route led them past the Catholic Church of the Assumption and its school.

In response to intimidating events like this one, Donovan wrote several letters to the editor of The Bellingham Herald. He said local law enforcement didn’t record the Klan’s violent acts because the officers weren’t targets.

Western Registrar Joe M. St. Hilaire wrote a history of the Church of the Assumption. He says we know little about the details of what happened to communities the KKK threatened because fear limited people’s responses.

“If there was discrimination with signs or cross-burnings, the Catholics wouldn’t have responded in a way to cause a scene in the papers,” St. Hilaire says. “They knew the danger if they did fight back.”

Bellingham’s Klan lasted longer than most KKK branches, largely because members considered it a social group, but for many spectators the image of hundreds of marching figures in white-hooded robes was threatening and frightening.

The town was divided about KKK ideology, so the Klan’s search for legitimacy caused controversy.
*Klipsun* is the Lummi word meaning BEAUTIFUL SUNSET.