

# THE WHITE RIVER JOURNAL

A NEWSLETTER OF THE WHITE RIVER VALLEY MUSEUM

JANUARY 2013



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## FEATURED HISTORY

### Auburn Municipal Airport

BY HILARY PITTENGER



Auburn Municipal Airport as seen from the air today.  
Photo courtesy of the Auburn Municipal Airport.

The Auburn Municipal Airport opened for business on September 20th, 1969. Senator Henry M. Jackson taxied slowly down the newly paved 2,900 foot runway in a blue and white Cessna and broke the ceremonial red ribbon while members of the City Council and aeronautics agencies looked on. Antique aircraft and special homemade models were scattered around the airport for public display, and new, state-of-the-art small airplanes were flown for exhibition by the airport's first and largest tenant, Seattle Flight Services. Senator Jackson spoke briefly, and unveiled a commemorative bronze plaque at the airport's entrance. All of these celebratory gestures, however, came after several years of hard work and conflict.

*Continued on page 4*

Ordinary People, Extraordinary History





## WHAT'S HAPPENING

### Things To Do

# I DO!

## TRADITIONS OF THE AMERICAN WHITE WEDDING

ON EXHIBIT JANUARY 16 – APRIL 14

This exhibit is sponsored by Nelson's Jewelry and Gifts.

The American white wedding is every little girl's dream—the perfect beau, the elegant white gown, tiers of wedding cake and something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. Many of today's wedding standards are steeped in traditions originating in religious ceremony, royal fashion and ancient history. I DO! uses antique wedding gowns and accessories to explore the histories and myths surrounding the traditions of the American white wedding.



## Book Your Bridal Shower or Event Today!

Our *I DO!* exhibit will serve as the perfect conversation starter for your bridal shower in the museum's convenient and affordable Muckleshoot Room. The room can be set for up to 30 guests and includes tablecloths, centerpieces, multimedia capacity, free wifi and the ability to serve refreshments. A two hour shower reservation is only \$100 and allows you to enjoy your event while leaving the set-up and cleaning to us.

Please contact Janet Wells for more information or to book your shower at:  
[jwells@auburnwa.gov](mailto:jwells@auburnwa.gov) 253-804-5010.

## I DO! Wedding Invitation Workshop

FEBRUARY 2 1 – 2:30 P.M.

Learn some basic calligraphy techniques from professional calligrapher Caitlin Dundon that can be applied to address or create your own wedding invites. All supplies included in class fee. \$40 per person, registration required.

## WHAT'S HAPPENING

### Things To Do



## Textile Preservation for Wedding Gowns

MARCH 12  
7 – 8:30 P.M.

Learn the best methods of cleaning, caring for and storing your wedding gown or precious textile pieces. Taught by Museum Curator of Collections Hilary Pittenger. \$20 per person, registration required.

## Late Play Date

FEBRUARY 28 AND MARCH 28 6 – 8 P.M.

Drop-in for family friendly activity and craft stations throughout the museum.  
FREE admission!

## Overnight at the Museum!

MARCH 22-23 7 P.M. – 8 A.M.

Overnight is great for kids age 7 – 12. Kids will enjoy fun museum activities like scavenger hunts, flashlight tours and a movie. \$30 for 1st child/ \$25 per additional siblings, registration required.





# Auburn Municipal Airport

BY HILARY PITTENGER



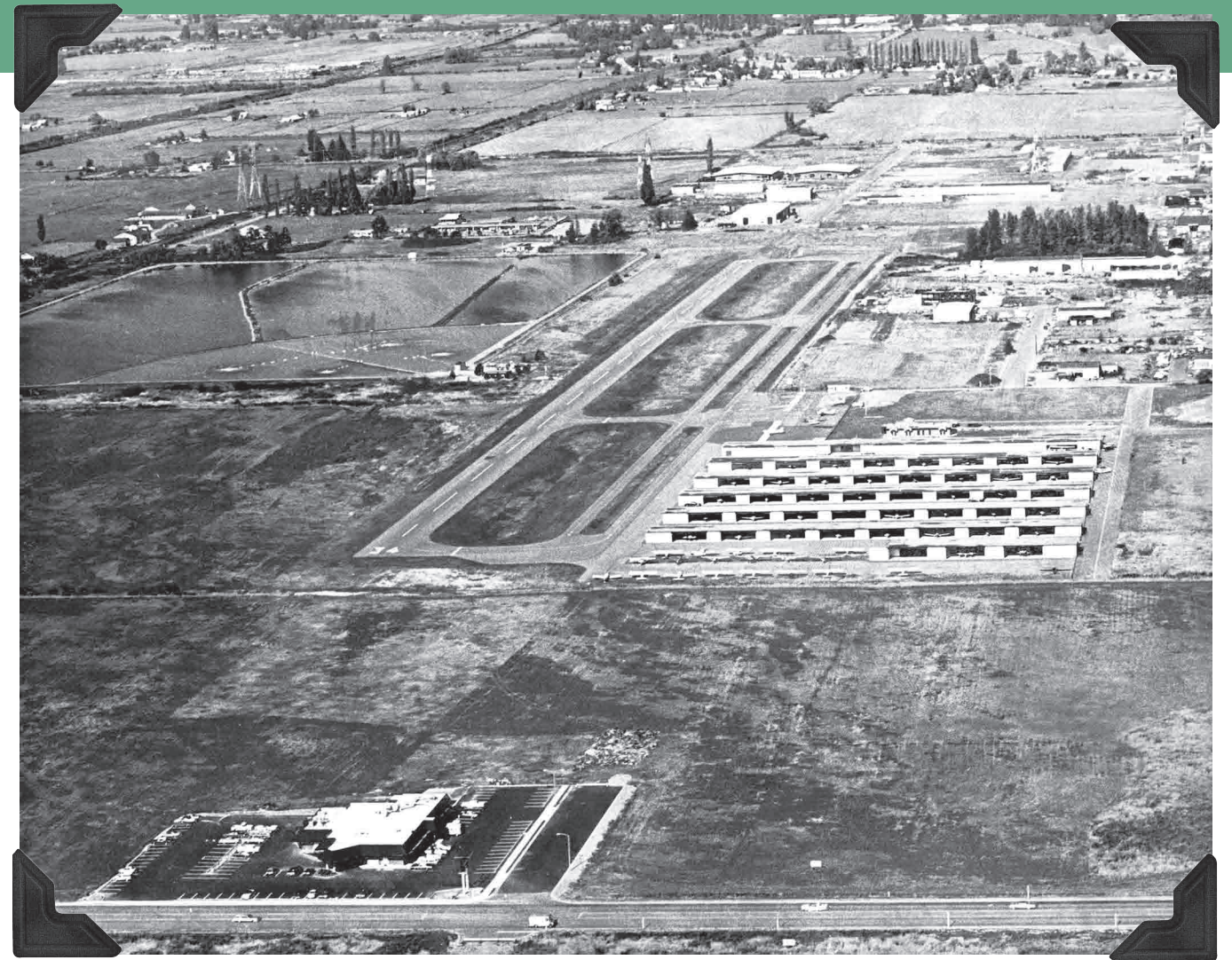
Pilot Wayne Spat working on his Cessna 140, 1973. This Cessna was based out of the Auburn Airport during the 1970s. Image courtesy of Mark Pittenger.

**The brewing space race between the United States and the Soviet Union also contributed to the public's interest in aviation: the path to becoming an astronaut usually began in the cockpit of an aircraft.**

*Continued from page 1*

The Auburn City Council first began looking into the feasibility of building an airport in their growing city in 1962, at the direction of Mayor Shaughnessy. General aviation, the branch of civil aviation that includes recreational flying, was experiencing a massive growth spurt across North America during the 1950s and 1960s. This was due to a number of factors, including an influx of young World War II veterans to the workforce who had experience and interest in aviation, and the development of new materials and technologies that made aviation safer and more affordable.

The nearby presence of Boeing and the boom in the aeronautics industry in the Pacific Northwest also contributed to a local interest in general aviation. As air travel became more common and affordable, business owners were discovering that short chartered flights could be a faster and more efficient means of travel between mid-sized communities than commuting by car, which drove up demand for short-range chartered flights. Employees at Boeing and other aeronautics companies who already had an interest in aviation or who gained an interest through their work were looking for local facilities to house their small planes and otherwise assist them in their new hobby. The final straw for many smaller cities like Auburn came with the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle, when large numbers of tourists flooded Seattle and the surrounding region looking to see the many sights of Puget Sound from the air.



The Auburn Airport as seen from the air, c. 1971. Photo courtesy of the Auburn Municipal Airport.

The state of other airports in the region also contributed to the push for an Auburn-area airport. SeaTac Airport, outside Tukwila, discouraged general aviation traffic in favor of the larger and more profitable commercial business it was built to accommodate. A few small, private airstrips were available in the Kent and Federal Way region, but they had very limited (and sometimes non-existent) facilities such as hangars and tie-down areas. Crest Airpark, located in Covington, was the closest of several small airports in the southern Puget Sound that served general aviation pilots exclusively, but the airport was still a 25 to 30 minute drive away for most residents living in the Green and White River Valley, and did not have good transit access. The Valley needed an airport, and some members of the Auburn city government wanted to make sure that Auburn was the place it was built.

There was only one small problem with this plan – finding a suitable location. Tracks of land large enough to house the kind of airport the city leaders envisioned

were available in the Valley, but the land was too valuable to use for a large swath of asphalt. Additionally, the geography of the Valley made it difficult to find potential sites that would not disrupt drainage paths into the Green River, or suffer too much from flooding, fog, or other unfortunate weather conditions that had plagued many other area airports. In September 1963, Mayor Shaughnessy met with members of the Kent City Council to discuss the possibility of a joint venture between Kent and Auburn to run a municipal airport for the benefit of both cities. Then-Councilman Robert Gaines was appointed to head the committee that looked into this option. Four months later, after Mr. Gaines had been elected mayor, the committee recommended that a joint site be located on what was then called the Kent Airport, a small landing strip located on a Kent farmer's property. This committee went so far as to submit the site to the Federal Aviation Administration for review, but they did not pursue that course of action any further.





Eleven different potential sites were selected and surveyed by this committee between 1962 and 1965, including the GSA property near C Street and the railroad tracks (today, home of the Social Security Agency and other lots close to the Supermall) and a strip of land located along the Stuck River. While all of these many selections were looked at, another city department was busy making its own land purchase: the water-sewer department. As a part of developing the City of Auburn's water treatment system, the Water-Sewer Committee of the City Council approved the purchase of a large swath of land between the Green River and Auburn Way North. The land had been previously used for agricultural purposes by the Lone family, who owned a large amount of acreage across the Valley. Its location on flat valley-bottom land made it a perfect candidate for the city's waste treatment lagoons – open-air ponds where sewage is treated before being put back into the natural water system. Fortunately for the Airport Committee, this land purchase included a long plot of land that had no water treatment use that would be nearly ideal for an airport runway.

In 1966, Mayor Gaines authorized a full feasibility study be created for the potential airport. The final report, compiled by Northwest American Inc., recommended that a general aviation airport located in Auburn could expect

to make a significant contribution to the local economy and see an 8% growth in business for the next five years at least. There was, of course, a catch: the airport would have to have facilities and a runway that were good enough to lure flyers away from their habitual haunts, including a well-lit runway, quality covered hangars, and tie-down spaces that were on a surface, such

**Unfortunately, it also meant that the future airport's closest neighbor would be a sewage treatment facility, a fact which later earned the airport the nickname "Sewer-TAK".**

as pavement, instead of bare grass. This would require a larger initial capital investment on the city's part than perhaps they anticipated, and the city was already looking to invest in several other expensive projects, such as the purchase of the Green River Golf & Country Club and updates to city hall.

The city government was in a quandary. If they went



Single-engine planes parked in the tie-down area.  
Photo courtesy of the Auburn Municipal Airport.

ahead with trying to fund the airport project, they risked over-extending themselves and drawing intense criticism from a citizenry that was historically not in favor of most major civic projects. On the other hand, if they waited too long, the land might not still be available, and another city in the Valley might beat Auburn to the punch and build a municipal airport first. In early 1966, Mayor Gaines and the rest of the City Council made the



Auburn Flight Service building at the Auburn Municipal Airport, 1971.  
Photo Gift of the City of Auburn, #PO-04233.

decision to go forward with their plan, in spite of these potential problems. In January 1966, Mayor Gaines appointed councilmembers Bob Kline, George Aaby, and Ken Fitzsimmons to the Airport Committee. This committee was in charge of collecting information, conducting studies and finding financing for the entire airport project. By September, the committee was ready to submit its funding plan: \$500,000 of bonds, to be put up for public vote on the November ballot.

This funding plan would be put off until the following year, when it was reintroduced with slight changes by Councilmember Kline as an "inside levy", then put off for another year to appear on the 1968 ballot – a choice that would result in the most public debate regarding the airport yet.

During the very first City Council meeting of 1968, an election year, Mayor Gaines laid out his aggressive agenda for the year, including his explicit desire to see the Municipal Airport project go forward before the end of the year. Many other projects were also featured on the mayor's list, and it was one of these projects which made it to the ballot for the September primary – a \$1,250,000 bond for a new city hall building. On primary election day, September 17th, the levy for the city hall building failed to get a majority vote. This caused a great deal of confusion when it was coupled with the unusual City Council meeting that took place on the same day.

A regularly scheduled City Council meeting took place on the evening of September 16th, the evening before the election. The meeting ran late, and the Council members were unable to complete their business. At 10:00 p.m., they called a recess, and were finally able to reconvene on September 18th, after the results of the election were known. It was at this point that the many Council Committee reports were made, including the Airport Committee's report. During the course of this report, Councilmember Kline put forward the motion to put a levy on the November ballot for \$450,000 to fund the construction of the airport. The motion was passed unanimously, the remainder of the Council's business was completed, and the Council members returned to their other duties.



Mark Pittenger and a Taylorcraft airplane, 1971. This was the plane flown by Mark Pittenger while he earned his commercial aviation license. Pittenger was based out of the Auburn Municipal Airport from 1977 to 1979. Image courtesy of Mark Pittenger.







As news of the Council's decision spread through town, their actions were seen through a very different lens. From a citizen's perspective, the City Council had met at an irregular time, for an unannounced and unadvertised meeting during which they could discuss the now well-known results of the primary election. Then, without a chance for public comment on the matter, the Council pushed another bond onto the ballot for November, when the voters had just voted down a different levy option. Many Auburn residents were not pleased with what they saw.

The overall political environment at

the time only added fuel to the fire. It was the height of the Vietnam War, Robert Kennedy had been assassinated only a few months earlier, and Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey were battling for the White House. Local news wasn't an improvement, with most of the newspaper headlines in Auburn dedicated to a nasty fight between Auburn firefighters and the City Council over a rejected pay increase. Many citizens were very unhappy with their local government at this time, and to see a City Council that did not want to support firefighters turn around and ask those same citizens for money for a project that they thought of as frivolous made

some of them downright angry.

Rumors and newspaper editorials spread like wildfire leading up to the next council meeting. Gene Kasper, a local business owner, organized a citizen's group called "Citizens Committee for a Fair Airport Decision" who wrote a letter to the City Council about their concerns with the way the bond decision had been made and took out ads in the newspaper to air their grievances. Groups of firefighters were also looking forward to getting an opportunity to confront the City Council members about the pay issue at the next public council meeting. It was shaping up to be a rough meeting.

The mayor and council members knew that public opinion was not in their favor, and they planned their meeting to keep as much order as possible. When the council meeting started on the evening of October 7th with a standing-room-only crowd, Mayor Gaines delayed the previously printed agenda and skipped directly to "Old Business". This served a dual purpose for the council – on one hand, it allowed the council to immediately address one of the issues the people crowding the council chamber were there to talk about. On the other hand, it also completely skipped the point in the meeting when they would have discussed the firefighter's pay, thus allowing the council to temporarily dodge that issue while they ironed out another.

After moving the agenda to "Old Business", Councilmember Kline made a motion to rescind the previous levy ordinances to fund the airport, then discussed the history of the search for the airport, and listened to many, many public commenters. Once everyone had their say and those questions that could be answered were, Kline made one last motion – to create an ordinance that would raise \$450,000 in general bonds for the building of the airport. This particular type of bond levy did not require a public vote. It was a bold, abrasive move that, while it did not make any of the council members extra friends, it did end in the creation of a publically accessible airport located in the heart of North Auburn, just as the council had originally set out to do.



No matter what you think of their methods or their politics, the 1968 Auburn City Council clearly had a vision for Auburn that they doggedly pursued, and the 1968 citizens of Auburn made their voices heard as they held their elected officials accountable for their actions. The end result is a legacy that every citizen can hope to live up to when the chance arises.

*A special thanks to Bill Thomas, Dave Van Vleet, John Holman, Don Rottle, Jamelle Garcia, Fred Poe, and everyone at the Auburn Municipal Airport for all of their help with this article!*



Mayor Bob Roegner and Bud Larson from the City, along with Davis Henwood of Seafirst Bank display a replica of the final check dated July 1, 1990. This represents the final General Obligation Bond for the Air Park and Golf Course.





By: Hilary Pittenger,  
Acting Curator of Collections

## Recent Photographic Additions to the Collection

### The Sakagami Family Homestead, c. 1921



Photograph gift of Mark Sakagami, #2012.29.

Matajiro Sakagami and his family pose in front of their farm house. The Sakagami family, like many Japanese-American families in the Green and White River valleys, grew a variety of vegetables on their farm for sale in the Western Washington market. Their farm was located close to the modern-day intersection of Auburn Way North and 9th Street Northeast in Auburn, which is home to the Fred Meyer grocery store today.

### Workers at the Oravetz Charcoal Factory, c. 1930



Photograph gift of John Oravetz, #PO-07517B.

The Oravetz Charcoal Factory was owned and operated by the Oravetz family for nearly a century in the Auburn area. Founded in the 1910s, Oravetz & Sons Charcoal manufactured charcoal that was sold for home use across the country, as well as used for the industrial manufacturing of explosives. The charcoal was made in large ovens called beehive kilns, which the workers in the photograph can be seen standing in front of. Most of the charcoal was made from fast-growing local trees, including alder and Douglas fir. The kilns were located just east of the present-day intersection of Kersey Way Southeast and Oravetz Road Southeast, on land now owned by Icon Materials.

### The Dedication of Howard Hanson Dam, 1962



Photograph gift of Grace Leach, #2012.34.

When the Howard A. Hanson Dam was dedicated in 1962, it was the end of a long planning and construction project that had started in 1936. Prior to the dam's construction, floods were often very destructive to the farms and homes of those living in the valley, especially the residents of Kent and Auburn. In this photograph, Washington State Senator Warren Magnuson is seen posing with several senior members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Said James Grafton, resident engineer at Howard Hanson Dam, "This was a great day".

### Auburn High School Reunion, c. 1979



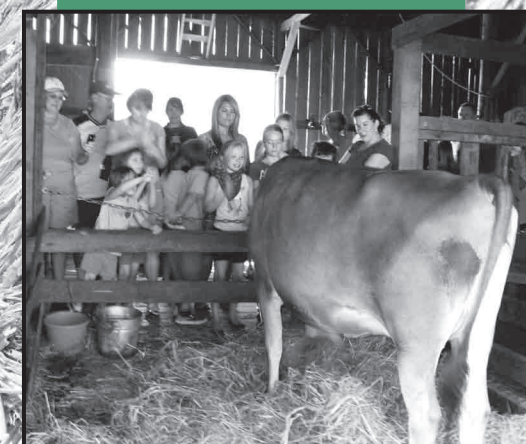
Photograph gift of Karen Acteson Schlichte, #PO-07931.

The graduating class of Auburn High School 1939 consisted of 138 people. This photograph of their 40th high school reunion, taken at Green River Community College, shows how many Auburn High School graduates stayed within travel distance of their alma mater, and the ethnic diversity that Auburn had prior to World War II.

# GOOD NEWS!

## THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN VISIT FARM!

Each fall we tour all Auburn School District first graders at the Farm where they learn about where their food comes from. This year those 1,117 students were joined by 278 from other districts and private schools. After that we tour all of Auburn's sixth graders, learning about stream ecology—right when the salmon are spawning, with about 975 Auburn District kids and about 70 students from out of district finishing up our Farm fieldtrip season.



We salute the schools that send their students to the Farm, our educators and volunteers who help create these memorable moments, and **Auburn Rotary** and **Soroptimists**, and **Centurylink** for helping to sponsor some tours. As one teacher noted: My students said, "It was the best day of their lives!"







**White River Valley Museum**  
**918 H Street SE**  
**Auburn, WA 98002**

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*WHITE RIVER JOURNAL*  
 is a quarterly  
 publication of the  
 White River Valley Museum,  
 which is  
 supported in  
 large part by  
 city of Auburn.



Want to receive our new monthly E-newsletter?

Send your email address to Erin Hash at [ehash@auburnwa.gov](mailto:ehash@auburnwa.gov).

*Ordinary People, Extraordinary History*



## Farm Update



### Working with Puget Sound Goat Rescue...

we have added two new critters to the Mary Olson Farm. Meet Dino and Peach! These wonderful people rescued and bottle fed both goats as kids. This agency is run by donations and volunteers, and could always use help, so consider contacting them at [rescuegoats@yahoo.com](mailto:rescuegoats@yahoo.com).

Throughout the fall Dino and Peach have high tailed it to the fenceline twice daily, to greet 60 first graders, four times a week. In between their performances with children, these Nubian goats are working on reducing our blackberry problems, with vigor!



*White River Journal* is edited by Patricia Cosgrove, designed by Jan Hoy Design  
 White River Valley Museum | 918 H Street SE | Auburn, WA, 98002 | Tel. 253.288.7433 | Fax 253.931.3098 | [wrvmuseum.org](http://wrvmuseum.org)  
 Open 12 noon to 4 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday, and by appointment for group tours and research.  
 Admission is \$2 for adults, \$1 for children and seniors. Wednesdays and 4th Sundays are free for everyone.

**4**  
**CULTURE**  
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