LIVING THROUGH HISTORY

How Washington is coping with COVID-19

SPECIAL 2020 PANDEMIC EDITION:

Facing Adversity  ■  Washington Snapshots  ■  Looking Ahead

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Welcome to an unusual summer edition of COLUMBIA. Like so many other things these past few months, it is very different than what we had originally planned. First, of all, we hope that you and your families and friends are surviving the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the resulting economic strain of sheltering in place and other social distancing measures is something we can all hope to put behind us sooner rather than later. In between, as the pandemic began to directly affect the lives of the majority of Washingtonians, it became clear that the Washington State Historical Society had an opportunity, perhaps even an obligation, to provide the stories and fictions that had been selected for the summer issue and instead do what only COLUMBIA could do to document the impacts to, and the responses of, the history and heritage communities around the Evergreen State. Thus, our goals for this issue are novel. First, we wanted to give a selected range of our colleagues around the state an opportunity to share thoughtful and inspiring updates about responses to the crisis taking place in a diverse range of communities. Second, we wanted to send a message to future historians by preserving with ink and paper a hard-copy record of a small slice of the Evergreen State during this momentous period. For me personally, I have newfound appreciation for what my parents experienced during World War II in Europe—my mother as a young girl in London during the Blitz, my father as a teenager in Poland when the Nazis invaded. They each faced mortal danger in their homes, followed by years of profound shortages of food and other necessities. While I’ve known their stories my whole life, even a few weeks of the kind of uncertainty that’s been common during this pandemic has given me far deeper emotional understanding of what they and millions of others have faced at dark times throughout history.

From all of us at COLUMBIA, we look forward to the day when the COVID-19 pandemic and, as we go to press, the violence and unrest that began in late May—as well as its causes—are also just distant chapters of our shared history as Washingtonians.
Radio and television ads during the COVID-19 pandemic have often used the phrase “during these uncertain times” to preface reminders that a particular retail chain or consumer product is available now or soon will be, in spite of the challenging social and economic situation. And while this phrase has quickly become a tiresome cliché in advertising, it’s hard to avoid when we think of the value of studying history “during these uncertain times.” We see history as a resource and priceless tool that might help us be better prepared to cope with the present and to prepare for the future. Thus, COLUMBIA invited a number of scholars to revisit times in the Evergreen State’s past when Washingtonians have faced and overcome adversity and, ideally, emerged from it stronger and wiser.

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CITIZEN ACTIVISM IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION
By Gwen Whiting, Lead Curator, WSHS

We are all adjusting to a new way of life that presents both challenge and opportunity. Washingtonians have always found creative solutions to local and national problems, even at times when these challenges seemed insurmountable.

The Great Depression of the early 1930s was one such epoch when community-driven activism led to the development of “self-help” organizations and alternate models of economic support. It took time for the Northwest to comprehend this “new normal.” There were few resources to fall back on in times of trouble, and communities were not prepared for the massive unemployment that emerged after the stock market collapsed. Then, as now, the unemployed struggled with feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty. It took months for any sort of organization to emerge from the haze of unreality that had settled in the new situation.

Starting in the summer of 1931, unemployed men and women began to organize, seeking not charity, but the opportunity to work. It’s not clear who first came up with the plan to develop this “self-help” organization but members of the Seattle Labor College were involved in the effort. What was created in these early meetings was a group that would later become known as the Unemployed Citizens’ League, or UCL. It was the first such effort in the United States.

The goals of the UCL were four-fold: to obtain employment for its members, to allow people to help themselves through cooperative action, to provide unemployment insurance, and to offer direct relief to individuals and families who were struggling. These aims were largely accomplished through development of a barter-driven economy among both League members and others in the community. Members of the League were expected to give two days of labor to the League without pay. In return, the League negotiated payment for the work in exchange for the goods and funds earned by the League doing critical property repairs or maintenance, the landlord would agree to forego rent for the residents inside. Although in other states the League fought evictions, this was not effective in Washington where the police often intervened in such efforts.

Goods and funds earned by the League were redistributed to members in need. In Seattle, this took the form of comissaries where people could come and collect the things they needed. The League was so efficient in terms of distribution that the Seattle chapters were asked to distribute public resources to the poor on behalf of the city’s relief office.

These efforts coalesced in 1932—a hard year for Washingtonians—in a series of what were called Hunger Marches. Members of several UCL chapters joined with tens of smaller grassroots organizations and Communists, marching to the state capital to demand relief and social protections for the unemployed. Unable to gain access to Governor Clarence Martin and struggling from the complicated politics among those who marched, the Hunger Marches were seen as a failure at the time. However, the protests emphasized the problem that Washingtonians were facing and revealed the power and coalition-building capability of working-class people, laying the foundation for later labor activism.

While the Unemployed Citizens’ League did not manage to completely build a self-sustaining economy, it provided the means for families and individuals to survive economic hardship. It also gave a sense of belonging and purpose when the shock of uncertain times caused many people to feel isolated and alone, with no governmental or limited public support available. Although the New Deal reforms that came later in the Depression would lead to the dissolution of the League, the spirit of community action remains in Washington to this day. In the end, we all depend on each other and in times such as now, we will continue to find ways to connect.
Often heard the Japanese phrase, shikata ga nai—“it cannot be helped”—during some of the 250 oral history interviews I’ve conducted with Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during World War II. These narrators mention the term as something their Japanese immigrant parents would say during the chaos of being forced to leave their homes and placed in American concentration camps. Their parents were conveying that, to survive, they had to let go of their future dreams and accept what could not be changed. I came to understand and appreciate shikata ga nai as helping many in the vulnerable World War II Japanese American community cope with the seemingly unbearable conditions forced upon them. People were doing the best they could.

Yet, there were some who did not accept what appeared unchangeable. University of Washington student Gordon Hirabayashi did not let the federal government stop him. Gordon decided to defy the federal law used to round up and incarcerate Japanese Americans because he believed that our laws should provide equal protection for all Americans. Although it would have been easier to accept and follow orders, Gordon knew he had the right to fight back. Gordon was the only Japanese American in Washington state to defy these orders, and although his case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, he was convicted of a federal crime and spent years in jail, prison, and federal work camps. In 2012, 70 years after he defied the government and a few months after his death, Gordon Hirabayashi received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, our nation’s highest civilian honor, for his courageous and principled stand.

Other Japanese American men, who were incarcerated in concentration camps while Gordon’s case went to the Supreme Court, also decided to fight for their rights and the rights of the community. When these men were drafted to fight in the Army, they performed their own act of civil disobedience. They demanded the release of their families and other Japanese Americans before they would enlist. For this stand, 330 Japanese American men would end up in federal prisons as draft resisters. In 1946, these men were pardoned by President Truman and are known today in the Japanese American community as resisters of conscience.

Another story of someone not willing to accept the status quo is that of Yuri Kochiyama. Her personal experience of World War II incarceration awakened Yuri to the inequities of our society. Before the war, when she lived in Los Angeles, she said all she wanted was a life of being married and having children. During the war, Yuri was incarcerated in the Jerome, Arkansas concentration camp where she found solace in her Japanese heritage and organized letter-writing campaigns for Japanese American soldiers fighting in the war. After the war, she resettled in Harlem, became politically active with Malcolm X, and grew into a leading human rights activist.

During the current pandemic, we have the opportunity to change what seems unchangeable. To be an activist like Yuri Kochiyama, or take a principled stand like Gordon Hirabayashi and other resisters of conscience. Today’s crisis has once again created a fear of others that divides us, when compassion, understanding, and connections are needed most. Hate crimes are on the rise as people blame Asian Americans for spreading the virus across the nation. Immigrants and refugees are detained in cramped prisons rife with the COVID-19 virus, needlessly waiting for hearings long delayed. Young African American men and women are shot while jogging or in their own homes, like current day lynchings.

This is a historic moment looking for historical changemakers. It can be helped, and we have the power—and the weight of our history behind us—to make it happen. ☑

TOP: Family greeting older woman behind barbed wire with guards. Courtesy of Oregon Historical Society, Frank Abe, DENSHO.

BOTTOM: Japanese family heads and persons living alone form a line outside Civil Control station located in the Japanese American Citizens League Auditorium at 2031 Bush Street in San Francisco, to appear for “processing” in response to Civilian Exclusion Order Number 20. DENSHO, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.
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isasters bring out the best, and worst, in people, as evidenced today in a world under assault from the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the last times the Pacific Northwest grappled with a widespread and unexpected calamity, the attack came from a freakish windstorm—the Columbus Day Storm of October 12, 1962.

The midlatitude cyclone was the strongest windstorm in West Coast recorded history, claiming more than 60 lives in Washington, Oregon, California and British Columbia. More than 50,000 homes were damaged or destroyed by winds that topped 100 miles per hour in multiple locations. Enough trees to frame one million homes were knocked to the ground along the 1,000-mile path of the storm.

Today we are under attack by a relentless, silent killer that is much more lethal (tens of thousands of lives compared to dozens), pervasive (global not regional) and long lasting (months not hours) than the Columbus Day Storm. But examples of life-saving deeds and risky behavior seen today were also on display in 1962.

In Spanaway, Washington, near Tacoma, a young father used a flashlight as a bludgeoning weapon to free his seven-year-old son Charley from the clutches of an African lioness roaming the neighborhood after the winds tore apart her enclosure. He warded off the bloodthirsty lioness again with a baseball bat as the pair piled into a neighbor's car to take Charley to the hospital. “I just did what any father would do,” Ray Brammer said years later.

Longview, a southwest Washington mill town on the banks of the Columbia River, was slammed by the storm as unsuspecting shoppers downtown dodged falling trees, bursting storefront windows and chunks of roofing and neon signs blowing through the air. Jim Comstock, the 31-year-old manager of the Montgomery Ward downtown had the good sense to open his store to those seeking shelter. Comstock ushered the growing crowd to the employee cafeteria, a safe distance from the single-pane storefront windows that bowed and flexed in the wind.

Once the winds subsided, recovery efforts took many forms. Forestry students at Oregon State University in Corvallis used their chainsaws and muscles to cut and haul fallen trees from the heavily wooded campus. Next, they volunteered their time and talent to the City of Corvallis, clearing city streets and sidewalks of storm windfall.

Electric utility crews in the Pacific Northwest and surrounding states worked around the clock for days to restore power outages affecting some 1.3 million electricity customers. “Ninety-eight percent of the system was done,” recalled retired Portland General Electric lineman R. J. Brown. “That hadn’t happened before (the storm) and it hasn’t happened since.”

In the age of coronavirus, good deeds are many: health care providers risking their lives to care for the infected, restaurateurs and volunteers cooking and distributing food to the hungry and landlords forgoing rent payments for tenants who have lost their jobs. These are just a few of the many acts of bravery and kindness.

In 1962, heroic acts and good deeds stood in sharp contrast to the risky behaviors exhibited by some during the storm. Friday night commuters in the midst of the windstorm drove through and around downed power lines, falling trees and windblown debris to reach their loved ones at home, rather than sheltering in place until the winds subsided.


Families huddled in their living rooms peering out windows on the verge of shattering during the Columbus Day Storm. Some ventured outside at the storm’s peak to check on loved ones. Risky behavior during the coronavirus pandemic has even greater consequences. Across the country, people have left the safety of their homes and apartments to gather at beaches, parks, restaurants and malls, even though the deadly virus is far from contained.
There is no question we are all living in a historical moment. Washington museums share many common concerns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It speaks volumes about mission dedication throughout the museum community that many, even those crumbling under the urgency of staggering financial losses and the uncertainty of when, how (and if) to reopen to the public, are asking “What can we do to inform future historians about this experience?” Not just what representative items can we collect, but as repositories of the past, what impacts can museums have on future historical perspectives? How will that perspective be meaningful in the immediate recovery period, and 100 years from now?

The Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture (MAC) in Spokane asked a similar question about another disaster that impacted the Pacific Northwest with the recent opening of Critical Memory: Mount St. Helens 40 Years Later. The exhibit features multiple contemporary perspectives, from those who were young children trying to make sense of the event, to adults who were deeply involved in immediate community recovery efforts. Now 40 years in the past, it’s easy to trace a direct correlation between the eruption of Mount St. Helens and several decades of public investment into regional emergency planning for natural disaster, monitoring, and communication.

It’s not difficult to see the striking “before and after” story of Mount St. Helens illustrated by the birth of instant folk heroes like Spirit Lake Lodge proprietor Harry R. Truman and United States Geological Survey scientist David Johnston, and the stark visible loss of the symmetrical Cascade peak known as “America’s Mt. Fuji.”

The eruption of Mount St. Helens was not the only factor contributing to enormous changes to lifeways in the Pacific Northwest in the 1980s. However, most would agree it amplified the region’s shift from a reliance on natural resource industries to emerging technology and services. It is a history that exists not in the multitude of souvenir jars of ash, but in the living memories of those who experienced the eruption. Those memories are a resource that, without concerted documentation efforts, pass further into history every day.

As the MAC prepares to mount a new exhibition, Unpacking World War II, commemorating the end of what was known—prior to the COVID crisis—as the world’s most recent global emergency, it feels meaningful to focus on the single basic requirement for historical perspective to be achieved: the ability for historical resources to survive and travel into the future. Recently I spent a couple of hours reviewing collections pulled from the MAC’s archives. It was a poignant moment, amplifying how strange an everyday activity suddenly felt after only a few weeks of separation. In the midst of the immediate effects of the COVID-19 virus it is easy to forget how regularly we are separated from people from the past.

I read several WWII-era letters from a pair of brothers connected to the MAC’s iconic Campbell House; one brother who survived, and one who was lost in WWII. The collection holds one incredibly poignant “V-Mail” letter from the family’s youngest son Lt. Allan Campbell Powell, a B-17 pilot lost and presumed dead. The collection holds dozens of letters he and his brother Lt. William W. Powell sent home. Allan’s last wartime letter was sent shortly before his plane went down during a mission over France on January 5, 1944. His body was never recovered. The 2000 expansion of the MAC’s campus and site of the present-day Cheney Cowles Center was made possible by a memorial gift of land in his honor in 1945, a visible reminder of how pain and loss help build the world around us.

Another family collection documented the loss of Spokane’s Lt. George William Rasque, who was killed in the Battle of Okinawa fighting with the Seabees in 1945. A banded packet of condolence letters partially burned on one corner, as if someone thought better of their destruction at the last moment, speaks to the powerful effect personal pain has on our connection to the past. Rasque’s father, George Melville Rasque is still known as one of Eastern Washington’s most prolific architects whose legacy can be seen in both public and residential buildings across the region. George Rasque, Sr. established Eastern Washington University and Washington State University memorial scholarships in honor of his son, a tangible legacy of his architectural practice and a family’s loss.

As an exhibit maker, I struggle with decisions of authority and authenticity. Whose voice will be heard? What will resonate with people, and evoke an emotional response or authenticity? Whose voice will be the most powerful and valuable to our future historical perspective will be. There will be many things to document COVID-19, perhaps a bundle of unpaid bills or 50 pounds of dried beans in a basement, but those items with the most power and value to our future historical perspective will be those that survive the flames.

WHAT ARTIFACTS WILL SURVIVE AND WHAT STORIES WILL THEY TELL?

By Freya Liggett, Curator of History, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture (MAC)
ON SHELTERING IN PLACE

Claudia Castro Luna, Washington State Poet Laureate

Living for weeks under quarantine
to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus
I have struggled to hold
a pen to tell of our present moment,
this time when life as we have known it
has come to a stand still
I’ve watched rain, wind, fog
weather’s ebb and flow
outside my bedroom’s picture window
against which now a table and chair stand
because the space I normally use for writing
is being shared by two others —
my husband spending at his desk more time
and my son who instead of leaving home
for school at dawn now fights dragons
in futuristic dungeons and from Seattle
joysticks cars in San Francisco
with his cousin who lives in Los Angeles
the new normal
like teddy bears arranged on windowsills
their plush limbs behind glass panes
unable to deliver the hugs for which they were designed
like face masks, indispensable these days,
left hanging, at the ready, from rearview mirrors
like the urgent call to gardening on display
on balconies, parking strips, front and backyards
like the millions of newly unemployed
standing six feet apart to file claims
and the other millions lining up seeking
hunger relief from food banks
we wait for the flattening of the curve
we read charts, analyze graphs
grasp how slopes and exponential growth
are more than abstract math concepts
this is our new lingo, this is how we understand
the virus’s spread and rate of infection
this is how we process that
thousands upon thousands
are falling ill and dying every day
here in Seattle where I live
in the midst of devastating news
on the other side of windows and closed doors
spring’s aching beauty unfolds
daffodils clump around tree trunks
effervescent cherry trees bloom and bloom
I can only say that the new normal is not normal
human isolation is not normal
hence language, hence metaphor —
yesterday on the side of the road
a clump of fiddleheads
their rhizomes pushing from darkness into light
their tops uncurling, their tender leaflets opening
to the world, to me, standing there on edge of sidewalk,
they issuing a gentle offering
like a good friend extending a hand

Claudia Castro Luna

The Washington State Historical Society
would like to extend its thanks to Washington State Poet Laureate Claudia Castro Luna for creating this special poem for COLUMBIA, and to Julie Ziegler and the staff of Humanities Washington and ArtsWA for managing the Poet Laureate program and for their assistance with this issue of the magazine. Image on opposite page courtesy of Jean Sherrard.
The first draft of the history of the COVID-19 pandemic is being written every day by media organizations online and on-air; by elected leaders, celebrities and regular people posting on social media like Facebook and Twitter; and even by some people writing with pen and paper in diaries and journals. Someday, all of these accounts will help scholars present fuller pictures of the beginning, middle and end of one of the deepest crises in most people’s living memory. Until those fuller pictures emerge, COLUMBIA reached out to friends and colleagues around Washington to collect “snapshots”—actual photos as well as written accounts—from people, organizations and communities as they respond to the immediate reality of the health issues, closures and economic distress of the crisis.

PANDEMICS AND EPIDEMICS: A TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE
By Michael Finley, WSHS Tribal Liaison

Decades before Northwest tribes would ever see outsiders settle in this region, they suffered devastation from diseases brought to North America by Europeans. Like the rest of the Native population across the Western Hemisphere, they never stood a chance. They simply didn’t have immunity to the many pathogens that were brought to those lands, at least not the same as those who came from the Old World and who thus benefited from resistance built up over multiple generations.

Beginning in the late 1770s, or perhaps even earlier, outbreaks of infectious diseases such as smallpox, measles, malaria, influenza, and yellow fever wreaked havoc, spreading like wildfire from one village to the next and decimating the aboriginal population. In just over one hundred years, millions across the continent would perish. Among Pacific Northwest tribes, it’s believed that to 75 percent to 90 percent of the population was lost. The onslaught came in waves from different directions: from the east, at the mouth of the Columbia River, where some headwaters of the Missouri River; from the southwest, at the mouth of the Columbia River, where some of the earliest fur trading posts were established. In some villages, casualties were so high, there was no one left to bury the dead. Many were left where they had fallen, only to later wash away, be eaten by animals, or have their bones and belongings looted.

And despite having their populations nearly wiped out by repeated epidemics, many tribes survived, and took with them the hard lessons needed to go on surviving in the ever-changing world that was to come.

Fast forward to today, and no one has a natural immunity to the COVID-19 coronavirus. In response, state, federal and tribal governments have instituted restrictions to limit exposure in a desperate attempt to “flatten the curve.” Much of this is accomplished through now overly familiar practices such as “social distancing,” or “stay at home” mandates and other precautions to prevent the spread of the disease. For tribes, COVID-19 has bolstered fears among their communities, where historical trauma—so deeply embedded from past epidemics from centuries ago—has remerged in the most terrifying way.

Despite warnings sounded nearly a decade ago, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) looked into the reasons the H1N1 flu killed four times the number of Native Americans compared to the rest of the population, tribes remain more vulnerable than other Americans. In particular, one CDC study found that an exorbitantly high death rate among Native Americans from H1N1 was largely due to prevalence of underlying conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease and asthma. Other studies show that, on average, Native Americans have three times the rate of diabetes as Caucasians; in some areas, that rate is even higher.

Natives also face higher rates of asthma and cardiovascular disease, each of which puts the indigenous population at higher risk for infection and death from COVID-19, according to the CDC. Coronavirus and all medical problems are compounded by the fact that tribal communities are often located in some of the most rural corners of the United States, far away from the nearest hospitals capable of treating COVID-19 or other complex conditions.

Even before the pandemic, many tribes have struggled for decades with access to healthcare, despite having signed treaties with the federal government and ceded lands in exchange for, in part, promises of such services. The federal government spends less per capita on Native healthcare than any other group for which they have the responsibility, including Medicaid recipients, military veterans, and federal prisoners, according to Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health.

Beyond medical issues, other longstanding challenges facing tribes remain, in many cases, unaddressed. Inadequate housing and lack of infrastructure are only some of the problems that will now become more acute because of economic distress during the pandemic.

This economic distress, in the form of dozens of tribal casinos, is already hitting some Native communities hard. In many ways, gaming revenue to tribes represents what tax base funding means to outside municipalities and governments. For some tribes, casino revenue supports up to 80 percent of their governmental budgets. The losses are staggering and will reach hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars in lost revenue before it’s safe for tribes to reopen for business. This does not include the unemployment impact to tribal and non-tribal employees that have been laid off because of the pandemic—some indefinitely. And these impacts run beyond reservation boundaries, since a majority of the casino workforce are non-tribal employees, many of whom live off the reservation.

In response to the crisis, many tribes in Washington have turned to cultural practices as an outlet, from ceremonies to gathering traditional foods from across the landscape. These ceremonies include the sweatlodge, where some tribal people who’ve been diagnosed with COVID-19 have reported improvements in health and claim the practice had reduced the severity of their virus symptoms. Others spend their time social distancing with other household members while gathering Native foods, such as fishing or gathering bitterroot and camas. Although this doesn’t satisfy the stay-at-home order, much of these activities take place in the most remote areas, where it’s rare to have any contact with others, even under normal circumstances.

Looking ahead, tribes will continue to adapt and persevere, just as they have done since time immemorial. Tribes are already planning beyond COVID-19 to the challenges to come. Although there remains a great deal of uncertainty, there’s also hope. If tribes have proven anything, it’s the value of learning from the past to be better prepared for tomorrow, and that through the most dismal and trying times, with a little grit and determination, humanity will overcome.
When news of COVID-19 reached us near the end of 2019, it was a terrible though abstract threat. At the time it was a brief mention in a news cycle dominated by domestic politics. Then in January it was announced that the first case in the United States had been identified, and that the patient was being treated about a mile away from the Everett Public Library at Providence Regional Medical Center. Out of a desire to carry on the work of my predecessors who kept a meticulous newspaper index and comprehensive clippings files, I started a “Coronavirus” folder because this seemed like a notable event. Little did I know that by the time the difficult decision was made to close the library to the public in mid-March, this collection would have swollen to four folders documenting news coverage, official city responses, library decisions, and actions taken by local business and organizations. I continue to monitor news and local government communications to add to this file while telecommuting.

Once the danger was realized, the response to COVID-19 was rapid at the city and state levels. The library changed its service models almost daily to adhere to new public health directives. After going from social distancing and frequent cleaning, to curbside pickup, to completely closed to the public in about the span of a week, our staff was suddenly left trying to find ways to serve our community remotely. This was no exception for the Northwest Room, home to Everett Public Library’s history collection. I was fortunate to be able to bring home duplicate copies of some of our most heavily used reference resources and to migrate a number of my digital reference files; these have enabled me to continue answering some of our most common inquiries.

Another asset has been the tight community of local historians who remain in contact via email. One of these locals, Neil Anderson, loaned me a family diary that described life during the 1918-19 influenza pandemic. I scanned the diary and it returned with the intention of using portions for blog and social media content discussing parallels between these two time periods. Everett’s local history community is also very active on Facebook, where groups of longtime residents meet to share pictures and stories. I have been able to use these groups to encourage members of the community to document their lives during this time, and to keep the Northwest Room in mind for future donation. In order to ease the process of collecting community history, I worked with the city’s information technology staff to create a dedicated email account. A call for submissions was included in the library’s emailed newsletter, social media accounts, and other city platforms to encourage participation.

Hopefully, by the time this article is published, we will have received images, emails to the future, art, and other first-hand accounts describing what it was like to stay at home in 2020.
LIBRARIES KEEP COMMUNITIES CONNECTED IN NORTH CENTRAL WASHINGTON

By Amanda Brack, Adult Services Manager, North Central Regional Library

It felt as if one minute we were distributing hand sanitizer and laminating handwashing signs, and in the very next breath we were quickly closing our 30 library locations in Chelan, Douglas, Ferry, Grant, and Okanogan counties.

The rapidly evolving situation surrounding COVID-19 in March was disorienting and heartbreaking to our staff of nearly 300. Following the orders of local and state officials, we quickly canceled programs, suspended services, and notified the public that for the first time in our 60+ year history we were closing our doors. We had no clear understanding of when we could reopen.

Yet, just like the individuals, families, first responders, small businesses, educators, and others in our communities—like Royal City, Leavenworth, Waterville, Twisp, and Curlew, our staff has responded to these challenges with resilience, flexibility, creativity, and a hopeful spirit.

In such an unprecedented time of anxiety and fear, the concept of “normal” is long gone. Yet, our mission has kept us steadfast. We are committed to connecting the people of North Central Washington, from Mattawa to Oxbow and everywhere in between, to the vital resources and opportunities that foster individual growth and strengthen communities, even in the midst of a pandemic. Now more than ever, we seek to serve as a trusted source of information, learning, inspiration, and fun. More importantly, we are committed to cultivating connection, creatively bringing people together virtually during the stay-at-home orders.

That’s why when our branches closed, we doubled down. We expanded our services by increasing the checkout limits for our digital materials including eBooks, eAudiobooks, and our streaming services for movies and music. We diverted funding to our digital materials including eBooks, eAudiobooks, and our streaming services for movies and music. Knowing how to use Zoom, create videos, and lead a book club discussion on Facebook will benefit us in the future but learning on a shortened timeline can be stressful and overwhelming. A virtual Story Time on Facebook can reach a lot of people, but it just isn’t the same as the beloved Chelan Librarian leading a face-to-face Story Time for the children and families in her community, in person. We miss our people.

We don’t know how long this road will be or what unexpected twists might lie ahead. We don’t know when we can reopen or what our “new normal” will look like. Still, we forge on, thankful for wise leadership and dedicated colleagues, protective of the health and safety of our staff and communities. We are acting for the opportunity to reopen. We long to see our communities face to face again. But, we are a family. We are doing our best for each other and our patrons.

We know that together, we will make the most of these challenging circumstances.

The Wenatchee Public Library is closed during the pandemic, but free Wi-Fi remains an accessible community lifeline, even from outside the building. Courtesy North Central Regional Library.

The response and engagement from our communities has been incredible, and we are eager to continue offering virtual services into the future, however long our libraries are closed, and even after they reopen. We are identifying solutions to bridge the digital divide in our rural communities to ensure more people can connect to our virtual resources through increased access to Wi-Fi and technology.

However, in the midst of the energy and enthusiasm, we also have our share of doubt, fear, and discouragement. We have had unexpected twists might lie ahead. We don’t know when we can reopen or what our “new normal” will look like. Still, we forge on, thankful for wise leadership and dedicated colleagues, protective of the health and safety of our staff and communities. We are acting for the opportunity to reopen. We long to see our communities face to face again. But, we are a family. We are doing our best for each other and our patrons.

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The southeast corner of Broadway and East Pike Street. April 5, 2020.
Clockwise from top:

This Too Shall Pass, The Ballard Farmer’s Market reopened with distancing and crowd size restrictions. Behind the murals: Horseshoe, a women’s clothing store, 5344 Ballard Avenue NW. April 19, 2020.

Stay Home Eat Snax, Capitol Hill, the Comet Tavern, corner of East Pike Street and 10th Avenue. April 24, 2020.


This is Temporary, First Avenue, just south of Pioneer Square. April 20, 2020.

Top: An eerily empty Pike Place Market, shortly after Governor Inslee’s shut down came into effect. March 16, 2020.

Above left: Artist Marit Helena Mork paints Nordic themes on exterior plywood at the Skål Beer Hall at 5429 Ballard Ave NW, which remains open for take-out only. April 4, 2020.

Above right: The Pike Place Fish Market, known around the world for its fish-throwing antics, continues to sell seafood but the crowds have vanished. March 16, 2020.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
The exterior of ‘The Rabbit Hole’ in Belltown at 2222 2nd Avenue. April 24, 2020.
Wash Hands Be Kind, the Capitol Lounge on East Pike Street. April 5, 2020.
Homeless tent encampment along the 2nd Avenue Extension South and South Main Street. April 14, 2020.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Pike Place Market sign soliciting donations for flower growers, across the aisle from Sosio’s Fruit and Produce. April 14, 2020.
Oddfellows Café and Bar, 1525 10th Avenue on Capitol Hill. April 24, 2020.
Ducks at First Avenue South and South Washington Street, just south of Pioneer Square. April 14, 2020.
STATE GOVERNMENT ADAPTS TO THE CRISIS
By Bob Ferguson, Washington State Attorney General

In his On the Origin of Species, Charles Darwin wrote that the species most adaptable to change is the one that survives.

The global pandemic forced my office to adapt to change. COVID-19 forced us to figure out how to do our jobs while working from home, while separated from much of the infrastructure that we took for granted.

We had to adapt, while also maintaining the excellent legal service we provide to our client agencies and Washingtonians. Because of the global pandemic, their needs were as great as ever. Responding to this challenge has made our office stronger, and better prepared to serve our employees and the people of Washington state in the future.

The Washington Attorney General’s office is the largest legal office in the state. We have nearly 600 attorneys and a similar number of professional staff who work out of 13 regional offices. Earlier this year, we didn’t wait to take decisive action to save lives. We strongly encouraged our employees to work from home 18 days before Governor Inslee’s “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order, and then made telework mandatory nearly a week before the Governor’s order took effect.

Despite the challenges of working remotely, we have continued to uphold the law and defend the rights and environment of Washingtonians. In many ways, we are doing more than ever. This would have been impossible just five years ago were it not for critical investments we made in our telework capabilities. Our agency’s ability to successfully work from home during this challenging time has implications not just for individual staff members, but also for our economy and the environment.

We were better prepared than other agencies to telework because, in the last decade, we’ve increased the number of employees working on laptops or tablets from just 10 percent in 2011 to 85 percent at the beginning of 2020.

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While it’s been challenging, we’ve not only maintained our excellent legal work on behalf of the people and the state, we are doing more than ever to protect Washingtonians during this emergency. This means working every day to help Governor Inslee exercise his emergency powers, and assisting our client state agencies as they respond to the evolving needs of Washingtonians.

During a pandemic, these evolving needs include combating price gouging and pushing back on COVID-19 related scams, and enforcing Governor Inslee’s emergency moratorium on evictions.

In the first two months since the pandemic gripped Washington, my office received more than 1,000 price-gouging complaints. We responded to those complaints by sending investigators to more than 300 businesses. We’ve also sent dozens of “warning” and “cease and desist” letters to price-gouging businesses. One online seller based in Spokane raised the price of an Source bottle of hand sanitizer from just over $3.50 to an average price of more than $25—a more than 600 percent increase. Some buyers paid as much as $40.

Because Washingtonians are hurting financially, and because it’s unsafe for families and the general public health to push families out of their homes during a pandemic, we helped Governor Inslee draft an emergency moratorium on evictions. We are working overtime to enforce that moratorium to help keep families from sleeping on the street for an inability to pay. The work has been extraordinary. We responded to more than 1,000 complaints from tenants in April alone.

In an unprecedented mobilization of resources, 23 attorneys from across the agency have pitched in to help our Civil Rights Division protect Washingtonians from losing their housing. For example, an attorney from our Environmental Protection Division with experience in landlord-tenant law is helping out. We filed the state’s first lawsuit enforcing an emergency proclamation against a Nevada-based property management company that started the eviction process against more than a dozen residents in Tacoma.

Fortunately, working from home has also brought some lighter moments. Our Solicitor General Noah Purcell has been preparing for one of the first-ever oral arguments by teleconference before the United States Supreme Court, and doing so in a house with three young kids. No doubt they’re helping him hone his focus. I’ve taken conference calls while playing catch with my daughter, and I even cut my own hair before a recent “Zoom call” remote video media interview.

Meanwhile, our ability to telework will allow us provide our employees with more flexibility and reduce our office’s carbon footprint by reducing commutes. We will also be able to retain valuable employees by providing them with the ability to adapt to other demands in their lives during these unprecedented times for all Washingtonians.

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BUILDING A COVID-19 COLLECTION FOR GENERATIONS TO COME

Curated By Maggie Wetherbee, Head of Collections, WSHS

Whether a year or a decade or a century from now, it’s clear that the story of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a chapter of our history that will shape and inform nearly everything that comes after. As such, the time we’re living through now is sure to be a topic ever-present in books, websites and museum exhibits. And, because photos and artifacts are so essential to telling stories of the people and events of Washington’s past, the Washington State Historical Society staff have been busy these past few months collecting with an eye to the future. With this in mind, the images in this feature represent a small sample of what’s been added to the collection lately. Collecting of artifacts and ephemera—accepting donations of actual physical objects—will come later, when social distancing restrictions are eased and staff returns to the History Museum in Tacoma.

As this special issue of COLUMBIA is going to press, many counties in Washington are in the process of officially reducing restrictions on social distancing, public gatherings and business activity. School administrators at all levels are weighing options for if and how to resume in-person instruction in the fall. Meanwhile, new cases of COVID-19 are reported in the Evergreen State each day, and the number of deaths in the United States attributed to the virus has climbed over 100,000. Against this backdrop, already politically charged by years of societal tension as well as by the looming 2020 presidential election, many are understandably still focused on basic survival during the ongoing health and economic crisis. COLUMBIA reached out around the Old Oregon Country to friends and colleagues tasked with thinking about what comes next, to learn how they are preparing for the next phase of a crisis that has upended nearly every aspect of life.

\[Image\]

\[Image\]
**HISTORIC ELECTION: COVID-19 AND VOTING-BY-MAIL IN WASHINGTON**

By Secretary of State Kim Wyman

Due to stay-home orders, social distancing, and other response measures to COVID-19, several states have postponed their primaries until later in the year over concerns about protecting voters and election workers. These tough but necessary decisions have left many wondering what this means for the upcoming 2020 General Election. As states across the nation grapple with how to conduct elections later this year amid COVID-19 concerns, more are looking to Washington state’s vote-by-mail system as a model to make elections more accessible by this fall.

Washington voters were fortunate during the state’s March 10 presidential primary to be in one of the five states that currently conduct all elections by mail. The primary, which occurred during the onset of the outbreak in King County, had record-breaking turnout of 49.56 percent—the greatest turnout Washington has ever had for a presidential primary and the highest turnout across the country to date, according to the National Vote at Home Institute. Though county election offices throughout the state remained open on Election Day to provide in-person services (i.e. same-day voter registrations, accessible voting units), a vast majority of voters were able to cast their ballots without human contact; they received their ballots by mail and placed their completed ballots in a mailbox or official drop box before or on Election Day.

Though Washington has been fully vote-by-mail since 2011, the transition to this system didn’t happen overnight. By the early 2000s, nearly 60 percent of Washington’s electorate cast general election absentee ballots. In 1993, voters were authorized to sign up for permanent mail-vote status. By the early 2000s, nearly 60 percent of Washington’s electorate cast general election ballots by mail and in 2005, lawmakers permitted counties to opt entirely into vote-by-mail. By 2011, all but one county had switched to vote-by-mail, so the legislature required vote-by-mail be adopted statewide later that year.

While many throughout the country—including myself—are advocating for more by-mail voting options for this fall, making the switch to 100 percent vote-by-mail is no short order. Though needs vary state by state, election officials would need to coordinate a great deal of resources, acquire specialized equipment, hire and train a robust workforce, and gin up an aggressive voter education and outreach plan—all within the next few months. We will likely see more states increase access to mail-in voting by this fall, but it’s unlikely a majority of the states will move to a model like Washington’s within the year.

Implementing vote-by-mail will expand access for voters, but it is not immune to the current pandemic. Just like poll sites in other states, conducting by-mail elections relies on a healthy workforce. Before an election, staff must design ballots, compile voting materials and send them to voters. Upon receiving ballots and on election night, staff must accomplish myriad tasks, from processing same-day voter registrations and providing in-person services, to collecting ballots from drop boxes, and processing and tabulating ballots. All of this requires a large workforce, often working in tight quarters, to ensure the election is successful and the results are accurate. This also does not account for the contributions of postal workers and vendors.

Bottom line: there is no such thing as a completely automated election.

Looking ahead to the historic general election this fall, it’s important that voters throughout the country have options. Though no voting system is completely sheltered from the effects of a global pandemic, vote-by-mail removes barriers to voting that still exist throughout the country today and ensures every voter has an opportunity to have their voice heard. Washington election officials are working tirelessly to mitigate concerns that may arise due to COVID-19, and we look forward to serving our voters this summer and fall.

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**VIEWS FROM OREGON, IDAHO, AND BC**

**Kerry Tymchuk, Executive Director, Oregon Historical Society**

While the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to close our museum and research library temporarily, our staff can take great pride in all we are doing to fulfill our mission of preserving Oregon’s history and making it accessible to everyone. We are sharing fascinating and relevant content through our many social media outlets and are hearing from our members and the public how much they appreciate our efforts. Hundreds of Oregonians have responded to our call for stories so that we can document this time. They have shared their thoughts, experiences, and emotions through journals, diaries, and emails, so that we, in turn, can eventually share them with future Oregonians—just as we share the journals of those who came across the Oregon Trail.

Senior management is also planning for the day when we can again open our doors and are finalizing protocols and procedures to ensure the safety of our staff and visitors.

**Janet Gallimore, Executive Director, Idaho State Historical Society**

During these unprecedented times, the Idaho State Historical Society has quickly adapted and remained steadfast while providing essential services and access to irreplaceable collections; and navigating closures of public-facing events and programming. Our agency quickly took measures to allow staff to work from home, which meant broadening our understanding of each site’s collective job duties and how they could be performed in a different space. This has been seen as an enormous growth opportunity for our agency in terms of how we deliver services statewide and continue to educate communities on Idaho’s history and its relevance. Staff have worked diligently to develop and centralize digital resources in the form of research materials, educational activities, digital collections, and virtual events in order to keep Idahoans educated, engaged, and informed. As part of our mission to steward and collect Idaho’s history, we have put a call out to the public for their personal COVID-19 experiences, and we have shared these stories through our digital web portal, history.idaho.gov/historyathome. This COVID-19 story collection, which will be permanently housed at the Idaho State Archives, will provide invaluable context for future generations of how this time in our history changed Idaho, and the world, forever.

**Shannon Bettles, President, British Columbia Historical Federation**

During these unprecedented times, the British Columbia Historical Federation (BCHF) was financially well-positioned going into the crisis thanks to the diligent work of previous councils. Being volunteer-run without a central office means that we have few overhead costs and staff considerations. We were already videoconferencing and using social media. Newsletters and magazines went digital last year and our online member management system has been active for some time. These initiatives to modernize have provided some stability and continuity in our business operations. But, the pandemic most certainly has affected the BCHF’s council, its 100 member societies, and corporate and individual members. Everyone is concerned about their families, friends and communities. Sadly, a dear BCHF member recently died due to COVID-19. Member societies are grappling with how to move forward when their volunteers and visitors are at a high risk for infection. Fundraising initiatives, research trips, heritage fairs, conferences and book launches have been cancelled, closed, or postponed. Most everyone will be impacted financially.

British Columbians are a resilient lot. Many innovative and inspiring initiatives have already emerged, and others are putting plans in place for new projects. Going forward the BCHF will look for ways to support members and carry on with our work in BC history—albeit in a new way.
A MESSAGE FROM OUR DIRECTOR

By Jennifer Kilmer

A human beings we strive to make sense of the world around us. One of my greatest joys as a parent has been watching my two daughters make connections in their own lives that have shaped their own views about the world. Talking about our families’ past, including its sins, sorrows, and triumphs of our past will inform the dialogue and help illuminate the path forward.

Better yet, I have come to understand that those who came before us weathered similar storms, and made it through this. The National Museum of the Pacific War has the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic! We intend to share our history, so we can come together to overcome, but also to understand how the ephemeral nature of our history has sometimes led to lasting positive social change.

It is the lesson that I hope my daughter brings forward from this experience. And I pray that she never has another like this again.

Note: Two weeks after I wrote this, George Floyd was murdered by police, and our nation erupted in protest. This outpouring of grief and anger, fueled by experiences that flow directly from our 400-year struggle with racism, has in many ways eclipsed the COVID-19 crisis in our nation. And yet, as I read over my words above, I can’t help but think the questions remain the same. How will we move forward from here? What will come together to overcome, but also to understand how the ephemeral nature of our history has sometimes led to lasting positive social change.

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JURIED EXHIBITION ON VIEW
JULY 16–SEPTEMBER 20*

IN THE SPIRIT Contemporary Native Arts

* Note: Scheduled dates are subject to change. Check www.InTheSpiritArts.org for updates and to purchase admission tickets.

Lily Hope (Tlingit)
Chilkat Protector, 2020
Chilkat weaving on thigh-spun merino and cedar bark warp, merino weft yarns, tin cones, and ermine tails.
Sydney Akagi Photography

IN THE SPIRIT Contemporary Native Arts is generously sponsored by Tacoma Arts Commission