

Save the Old School Update

by Jerry Bates



Since 2003 our Society has been an advocate for saving the old brick Firgrove School building. The above newsletters are available for download on our website southhillhistory.com (Above left to right, July 2003, Winter 2008, Summer 2010)

SINCE 2003 this newsletter has covered the efforts to save the old brick Firgrove Elementary School building from demolition. Considering our mission is to preserve the history of South Hill, we naturally want to see the old structure—opened 81 years ago—continue standing as a South Hill treasure. Its fate is a major concern for our Society.

A Long Road—Quick Look Back

In 2009 the old building's days certainly looked numbered. That was the first attempt at a school bond and levy that, if passed, would build a new Firgrove Elementary School. At that time, there seemed little sympathy among the school district officials for the old building's preservation. It became obvious something needed to be done if the school were to be saved. Alumni, former teachers, our Legislative representative,

Society and community members came together to promote a public awareness that could help save the school. A grassroots effort was started; a group was formed calling themselves the Save the School Committee. Petitions were started; the news media contacted, more meetings followed, and events were planned such as two Old Firgrove School reunions. Our Society backed these efforts. The South Hill Historical Society wrote a letter to the Puyallup School District superintendent, pleading for the building's preservation. The response wasn't inspiring. His suggestion was to start fundraising to buy the building and have it moved to another site. Fortunately, for the old building's sake, the 2009 school bond and levy failed. The old structure's life or death decision was put on hold.

In 2015 a new bond was put to the voters. It

would create one new elementary school in addition to remodeling two existing schools and replacing three others. One of the three to be replaced was the Firgrove School. The bond passed—and once again the old school's fate is on the line.

As they say, time changes everything, and it seems to have benefited our prospects for the old school's survival.

October 2016 Bond Construction Meeting

Our Society was well represented at the first of the "2015 Bond Construction Information Nights." This meeting was held at the Firgrove Elementary School; its focus was the Firgrove Elementary School replacement project. It was the first of a series of meetings to be held to inform the public on each of the individual school projects, time frames, design and construction plans with question and answer sessions. Hosting the Firgrove meeting and representing the Puyallup School District (PSD) was PSD Chief Operations Officer, Mario Casello. Speakers included Mike Meadows, PSD Project Manager, followed by presentations from the architects of the Mahlum Architectural Firm, David Mount and Rebecca Hutchinson. Also in attendance were members of the Puyallup School District Team: Gary Frentress, Executive Director of Capital Projects; Brian Devereux, Director of Facilities Planning; Judy Piger, Director of Educational Planning.

It was very encouraging to realize the above-mentioned roster of PSD directors and projects architects are very much aware of the importance to the community of preserving the old brick school building.

During the meeting, Chief Operations Officer, Mario Casello mentioned the South Hill Historical Society and his "great" talk with Terry Maves (SHHS Vice President) regarding the old building.

Mr. Casello added, "Art (Art Larson, SHHS member) just said to me, 'Mario, our greatest interest is that building.' Mario: "we know it is, our school board knows that, our superintendent knows that, we know that as a project team, and we are definitely interested in sitting down with you guys and having a deeper conversation about that facility, about possibilities, what that can look like, what could be in there, all those sort

of things, we're definitely open to having those conversations and we are going to have those conversations."

Well, seems things are working in our favor since the 2009 School Bond!

It's been a team effort!

Due to the limited scope of this article, I have not mentioned many names of individuals whose roles have been essential in trying to save the school, a long list that in all fairness would start with the late Don Glaser and his wife Mary.

Nothing is final until the Puyallup School Board votes yea or nay on a construction plan that would include preserving the old school.

DVDs Available

We have a vast library of VCR tapes that have been individually converted to DVD discs. They can be viewed on televisions using DVD players or your home computer. Most General Meeting speakers are digitally recorded by Bob Ballou. The speaker receives a free DVD of his or her presentation. All additional DVD requests cost \$3.00 each.

Our DVD collection also includes many years of interviews with South Hill people of interest. All DVDs are available for loan by SHHS members.

For a list, contact Paul Hackett.
phackettyes@comcast.net
253-845-7691

The History of Habitat Park—Evolving

by Jerry Bates

Betsy Stubbs, our September general meeting speaker, is a familiar name to those involved in South Hill community advocacy, development, environment or quality of life issues. She moved to the South Hill in 1981. Since that time, Betsy has kept a close eye on Pierce County government and developer's plans for South Hill. She is or has been a member of a long list of South Hill organizations and efforts to protect the livability of South Hill.

In the late 1980s, Betsy, along with others, formed South Hill Action to Protect the Environment. "We wanted to make sure there were public places to play, be outside and enjoy the beauty that makes up this state and the Hill," said Betsy.

Betsy 'eyed' the church property located at 144th and Meridian, seeing it as a great site for a future park. It was owned by the Champions Centre Church and used for their annual 'Jesus of Nazareth' production. She felt that "if that property ever came up for sale, the County needs to buy it!"

Betsy and the South Hill Community Council developed a document listing series of amenities that would enhance life on South Hill, one of which addressed the church property.

Working with the South Hill Community Planning Board, the goal of acquiring the church property for a park became official. It was included in the South Hill Community Plan (The plan adopted by the Pierce County Council in 2003, to control development on South Hill.) In 2006 the church property became available on the real estate market and the County bought it.

Now that they had a park site, Betsy and the South Hill Community Council wanted to give the

new Meridian Habitat Park a "personality" other than its church association. "In my mind that property had an identity crisis," said Betsy. "For many—having lived for any time on the Hill—it was still the place of the 'Jesus of Nazareth' production."



Betsy Stubbs

With the park 'personality goal' in mind, Betsy and fellow South Hill Community Council members decided to hold the South Hill Tree Lighting Christmas event at Habitat Park. The event was held for seventeen years; the last ten years they used the park location. "We had three elementary schools involved at one time and teachers liked it; they could come say the word Christmas and sing Christmas songs and not worry about being politically correct." The South Hill Community Council Tree Lighting Event had essential support and help from Pierce County Parks & Recreation, the Fire Department, and the Sheriff's office. The kids would each bring an ornament for local charity groups; it became a "real community thing," said Betsy.

Sadly, over time such a big project became more than the willing volunteers could support and the last event was held two years ago.

With the park identity still an issue, Betsy and the South Hill Community Council decided South Hill Habitat Park needed a playground to attract park visitors. Betsy, who works with disabled children for the Puyallup School District, knew there was a need on the Hill for a place disabled children could go—a place where children with autism or those in wheelchairs, walkers and braces could play and have fun outdoors. A June 2010 *Puyallup Herald* article titled "South Hill wants place for all kids to play" featured Betsy's and the South Hill Community Council's vision for a "sensory" playground for kids with disabilities. The idea gained momentum. "Even Sena-

tor Patty Murray loved it; she came out and we walked her around,” said Betsy. Six months later, the economy went downhill. The playground idea was considered pork barrel spending and put on the shelf.

Betsy’s talk continued covering park-related history, the Boys & Girls Club involvement, new visions for the Habitat Park, the cityhood movement, and current park usage hosting various activities.

The Playground

Betsy, and her park



Sensory playground at Habitat Park

advocate friend Sherri Bails, didn’t give up on the playground idea and “finally things started to happen.” The County put a new playground plan forward. This time it would be done in phases—and construction got under way! A grand opening is planned for Saturday, October 29th at 11:00

AM— “it’s happening!” said Betsy. She maintains contact with the playground designers and builders making sure their plans are conforming to a woodland theme, that it’s safe, and meets the needs of “all” children.

From Cow Pasture to South Hill Park

by Jerry Bates

About a year ago, a few friends and I visited South Hill Park—a great way to enjoy a nice sunny day on the Hill. From the parking lot we walked the

Nathan Chapman Trail. All the while I thought to myself, “This Park is a real South Hill jewel!”

With its playground and quiet trails and ample parking, we’re lucky to have it. Decades of effort went into the development of this special place. We heard how it all happened during our October General Meeting from Sherri Bails, our guest speaker. Thanks to her faith and determination, we have the park we all enjoy today.

Member Pat Drake introduced Sherri. “The Park



at 144th and 84th should be named Sherri Bails Park; it was a result of twenty years of her perseverance with many saying it couldn’t be done,” she stated.

The story begins in 1978 when four South Hill residents—Larry Finnestad, Sherri Bails, LuAnne Foxford and Janelle Hooper—formed SHORE (South Hill Outdoor Recreation & Education.) Its purpose was to acquire and develop park sites on South Hill. The organization approached Ward Bradley about selling his property of 50 scenic acres with a lake and old barn for a park. The SHORE group got busy getting advice from the gentleman that developed Snake Lake Park in Tacoma while Sherri wrote a prospectus. They got

commitments from six school districts interested in bringing children to the site. For political help, they gave state legislators George Walk, Mark Gaspard and Dan Grimm a tour of the site who “fell in love with the property and felt our enthusiasm,” said Sherri. They set about trying to get state approval for a purchase agreement to develop the Bradley property. The legislators were able to secure \$725,000 in state funds, but things fell apart when Bradley refused the state’s offer.

After all their hard work they were back to square one. Then, “Dan Grimm had an idea!” said Sherri. His plan was a land swap with the State Department of Natural Resources to acquire a 40-acre parcel, formerly used as a cow pasture on the corner of 144th Street East and 86th Av E, just south of Rogers High School. Because they had done so much work on the Bradley property, it was decided they could fold over all that effort and apply it to the new site.

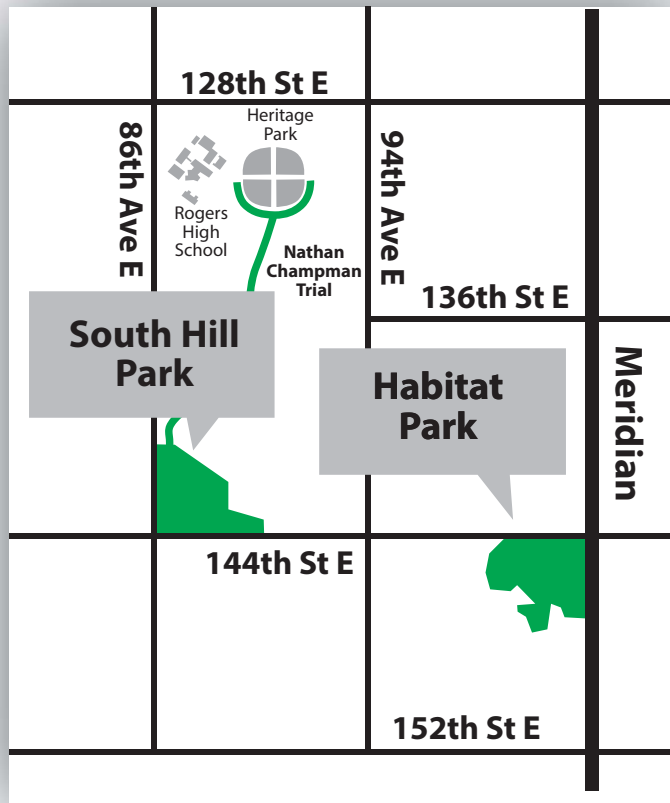
One problem remained—they needed \$600,000 to finish the land swap. It was 1981 in a recession. Mark Gaspard warned Sherri that her prospects were dim for getting the money from the Capital Budget. After many hours of debate and back and forth—at the last moment with a line item, up or down vote—they got the one Republican vote they needed. It was the first interagency land swap in the State of Washington. It was a state park, and the county agreed to develop it, and SHORE would be the catalyst for all the community groups that would help develop it! “We contacted every community group in Puyallup and South Hill to sign on and help, along with the legislators

and interested individuals,” said Sherri.

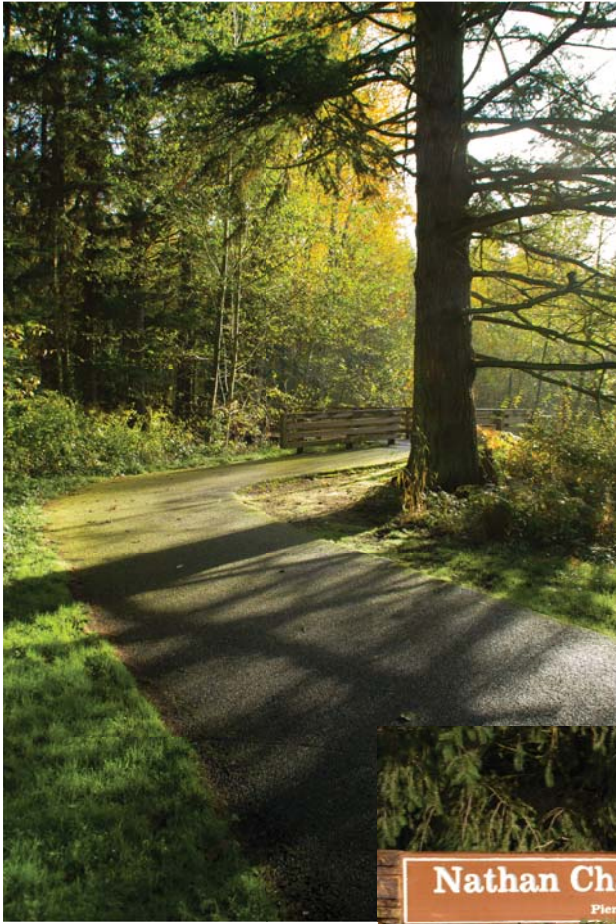
They had the park property, and knew how they wanted to develop it. However, they needed an unclassified use permit. Then, a long running difference of position, regarding opposing visions of the park, began between [then] County Parks Director Jan Walcott and Sherri. Walcott kept refusing the permit. The parks director, a former coach, imagined a park consisting of ball fields. Sherri’s vision was the preservation of woods and wetlands. Sherri and her group were for keeping the old second growth wooded area as a natural area of the park. Sherri described the history of all the efforts the group went through to validate



Sherri Bails



their plan. (In the end she won because the main feature of today's park is the paved trails and raised walkways through a natural wooded and wetland area.)



South Hill Park

Their struggle continued without funding—but that didn't stop them. They found voluntary/free help including from the Boy Scouts, dredging and grading from the National Guard, and a local contractor. "We were looking for money to develop this site [but during] all those years we used free labor to get it done without the help of anybody," said Sherri.

During the early 1990s, events finally turned around. State Sen. Calvin Goings secured \$500,000 in state funding. Pierce County Executive Doug Sutherland kept his promise to support the park. The county agreed to contribute \$250,000. Sherri, with help including Pat Drake, obtained an additional grant of \$241,000 from Microsoft billionaire Paul Allen. Their financing goals were met! Their years of effort finally real-

ized, the park would become a reality. Shovels were ready and guests gathered for the April 1, 2000 groundbreaking.

Sherri summed up the long years of struggle saying, "I was never alone; basically, I kept it going. I put my finger in the dike and stubbornly kept it there." She also credits many "amazing occurrences" that happened during the long journey to her strong Christian faith. She was especially motivated by the Bible passage, "...I will overcome the world."

The Nathan Chapman Trail

SFC Nathan Chapman was the first American soldier killed during the Afghanistan War, in January 2002. He was a member of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) and a young husband and father. The family lived on South Hill. In 2005, the portion of the South Hill Park trails that connects South Hill Park with the Heritage Park & Recreation Center was dedicated in his memory.



Do you have something you would like to share relating to South Hill? For example: family history, a current event, an announcement, or old photographs?

Subjects from fellow members as well as the public makes for a better newsletter! We are glad to assist with writing or editing.

Contact Jerry Bates
mail@southhillhistory.com

From the Treasurer

by Ben Peters

Welcome to New Members

Bob Molke
Dr. Jerry Ramsey
Haily Walker

Please call, e-mail or write any change of address to me, Ben Peters, 253-845-7028, poppa-ben2002@yahoo.com, South Hill Historical Society, Box 73582, South Hill, WA 98374.

Also, don't forget that we are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Dues, donations, etc., are fully deductible from your income taxes if you are able to do so. If you need a receipt for tax purposes, contact Ben.

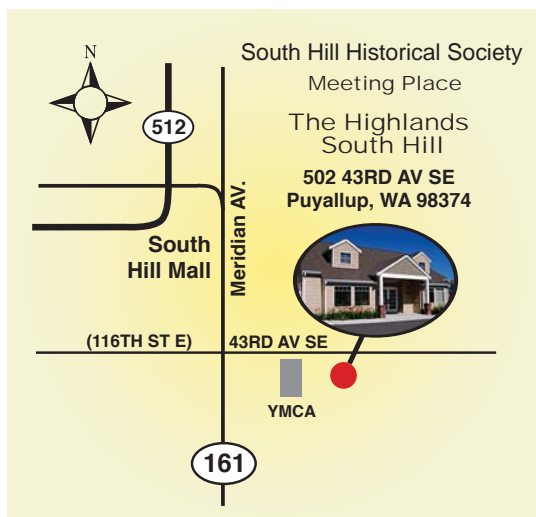
Dues Reminder

I will attach a sticky note to the Society newsletter mailed closest to your renewal date. **No need to fill out the membership form unless there is a change of some kind.**

The South Hill Historical Society meets regularly on the **THIRD TUESDAY** of the month, 10:45 AM, (no meetings July and August) at The Highlands in the Community Center. This complex is located at 502 43rd Ave. SE, adjacent to and east of the Mel Korum YMCA.

We welcome you to our monthly meetings. For more information, contact Wes Perkinson at (253) 241-5397.

Where to Find Us



Our Current Members

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Elizabeth Anema	Carolyn Nelson
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South Hill Historical Society Membership/Renewal Form

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Signature _____ Date _____ Renewal, check here

Annual Dues: Society membership \$25.00

Note: Please do not send cash.

Make check or M.O. payable to South Hill Historical Society and mail with this application to:

**South Hill Historical Society, Box 73582,
South Hill, WA 98374**



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