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## FEATURED HISTORY

### Auburn's Landmark Post Office Building

BY HILARY PITTENGER

Most people today will do anything to put off a visit to their local post office. It usually conjures images of long lines, impatient people, and boring institutional architecture. When out-of-town guests come to town, going to visit the post office is not usually high on the list of fun places to visit. The United States Postal Service has expanded its services in the last decade to allow people to completely bypass the post office if they want – stamps can be purchased at the grocery store now, and competing services have drastically changed the types and quantities of materials being sent through the post.

But this wasn't always the case. In the late 19th and early 20th century, post offices buildings were vital to their communities. Post offices connected towns and people to an international network, first with postal mail and later as telegram clearing houses. Rural Free Delivery was introduced to Washington State in 1897, connecting rural communities to the postal system by at least sending out regular mail carriers. Having a post office was a symbol that a community was successful and recognized by the broader world: up until 1911, only cities with more than 20,000 people were eligible for federal funding of post offices and carrier service. As populations and mail loads expanded, smaller towns and villages had to find their own way to manage mail deliveries.



Auburn Post Office, c. 1940.

*Continued on page 4*



## WHAT'S HAPPENING

### Things To Do

## SALISH MODERN

### An Exhibit of New Native Art - Inspired by Ancient Traditions of the Salish Sea Nations

Come to the Museum and become immersed in the elegance of cutting edge Salish Indian art. Featuring the work of young Native artists recognized globally for the elegance and sophistication of their designs. From the one-of-a-kind decorated tennis shoes of Louie Gong to the sweeping curves of Qwalsius' print designs, to the sparkling glass of Dan Friday, SALISH MODERN is not to be missed. Supported in part by the Association of Tribal Art Dealers of America, the City of Auburn Arts Commission, 4Culture, and the Hugh and Jane Ferguson Foundation.

### SALISH MODERN Exhibit Opening Event

July 11 from 5 – 7 p.m.

See the exhibit and stay for a 6 p.m. lecture from exhibit curator Kenneth Greg Watson. Free event, no registration required but space is limited.



### FIRST THURSDAYS!

NOON – 4 P.M. AND 6 – 8 P.M.

On the first Thursday of every month drop-in for FREE admission! The Museum is open and FREE for regular hours from Noon - 4pm and again in the evening from 6 - 8pm. During evening hours we will have a Late Play Date for the kiddos with themed activities and craft tables perfect for children 3-12 years of age, no registration required.

### HOOKED ON HISTORY

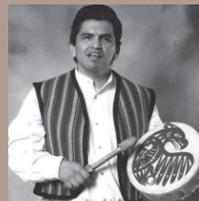
SPONSORED BY THE WYMAN YOUTH TRUST  
EVERY WEDNESDAY IN JULY 10:30 – 11:30 A.M.

Before the concerts in Les Gove Park bring the kids to the Museum for free crafts and activities with a new theme each week! Free, no registration required.

### NATIVE STORYTELLING PROGRAM

AUGUST 3, 7 P.M.

Roger Fernandes is a member of the Lower Elwha Band of the S'Klallam Tribe, and a storyteller whose performance incorporates song and dance. In the course of telling Native American stories, Roger integrates stories he has learned from other cultures around the world. Free event, no registration required, but space is limited.



### COAST SALISH ART LECTURE

SEPTEMBER 6, 7 P.M.

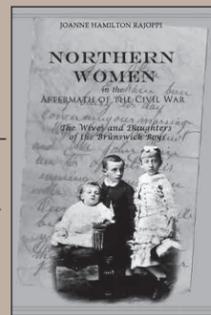
Lydia Sigo, Curator and Archivist at the Suquamish Museum, will share some of the history and techniques of Coast Salish art. By exploring the knowledge and traditions passed down through tribal elders, we will examine the intricacies of Northwest baskets and wool weavings, investigate the manufacturing process of ancient bone artifacts and learn about the shape and design of Puget Sound canoes and other carvings. Free event, but RSVP is required at [www.wrvmuseum.org](http://www.wrvmuseum.org).



### NORTHERN WOMEN IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE CIVIL WAR LECTURE

SEPTEMBER 24, 2 P.M.

Meet author Joanne H. Rajoppi and learn about the history behind her book *Northern Women in the Aftermath of the Civil War*. The book follows the women of the Hamilton family from New Jersey to Detroit and thence to Washington Territory. The family settled in Seattle; one family member settled right here in the Green River Valley! Lecture included with regular Museum admission or membership.



## SUMMER AT THE MARY OLSON FARM!

Open Every  
Saturday and Sunday  
June 24 – August 27  
Noon – 5 p.m.

Admission is FREE!

Take your family on a trip back in time to the Mary Olson Farm. Kids will love meeting our cow, chickens, and donkeys and going on a tour of the Olson's farmhouse. Pack a picnic and spend the day enjoying one of the best preserved historic farms in King County!

## FARM EVENTS

### SUNSETS AT MARY OLSON FARM

JULY 6, 20 & AUGUST 3 AT 7 P.M.

The Auburn Symphony Chamber Orchestra presents a wonderful series of outdoor chamber music at the Farm. For more information and tickets please visit [www.auburnsymphony.org](http://www.auburnsymphony.org).

### LIVING HISTORY CAMP

SESSION 1: AUGUST 7 – 11

SESSION 2: AUGUST 14 – 18

9 A.M. – NOON

Kids ages 7-12 will explore the daily activities of farm life in the early 20th century. Activities include: caring for farm animals, working in the garden, finger weaving, archery, baking in a wood stove, playing historic games and more! Before care is available and is included in the price.

\$95 per child, pre-registration required at [www.auburnwa.gov](http://www.auburnwa.gov).



## POETS ON THE FARM

AUGUST 26, 1 – 4 P.M.

Join Northwest Renaissance Poets for an afternoon of poetry and a musical performance. Sit back and listen or join the free-write session and open mic – no experience required! Free program, no registration required.

## HOPS & CROPS MUSIC & BEER FESTIVAL 21 AND UP ONLY

SEPTEMBER 16, NOON – 6 P.M.

Get ready for cold brews and cool tunes at this annual festival featuring samples from Washington's best craft breweries and live musical performances by some amazing roots, indie and soul bands!

Dogs of all ages are welcome thanks to our pet fun sponsor:



\$15 online before September 8th / \$20 after and at the door.



Register for Farm and Museum events online at [www.wrvmuseum.org](http://www.wrvmuseum.org) or call 253-288-7439.



## Auburn's Landmark Post Office Building

BY HILARY PITTENGER

*Continued from page 1*



Auburn post office and first rural postal service employees, c. 1904. The building was located on First and Division Streets in downtown Auburn. Standing on the porch are postal clerk Gertrude E. (Roberts) Browning and post master Olaf Norris Erickson. Next to the wagon on left is mail carrier Humphrey McLaughlin; mail carrier Theodore Emmett on the right.

**Auburn in the 1910s was a perfect example of a rural town in need of a postal solution.** With a population of 957 in 1910, Auburn wasn't eligible for federal funding, but it was served by the Rural Free Delivery system. A post office was needed, but getting and maintaining a building to house the office was the responsibility of the city postmaster. This resulted in the postmaster housing the post office in whatever building happened to be accessible to him or her – usually a family business. In Auburn, this meant the Post Office regularly moved locations until about 1915, after which it remained put for two decades at 106 East Main (close to the current location of the Rainbow Café).

This system worked well enough in the 1910s, but by 1930 Auburn's population had more than quadrupled to 3,906. The growing impact of mail-order business and advertising

by mail caused the amount of mail being handled by postmasters and rural route carriers to significantly increase as well, and the funds available to small cities like Auburn were not enough to both expand service and build a new post office for housing all this service. Adding on to Auburn's postal issues, as the city expanded and rural populations shifted, smaller rural post offices like those in the hubs of Stuck (south Auburn), Green River (East Auburn), and White River (North Auburn) closed down and had their workloads assigned to the Auburn post office.

As though this wasn't enough, the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and subsequent Great Depression squeezed budgets from the federal to the local level, making a difficult and necessary job like delivering the mail even harder.



The Levi Ballard house, c. 1936, shortly before it was torn down to make way for the new post office building.

Despite all of these difficulties, Auburn finally erected its first purpose-built Post Office building in 1937, and officially opened for business in March of 1938. The 1937 building was funded in part through the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) program. Between 1935 and 1943, many local construction projects during the Great Depression were funded in part or in whole by this federal program, which helped build tens of thousands of infrastructure projects like roads, parks, schools, and post offices all across the United States. These projects helped to employ otherwise out-of-work people during the worst of the Depression years, and also laid out infrastructure projects that impacted the development of nearly every town and city in the country.

The land for the post office was donated by Levi Ballard, an early Auburn citizen and the town's first postmaster in 1886, when it was still called Slaughter. The Levi Ballard house can be seen in the center of the image below, shortly before it was demolished for the post office. (The brick building in the background of this image was partially preserved and repurposed as the Auburn Ave Theater.)

The building was designed by architects Louis A. Simon and James I. Barnes. Simon worked on many WPA projects, especially post offices. He preferred a Colonial Revival style, which is reflected in the symmetrical façade of the building and matching windows.



Auburn post office employees c. 1915, in front of the East Main post office building. From left to right: Jim Reilly, Mamie Wilkinson, Postmaster J. F. Payne, and Mrs. Pauline Muttart.





Auburn Post Office construction progress. Top to bottom:  
September 1937, November 1937, January 1938, and  
February 1938.



Colonial Revival architecture had been a popular style in the 1930s, thanks to the increasing visibility of true colonial sites on the east coast, such as Colonial Williamsburg, and it was often requested for governmental buildings due to its patriotic feel – symmetrical windows and heavy columns evoke important and solemn buildings from the nation’s capital, and smaller institutions liked to borrow some of that gravitas with similarly proportioned architecture.

James I. Barnes also worked on a variety of other WPA projects, many of which featured a Classical Revival style of architecture. Despite both of the architect’s usual preferences, the Auburn Post Office was designed following a slightly more modern aesthetic, referred to today as Starved Classical or Modern Movement, which did away with many of the pillars and ornate details preferred in previous decades in favor of a cleaner façade. This style gained popularity in the years between World War I and World War II for the way it balanced the heavy, serious, governmental feeling of Classical and Colonial Revival buildings with the smooth, fashionable, minimalist aesthetic of the cutting-edge Modernist architects.

**The architects and city planners didn’t only have their own tastes to consider** – this would be a large public building, visible to every new visitor and resident in Auburn, and it needed to be both modern and progressive-looking and look like it belonged with the other prominent city buildings. Nearby to the post office site was one of Auburn’s other prominent city buildings, the Auburn Public Library, a brick edifice built in 1914 in the Neoclassical style. While the style changed slightly between the two buildings, the materials did not, and the new post office was constructed with the same style of bright red brick and white accents.

While the exteriors of the two buildings were complimentary, the interior of the new post office was decidedly modern and fashionable for 1937. Brass-front mailboxes lined two walls, and beautiful white-and-grey Alaskan marble lined the floors and the mail counter.

Dark wood paneling covered the walls and doors, contrasting handsomely with the marble and giving the whole building the warm, formal feel of a library.

**When the new post office opened its doors in March of 1938, 2,500 visitors came to see the official open house!** The American Legion Drum & Bugle Corps and the Young Men’s Band played music for visitors, souvenir toy cars were given out to children, and the ladies of the Auburn Garden Club provided flowers for the occasion. The post office employed 15 people at the time of its opening, including the postmaster, post office workers, and mail carriers.

The building served as the Post Office building until 1963, when a newer, larger facility was built a few blocks away. Like the previous post office located on East Main street, the 1937 post office building was perfect for the community when it was built, but as the population continued to grow over the following decades it became cramped and crowded: by 1960, Auburn’s population had nearly quadrupled again to 11,933. Architectural tastes had also shifted to more modern, concrete-based construction, pushing older, more traditional brick structures out of favor. When the new post office was opened in 1963, Auburn citizens were happy to shift their postal business away a few blocks, leaving the WPA building empty.



Interior of the Auburn Post Office, March 1938. The newspaper took special note of its “Alaskan marble floors”.



## Old Post Office Building Repurposed in the 1960s

With the post office building vacant, both the Auburn School District and the King County Health Department hoped to utilize the newly-available building for expansions of their services, and began lobbying the community and the federal government heavily for their purposes. The School District hoped to use it as a vocational training center for secondary students; the Health Department hoped to open its first public clinic in Auburn. The General Services Administration (GSA), the agency responsible for managing the property and supplies for the entire federal government, was the legal owner of the building and it was their decision to make in the end, taking into account both local concerns to have more control over significant downtown buildings and larger budgetary issues. The GSA awarded the building to the Health Department, who began renovations in 1964. The renovations included lowering the ceilings, a common practice in the 1960s, and repairing the furnace.

When the facility reopened in March 1964, the staff of the new health care facility included nine nurses and a clerk. This small public clinic served as a place for non-emergency care, including rehab nursing for recently released hospital patients, inoculations of school-aged children and adults, post-hospitalization care planning, and medical supervising of new babies. Alterations were made to the interior of the building over time to support these medical tasks, including adding cubicles, temporary walls, and opening up new hallways. The building also continued to be used as a storage site for civil defense mobile hospital facilities, something which it had already been doing as a post office. Civil defense mobile hospitals were 'pre-packaged' emergency 200-bed hospitals that could be quickly set up in the event of a large disaster. All of those materials required a significant amount of space to store, and the newly redesigned health care facility continued to be an ideal home for the emergency supplies.



Seattle - King County Public Health building, c. 1990. Note the addition of the portico to the entryway.

In 2000, the post office was added to the National Register of Historic Places, which protected its exterior from significant changes, though its interior was so drastically altered from its original use that protections were not extended to interior elements.



The landmark post office building is now poised to become Auburn's Arts & Culture Center.

## Post Office Building Repurposed Again!

The building continued to be used as a public health clinic until 2009, when King County Public Health relocated to a newer building on Auburn Way. It remained vacant until it was acquired by the City of Auburn in 2016 for \$350,000, after significant public debate and negotiations with King County, who were now the owners after purchasing the building from the GSA in the 1980s. Shortly after acquiring the building, the City of Auburn began a series of public meetings and working with a consultant to create a plan for turning the historic building into an Arts & Cultural Center. The first phase of this project has already begun, focusing on renovating the main level of the building to allow for public programming.

According to the City of Auburn's project timeline, the completed first phase construction "will include two art exhibition spaces, a multi-use classroom, a Visiting Artist studio, office spaces for staff, partnership and programming opportunities for location and regional arts organizations, a small coffee and food vendor kitchen, reception desk, a gift shop to sell and promote local arts and crafts, and an open lobby space to host events, meetings, poetry readings, artist lectures and presentations for local organizations." The new Arts & Cultural Center is expected to open to the public at the end of 2018, allowing a new generation to use and enjoy the historical building that continues to add so much character to the city.



Artistic rendering of possible lobby space, café, gallery and gift shop at Auburn's Arts & Culture Center.



## A New Donation of Yearbooks

By Curator of Collections, Hilary Pittenger

A recent donation of 144 Auburn-area yearbooks has dramatically added to the Museum's research library collection. The yearbooks were a gift from the Auburn School District, who found the duplicate copies of the annuals while cleaning out their district office building in preparation for remodeling.

Yearbooks are a unique and important historical resource for any community. Aside from being a record of local school activities, yearbooks also serve as a unique genealogy tool and a way of gathering information about a town or school district. For some people, a yearbook photograph might be the only surviving image of their teenage years. Families who moved often or were displaced before they could be recorded on a census or other official documents still leave their family names behind in the lists of students who attended public schools, and people who later changed their names (especially women) are still listed with their formal birth name, as well as any well-known nicknames.

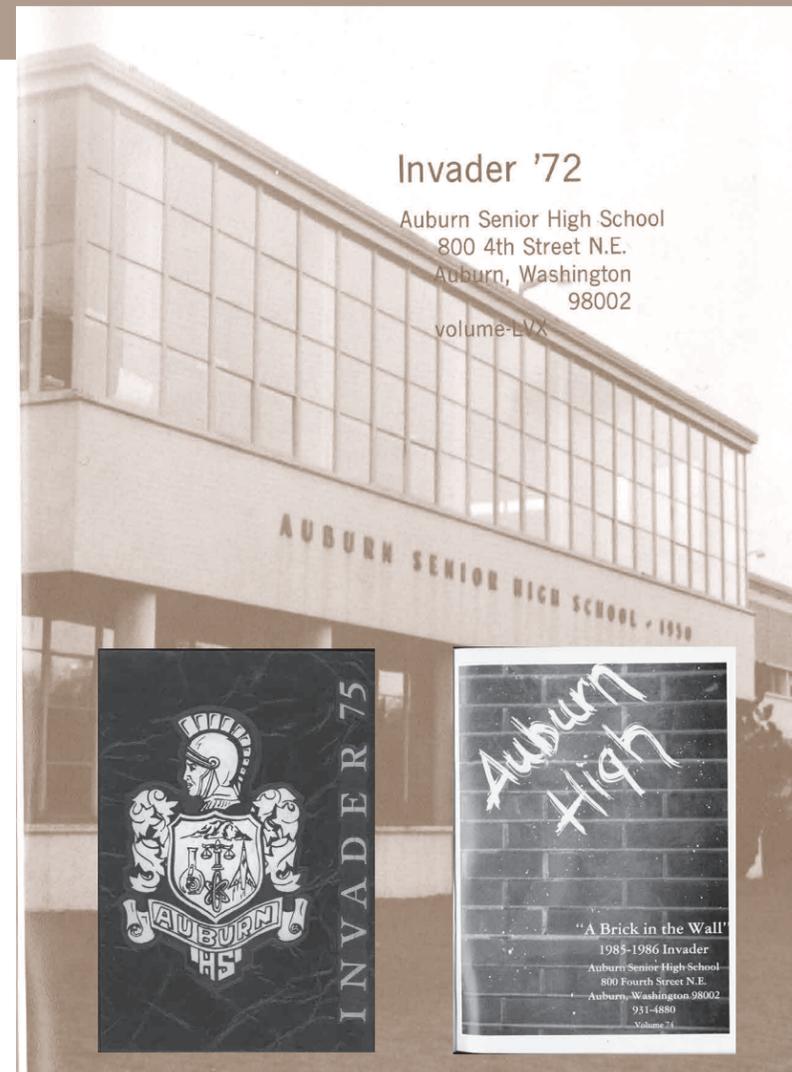
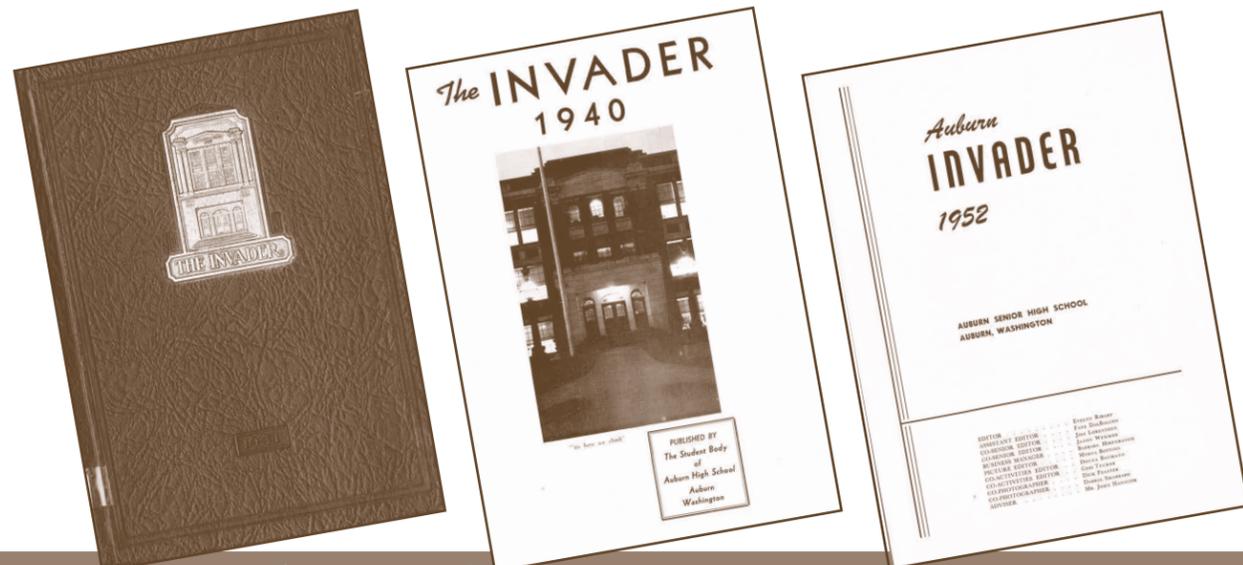
Yearbooks also serve as tiny cultural capsules. Since the books are usually produced by students, for students, they can be used to view what was considered "cool" by teenagers in decades past. Beyond showing us changing fashions (thanks, beehive hair and frosted tips!), yearbooks document the day-to-day activities of students, how they socialized, and what was important in their

school life. Big news stories and pop culture references crop up in yearbooks, and give us a window into how young people perceived the world around them and talked about the news of the day with each other.

The newly donated yearbooks help to round out the Museum's yearbook collection, adding annuals from the 1990s and 2000s, and also giving us annuals from Auburn's newest high schools.

### The collection now includes the following volumes from Kent- and Auburn-area schools:

- Auburn Adventist Academy: 1929 - 1953
- Auburn High School: 1912 - 2015
- Auburn Mountainview High School: 2006 - 2016
- Auburn Riverside High School: 1998 - 2016
- Cascade Middle School: 1966 - 2015
- Green River Community College: 1966 - 1967
- Kent Junior High School: 1959 - 1988
- Kent High School: 1912 - 1948
- Kent-Meridian High School: 1949 - 1974
- Meridian Junior High School: 1964
- Meridian High School: 1922 - 1931
- Olympic Middle School: 1958 - 2016
- Rainier Middle School: 1992 - 2015
- Sequoia Junior High School: 1967 - 1969
- Thomas School: 1975



The collection still has some holes in it, however. If you or your family have any of the following volumes in your collection and are looking for a good place to preserve and share those high school memories, please consider donating them to the Museum!

### We are currently looking for:

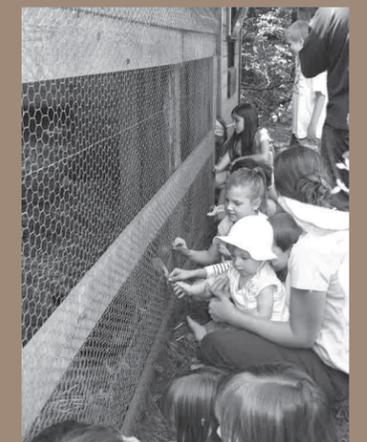
- Auburn Adventist Academy: 1919-1928, 1930, 1932-1933, 1935-1940, 1943-1948, 1950-1952, 1954-2016
- Auburn High School: 1903-1911, 1913-1919, 1921-1924, 1951, 1955, 1992, 1996-1997, 2000, 2002, 2010, 2012, 2016
- Auburn Mountainview High School: 2010, 2011, 2013-2014
- Auburn Riverside High School: 1995-1997, 2002
- Kent High School: 1919, 1925-1929, 1931-1933, 1944
- Kent-Meridian High School: 1953, 1970, 1973, 1975-2016
- Kentlake High School: All years
- Kentridge High School: All years
- Kentwood High School: All years
- Meridian High School: 1914-1921, 1926, 1928-1930, 1932-1948
- Thomas School/Thomas High School: All years except 1975
- West Auburn High School: All years

## GOOD NEWS!

### Farm Tots!

In May we launched a new early learning program at the Farm – Farm Tots! Every Tuesday morning a great group of 3 – 5 year olds accompanied by moms, dads and sometimes grandmas learn about farm animals, bees, food and more through fun hands-on activities.

We've heard from several parents that they were so sad the class was ending, but not to fear, it will be back next year and in the meantime we have our new Museum Tots program coming up every Tuesday morning in November!





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

253.288.7433

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**WHITE RIVER JOURNAL**

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Send us your email address to [arust@auburnwa.gov](mailto:arust@auburnwa.gov)  
 if you wish to receive our monthly e-newsletter, thanks!



**VITALLY VALUABLE VOLUNTEERS!**

The Museum and Farm could not manage without volunteers. Along with 16 brilliantly brainy board members, we have 38 delightful docents, school tour guides and collections caretakers. Docents greet visitors and help the museum run smoothly. School tour guides take over 6000 school age children through the Museum and Farm on curricular based fieldtrips. Collections caretakers work in the back room cataloging the collection. WOW what a great group!

If you are interested in learning about volunteer opportunities,  
 contact Janet 253-804-5010 or [jwells@auburnwa.gov](mailto:jwells@auburnwa.gov).

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 White River Valley Museum | 918 H Street SE | Auburn, WA, 98002 | Tel. 253.288.7433 | Fax 253.931.3098 | [wrvmuseum.org](http://wrvmuseum.org)  
 Museum Open: Noon to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, 6 to 8 p.m. first Thursday and by appointment for group tours and research.  
 Admission: \$2 for children and seniors, \$5 for adults. Museum members free. First Thursday and third Sunday free.

