Little Hollywood on the Flats

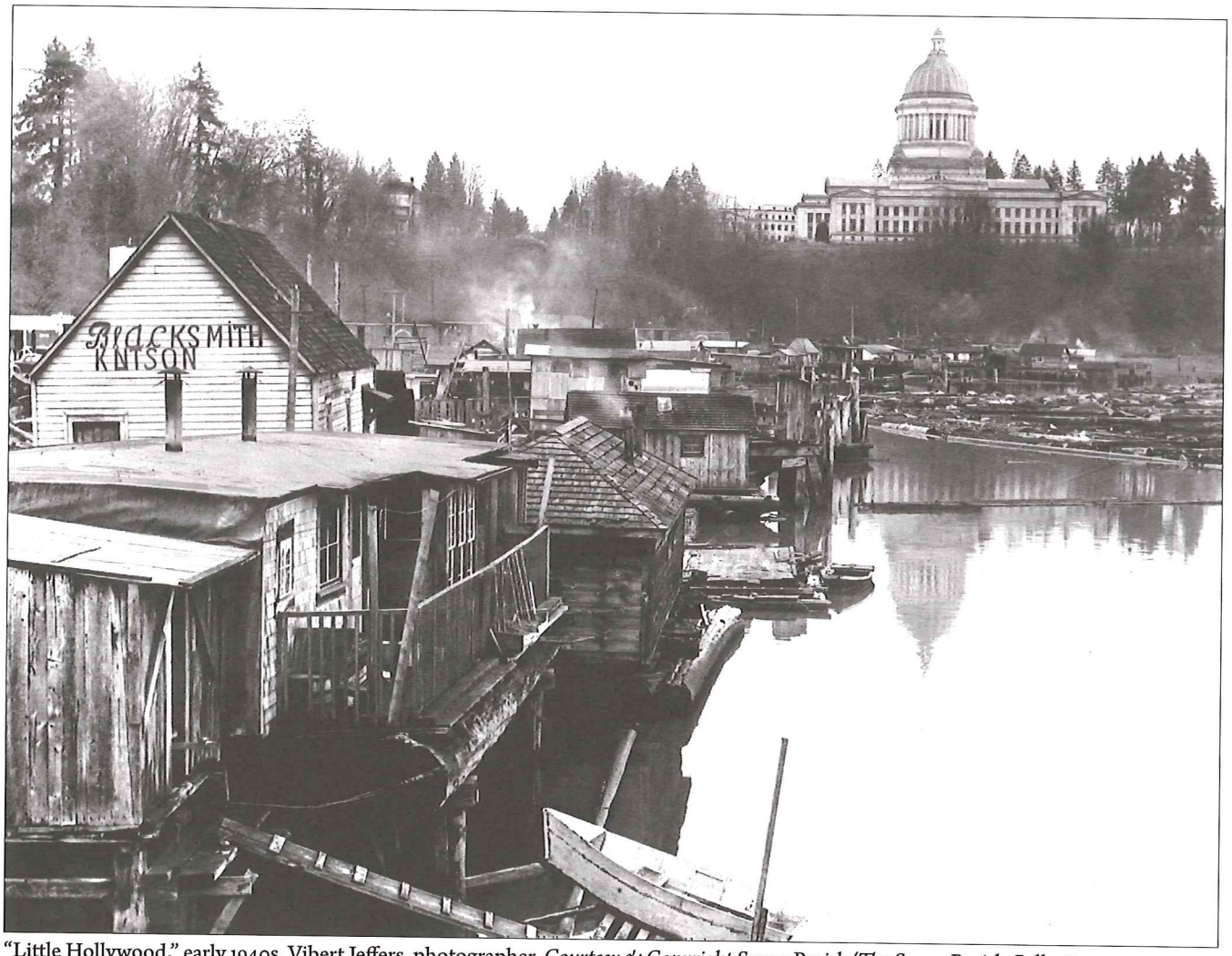
by Daeg Aerlic Byrne

To some, Olympia is a town. To others, it is the capital city of the State of Washington. This mixed identity is a part of our history, and it is a key component to the history of Little Hollywood. The story of Olympia's squatter's district suffers from a lack of specific detail. Known today simply as "Little Hollywood," a collection of floating houses and houses on pilings, arrayed parallel to Water Street, once stretched along the shore of the Deschutes River estuary. Beyond a few photographs and some newspaper clippings, we have few direct sources to draw from, should we attempt to ask basic questions: When did Little Hollywood exist, what exactly was Little Hollywood, who lived there and why? If we accept the widespread characterization of Little Hollywood as a hoboville resulting from the Great Depression, then the above questions seem to have routine answers. But a careful look at the available sources reveals that Little Hollywood was anything but routine. What emerges is a story of humans and their landscape, full of tragedy, but as unique as Olympia itself.

Photographer Vibert Jeffers snapped his shutter and captured one of the few images of Little Hollywood. The picture, shown on page 90, has a strange appeal. The state's capitol dome rises in the background. Stretching from the foreground into the distance, the tightly packed houses and shacks face the Deschutes Waterway, crowding together like a family portrait of the Great Depression. The contrast between the symbolic capitol dome and the symbolic shacks gives the photograph a singular power, and is a testament to Jeffers' expert eye. But take a second look. Forget, for a moment, the symbolic message inherent in the picture, and look closely at the buildings against the water's edge. The structure with a painted advertisement, "Blacksmith Knutson", does not, by itself, belong in a Depression-Era hooverville. It evokes, as do many of the buildings, the feeling of a frontier settlement. It implies that at least some residents operated permanent businesses or trades, and hints that while the Great Depression may have swelled its ranks during its last decade of existence, Little Hollywood was more than a hooverville. It may be that the existence of Little Hollywood owes more to Olympia's frontier past than to any other historical period, including the Great Depression.

The northwest coast offers other examples of similar phenomena, rooted in the frontier period of previous generations. In Vancouver, British Columbia, "waterfront dwellings were remnants of the frontier, resource-based settlement built in the 1860s", whose residents even had "colorful names like Aunt Sally, Portuguese Joe", etc.[1] Olympia's Little Hollywood was home to Big Nel[2] the well-loved bootlegger, and other larger than life characters, but many of its residents were indistinguishable from the residents of Olympia's other neighborhoods. Brady and Nickel Stark, Ed Harrison, Edna Martin, who was a single mother with her son Amos and her daughter Ruby, Knute Knutdson and his wife Betsy, these were all individuals and families that were a part of the fabric of life in Olympia. Edna Martin was a "beauty operator", and her daughter Ruby later followed in her footsteps.[3] Knute Knutdson was in the city registry in 1934, with "blacksmith" listed as his occupation, his address simply declared as "Water Street".[4] Quite a few residents owned trucks and saws,

1934
523 S. Water



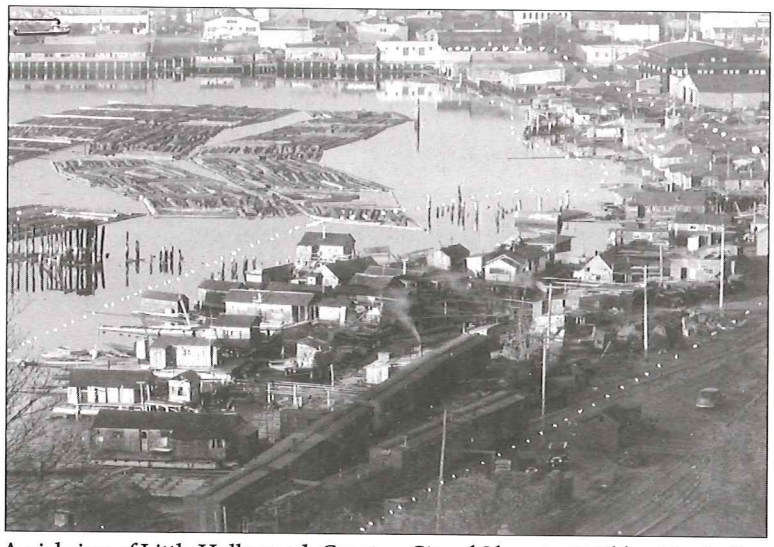
"Little Hollywood," early 1940s. Vibert Jeffers, photographer. *Courtesy & Copyright Susan Parish/The Susan Parish Collection.*

and they cut and sold firewood for a living, according to Olympia resident Nyal Jeffers, who was in high school when Little Hollywood was still around. Jeffers also insists that "pretty good people lived there."[5]

Not all Olympians of the time viewed the residents of Little Hollywood with fondness, however. Ray Hays, Olympia City Police captain during the 1930s and early 1940s, was somewhat of "an authority on the sinful and seamy side of Little Hollywood," and a "practical lawman of the old school." Hays declared the district to be a "nest of immigrant lumber and forest workers and every type of character and bum." Of course, it was Hays' job to extract "murderers, robbers, rapists, and every other type of stinking criminal out of there."[6] When asked whether there were any immigrants living in the district, Nyall Jeffers replied, "Not to my knowledge, no." The discrepancy between these two views is not surprising. In a neighborhood stretching the length of seven blocks or more, composed of more than one hundred and fifteen structures, it is likely that residents who were friends to a high school aged youth seldom crossed paths with the police captain. The contrast in their experience of the place suggests that Little Hollywood was a place of greater dimension than we might expect to see in a temporary shantytown.

In fact, Olympia had been dealing with the social dimensions of the tide flat residents for many years. Local leaders had been attempting to manage, rather than expel, the residents since the previous decade, well into the early half of the 1920s. Nyal Jeffers, who came to Olympia as a

boy in 1917, remembers seeing float houses on "the flats" then. But the earliest documented evidence of the ongoing squatter's settlement is from 1924, where a cartographer penciled, in the blank stretch of undeveloped shore land running five to six blocks south from the intersection of Water Street and Fifth Avenue, "shanties on floats." [7] Just a few years later Mayor Mills expressed concern about the tide flat district, and speculated on the need to eliminate it altogether. This dialogue is described well by historian Gordon P. Newell:



Aerial view of Little Hollywood. *Courtesy City of Olympia, G. Eldon Marshall Collection.*

"Mayor Mills and the City Commission instructed City Attorney W.W. Manier to take action to remove floathouses moored at street and alley ends along the waterfront. 'Many occupants... are undesirable citizens,' the mayor told the *Olympian*, adding that, in his opinion, 'moral conditions in that district are very bad.'" [8]

But it was, perhaps surprisingly, then Police Chief Cushman who kept the district untouched by the jurisprudence of the city attorney. Cushman's argument to the City Commission in favor of leaving the tide flat neighborhood intact was not as much on behalf of the "undesirable citizens" that lived there, but was based on the idea that they were easier to manage as a unit, assembled together in one place. He advised the Mayor and the Commission that if the residents of the immoral district had their homes destroyed, "they'll just move their activities uptown." In that decade at least, Little Hollywood on the Flats had a sanctioned, if tenuous, role in the larger community: containment of the city's less than desirable characters.

But by the end of the following decade, something changed in the way the city regarded Little Hollywood. In 1938, city authorities tasked Wally Turner, the city's building inspector, to issue eviction notices to each of the more than one hundred and fifteen dwellings on the shores of the estuary. No available documentation explains why, after at least twenty years of tolerance, the city took such an abrupt course of action. Just the previous year, the Washington State Legislature had authorized and funded the State Capitol Committee to clear the way for the transformation of Olympia's tidal mudflats into a lake. The Committee was ordered to do "all things necessary to fulfill the purpose of this plan." [9] The residents of the tide flats were squatting in the exact spot that had been winningly envisioned twenty-six years earlier by the architects Wilder and White. They had sketched in a serene, if gigantic, reflecting pool for the State Capitol Building.

Building inspector Turner had to first confirm occupation and ownership of each domicile, and then issue eviction notices one by one, on the basis of unhealthy or unsanitary living conditions. He was assigned a bodyguard from the city police. It took them almost four years to complete this administrative work. As homes were being demolished individually around them, some residents held out. The only incidence of violence during this process was when a man allowed Turner to enter his shack, "and then took a swing at me with a two-by-four." Otherwise, the process was "carried out with a minimum of fuss and fury." [10] By April, 1942, only thirty-six homes remained.[11] In September of that same year, debris removal from the entire site was imminent, but had to be postponed for a few days "until the last of the few remaining dwellings on the Deschutes Waterway front are vacated." [12] As our nation geared up to enter World War

II, the end of an era in Olympia went up in the smoke of a massive bonfire on the tide flats. Some nine years later, the estuary itself became history, beneath the waters of the Deschutes River, behind the dam that progress built.

Much of the human story behind Little Hollywood may be lost to history. We may never know the extent of personal tragedy, or triumph, that played itself out in the early decades of the twentieth century on the shores of our capital city. But we do know enough about it to declare that those human stories belonged in large measure to Olympians, and not to the stereotypical drifting hobos of The Great Depression. We can say, after a more careful look at the identity and history of our own town, that the story of Little Hollywood was our story, for better or for worse.

Daeg Aerlic Byrne is an environmental horticulturalist working with The Nature Conservancy to save prairies and oak savannahs in the Puget Sound region. He lives in Olympia with his wife, Gabrielle, and their two daughters. Daeg was inspired to research Little Hollywood when an elderly man called in response to a letter he submitted to *The Olympian* in 2001, to defend the people that lived in Little Hollywood, and to declare that they were "good people that lived there," and that "they weren't hobos".

Endnotes

1. Jill Wade, *Houses for All: The Struggle for Social Housing in Vancouver, 1919-50* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1994), page 18.
2. Dean Shacklett, "Little Hollywood Era in Olympia Recalled," *Daily Olympian*, March, 23, 1958, page 4.
3. From telephone interviews with Nyal Jeffers, March 5 and 6, 2001.
4. Olympia City Directory, 1934. Washington State Historical Society Collections, Tacoma, WA.
5. From telephone interviews with Nyal Jeffers, March 5 and 6, 2001.
6. Dean Shacklett, "Little Hollywood Era in Olympia Recalled," *Daily Olympian*, March 23, 1958, pages 1 and 4.
7. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Downtown Olympia, 1908 and 1924, Southwest Washington Regional Archives, Olympia, WA.
8. Newell, Gordon P. *Rogues, Buffoons and Statesmen.* (Seattle, WA: Superior Publishing Company, 1975), page 361.
9. "History of Capitol Lake," [ga.wa.gov/Capitol Lake/History], July 14, 2009.
10. Dean Shacklett, "Little Hollywood Era in Olympia Recalled," *Daily Olympian*, March 23, 1958, page 4.
11. *Sunday Olympian*, April 15, 1942, page 1.
12. *Daily Olympian*, September 3, 1942, page 1.