Jennie Moses (c. 1852 – 1937)

Jennie Moses was a long-time resident of the Renton area. Little is known of her early life and her parents; her obituary claimed that she was raised by her uncle. She married James Moses, a member of the Duwamish tribe, and they had at least two children: sons Henry and Joseph. Since the Duwamish were never granted a reservation, the Moses family never moved away from the Renton area. The family lived on the shores of the Black River, but they did not have legal title to their property, and as Euro-American settlers moved closer, the Moses’ land became smaller and smaller. Eventually, one of the Renton residents (Henry Tobin or Erasmus Smithers, accounts differ) legally donated them an acre of land.

After James Moses died in 1912, Jennie brought in money by doing housework and making rugs to sell. Her sons also did odd jobs after school. Both boys attended Renton High, and Henry was a member of the basketball team.
Shoreline Map: Renton

### Map Key

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Some thirty years ago the following account of a notable event appeared in a local newspaper:—

For the past week over 300 Indians of the Black River, Cedar River and Puyallup tribes have been holding an immense “sing-gamble” near Renton, the first event of its kind in this county for thirty years or more. In early days before the advent of the paleface modified the savage traits of the dusky braves, a “sing-gamble” was an annual occurrence, and was always the most important as well as the most exciting event among the Indians of Puget Sound. The revival of the ancient custom, literally as well as figuratively, and the somber tone of the tom-tom and blood-curding chant of the painted, feather-bedded bucks made night hideous for a radius of two miles.

The Black and Cedar River tribes, always inveterate gamblers, were combined, and they tried their fortunes against the Puyallups, but at 6 o'clock last evening, after 120 hours of unceasing hullabaloo and work, the gamblers suffering from sore eyes, weary from loss of sleep and weak from fasting, called the game a draw and broke camp. The stakes played for included forty horses, wagons, buggies, saddles, blankets, jewelry, rifles, bed quilts, shawls, clothing and $150 in cash, the whole representing a total of $3,500 worth of property. The Cedar and Black River Indians could ill afford to lose, for everything they possessed, including the winter's food and the clothes they wore, had been put up, and in case it happened, that their god of fortune deserted them they would have been obliged to appeal to the white residents of Renton for the necessaries of life. The Puyallups are a more numerous and a wealthier tribe, and have the additional distinction of a residence on a reservation, but notwithstanding these advantages they did not purpose to throw the game in favor of their poorer, but not less plucky brethren. The game was for blood, and no “sing-gamble” of the old days was ever more stubbornly contested.

Among the Black River tribe at the “sing-gamble” were the following well-known worthies: Dan James and his boys, Jim and Dave, and his daughters, Louise and Mattie; Jake Foster, George Washington, Daniel Webster, Jim Moses, and Jim Driscoll. Those of the Cedar River: Doctor Jack, William Rogers and his son, Pete, Chief William, Doctor Bill, Ben Solomon and his boy, Dave, Frank Allyn, Charley Moses, Paul Williams, Henry Tom, George Yok, Jerry kaum, Thomas Josh, Kultus Johnny and Green River Jimmy. On the Puyallup side were Nuke Sewaltis, George Newallup, John Wallace, Johnny McKemm, Johnny Wrinkles and Boston Charley. It will be noticed that some of the names are English, but English is only adopted by the Indians when it is found that the untutored paleface can’t twist his foreign tongue around the native names.

Description of a Duwamish “sing-gamble,” circa 1900
(1/2). Source: Clarence Bagley’s History of King County, copyright 1929.
During the progress of the game on Monday the squaw of Jimmy Moses, a ponderous Indian woman, was suddenly taken ill, with symptoms of insanity. The game was not stopped even for a moment, but Doctor Bill was summoned and he immediately began preparations to drive away the evil spirit of which the woman was supposed to be possessed. Mrs. Moses was first seated in front of one of the fires near the entrance to the main tepee and Doctor Bill then ran his hands over the squaw’s face and shoulders, manipulating and gesticulating in much the same manner as a magician when he essays to place a subject under a hypnotic spell. In fact, the old doctor, notwithstanding his wise grimaces and solemn blinkings, gave evidence of having at some time witnessed an exhibition of mesmerism. While the doctor was subduing the evil spirit in the woman, the wives of old Doctor Jack filled an empty white lead keg full of water and placed it beside the afflicted woman. Then a stone as large as a person’s hand was placed in the fire. Now the fun began in earnest. The woman’s friends joined the doctor in a weird dance around the fire, all singing in a low, weird tone:

“Si-si Tomomalies!
“Si-si Tomomalies!
“Si-si we!”

Tomomalies is supposed to be the imp of sickness who takes possession of good and bad Indians alike, and rends and tears them and causes them pain. By making a hideous noise and calling out “Tomomalies,” the spirit is frightened and seeks to hide itself. Having a fondness for cold water, it will generally leave the person whom it has possessed and go to the water. Thus it was that a keg of water was placed by the side of “Mrs.” Moses. Finally the squaw became quite placid, and then with war-whoop, Doctor Bill rolled the stone, now red hot, from the fire and dumped it into the deg of water. The women danced livelier and yelled louder than ever, while the doctor repeatedly soused his hands and arms in the boiling water up to his elbows. The hot rock was put into the water for the purpose of torturing Tomomalies. The doctor did not hope to kill the spirit, for that is impossible, but he wanted to give it such a warm reception that it would not molest the tribe in the future. There was a time, in the long, long ago, when a doctor, who failed to save a patient, suffered the death penalty. It became the duty of the nearest male relative of the deceased to cut the doctor’s throat, and if the relative neglected to carry out the custom and commit the bloody deed, he was liable to punishment himself. This custom served to make the profession a dangerous one and consequently there were few doctors, but now every tribe has several doctors, who practice the art of healing with indifferent success.

A few hours after Tomomalies had been boiled Mrs. Moses was herself again and occupied a back seat, indifferent to the chant of those engaged in the “sing-gamble.” She was busy with an old pair of carders, carding a bunch of yellow wool. An American, who had a limited knowledge of Chinook and who was curious to know what the old lady was about, asked her:

“Icta mika mamock?”

“Nika mamock wool kapo sock,” promptly replied the squaw, signifying that she was carding the wool preparatory to weaving it into socks.

But the game still went on. The savage song of the siwashes and monotonous sound of the tom-tom continued to disturb the repose of the residents of Renton and make the advance of night a thing to be dreaded. It is interesting to note that this is only the second game played within the last sixty years that ended in a draw. At a game between the Black and Cedar River tribes, the date of which is not known, the Indians played for four days and five nights, at the expiration of which time they were completely exhausted and the game was declared a draw.

Description of a Duwamish “sing-gamble,” circa 1900 (2/2). Source: Clarence Bagley’s History of King County, copyright 1929.
My ancestors lived first about where West Seattle is now. But after white settlers began coming the Indians found it hard to hold their land because the whites insisted on legal titles. My grandfather and some other relatives moved to Renton and settled on the Black River. Here, through the kindness of Henry Tobin who staked a donation claim bordering both the Cedar and Black Rivers, they were able to keep their land. Tobin gave them land and saw to it they had the necessary legal papers to protect their property.

My three brothers and I grew up in a house near the Black River just back of the present Renton High School. When my brother Joe died in 1956 the last two acres belonging to the family were sold to the Renton School District.

When I was a boy there was an Indian village about where the Renton Shopping Center is now and another at Elliott on the Cedar [River]. The Indian cemetery was at the forks of the Cedar and the Black.

There was wonderful fishing in the Black River, trout up to two feet long. All the Renton boys, both Indian and white, fished and paddled canoes up and down it. Our family always kept a cedar dugout tied to our porch. When the bell of the old Presbyterian Church on Renton Hill rang warning of a flood, we just paddled off to high ground.
IF WE feel a little sadder than usual on the passing of a friend, well—

Chief Joe Moses departed this earth just as something very nice was going to happen to him.

Moses was 75 when he wound it up. He lived in an old, barn-like house in back of Renton High School. Two, three sacks, usually, protruding from broken panes. Vines over the weathered sides, surrounded by ancient and gnarled fruit trees—that kind of a place.

And, indeed, we can still see Moses in some what that might call a disordered kitchen, chair tilted against the wall and near the cast iron stove winter or summer, a hand-made cigarette dangling from his mouth.

In the days of old, in the days before the white man came, the place was a lush one, Moses used to tell us. In the first place, he would say, pointing to the dry gulch in front, the Black River ran right by the door.

There was a landing there, so, and Indian canoes tied to it, so. Willows here, cattails in the part that was swampy.

THE INDIANS used to call the near by Cedar, the “Dow.” Moses would say then, “A river was “mish.” Somehow or other the early settlers put these two words together and hung the name on another river—and all the Indians who lived in these parts.

That used to puzzle Moses—not that he regarded it as particularly important.

We think we should say that he regarded old Chief Seattle a good deal less lightly than we who live under his name, too.

Chief Seattle, Moses used to say, was not as much as a local Indian. He had been a slave of the Kitsaps, origin unknown, and he escaped and was embraced and or tolerated by the more friendly natives on these shores.

The early settlers liked Seattle—Moses version—because he was such an accommodating fellow.

“Look um here, Chief,” they would say, giving the man a title, he did not have, and pretending to be proficient in his own language. “We ums need um more land. How um about that there couple a thousand acres over there?”

Chief Seattle would nod that it was a deal.

“My dad used to tell me that the woods around here were full of deer,” Moses has told us. “The marsh, that was a resting place for the ducks and geese on the migrations. Myself, I've seen the Black fairly choked with salmon.”

NONE OF THAT, of course, mattered to the pioneers, nor did the fact that a band of Indians lived there.

The timber went and the bogs were drained and city lots were staked out and all the Indians, but the Moses family moved elsewhere.

“Yes, my dad stayed on,” Moses used to say, “but I want to tell you something.

“Every day of his life he lived in fear that he’d see some white man coming down that path waving legal papers.”

And so they lived—by the river, at least—until the opening of the Lake Washington Ship Canal.

“That was quite a day, for the white people, at least,” Moses used to tell us, and with sighs. “The waters just went down, down, until our landing and canoes stood dry, and there was no Black River at all.

“There were the pools, of course, and the struggling fish trapped in them. People came from miles around, laughing and holliering and stuffing the fish in gunny sacks.”

The Moses, we gathered, were too overcome to join in.

Obituary of Joseph Moses, unknown newspaper, 1956.
Source: Eastside Heritage Center Reference Files.