

# Benn's Bulletin

A Publication of *The Friends of the Aberdeen Museum*

July 2009

## George J. Wolff Pioneer & Visionary

### Coming Events

Aberdeen Museum Board  
Monthly Meeting  
First Tuesday of each month  
Aberdeen Museum  
7:00 p.m.

Friends of the Aberdeen Museum  
Monthly Meeting  
Third Tuesday of each month  
Aberdeen Museum  
7:00 p.m.

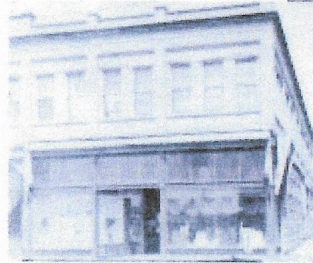
### *Coming Events*

#### **Harborite of the Year Dinner**

*Saturday, October 10th.  
Tickets on sale soon.*

**ANOTHER**  
*Women of Grays Harbor  
History Event  
COMING January 2010*

*George Wolff posing in front  
of his store.  
NW corner of Heron and H Streets.  
Prior to the fire of 1903.*



*George Wolff Store  
NW corner of Heron and H Streets.  
after the fire of 1903.  
Ca. 1904*



*Wolff's  
Built in 1922, SW corner of Broadway and Wishkah Streets.*

Friendless, alone, gazing wide-eyed at America, land of his dreams, land of opportunity, 16 year old George J. Wolff arrived in this country, bringing with him a school high education, and a hard-earned apprenticeship at trade—three years at no wages. Beyond a monosyllabic “yes” or “no,” he knew no English. He had started his adventure in Germany with borrowed money to secure passage, and a set of new clothes purchased by his mother with funds obtained by pawning her gold watch. The watch still belongs to the family.

*Geo. Wolff - Continued on page 2*



**Aberdeen  
Museum of History**

Dann Sears, *Director*

**Board Members**

- LaMont Shillinger, *President*
- Byron Eager, *Co-V. President*
- Roy Vataja, *Co-V. President*
- Margo Shortt, *Secretary*
- Barbara Jones Caskey
- John Erak
- Joan Turner

**Friends of the Museum**

- Vacancy, *President*
- Carol Stubb, *V. President*
- Florence Smith, *Secretary*
- Marty Honer, *Treasurer*
- John Erak, *Citizen at Large*

**Trustees**

- Leonard Airhart
- Bettie Garbe
- Carmen Ainsworth
- Bill Reid



*Wolff Company clothing label  
Designed by  
Artistic Weaving Company, New York City*

*Interior of Wolff Store,  
NW corner of Heron and H Street.  
Before the 1903 fire.*



*Interior of Wolff Store,  
NW corner of Heron and H Streets.  
1907*

*Interior of Wolff Store,  
NW corner of Heron and H Streets.  
Remodel and new fixtures  
Date unknown*



*Interior of Wolff Store,  
SW corner of Broadway  
and Wishkah Streets.  
Remodel and new fixtures  
1948*

*Geo. Wolff: continues from pg. 1*

Young George was used to frugal living, and it served him well as he searched for opportunities in New York, Chicago and other locales. A wage to keep body and soul together was all he needed, and there definitely wasn't time to regretfully dwell on the past. Not finding anything suitable to his liking George headed west, reaching Olympia with a dollar and thirty-eight cent to his name. What hardships and sacrifices he must have endured, one can only imagine.

Olympia was the beginning of the Wolff legacy, but not an end of his sacrifices. Upon his arrival in 1889 George scored what he termed a "real job," with I. Harris and Sons, earning \$2.50 a month, plus board. After six months his salary was raised to \$5.00 a month. "I was saving money by that time; sending some home to the old folks—it was work and save, work and save."

Years flew by, eight to be exact. George, now in his early manhood was sent to Centralia to manage another store owned by Harris & Sons. This position was short-lived however when in 1897 a manager position opened at the firm's store located in the booming city of Aberdeen. Five and a half years of excellent managerial accomplishments in the Aberdeen store paid off. I. Harris and Sons, desiring to sell their Aberdeen store, made Wolff an offer. The firm believed their manager possessed the essentials for success, industrious, intelligence, and honest, the terms of the sale were made easy. A small down payment was made and Mr. Wolff, with his known reputation easily obtained a loan of a few thousand dollars from a local bank.

By 1903, hard work and sacrifices resulted in steady gains; things were looking up; until the morning of Friday, October 16<sup>th</sup>, when dark clouds of doom rolled over Aberdeen, not from typical fall weather however, but as the result of what was eventually to

become known as Aberdeen's "Black Friday." 140 businesses including Wolff's store went up in smoke. Even though he sustained heavy losses it didn't discourage the young proprietor. Wolff salvaged what he could from the disaster, and moved to the Commercial Block on Market Street; occupying a space jointly with a grocery store—ten days later the Commercial Block was destroyed by fire.

*"I tell you, I had just as much confidence in the future of Aberdeen and Grays Harbor that night when I was 'cleaned,' as ever; just as much."*

With strong convictions that Aberdeen would be rebuilt, Wolff again gathered together odds and ends of what could be salvaged and placed them in the Congregational Church to dry out. The Commercial Block fire occurred at night, and by 11:00 the next morning Wolff had rented a lot on Heron Street for thirty dollars a month—by noon had contracted for the construction of a new building to be put up, at the cost of \$630.00, with the stipulation that it must be finished within ten days. At this point in Aberdeen's history, carpenters were few, and most were busy after the fire. This found Mr. Wolff vigorously swinging and sawing shelving between intervals of taking inventory and other tasks. However, within the ten day period the store was completed and ready for business with brand new stocks of goods.

"That was one of my lessons," mused Mr. Wolff. "It gave me increased confidence; and I think that I am not unduly boastful when I say it gave others confidence."

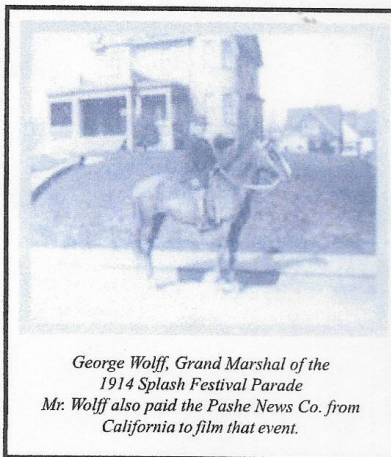
Life was full of lessons for Mr. Wolff; and they were profitable to others. In 1922 George Wolff, a true visionary, once again putting his trust in the growth of Aberdeen built his final store on the corner of Wishkah and Broadway away from the central business district—a store that would set the standard

for dry goods and ladies apparel for decades to come.

The new Wolff's featured a spacious main floor with numerous departments, beautiful display cases, balconies, mezzanine floor, and wide aisles all illuminated by scores of blazing electric lights, the rays dazzlingly reflected by mirrors placed everywhere. The store was a picture of grandeur—for there is grandeur in a certain kind of business—combined with perfect simplicity and good taste.

George J. Wolff loved Aberdeen and Grays Harbor giving to the communities an unfaltering, unselfish devotion. From 1897 when he first arrived, until his death in 1931 he played an important role in the Harbor's progress. Wolff's legacy was carried on after death by his son Joel, his family and a legion of dedicated employees until the store was downsized to a smaller shop connected to the main building, which was leased to Woolworths in the early 50s and Pay-n-Save in the 60s.

A lesson is to be learned here—if Aberdeen is to succeed, it will take vision, good leadership and unselfish dedication.



*George Wolff, Grand Marshal of the 1914 Splash Festival Parade  
Mr. Wolff also paid the Pashe News Co. from California to film that event.*