

A Drop Becomes a Trickle: A History of the Duwamish

By Dave Johnston

The Duwamish started up in the mountains. A couple drops that got together and became a trickle, which took a little time and eventually turned into a raging torrent.

After that, it didn't take long before the Duwamish was drawn down to the saltwater siren's call of Puget Sound, the harsh slap of water against wooden piers, the laughing bark of sea lions, the mourning echo of foghorns, and the never-ending movement of the city of Seattle.

The Duwamish was untamable. It did as it wanted and ran with the wrong crowd. The Cedar, the White, the Black, and the Green all added something to the mix...none of it good. Together, they were strong enough to do whatever they wanted and stupid enough not to know what they wanted. They never had to look for trouble, because trouble followed them. In fact, they dragged it behind them like a wooden duck toy, all the way down to Seattle.

They were bullies, but they were also morons. They could punch a hole through a wooden door but were flummoxed completely by a potential victim saying, "What's that behind you?"

But one day, things changed. The Duwamish met Bill Boeing.

The Duwamish was down in the Georgetown rail yards digging up railroad spikes to sell back to the railroad for a penny a pound, while Bill Boeing was unsuccessfully trying to shake down transients for a "hobo tax." The second they laid eyes on each other, they understood that they shared something in common: A complete disregard for the welfare of the people of Seattle.

Now most con men and hoodwink ladies avoided Seattle. The city was far enough west geographically to not have experienced most confidence schemes. In addition, the people also tended to be too trusting and carried their wallets like they were making an offering at a Greek temple. Working in Seattle was like asking a safecracker to get a cardboard box open or a second story man to break into a basement. Too easy.

But for Boeing and the Duwamish it was just right. Boeing was always planning the next bamboozle, while the Duwamish made sure no debts ever went unpaid. They ran a boatload of ploys from the Cleveland Steamer Trunk to the Money Box of Calcutta. They stole dogs and sold them back to their owners in the morning with a different name. One day, they painted stripes on the city's horses and made everybody on the street pay zoo admission. They even audaciously convinced the managers of the Rainier Brewery that they actually had to pay for water.

While they attracted others of a similar ilk, there was no question: the Duwamish and Boeing were the kings of Seattle. If they wanted to sleep in the mayor's bed, all they would have had to do was nudge him and indicate "out." If one of their compatriot's wanted the best champagne in town, they didn't think twice about grabbing a complete stranger and making them explain what champagne was.

After a while, the White, the Black, and Cedar moved on. The Black became a koi pond in Renton, the White found religion, and the Cedar disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Only the Green remained.

But even at its worst, people were drawn to the Duwamish like the outgoing tide. There was always something about the raw power of the Duwamish. And after all, it couldn't be all bad if it supplied the water for Rainier beer.

The Duwamish was even a hero one time. It stepped in and saved a toddler named Jessamine Fielding who blundered into the middle of a lower Pine Street bust-up

that had quickly progressed into a brawl involving burning logs. It didn't even matter that the Duwamish and Boeing had ordered this set-to to provide a cover for their robbery of the police chief's German shepherd.

They held a parade in the Duwamish's honor, with Jessamine waving happily from a fire wagon. Meanwhile, every spectator had their pockets picked by the light- and average-fingered associates of Boeing and Duwamish. They even stole the fire wagon when Jessamine eventually got off it.

People weren't drawn to Boeing the same way they were to Duwamish. In part, it was because they didn't fear him like they did the Duwamish. They didn't tremble at the sound of his approach.

Boeing knew this and didn't like this. He had always been jealous of the Duwamish, though he was careful to keep his resentment to himself. He never told the Duwamish. In fact, the Duwamish never saw that side of Boeing until it saw it in a close-up. That was the day that Boeing built an airplane factory on the banks of the Duwamish and had his workers start dumping corroded metals, industrial acid, aviation fuel, and tainted ooze into the water. Even the plant's sewage lines ran directly into the Duwamish.

Because Boeing was going to kill the Duwamish.

The Duwamish didn't even see it coming, which is one of the largest problems of being the muscle to somebody else's brains.

The Duwamish was on the outs and nobody stepped forward to help. Well, little Jessamine Fielding tried to, but her parents dragged her away like the Duwamish was a villain that had tied her to the tracks rather than the one that saved her from a firewood fight.

As for its old friends, only the Green was left. And if you're only going to have one friend in the entire world, you don't want to it to be the Green. You never wanted to be in the position of owing the Green a favor.

Boeing made sure the Duwamish knew that this was no mistake. Boeing, himself, came out of his airplane factory once a day to empty his spittoon, staring unblinkingly at the Duwamish as he did it.

It was at these times that the Duwamish remembered that the night before the Cedar disappeared, it had said to watch out for Boeing. It made it nervous that Boeing never drank Rainier, that he only drank beer from California. The Duwamish thought it was an affectation, but now it seemed like part of the longer con.

As for Boeing's airplanes? That was just a ruse, a trick, a Philadelphia shoulder tap. He bought the plans from a bankrupt inventor in Bulgaria. The first time Boeing saw one of his airplanes take off, he spit his Los Angeles-made beer out in surprise. The important thing for him was that building airplanes produced all sorts of waste, the kind of garbage that could choke a river to death.

To add insult to increasing injury, Boeing held lavish parties alongside the Duwamish that lasted long into the night. At the end of the parties, people would throw everything into the Duwamish: chairs, tables, soiled napkins, empty liquor bottles, and shoes. Everything. Boeing made sure that the people who had once groveled before the Duwamish, now laughed at it. He made sure any love they had for the Duwamish was crumpled up like paper with a really bad idea written on it.

More businesses, former friends and compatriots of the Duwamish, joined Boeing, adding their own mix to the stew of death. Metal shops, arsenic makers, tar cutters crowded the shore, and every piece of waste they created went directly into the Duwamish.

There was nothing that the Duwamish could do. It didn't even look like a river anymore. It was a saturated mess choked with excrement, poison, and party favors. Water didn't lap the shore as much as it was a wet slap, like a fish thrown onto a marble table. And while the Rainier people still came to fill their water buckets, but they refused to pay anymore.

Even as the Duwamish was dying, it wasn't dying fast enough for Boeing. Instead of death by inches, he cut nine miles off the Duwamish. Straightened it like you'd straighten the tie of a rival, with a little slap to the face as a reminder to who was in charge. He even got cartographers to write "Not a river" next to it on maps.

It got worse when Boeing started trucking in waste from hospitals and dye shops, from exotic animal stables and tire boilers. And all of it went directly into the Duwamish.

Each case of Rainier beer now came with a sieve. Since instructions were not included, savvy drinkers would pour their beer through the tiny holes prior to drinking it, thus saving themselves from mouth injuries caused by phonographic and hypodermic needles.

Children were taught that if they saw a fish in the Duwamish, they should immediately try to kill it. Not catch it. Just kill it. Because there was deep inside its thin, fishy bones there was something very, very wrong with that fish.

Worst of all was the smell of the Duwamish. Bubbles would form at the surface. Luminescent in day or night, they contained a swirl of sharp-colored foulness, a maelstrom of gas caught within. When these bubbles burst, the resulting odor was

horrifying. The smell would sweep across Seattle in a haze, causing everyone to vomit. Men driving in motor cars, women pushing prams, babies in prams, dogs on the street, and birds in the sky would throw up at the same time. The smell of it all lingered like a bad reputation. Then, due to rain, gravity, and the inevitability of terribleness that vomit would make its way back down to the Duwamish and the process would begin again. This happened several times a week.

The Duwamish was so toxic that a canoe caught on fire one time.

Over a period of years, the Duwamish became so choked with filth, with the worst discharge of industry and man, it ground to a halt like an unoiled gear. At first, neighborhood youth would come down and throw rocks at it, to see if they could get it to move. But after a while, it stopped.

Bill Boeing would tell anybody who would listen, and with the power he held he could get anybody to listen, that Seattle didn't need the Duwamish anymore. Of course, he didn't say Duwamish, he just called it "that river." A ditch, he said, could do the same job at half the stench. But when they started pouring concrete blocks into the toxic stew that the Duwamish had become, the blocks melted like lead spoons in 5-alarm chili.

So, instead, they just left it. Ignored it. Turned away from it.

Boeing had won. Along the way, he had made the transition to valued member of society. He moved into a mansion up north. He ate plates of fried oysters and thick slices of buttered bread. He dressed in the softest fabrics, cottons mostly, and drank his Californian beer.

Boeing had the best life in Seattle, bar none. As he grew old, he became more and more respected. People he had robbed in the old days had forgotten about it.

For so many years, life was good to Bill Boeing. So good that maybe he forgot about his old partner, the Duwamish. Maybe he didn't look left when he departed the Elliott Bay Yacht Club on his yacht, "The King of Seattle," for a short September outing. If he had, he would have seen the Duwamish, still frozen in filth and refuse, still bubbling with poison and toxins.

Boeing died that day on his yacht, not that far from here. They said it was a heart attack, but they say a lot of things about a lot of things when they're trying to keep stock prices steady. Detectives found an empty bottle of Rainier next to him that stunk like a combination of spittoon and the rail yard. His cabin steward, a Miss Jessamine Fielding, said that it was indeed odd that he was found with a Rainier because he didn't drink the beer as a rule. It was also odd, she conceded, that he was tied to a chair, was soaked to the bone, and smelled so badly the coroner would later write "Devil's dog poo??" in his notes regarding the odor. Of course, Miss Fielding was taking an afternoon nap in the cabin opposite and was, she admitted, a very heavy sleeper, so she had no idea what actually happened to Boeing.

What is known is that when Boeing was brought back to the yacht club and a retinue of vomiting followers and dry-heaving club employees attempted to carry his body off the boat, a rogue wave rose up and knocked the yacht in such a violent manner that Boeing's body was flung into the water. After several hours of trying to snag Boeing with a boat hook, it took a child willing to jump in the water and tie a rope around a dead man to retrieve the body.

During this difficult process, witnesses claimed to have heard somebody laughing. But over time, they realized it wasn't laughter, but the sound of water. Running water. And that's when they realized the Duwamish was moving again. Slow at first, but steady.

The Duwamish is still coming back from what Bill Boeing did to it, but it's getting stronger. Tide in, tide out. Automatic, like a sleeping giant.

And everyday the Duwamish teaches us a lesson: If you're going to kill a river, you better stand there and watch as that flow becomes a trickle and that trickle becomes a drip and that drip stutters and stops and all you've got is silence. Because, if you're going to kill a river and you want to get away with it, you better make sure that river is really dead.