

## Q & A WITH KAREN PICKETT

*TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.*

*This month is the 19th installment in the series: former Ruston city councilmember Karen Pickett.*



Thirty-year Ruston resident Karen Pickett loves living where she does and talks with excitement about the changes she has observed in her community. Fond of history, she is an author (*Ruston: Images of America*), a collector of photographs, and a contributor to the Asarco History Hall.

The Asarco History Hall, located in Point Ruston's Copperline Apartment, is dedicated to the thousands of copper smelter workers who made their living at the sprawling complex and who created a colorful history deeply embedded in the development of both Tacoma and Ruston.

Serving on the Ruston town council from 1987-1992, Karen and her colleagues experienced the community's financial stress that immediately followed the shutdown of Asarco when the smelter's large tax base disappeared. She now looks at a community that has bounced back.

### **Q: How did you come to be connected to the History Hall?**

A: As an undergraduate at the University of Washington Tacoma, I took classes in local folklore and Tacoma's waterfront history, then did research papers and became more deeply interested in the related topics. For the history display, I secured permissions to use pieces from the collections of the library's Northwest Room and from the History Museum. Hearing about the project, people began to drop off photographs and keepsakes they had. Then I wrote the descriptions for the display at the History Hall.

### **Q: From what perspectives have you observed what has happened since 1992 when you left the town council?**

A: I did community outreach for Asarco for 16 years during the time of a lot of the environmental cleanup. To plan the future of the site, there was an unusual, very public, process led by a local civically minded architect. The process invited all residents, business owners and workers to dream of what could happen on that land. This was unique because the process asked participants "what do you want?" from the start. As a result, participants and others wholeheartedly bought into the development of the site we now see. That

process became the basis for the Environmental Protection Agency cleanup of the site that became Point Ruston, the \$1 billion-plus residential and retail center. The community suggested an onsite containment facility, which was completed in 2005, and the EPA approved that route over its own recommendation. Initial residential, public, and business yard cleanup involved over 3,600 properties. The state began a second round of that this year. I now serve as an oversight contractor for the EPA at the Point Ruston development site, monitoring air and water for cleanliness.

**Q: What has been the largest surprise for you throughout these projects?**

A: That the two municipalities of Tacoma and Ruston have worked together and come so far. When you have two different municipalities, regulations can be interpreted differently. The inevitably different personalities talked, and building is happening today. There are boots on the ground as a result.

**Q: What has been the biggest challenge for Ruston?**

A: Asarco was seen as big brother by Ruston residents. There was a feeling that Asarco would take care of us and that our destiny was in someone else's hands. There was a difficult 10 years when Ruston's identity moved on from what we did have in the past -- and most people supported -- as a working class municipality that liked getting its hands dirty. After Asarco left, the property values went up. After the Commencement Condominium Project was built, the town received an influx of cash from taxes. These were costly projects and not without hiccups, but to me it has been worth it for the overall good of the community.

**Q: What is the biggest challenge for Commencement Bay going forward?**

A: Continuing to find a balance between public access and sustainability. I believe that we do need some development in order to make the resource workable.

**Q: What are the opportunities?**

A: Achieving an enhanced sense of who we are as residents of Commencement Bay. To discover our real connections to the water, ones that consider proximity to it or the stunning views it provides as more than simply personal assets such as raising the value of one's own personal property. I'd like to see finding more ways to share this jewel with a broader audience. Maybe through the launching of a water taxi...

**Q: What have you learned?**

A: I have had the chance to work with collaborative leaders, people who are open, approachable, fun, intelligent, and forward-thinking. They had opinions but would listen first. That was effective for both my employers and the community. Finding compromise in complex projects takes people able to determine the impact a decision will have and to act based on what is workable. These skilled people I worked with taught me to remain calm, let your ego go, look at the big picture, and to do what serves everyone, not just you.