

When Seattle Came Together

Essay by Leonard Garfield, MOHAI Executive Director

Historians call it the Seattle Spirit—moments when the Seattle community, seemingly against all odds, has come together to get things done in dire times. The COVID-19 crisis of today and the “Spanish Flu” pandemic of a century ago both reflect moments when unexpected tragedy precipitated a strong civic response. While no events in our region’s history compare to those pandemics, there are moments in our past when extraordinary challenges upended the city’s routine and brought the community together in a demonstration of that famous Seattle Spirit. Here are just three stories from our collection that reflect moments that historians often cite as examples of the Seattle Spirit. What moments would you add?

Often, the “Seattle Spirit” has described the community’s response to economic or political dislocations as opposed to the health crises of 1918 and today. In fact, the first reference to the Seattle Spirit is believed to be July 14, 1873, when Seattleites awoke to the somber news that the nation’s early transcontinental railroad would bypass the Queen City, heading instead to the new city of Tacoma where it would build its terminus on the shores of Commencement Bay. For a town that had built itself in anticipation of the railroad’s arrival, the news came as a deep shock. Until it became an incentive to get the job done in a new way. On the very day that the bad news arrived, city leaders exhorted their fellow citizens—a quarter of whom had gathered at Yesler's Mill—to grab their picks and shovels, load their wagons, and build their own rail line heading eastward across the county. The community responded and got to work immediately. And while the work ultimately took four years and hundreds of Chinese and other workers to make real progress—the newly born Seattle and Walla Walla Railroad reached the coal fields of eastern King County, precipitating an economic boom of its own. And that dark day at Yesler's Mill would be seen as a major milestone in its own right—a sign that Seattle was a city that could battle through disappointment to long term success.

Nearly 20 years later, the city experienced the most devastating physical disaster in its history. The sudden fury of the Great Seattle Fire completely destroyed most of the city's waterfront business district on June 6, 1889. Volunteer firefighters from throughout the region raced to battle the flames, and though their valiant efforts were largely futile, the fight launched the city's rebirth. The ashes were still smoldering when the city mobilized to re-house businesses in tents, establish stronger building codes, create a new public water system, assemble a professional fire department, and, ultimately, rebuild the business district into a far larger and more permanent city center than had existed just months before. A common symbol of Seattle at that moment? A mythical Phoenix, boldly rising above the devastation.

Fast forward 70 years to a global crisis. World War II was a deeply challenging time for Seattle as it was for the entire nation. The community rapidly transformed into a classic homefront city, with massive manufacturers ramping up production to build the planes, ships and tanks that helped win the war. But it was also a community deeply harmed by the incarceration of Japanese American residents, torn from their homes and businesses and forced to remote camps for the duration of the war. Yet through the dislocation, the community came together in supporting the troops, many of whom were sent overseas from Seattle. Large-scale rallies to promote the sale of war bonds, hosted in a downtown plaza known through the war years as Victory Square, attracted thousands and raised millions of dollars to support the war effort. In this image, Lana Turner, a Hollywood star of the World War II generation, visited Seattle to help in the effort. Rallies like these, and the wartime efforts of thousands of workers, service personnel, and their families, confirmed Seattle's role as a center of America's "arsenal of democracy" and helped boost the spirit of a wartime nation.

Building a railroad, fighting a fire, waging a war, or battling a pandemic. Whatever we call times like these, when Seattle joins together to find common purpose and innovative solutions, you can see the Seattle Spirit at work. Be sure to let us know what the Seattle Spirit means to you and we'll share some of your thoughts in the weeks to come.