Welcome to an online exhibit presenting the AHS History Wall, which was created by Mary Ennes Davis in 2018.
Davis, an AHS alumna, created a mural-sized assemblage in the school’s common area.
Mary Ennes Davis incorporated such diverse elements as memorabilia, photographs, documents, stories and poetry into a public art installation designed to make local history come to life for students. She used the extensive archives of the Anacortes Museum, school artifacts, and hosted community events for input and collaboration.
Dear Laura,

The ladies are having a dance to raise funds for the new school at March Point. Almina says they need more room and are hopeful that they can purchase books and lanterns. It should be a festive occasion. I'm still teaching at the Weston School as by law, have to remain single. I'll surely want to be attending.

Yours truly,

Jennie Howard
Piecing together history is like stitching together a quilt. The parts are scattered, each piece telling only part of the story. In 1927, Sophie Walsh’s column for the Anacortes American reflected on the hardships of Fidalgo Island pioneers. She wrote, “...we have no yardstick to measure the blessings we now enjoy.” The purpose of this wall is to create that yardstick and share that story...to stitch together the history of the school and its community.

It is an inspirational story of generations of Anacortes citizens striving to make this city a destination, a Utopia. The transformation of Fidalgo Island was realized through hard work, speculation and big dreams.

There are similarities with other schools: sports, activities, favorite teachers, new buildings. What sets Anacortes High School apart is the town’s involvement; investing time and resources, empowering students to have a voice, and valuing good character with as much regard as good grades. The isolation of island life in the early days surely played a role in developing its strength of character. The story shared on this wall is a yardstick by which to measure the blessings of today.

Backdrops for the wall include vintage postcards and an oil painting from 1891. The painting was created by an itinerant artist who stayed at an Anacortes hotel and not able to pay his bill, painted what he saw out his window. He left the painting to settle his debt. The painting now hangs at The Anacortes Museum. Both the painting and the postcards seem fitting, as Anacortes High School has had a picture postcard view of Mount Baker for over a hundred years.
In the spirit of unity we are guided by our ancestors.
The first schooling on Fidalgo Island occurred thousands of years before Anacortes was founded in 1879. Early inhabitants, the Coast Salish people, harvested the abundant surrounding resources and passed on a culture rich in art and storytelling. The Point Elliot Treaty of 1855 forced the tribes onto reservations, opening up land for the first settlers to stake claims; the tribes lost their homes and their rights.

An early teacher on Fidalgo Island was Almina Richards Griffin. Arriving in 1868, she taught in a one-room school house at March’s Point. She was the first of many teachers to instruct small groups of students in settlements on the island. Other small schools, including one on Guemes Island, were built on donated land spanning the island’s neighborhood settlements. These territorial schools provided entertainment for nearby families, with picnics, plays and box socials. Because there were no roads or cars, the waterways connected the communities. In later years Anacortes took to bikes, but during the early days, boats, horses and two feet were the travel options.
I think the overriding belief system was in the value of education and in the dignity of work. You could do whatever you set your mind to and this was the place where it could happen, here in America.
Anacortes was a blue collar town filled with hard workers who believed in the dignity of work. The 1935 yearbook is dedicated to The Mill and showcases student artwork depicting the process of making lumber. Starting with the first lumber mill in 1882, the immense amount of forested land on Fidalgo Island and the accessible shoreline allowed for the success of box companies, shipyards, shingle and lumber mills. In 1911 one mill was reported to have milled 25,000 feet of lumber daily. Anacortes became known as the City of Smokestacks as Fidalgo Bay and the Guemes Channel were filled with manufacturing and industry. Many families’ livelihoods depended on the mills for income and students found work sorting logs and stacking lumber. A student recalls walking along the train trestle to deliver a hot meal to a family member working a shift at one of the mills.
The Waters Run Deep
THE SACRED

After the teacher asked if anyone had a sacred place
and the students fidgeted and shrank
in their chairs, the most serious of them all
said it was his car,
being in it alone, his tape deck playing
things he’d chosen, and others knew the truth
had been spoken,
and began speaking about their rooms,
their hiding places, but the cars kept coming up,
the car in motion,
music filling it, and sometimes one other person
who understood the bright altar of the dashboard
and how far away
a car could take him from the need
to speak, or to answer, the key
in having a key
and putting it in, and going.

—Stephen Dunn
In 1891, The Anacortes Hotel was built, but after a grand opening, struggled to stay occupied. Students at the north end of town moved in and it housed Whitney School until a school building was constructed five years later. The Nelson School was built on donated land at the opposite end of town and taught the South Siders. The 1910 census recorded a large and diverse immigrant population in Anacortes. It included Norway, Sweden, Germany, Italy and Austria. Lake Campbell was home to both a Norwegian and Swedish Community, 15th street was referred to as Garlic Alley, home to Croatian families, while German families settled at the south end of town. The classrooms were a mix of language, culture and age. It was not unusual for a teacher to have 40 students ranging in age from 6 to 21. Not all spoke English, adding to the teaching challenge. Books were shared, lessons memorized and it was a privilege to attend school. Students were expected to help provide for their families so many left school early and never graduated.
The Columbian School was built in 1892 in the same location as the current high school campus. It was a vision to behold. Designed with Gothic columns and Victorian classrooms, its inspiration was the upcoming World's Columbian Exposition. The town spent $40,000.00 for a building with a bell tower that provided the best view in town. Generations of students recall the sound of the bell ringing and their sense of wonder while looking out the upper windows at snow on the trees below. The sheer cost and size of the building was a reflection of the town's belief and investment in the students' future. Worn front steps remain on 17th street as a reminder of the many feet that climbed them until the building was demolished in 1966. The bell was preserved and also remains on today's school campus.
Manual Training Boys Show Skill
By Erecting Fine New School Building

The American has watched with interest the growth of the High Manual Training School in Seattle, which is completed. From the best of workmanship and materials, the building has been erected, and it is now ready to open. The boys have worked hard, and the building is now ready for occupancy. The boys are very proud of their work, and it will be a great source of pride to the community.
High School students recall choosing which educational track they wanted to pursue. Starting in the 1920s there were two choices: The Commercial track and the College Preparatory track. For girls, the Commercial track included typing, bookkeeping, home management and cooking. For boys it included woodshop and manual labor. One of the earliest manual labor projects took place in 1917. The boys drew blueprints and built their own shop building. In the 1930s, boys built fishing boats, and in later years many worked on automobiles. The College Preparatory track offered foreign language, science, the arts, literature, history and mathematics. In the early days few students continued on to college; those who did took The Old Kulushun boat to Bellingham Normal School, residing in boarding houses.
blessing the boats
(at St. Mary's)
may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back
may you open
your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that

-Lucille Clifton

I didn't raise you to be a quitter. I raised you to change the world.
The Coast tribes had fished the rich waters of Puget Sound long before settlers arrived. In the early 1890s the codfish industry began and was quickly followed by salmon. Fish traps were used and canneries sprang up along the north shoreline of Anacortes. Canneries employed Samish, Chinese, European immigrants and Japanese workers. Although they worked together they were not treated equally. During the biggest fish runs, businesses and schools closed to help harvest the catch. In 1914 Apex Cannery reported processing 50,000 salmon in one day with children working alongside adults. In later years, The Seahawk Newspaper ran a column titled Round up Time for Summer Jobs to help students find jobs. Many worked in the canneries, at the ferry dock and alongside farm workers in the Skagit fields. High school boys coveted jobs on the fishing boats. As the local salmon supply diminished, boats headed north to Alaska to fill their holds. The risks were high, but so were the profits. Fishing was not without cost and the fishing fleet did not always return home safely. The community who worked together also mourned the loss of loved ones together.
Flanders Field, was built in 1928 with a student club, The Knight Hawks, standing guard at the fenceless perimeter to catch unpaying fans. In 1946, a proud town dedicated War Memorial Field with the city’s first evening football game. Businesses shut down and fans filled the grandstands. Opportunities to participate in school clubs were made available with community service clubs serving as role models.

The town supported the growth of the schools and many organizations offered scholarships. Over the years the number of students choosing college has increased and Anacortes schools have earned high accolades for supporting multiple paths for learning. The wide-ranging vocational programs prepare students with skills to enter the workforce and advanced placement classes offer a solid foundation for higher education. Many alumni shared that the strong bonds fostered between teachers, coaches and students remained steadfast into adulthood.
The Rhododendron
1910 to the present
Going back to the earliest yearbooks, there are grainy pictures of drama productions, marching bands, choral groups and musicals. Art clubs and literary groups printed their work and the sheer volume reflects the sense of importance placed on the humanities. Opportunities for exposure to new ideas were provided throughout the decades, including trips to Washington D.C., New York City, the Ashland Shakespearean Festival, Centrum at Fort Worden, band trips, and debate competitions. The town also brought varied experiences and culture to the schools. During one school year, The Rotary Club and Youth for Understanding sponsored 13 foreign exchange students from around the world and housed them in local homes. A mock United Nations was held each year and students were challenged to compare U.S. democracy with other governments and cultures.
Basketball was the sport that unified the entire community. The old gym's bleachers would fill to the rafters with fans. Young, old, parents and townspeople, all would gather to cheer on their teams. After a film was released in 1924 starring a pirate named The Seahawk, students adopted the name to represent their athletic teams. In 1956 the Hawks were the NW District champions and headed to Seattle for the State Championship. The entire town shut down and Hec Edmundson Pavilion recorded the largest crowd to ever attend a game: 13,241 with an additional 3,000 fans still outside.

During the 1960s The Hawk Hex became a tradition at basketball games. Five hundred pieces of licorice were purchased for each game and fans would wave it in the stands. Players ate it before the games and it was a symbol of school spirit and a hex on the opposing team. The town has had an unwavering support of all their teams and there has always been a sea of purple and white filling the stands.
Traditions abound in Anacortes: the Victory Bell, Homecoming, the Seahawk Newspaper, painting the Senior Rock, dragging the Gut, the Scholastic Top Ten, the Outstanding Leadership Ten, the Seahawk Store. If you dig deeper a tradition of student voice is discovered. The Board of Control, organized in 1938, allowed students to write a constitution, creating a decision-making structure for the student body. Over the years the name changed, but the purpose remained; students participate and have a voice in decisions regarding school government, activities and community service. Students published their own newspaper and also wrote a column that was published in the Anacortes American. A more recent addition has been student representation on the Anacortes School Board. Student voice is an important, ongoing tradition in Anacortes schools.
Democracy cannot be inherited; it must be earned by each generation.
The arts exploded in Anacortes in the 1960s and have maintained momentum to the present day. In the early days APOTA (Anacortes Patron of the Arts) was formed to support the fledgling arts festival. APOTA fund raisers have included dinners and auctions; the most memorable was in 1965 when they chartered The Princess Margarite Cruise Ship and filled it with students and townspeople from all over Skagit County. In the 1970s a community group wrote grants to begin a cultural education program which paid for classroom residencies for artists, musicians, storytellers and poets.

The program grew and Anacortes became known for its extensive arts program and its permanent collection of purchased student art, a model emulated by other districts. Martha Graham’s New York Dance Company performed in one of the early Pop-n-Art productions at Brodniak Hall; dancers invited football players to join them on stage to compete in a muscle and leg strength contest. The dancers won.
Are you ready for Anacortes? Because we are ready for you!

Go SEAHAWKS!

Foul Shot

With two 60's stuck on the scoreboard
And two seconds hanging on the clock.
The solemn boy in center of eyes
Squeezed by silence.
Seeks out the line with his feet,
Soothes his hands along his uniform.
Gently drums the ball against the floor.
Then measures the waiting net
Rises the ball on his right hand,
Balances it with his left.
Calm it with fingertips.
Breathe.
Crouches, rises.
And then through a stretched skilllessness
Nudges it upward.
The ball, slides up and out,
Leaves, wobbles, wavers,
Hesitates,
Explores,
Plays if coy
Until every face begs with
unsounding screams.

And then,

Right before ROAR-UP,
Dives down and through.

Edwin A. Henry

We live our lives by what we choose to see.
Anacortes is a small town with strong branches and deep roots. Alumni return to raise their own families and the generations of community members span the decades. In interviewing alumni ranging in ages from 19 to 108, the common threads running through their stories were relationships with others, remembrance of friendships and the feelings connected to those memories.

In the early days, they recall gathering at each other’s homes to share a meal and play games. Linked to these memories are the welcoming of parents, the smell of soup on the stove and bread in the oven. Generations of students recall dragging-the-gut (driving up and down Commercial Avenue in cars while honking and waving at their friends) or gathering at Village Pizza, or, in earlier days, at The West Coast Creamery. Others recalled special teachers whose classrooms were a safe haven. Water is part of many of the memories: ferry rides, picnics on the beach, fishing and watching the changing tide. Living on an island, by sheer necessity, created a unique opportunity to be connected to one another. These connections are the notches on the yardstick, a way to measure the blessings of today.

In the words of alumnus and poet Sam Green:

“But what makes our lucky houses even luckier, I think is the act of sharing, letting the raven wings of our hearts carry the poetry of our lives to others, even as we stand listening for that distinctive flap ourselves.”

I am honored to share this wall with you. It was made possible with resources shared by the Anacortes Museum and its staff, and with the help of my husband, Jeff Davis.

Artist - Mary Ennes Davis 2018
Anacortes' early founders hoped to entice the world to come to their town. The map shown above, and also enlarged for this section of the wall, came from an 1890 publication titled, Anacortes, the Terminal City of Puget Sound. It was used to promote Anacortes as a destination. With real estate speculation and the hope of becoming a major railroad terminus, early leaders referred to Anacortes as the New York of the West. The hope and promise of the city changed dramatically with the ebb and flow of promotion and pipe dreams. Anacortes became a boom town, growing from 60 to 2000 nearly overnight. With the increase in population came construction. Large hotels and the Columbia School were built, railroad tracks were laid and businesses opened overnight. Land prices and the population grew in anticipation of becoming a large metropolis. However, Anacortes was not selected as the railroad terminus and many left, leaving behind a smaller population of hard working individuals who believed in the location and the potential of the island.

Parts used in this installation:

- The drinking fountain was preserved by Bill Mitchell from the Columbian School.
- The yardsticks are from Anacortes businesses and the old high school.
- The coffee grinder, typewriter and lantern are from The Bird family on Lake Campbell. The grinder is thought to have come from a local mercantile open in the early 1900’s.
- The components that connect the globes are largely from the old high school. Parts include film reels, musical instruments, keys, salmon labels, hardware, Bunsee burners, tape measures, soda fountain ice cream dishes, cafeteria utensils, records, vintage tins.
- The wooden board is a bench seat from the girls’ locker room.
- The ships wheel and compass were salvaged from an Anacortes fishing boat, The Brigadier. whose crew was saved after sinking in Alaska. It was salvaged by Anthony George Framorich and preserved by Marta Petris.
- The purse seine cork line is from McCracken's bosthouse on Guemes Island.
- Woodworking tools are from Phil McCracken’s studio on Guemes Island.
- The dry dock draft indicator is from Lovrie’s Shipyards.
- The books are from the old high school and local antique stores.
- The crates are from the wharf and a local mercantile.
- The Anacortes- the Friendly City sign is a copy of a sign designed for car grills in the 1980’s.
- The birds are decorative Carriage Birds from the early 1900’s.
- The postcards and photographs were used with permission from the Anacortes Museum.
I think the overriding belief was in the value of education and in the dignity of work. You could do whatever you set your mind to and this was the place where it could happen, here in America.