

Case Study: Nooksack Valley Heritage Center at Everson Library

About the Everson Branch of the Whatcom County Library System (WCLS)

Everson is a small community of about 3,000 residents located in Whatcom County, Washington, 15 miles northeast of Bellingham on the banks of the Nooksack River in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. The library has a collection of 25,500 items and a staff of 12 plus two adjuncts.

The Everson/Nooksack communities have an enduring interest in local history. In 1976, members of the Everson Senior Center created a narrated slideshow of “Our Little Corner of the Valley.” Soon after the Everson branch was established in 1977, the Friends of the Library included a History Committee, which recorded local oral histories. The library displays photographs from the “Everson Historical Collection,” assembled by local volunteers in 1989 for the state centennial celebration.

The “Whatcom Memories” notebooks, full of photographs and family memorabilia, were collected in 1995. A 2012 Rural Heritage grant from the Washington State Library (WSL) enabled digitization of photographs from the Whatcom Memories project, now housed on the WSL website as Nooksack Valley Heritage.

Everson Branch Manager Eileen Shaw led the project development, with support from new Director Christine Perkins and Regan Robinson, Public Services Manager for WCLS. All quotations are from Shaw.



(before)
Everson Library
stacks

Responding to community needs

Community input about new uses of the library space was collected primarily through a survey, which was distributed online, through the mail and in person to reach as many residents as possible. The short survey of nine questions sought to determine what patrons valued about the Everson Branch.

Based on the 183 responses from respondents age 10 to over 70, there is much that the Everson Public Library is doing right:

- *Services rated most useful are all very traditional—collection checkout, computers/Internet, storytimes, lectures/events, knowledgeable staff*
- *The number-one most relevant and popular thing is the monthly history programming*
- *Asked about improvements, the overriding theme was “We need a bigger library!”*

Shaw did not feel that they received a “clear mandate” from the community survey responses.

“There was definite enthusiasm for doing ‘something’ in the library, but not clarity as to ‘what.’ We looked at the positive reaction to our long-standing focus on local history, and decided to build upon the groundwork of the past to create the Nooksack Valley Heritage Center within our library.”

Alignment and buy-in

In a small community, buy-in is especially important. To begin with, the survey validated that alignment with the Nooksack Valley pride in its history and heritage was strong. The tight-knit library staff were instrumental in determining the questions for the original survey and were invited to respond with comments and suggestions throughout the process. **The campaign to inform the community about the project probably reached every corner of town.**

In addition to the survey and feedback solicited by the Library Friends, the library distributed informational flyers, promoted the project at the town’s summer festival, and sent letters to business owners, clergy, nonprofits and educators.

They bought Facebook ads targeted to anyone with an Everson address. For those who visited the library, a large “What’s Happening Here” banner was hung in the newly vacated space to stimulate questions and fuel anticipation. The coming changes were explained at monthly history programs and feedback forms were provided for anonymous expression of reactions to the changes.

Reclaiming space

With floor area just over 4,000 square feet, the choices for space were limited. The natural inclination was to choose the reading area, which was already furnished with tables and chairs and no stacks. However, that proved to be a false start. Rather than lose that area to a new purpose, Shaw and her team refreshed their thinking and settled on the space in the center in direct line of sight from the circulation desk, an area that housed a “dwindling reference collection, soon-to-be-abandoned VHS and books on tape, and other things.”

It took some shuffling to clear the area. Once the area was cleared, there was room to design and to breathe new life into the space.

“We reduced collections that were housed on rolling units, made room for the two Internet stations in the center to join their three counterparts in the south section. We received permission from our IT department to relocate the printer station, which resulted in an improved Internet/printer configuration. Books on CD and music CDs were moved to the DVD aisle, so that became a dedicated audio-visual aisle. Adult Nonfiction was also severely weeded to accommodate the previous moves.”

Designing and planning

Soon after the decision was made to focus the new space on Nooksack Valley heritage, Shaw convened a meeting of 12–15 interested community members to discuss the possibilities and solicit their thoughts. Among those who showed up was Friends of the Library board member Reg Wilford, a new resident who had bought and begun to restore a century-old house in Everson. He brought to the project a budding passion for the local history and valuable expertise from his day job with a company that designs interactive exhibits for museums. His pro bono contributions were pivotal in directing design decisions and selecting fixtures and equipment. “He became the real visionary for the project.”

Wilford worked with Shaw to develop a plan for the space that would be flexible and multipurpose, with modular, mobile furnishings. They identified three key elements for the Heritage Center—**research**, **digitization** and **recording**. Two 24-inch touch screen kiosks would provide access to the Washington Rural Heritage site, Ancestry.com, local history films and other community history presentations, and the tools for visitors to create their own histories. The hardware and software selected require little staff support and don't have high ongoing costs for technical support or upgrades.

Once the plans were formed and equipment ordered, volunteers came out of the community woodwork to implement the construction phase.

“The story here is about volunteerism. A patron overheard us talking and offered his drafting skills; another patron, a local contractor, agreed to help build. Local businesses donated building materials. Two local professional photographers provided historical photographs and helped to create banners. The Everson Lions Club paid for a year’s subscription to Ancestry.com and a former school librarian offered to teach monthly classes on its use. I think we had just the right amount of help.”

(after)
Nooksack Valley Heritage Center



Partnerships

The Everson library's plans for its Nooksack Valley Heritage Center aroused the interest of related organizations in the community. The Northwest Washington Fair Foundation plans to build a Nooksack Valley Heritage Museum on the fairgrounds, and would like to partner with the library and the Lynden Museum. Shaw met with the curator of the Lynden Museum and discussed "a plethora of partnership possibilities."

Shaw also met with representatives from the Nooksack Valley School. They are compiling a Nooksack/Everson community directory for their Senior Project, and will be partnering with the Everson library, the two city councils and the Lions Club. They want to include a strong local history element and will feature the library's new Nooksack Valley Heritage Center.

Programming

Even before the Heritage Center was finished, patrons began taking advantage of the new possibilities.

"The Ancestry classes have full attendance and an enthusiastic reception. Patrons are sitting in the Center, browsing our expanded local history collection. The recording of oral histories has resumed, fueled by the enthusiasm for this project, and the knowledge that we'll have a place in-house where they will be housed and can be enjoyed."

The new Nooksack Valley Heritage Center opened officially to the community after the Friends' annual meeting on April 26, 2014. The 35 community members listened to Shaw and Wilford describe how the Center came together and their vision for its future.

"Step back in time, browse our collection of local history books and DVDs, interact with our history-focused touch screen work stations, explore Ancestry.com, bring in your artifacts and memorabilia to digitize, and record your own local history."



Unanticipated results and lessons learned

The Heritage Center is being received with enthusiasm from staff and the community. The Center is definitely capturing the interest of patrons who come to the library for other reasons.

Shaw has been amazed at the community members who volunteered to work on the project, and at the close friendships that developed as a result.

“We have a distinctly different new space, highly visible to all patrons, and dedicated to the exploration of local history. We have a sleeker, fresher collection. We’ve utilized the space that we have more efficiently.”

For Shaw and her team, the project took longer than anticipated; they had to come to terms with the reality that it could not be rushed because decision-making was sequential, often depending on the outcomes of the physical alterations. They made a significant change of direction in the location for the Center—a decision that required time to allow the better solution to percolate up to the surface.

“I tend to be a ‘plan-y’ person: make a list and check it off, hopefully in the right order. This project has played out much more spontaneously. As a result, creativity has flourished; ideas keep exploding and evolving. It continues to be an exhilarating ride. I guess the process itself has exemplified the key goal for the space we are creating: flexibility. Our ideas kept evolving, hopefully getting better!”

(after)
Nooksack Valley Heritage
Center in use

