

*Welcome to “History on the Fly” a podcast series offered by the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is titled: “Erna Gunther and the WPA Diorama,” by Maria Pascualy, Curator for the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is one of four gallery talks describing the Hall of History gallery at the Washington State History Museum, in Tacoma, Washington.*

Indian people in the Puget Sound region had three basic house types. One of these was the shed roof house. Imagine enormous upright red cedar posts towering on the beach with red cedar planks resting on cross bars to form the classic lean to like roof. Making a house was hard work. Each cedar tree was felled by hand- this took hours or days. Once the tree was down and hand cleaned with an adze wooden wedges were hammered into the log with a stone maul. The wooden wedges slowly split the planks from the logs. Dogfish skin was sometimes used to sand down the surface of planks destined for finer homes. Planks for walls were secured to each other with cedar withes and the roof planks were held in place high above with heavy rocks. Planks were treasured. Planks were considered inheritable property and were passed down to family members.

At the Washington State History Museum you can see a Puget Sound Salish shed roof home in miniature. Our tiny plank house is located in the back of the Hall of Washington History. This delicate three-dimensional miniature world in a plexi cube, the diorama, measures about four feet by four feet. It gives us a snap shot in time of life on Puget Sound before the arrival of Euro-Americans. We see a sandy beach, tiny sea creatures and carefully modeled human figures with skin clothes added on with a brushstroke. A large shed roof house sits in the middle with all its planks visible as people work inside and outside the home. We can see a red and black painted canoe with its paddle; a gathering basket left by the side of the home and a coiled cooking basket sits near the fire pit outside.

Dioramas like this one were once commonplace in museums because they made it possible for visitors to experience an entire environment. Dioramas created a sense of awe that helped the museum get the visitor to pay attention and ask questions and learn.

How accurate is the scene depicted? Erna Gunther, an anthropologist at the University of Washington in the 1930s was in charge of this project. She directed a team of artists employed by the government to make educational exhibits for museums. She provided the young artists with readings on Indian life in the Puget Sound and then they submitted designs for the diorama. Doctor Gunther, who had worked with Indian people in the region for many years, made sure the details of the home were accurate. Although several people worked on each diorama museum records tell us Joe Taylor was the lead artist. Artists were paid \$15 dollars a day by the Works Progress Administration, a federal project established by President Roosevelt in his third year in office when unemployment in America was at about 25%. Gunther, in an interview in the 1960s emphasized that the diorama project educated the artists about the Indian history of Washington State. It also helped educate thousands of third and fourth graders who saw these little worlds during their school visits to the Burke Museum in Seattle. In 1989 the dioramas were transferred to the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma.

What do Indian people think of this diorama? Cecelia Carpenter, a Nisqually elder examined the recreated scene and wrote:

*Washington children should know that long ago our people needed a deep knowledge of the natural world in order to build their plank houses, find the fish, dig the camas, gather berries. This knowledge insured the survival of the people and was important knowledge that was passed down among us for countless generations.*

Mrs. Carpenter likes the plank house. I hope you can make time to come down to the museum and see the little plank house for yourself.