

A Short History of Bellevue, Washington

Eastside Heritage Center, 2011

In 1863, while Seattle was still a rough town of dirt roads and scattered homes, the first settlers began to drift across Lake Washington and claim lands in what is now Bellevue. The first claim is thought to be that of Aaron and Ann Mercer, members of the famous Seattle family, who staked out 80 acres along what is now Mercer Slough. They were living on the property by 1869, the same year that William Meydenbauer, a baker from Seattle, staked out his claim around the bay that would later bear his name.

In the 1870s and 1880s more settlers trickled over. Most of the area was logged off during this period, leaving open areas that became orchards, vegetable patches and berry farms. Fast-growing Seattle needed a regular supply of fresh produce, and Bellevue provided it. Regular ferry service began in the 1880s, linking Eastside communities with markets in Seattle through Leschi and Madison Park. Most of the farmers had families, and Bellevue's first school opened in 1883 in a log cabin in the Enatai area.



Meydenbauer Bay, Bellevue, circa 1910.

By 1900 the greater Bellevue area had about 400 full-time residents. The trappings of civilization began to arrive, with phone service reaching the Eastside by 1907 and mercantile stores opening in Medina and Bellevue. The major change came in 1913 when car ferry service aboard the Leschi began. Trips left the Leschi dock in Seattle every 15 minutes and stopped at Medina and Meydenbauer Bay.

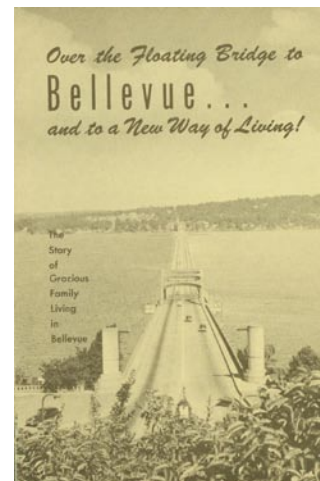


Takeshita Strawberry Farm near Lake Bellevue, 1930s.

Bellevue and its surrounding communities grew gradually during the first decades of the century, with the census showing about 1,500 residents in 1920. The American Pacific Whaling Company moved its headquarters to Bellevue in 1919, wintering boats in Meydenbauer Bay. The first Strawberry Festival was held in 1925, drawing 3,000 people, mostly from across the lake. The Festival became an annual event, and Bellevue developed a reputation as a peaceful, pleasant farming town.

Then everything changed. In 1940 that miracle of engineering the Mercer Island Floating Bridge opened, bringing an end to ferry service and making a trip to Seattle just about as fast as it is today. Thanks to the ad campaign of the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce and the availability of cheap land, the post-war housing boom spilled across the bridge and altered Bellevue forever. New subdivisions sprang up along the new highway at Eastgate, Newport Hills and Lake Hills, providing attractive, affordable homes to the returning GIs and their families.

Bellevue Chamber of Commerce Promotional Brochure, circa 1950.





Eugene Boyd and Phil Reilly, 1953.

In 1953 Bellevue successfully incorporated as a third-class city with a population of 5,940. In the coming decades the city would grow, as much through annexations as by construction of new homes, reaching 60,000 in 1970.

A growing population provided a customer base for retailers and Kemper Freeman Sr. opened Bellevue Square shopping center in 1946, with the Bel-Vue Theatre as the first anchor tenant. The neighborhood shopping districts of Eastgate, Newport Hills, Lake Hills, and Northtowne opened as those areas grew. Crossroads Shopping Center opened in 1960, a decade that also saw Bellevue's first big box stores at Overlake.

If the era from World War II through the 1970s was all about "gracious living", the 1980s to the present has been about

Bellevue as a major center for business. By the 1970s the Puget Power building (built in 1956) and a few modest office buildings on 108th Avenue were the centers of business. Then came the "Boeing Bust," and Seattle residents looked east across the lake for work. The Paccar Building (built in 1967), followed by several taller buildings along 108th gave downtown Bellevue a skyline by the mid-1980s. At around the same time, large office complexes started sprouting along Interstate 90, from Factoria to Eastgate. By 2000 Bellevue had more jobs than residents, ending its status as a bedroom community. Microsoft has become the city's largest employer, having absorbed a large part of the new downtown office space built during the 2000s.



Puget Power Building on NE 4th Street, circa 1969.



Bellevue Way & NE 8th Street, looking south-east, 1937 & 2007.

All of this development would not be nearly as interesting if it were not for the remarkable people who have chosen to make Bellevue their home. Back when Seattle itself was a rough place, hardy pioneers cleared the land. Japanese farmers settled much of the area, providing the strawberries for the first Strawberry Festival. The WWII veterans who drove the first wave of growth have been replaced by the Microsoft workforce that comes from all over the world: according to the U.S. Census Bureau, one third of Bellevue's population was born outside the United States. In 140 years Bellevue has



traveled the route from forest to farm to suburb to global city. And from those earliest pioneer days to today, it has always been a great place to live, work and visit.