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Thea Foss Waterway

From Blight to Beauty

By Sean Griffin

My first trip to Tacoma, Washington was a drive-by, in the spring of 1982, and it was an unprecedented olfactory assault. Whatever that intense, pervasive catbox-like aroma was couldn't possibly be good for you, and I recall trying to hold my breath as I passed through the downtown area and port. Seattleites derided the "aroma of Tacoma" with good reason.

A decade after my first visit, I moved to Tacoma, and got my first introduction to the Thea Foss Waterway. Here's what I recall: an industrial cesspool, polluted by decades of toxic chemicals, solvents, sludge and heavy metals from businesses that ranged from a coal-gasification plant to a plating facility. Where it came closest to downtown, a mile-long stretch of Pacific Avenue, I mostly found boarded-up, abandoned warehouses and fractured sidewalks largely populated by disreputable people.

In other words, you only cruised to the Thea Foss if you needed a major

repair that required the attention of a boatyard.

That was then. This is now: a blue-collar city once derided as the arm-pit of the Pacific Northwest has been transformed into one of the region's most dynamic, upscale and desirable places to visit, raise a family and/or do business. One of the starkest manifestations of that sea-change is found along the Thea Foss Waterway.

The difference between my 1992 impression of the Thea Foss and today's couldn't be more striking. The aroma is gone – unless you like the smell of fresh sea breezes. There is life all along the Foss: restaurants, art galleries, parks, condos, apartment buildings and museums; even the Thea Foss Esplanade, a linear park along the waterfront and on both sides of the waterway, with signs that tell the story of the Foss' transformation. The esplanade links to a waterfront trail that leads to Tacoma's Ruston Way waterfront, which will continue all the way to Point Defi-



ance Park sometime around 2018.

The turnaround is the quintessential “darkest hour is just before dawn” story. The nadir was the federal government’s recognition in 1983 that the Thea Foss was one of the most polluted sites in the nation, adding it to the Commencement Bay Superfund site. Coming with that recognition, however, was funding for the cleanup. What ensued was an extraordinary public-private partnership that led to a transformation of the waterfront and the adjoining Union Station Historic District.

Union Station, a stunning Beaux Arts building dating to 1911 – once slated for demolition – was restored to its former elegance, becoming home to the federal courts and a large collection of glass art by native son Dale Chihuly. Then work began on a new Washington State History Museum, a convention center, a new Tacoma Art Museum and the crown jewel – a University of Washington campus, preserving, restoring and transforming many of those boarded-up warehouses I saw in 1992 into an urban gem of a college campus. Those successes, and the momentum of the public-private partnerships, resulted in Tacoma being the first community in Washington to get a light-rail system up and running. It’s a 1.6-mile leg that reaches from Tacoma Dome station, travels through the Union Station Historic District, paralleling the waterway, and reaches its turnaround in the heart of Tacoma’s theatre district.

To guide the transformation of the waterway – and free it from undue political interference – Tacoma created the Foss Waterway Development Authority, whose vision was to guide the creation of a diverse and multi-use community with residential, cultural, arts, culinary, educational and maritime activities.

Near the north end of the Foss is one of Tacoma’s lesser-known gems, the Foss Waterway Seaport, billing





itself as Puget Sound's premier maritime heritage, education and event center. There is extensive moorage at the Foss Waterway Seaport dock, including a new seaplane float at the north end, making it one of the few museums directly accessible by sea and air. Maritime exhibits include some of the original rowboats that Thea Foss – she of “Tugboat Annie” fame – rented and sold beginning in 1889, on her way to launching Foss Maritime Services.

At the opposite end of the Thea Foss, just beyond the end of the waterway and next to the Tacoma Dome, a shrine to the automobile has arisen. LeMay - America's Car Museum, with four floors of cars selected from the world's largest collections of vintage automobiles, opened its doors to the public in 2012.

Within the collection, in addition to rotating exhibits and a chance to witness car restoration in progress, you'll find a 1948 vintage Tucker - one of only 48 made - as featured in Francis Ford Coppola's 1988 film “Tucker - The Man and His Dream.” The big surprise? A 1922 Olympic 2.5-ton truck, manufactured in Tacoma at a time when some in the “City of Destiny” envisioned it as Pacific Northwest counterpart to Detroit.

Flanking the Foss on the west are three other museums – the Tacoma Art Museum, the International Museum of Glass and the Washington State History Museum. Like Foss Waterway Seaport and LeMay - America's Car Museum, all have been built during Tacoma's recent renaissance.

The Dock Street Marina borders the International Museum of Glass, and from there it is a short jaunt across the Chihuly Bridge of Glass to vibrant Pacific Avenue, with its light-rail line, beautiful UW campus, restaurants, retailers, clubs and museums. Amazingly, that's the very same stretch I saw boarded up and abandoned just 23 years earlier. 🚢



10 THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEA FOSS WATERWAY

1. Tie up your boat at the Waterway Seaport dock – or park your Beaver at the seaplane float at the north end of the dock – and wander down to Rock the Dock for a beer and standard pub fare. You can moor there for free for two hours, or overnight for \$12 and up, depending on length.
2. After lunch, wander along the dock to the Foss Waterway Seaport museum and take in the region's maritime history. Tour the collection, or take advantage of one of the activities, ranging from learning fly-tying to stand-up paddle boarding.
3. Pull up at the guest float at Johnny's Dock Restaurant or moor at the Dock Street Marina and grab a waterfront table with a commanding view of the Foss Waterway, SR 509 Bridge, the Museum of Glass and the Foss Esplanade.
4. Visit the International Museum of Glass, with its collections, exhibits and live action as renowned artists fashion art glass in the cavernous “hot shop.” Or, if the weather's too nice to be inside, just pop into the museum's gift shop for some truly unique gifts.
5. Stroll the linear waterfront park known as the Foss Waterway Esplanade, enjoying the public art. When you're tired of walking, stop at South Bar on the bottom floor of the Thea's Landing condo/apartment tower for refreshment.
6. Cross the Chihuly Glass Bridge to reach the vibrant Union Station Historic District, where you'll find restaurants, galleries, art, a bookstore, UW-Tacoma and the Tacoma Link light rail line.
7. Got tickets to a Tacoma Dome concert? Catch Tacoma Link light rail and ride it free to Tacoma Dome station. Have tickets for the Pantages, the Rialto or Theatre on the Square? Ride Tacoma Link free in the other direction to the end of the line (the theater district).
8. In the market for a new yacht? NW Yachtnet is on the ground floor of Thea's Landing – next door to International Museum of Glass – and longtime yacht brokers Bob Berglund and Kurt Kingman will be happy to broker your next deal.
9. The Washington State History Museum is an outstanding, hands-on museum for all ages, with a terrific Northwest gift shop. On the top floor is a huge model-train layout depicting historic Tacoma.
10. The Tacoma Art Museum is a charmer, emphasizing Western and Northwest art, including Native American art, glass art and early-American modernism.