

Ma Olsen ran a small grocery store in downtown Linnton for much of the first half of the last century. Those old enough to remember her knew her as Grandma Olsen, and loved it when their mothers sent them to get something from her store -- she was kind and there were penny candles, and nickel pickles in a barrel by the door. She had a pad by the register where she kept the families' accounts, to be paid on pay day at the end of the week. During the Depression, she forgave bills, feeding folks in need. Her store was bulldozed in the early 60's, along with most of the other buildings lining St Helens Road in Linnton, to widen the highway. Not long after this Nora "Ma" Olsen, while crossing the highway, was hit, and killed by a car. A plaque, bench, and a Benson Bubbler were placed where the back of her store had been, and that swath of hill was named Ma Olsen's Garden.

Forty-five years after her death, the steep hillside that was her Garden was overgrown with ivy, blackberry, and a tangle of fallen trees. We removed the thick green shroud that covered the garden, added paths, benches and a berm, planted hundreds of native shrubs and flowers of over fifty species. After three years of work we held a re-dedication of the garden, shocked that the dozen strangers trooping across the highway toward the garden were Ma Olsen's relatives, some coming all the way from Idaho. Most of the five block long, seventy-five foot wide sliver of land, of which the Garden is the southern tip, remained buried under invasive plants. Why not extend the project north, since Linnton as "hanging garden" was the goal to begin with?

So we roll along; the past two winters extending the garden another block, planting as we go. It's gnarly work, with established ivy, blackberry, vinca and laurel on rocky, steep, uneven slopes. Uncovering old stone walls, terraces, mundane and weird trash heaps, and poison oak keeps the work interesting, sometimes too much so. When the rains begin this fall, we'll be at it again, working a tangle of small trees, ivy and blackberry thicket behind where a bank used to stand. We'll come to the new walls made of giant boulders soon. We're incubating plans for a tongue-in-cheek sculpture/Dr. Seuss garden in this section. We should be able to polish off the remaining weeds this winter, but we need an infusion of help and laughter. We'll also be restoring the Linnton Trail Head this winter, so we'll host at least two events a month from October to May, with a big party in June. We'll have fun all winter.

~ Rob Lee