

# Gordy Tweit – Capturing the Spirit of Time

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Someone said it was impossible, but little Gordy was undeterred. As a child, Gordon Tweit took his first photo with a square Kodak camera. Before the towering trees were tall on Donovan Avenue, he stood on his front porch during a storm and vowed to capture lightning. He got the shot that night, some eighty years ago and has been photographing Bellingham's natural wonders, events and culture ever since. Known as Fairhaven's unofficial archivist, Tweit was the official pharmacist at Fairhaven Pharmacy on Harris Avenue until 1991. Now, at age ninety, he's seen his coastal haven's evolution through a myriad of lenses.

Big band music floated in the background of Tweit's living room as we sat on antique green couches to discuss his life. In 1941 Gordy began as a delivery boy for the pharmacy. By age 18, he was stationed in the Navy on the Aleutian Islands of Alaska as a quartermaster in charge of steering the ship.



Later, as a student at Western Washington University, young Gordy returned to work at Fairhaven Pharmacy on weekends and summers to satisfy his requirements. In those early years, he liked helping people trouble shoot with their own cameras as much as he enjoyed filling prescriptions and taking photos himself. By 1952, he was a young pharmacist working full time and, like his predecessors since 1889, he worked and managed the store before purchasing it from Rene La Case. Tweit finally sold the business

to Rob Johansen in 1991, but stayed on in various capacities until the store finally closed its doors in 2015.

For 126 years, the pharmacy provided a place to answer people's questions- be they physical ailments or otherwise. "Everyone wanted advice back then, not necessarily pharmacy advice ... That's what pharmacies were in those days," Tweit remembered. One could pay the telephone and electricity bill, get the telephone number of the man who sold wood, have a flashlight fixed, fill a made to order prescription and do the grocery shopping in one fell swoop. There were deliveries made in the dead of night, political meetings held in the basement and a sign that hung, well before Tweit's day, guaranteeing information of every kind.

The kind of service Tweit gave his customers is almost inconceivable today. As evidence of this loving attention, he keeps a letter postmarked from 1962 in the nightstand drawer beside his bed. On the back of the envelope, scribbled in pencil, is the word "SAVE". The letter is addressed to Mr. Tweit from Edward R. Murrow, a broadcast journalist most notable for his coverage of WWII. Murrow thanked Tweit for the red roses he sent to Murrow's mother in the hospital and for being a pallbearer at her funeral. The note goes on to express how fond Murrow's mother was of Tweit and the deep gratitude the Murrow family felt for the "kindnesses" he'd bestowed over the years.

That spirit of kindness was shown to the children of Bellingham every Halloween. Tweit is well known for the annual photos he took with his Minolta camera. For forty-nine consecutive years, he photographed each child who stopped by the pharmacy, freely distributing full-size candy bars at the same time. Tweit began hanging the 5x7 photos of the costumed children in the display windows only to give the photos away to those who wanted a souvenir of their holiday fun. "I once took 800 Halloween portraits in a single day," Tweit recalled, "but the norm hovered around 525. And those kids never forgot."

He's donated the cameras he used- well over a hundred cameras- to the [Whatcom Museum](#). Among his favorite photos are the ones he's kept in Halloween photo albums and the collection of ship photos displayed in his hallway.



Gordon Tweit sits on the front porch where he captured a bolt of lightning, with his Kodak camera, when he was just ten years old. Photo credit: Dondi Tondro-Smith.



Eliza Island looked like this before development and the Pacific American Fisheries Company. Photo courtesy: Gordon Tweit.



Fairhaven Pharmacy may be a thing of the past, but Tweit's legacy of giving will continue. Anyone who drives down 12<sup>th</sup> Street notices Gordon Tweit's name stenciled on the back of the iconic building he used to call his office. The photographs of Bellingham he'd taken and acquired, used to hang on those walls. Since the pharmacy closed in 2015, his collection of medical books and maritime memorabilia has been distributed to a myriad of organizations and the Western Gallery. His shots of Chuckanut Drive were used to celebrate the road's centennial and one of his photos of Lake Samish was used as a front cover for a book about the picturesque lake.



This fundraiser tribute honored Gordon Tweit for his many contributions to the Whatcom Maritime Association. Photo credit: Dondi Tondro-Smith.

Tweit (originally spelled Tveit- there's no W in Norwegian) is a Norwegian name dating back to Tweit's paternal great-grandparents who arrived in Bellingham in the 1890's. Tweit has preserved the legacy of his great-grandfather's livelihood, working for the Pacific American Fisheries on Eliza Island, through collected photos and an assortment of the original tin can art of PAF's salmon. On the island, Tweit's great-grandfather worked side by side with his cousin's grandfather to build barges, salmon tender boats and ships for the PAF.

His collection of PAF tin cans has recently been donated to the Whatcom Maritime Association, as well as many photos displaying the maritime history and heritage of the region. Executive director Steve Paus, has known Tweit since 1991, but knew his mother as the cook at Lowell Elementary when he was a student there.



Tweit's collection of PAF tin cans has recently been donated to the Whatcom Maritime Association. Photo credit: Dondi Tondro-Smith.

Tweit was a founding member of their organization and in Paus' words, "Gordy was a very generous donor of funds as well as all of these wonderful artifacts he gave us after the closure of the pharmacy. You would see him at the pharmacy and walking around the streets of Fairhaven taking photographs and at all kinds of events. He was always there. He's really the spirit of Fairhaven and the community. He loves Fairhaven and Fairhaven loves him."