

The Transformation of Center:
Baptist Church - Zarth Garage – McFeeds – Vashon Center for the Arts

This year is a year of transformation for the crossroad at Center. The construction of the Vashon Center for the Arts, which has been fraught with controversy and delays, will open a new era for a location that was once a thriving commercial center, and in recent years has become an important gathering place at The Coffee Roasterie, The Minglement, and ZuZu's Ice Cream.

The Southeast corner of the Center intersection was the original site of a Baptist Church built in 1893, and the first school. When the church building was abandoned and the school moved to Vashon Town, Ed Zarth, whose family had come to Vashon in 1909, took the initiative and opened an auto repair shop in the old church building. He quickly found the old church building inadequate for his needs as more and more automobiles came to the Island, so in 1924 he began constructing a new modern garage built in the Mission Style. The 50 x 60 foot building, with a solid concrete floor was completed in April 1926, but was destroyed by a fire only five months later. Zarth quickly replaced his destroyed garage with the building that until recently stood at the corner. It was an amazing building, very lightly constructed, with a "birds nest" lattice-work structure holding up the roof.

A year later, Zarth became the Willys-Knight Overland and Whippet dealer for Vashon and received a shipment of new cars direct from the factory in Toledo, Ohio. He received a second shipment of new cars in June, and then on July 10, 1927 he staged a big beach picnic and strawberry feed at Ellisport for the owners of the cars he sold. The celebration started with a parade of Island owned and visitor's cars to the Zarth Island Garage where the cars were lined up and can be seen in the photograph by Island photographer Norman Edson.



Edward Zarth's Island Garage, 1927
Norman Edson courtesy Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

Ed Zarth continued to operate the garage through the Depression and World War Two, although the Whippet line of cars ended in 1931, and Willys-Knight in 1933. Willys continued to be produced until 1941, but when Willys developed the Jeep for the U.S. Army, they never went back to passenger automobiles after the War. Zarth was killed in an explosion at his garage in October 1948. Others continued to operate it as a garage through the 1950s and 1960s, until it was purchased and converted to a feed store in the late 1960s, and then to McFeeds Pet Store in the early 1980s. When McFeeds closed, the building was empty for a few years until Vashon Allied Arts purchased the building in April 2008 for possible expansion.

In January 2011, Vashon Allied Arts announced plans for a new performance center on the southeast corner of the Center Intersection. The plan was met with a mix of strong support and significant financial contributions, and vocal opposition, which focused on the planning process and appropriateness of the building design for the site. Ground breaking for the project was held on October 25, 2014 although an open letter from VAA Board President Tim Roden in November 2014 announced construction would be delayed until this year because of escalating building costs.



McFeed's Building, 2014
Terry Donnelly

The 1927 Zarth Island Garage building, seen in the 2014 Terry Donnelly photograph, had not changed a great deal. The front service bay overhang was enclosed, an extension of the building was added to the South side, and the Island Garage signage was painted over, but, the shape of the false front façade remained unchanged. The building was decorated with a mural by Island artist Bruce Morser, crows by Steffon Moody, a puzzle depicting the new Performing Arts Center by Will Forrester, as it sat empty waiting until it was demolished in early May and the new construction began.



Vashon Allied Arts Vashon Center for the Arts, 2016
Pete Welch

Bruce Haulman is an Island Historian
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