
FROM THE ARCHIVES...

FRISKO FREEZE

[Editor's note: This is a summary of the nomination of Frisko Freeze to the Tacoma Register of Historic Places, by Marshall McClintock

Frisko Freeze has been in continuous use as a food stand since it opened in August 1950 and is now a well known and much loved Tacoma icon. It has served generations of Tacoma's teenagers an important social site. This simple commercial building and its neon sign represents an early, and one of the few remaining, unmodified examples of googie architecture from Tacoma's early 1950s. Both architecturally and culturally, it represents the post-WWII building boom and the emergence of the mid-century American teenage culture in Tacoma.

Perry W. Smith, Frisko's original owner, was a well-known Tacoma businessman. He was born in Canada and attended Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA. In 1947, he married Roberta (Bobbe) C. Clark, a registered nurse.

Permits were issued in May 1950 for "Cream Freeze" that Perry and Bobbe would jointly own and operate for the next 40 years – open 365 days a year with half days on Thanksgiving and Christmas.



Frisko Freeze's upswept roof gives the false appearance of 'leaning out' to the street, is a common characteristic of the Googie architectural style, are the rounded roof corners, oblivious to the 90° angle of the walls. Coupled with the neon lighting on the building is the oversized, neon sign on a candy-striped pole in front in front. The expanding, downward curving yellow arrow catches eye and emphasizes speed. Above is a red, "soft" rhomboid shape with the business name, while below is a backlit image of a hamburger, adding realism to this futuristic mix. Surrounded by an asphalt parking lot and lit by yellowish neon lights at night, the building seems to float in the darkness.

Frisko Freeze's hamburgers and milkshakes achieved legendary status. It is frequently found in various "Best of" lists, including among the "20 best burgers in the West" by *Sunset* magazine in 1993.

In the 1980s, the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* food critic, John Owen, proclaimed it the "best hamburger in the area;" it was the only Tacoma restaurant he ever

mentioned. Gov. Booth Gardener, an avid fan, ate at Frisko whenever he could.

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Through the 1980s, the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* food critic, John Owen, proclaimed it the “best hamburger in the area,” and it was the only Tacoma restaurant he ever mentioned. Gov. Booth Gardener, an avid fan, kept a photograph of Frisko Freeze on his office wall in Olympia.

The property at 1201 Division and owned by Mrs. Elizabeth G. Thomas who worked out an arrangement with Smith and

Perry hit on the name “Frisko Freeze” while listening to sports commentator Leo Lassen call a Seattle Rainiers--San Francisco Seals baseball game. Lassen referred to the San Francisco team as “the boys from Frisco”. With a slight modification of the spelling, Smith had his business name.

Neither Perry nor Bobbe had any restaurant experience when they opened. As a family-run, independent business, they developed their own recipes and kitchen operation, unlike franchise operations. Sales initially focused on soft-serve ice cream with hamburgers being prepared on a hot plate. Eventually a proper grill was installed, and Perry noted in a 1976 interview that hamburgers now made up “95% of our business.”

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