

# Racism in Oregon: An Egregious History *continued from front page*

and said in a statement, “We are sorry that this matter ended the way it did. We are a place of public accommodation and do not discriminate against any individuals or groups.” A few days later, after Massey’s recording of the incident had gone viral on the internet, Double Tree fired the two employees involved.

\*\*

Oregon’s history of racial discrimination, and the ways it continues to manifest itself today, is challenging to comprehend and disturbing when scrutinized. Oregon, with its liberal strongholds of Portland and Eugene, is often viewed from the outside as a bastion of acceptance, a welcoming place where free-thinking and uniqueness is honored and accepted. But scratch under the surface just a bit, and you quickly uncover an ugly truth – Oregon has a deep rooted tradition of intolerance and is not as welcoming as some of us would like to believe. While institutional racism and white supremacy, like the original exclusion laws barring blacks that were written into the state constitution, are no longer part of Oregon law, a culture of discrimination remains, and continues to show itself regularly.

I starting thinking about writing this series of articles on racism in Oregon after reading and hearing several different disturbing stories. One was the recent incident that occurred here in Columbia County in January at the St. Helens High School during a girls basketball game against a team with several African American players. Parkrose High School varsity head coach Krystal Forthan told the media after the game that some St. Helens spectators made monkey noises and called her athletes the n-word. She said it wasn’t the first time this type of incident had occurred at a Parkrose away game and student athletes from Parkrose said it had happened before in St. Helens.

Looking into Oregon’s history of racism has been educational and upsetting. The United States Declaration of Independence proclaims in its second paragraph “...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Yet nothing has been further from the truth. Throughout American history, and particularly in Oregon, racial minorities have been systematically denied access to both human and civil rights, and their attempts to be treated as equal citizens have often been

rebuked. Oregon became a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and has remained an unfriendly place for blacks to settle. In 2018 African Americans made up 13% of the population in the United States – in Oregon they represent less than 2% of citizens.

The election of Barak Obama was believed by many to herald a new age of equality and hope. “The reality of Barack Obama being the President of the United States – quite possibly the most powerful nation in the world – means that the image of power is completely new for an entire generation of not only black American kids but every population group in this nation,” said Kehinde Wiley, an artist who was commissioned to paint President Obama’s portrait for the Smithsonian National Gallery.

Unfortunately, the opposite seems to have occurred. While feelings of optimism increased, it was accompanied by a rise in bigotry. Since the election of President Obama, incidents like the ones that happened to Representative Bynum and Mr. Massey have increased. In Oakland, California in April 2018, a white woman called the police on several African Americans for BBQing in a park. A series of other calls involving African Americans doing ordinary, everyday things has occurred: waiting in Starbucks, working as a home inspector, shopping at Nordstrom Rack, sleeping in an Ivy League college dorm common room.

But incidents of seemingly unnecessary calls to police have not been the only issue. Hate crimes and violence against minorities have also been on the rise, as has an increase in the visibility of organized white supremacist groups and hate speech. On April 17, 2019 a Multnomah County judge sentenced Russell Courtier to life in prison for the 2016 murder of Larnell Bruce Jr., a 19 year old African American man. Courtier, who had known ties to the white supremacist prison gang called European Kindred, was convicted of murder and second-degree intimidation for running down Bruce with his vehicle after an altercation in a parking lot of a 7-Eleven in Gresham. On May 26, 2017 a white man, Jeremy Christian, shouted anti-muslim insults at two young African American women while riding on public transportation in Portland. When three white men stepped in to try and assist the young women, Christian stabbed all three, killing two of them.

\*\*

African Americans and other minorities, including Japanese and Chinese immigrants, faced a hostile environment in Oregon, and particularly in Portland, in the 1920s and into the 1930s. The depression of the 1930s was especially hard on blacks, as African Americans lost jobs and black owned businesses closed. A lack of employment opportunities continued to deter blacks from migrating to Oregon. Exclusionary clauses were written into real estate deeds that did not allow minorities to purchase property in certain parts of Portland, and white residents gathered signatures on petitions objecting to black homeowners in their neighborhoods. One subdivision, U.S. Grant Place, included a restrictive covenant which stated that no building, “shall be used or occupied by Chinese, Japanese, or Negroes, except that persons of such races may be employed as servants...” Banks often practiced “redlining,” a discriminatory policy of mapping areas based on community demographics – identifying black neighborhoods where they would avoid offering loans and making investments.

The result was a pattern of segregation in housing that located most African Americans in North and Northeast Portland near industrial areas, especially in the Albina neighborhood. In the 1940s, Portland’s African American population swelled from around 2,500 (just .25% of the state population) to almost 25,000 (7%), as black workers were imported to work in the Portland shipyards on the east bank of the Willamette River during the war years. The influx of African Americans was met with an increase in racial discrimination, as “White Only Signs” began to appear in restaurants, hotels, movie theaters, and other businesses, and labor unions banned blacks from joining.

Because of a housing shortage, a new development of 10,000 homes was constructed in the flood plain of the Columbia River in 1942, just north of Portland City limits, called Vanport City. Workers quickly took up residence there, a mix of African Americans and whites. It was the second largest city in Oregon, with a population of over 30,000 – in January of 1945 blacks made up 18% of the population in Vanport.

Following the end of the war the shipyards faced massive layoffs and white workers quickly began moving out of Vanport, but housing segregation forced black families to remain. By May of 1948 a total of 17,000 people still lived

in Vanport, about 5,000 of them black. On May 30 a massive flood wiped out the entire development, and forced the residents to find housing elsewhere, exacerbating Portland’s housing shortage and adding to the segregation. By 1950 almost half of Portland’s blacks lived in a concentrated area of the inner north-east neighborhood.

\*\*

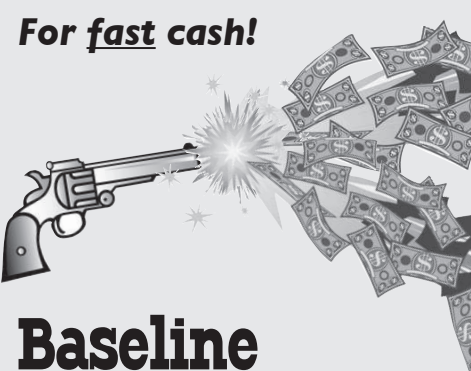
Blacks weren’t the only minorities to face discrimination in Oregon during the war years. The United States government infamously ordered Japanese American citizens interned in camps following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1942 under Executive Order 9066. In all, a total of about 4,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated in Oregon.

*The Vernonia Eagle* noted the local departure of residents from the community on the front page of its May 21, 1942 issue under the headline “Local Japanese Leave in Bus Wednesday,” noting, “...an Oregon Motor Stage left town with 10 people of Japanese ancestry, clearing the town of Niponese blood.” The article went on to say that “Vernonia citizens who saw them leave felt relieved to think that this possible source of danger was leaving, but with that feeling of relief was mingling regret that some well-known and liked, worthwhile Japanese populace were required to abandon their homes.” *The Eagle* reported that the Vernonia residents were sent to the Portland Livestock Pavilion where they awaited further relocation.

The next issue of *The Eagle* on May 28 followed up with an article that included correspondence from two Vernonia residents about their new life at the Japanese Assembly Center in North Portland where they were being held. Teshi Kuge was a medical student at the University of Oregon who had been elected Vernonia High School Class President in 1934-35. He told *The Eagle* he, along with another medical student and a doctor, had taken responsibility of the medical health of the entire center. Kerry Soejima, a recent VHS grad, sent a letter that updated the community on her family. Miss Soejima tried to put a positive spin on her family’s experience after just one week in the center, calling it an “adventure” but noting that there wasn’t much room or privacy. “There is a room on three sides on us and a hall with people going by all the time, and we have no door, just a drape,” she wrote

*continued on page 8*

**Don't Sell it!  
Pawn it!**  
*For fast cash!*



**Baseline Pawn, Inc.**  
2245 Baseline St., Cornelius  
(Across from Fred Meyer)  
**503-530-8119**  
State Licensed PB-0388

Open everyday at 10 a.m.

**BEHIND EVERY PROJECT IS A**  
*True Value*®



**Get Your Garden Ready**  
Lawn Care Supplies • Insect Control  
Trimmer Line • Hoses • Seeds  
Potting Soil • Garden Tools

*Family owned & operated for over 45 years*  
834 Bridge St., Vernonia (503) 429-6364

NEW LOCATION



**The BLACK BEAR**  
COFFEE COMPANY.  
**Just Suck It Up!**

FRESH ROASTED COFFEE  
ESPRESSO • BAKED GOODS

OPEN EVERY DAY AT 6:00 AM

**825 BRIDGE STREET**  
**503-429-0214**