

Slides and lecture show old South Portland's ethnic history

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

More than 100 people crammed into the Cedarwood Montessori School last month to hear a lecture and slide show on South Portland's history, especially as it related to the Italian and Jewish communities.

Historian Arnie Panitch provided the commentary to a slide show of both current and historic scenes by Ken Kane. The event was sponsored by the Tuscan Association of Oregon.

The venue was the school auditorium, which was once Oregon's first indoor pool. The building was originally Neighborhood House, built in 1905 by the National Council of Jewish Women as a settlement house. As such, it provided classes.

As such, it provided classes, recreation and activities geared toward immigrants. As one person at the lecture noted, Jews never made up more than 50 percent of the patrons of Neighborhood House, which served a succession of immigrant groups.

Indeed, old South Portland, which Panitch said was bounded by Southwest Columbia and Hamilton streets, Barbur Boulevard and the Willamette River, was a community of immigrants.

Significant structures that stand today include the Lair Hill Market, created in 1912; Failing School (now part of the National College of Natural Medicine); and St. Mary's Academy, the oldest school in Portland.

Others include the former Carnegie Library, now owned by the Portland Bureau of Parks; the former Kesser Israel orthodox synagogue building, originally a Baptist church and now the Church of God; and Italian restaurant Caro Amico.

Panitch noted that many of the area streets were named for Civil War heroes – Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Meade and Hooker. In 1931 came the Great Renumbering, with the City substituting a new uniform set of building numbers to replace the systems of what had been independent villages.

A major part of the area's history was the South Auditorium urban re-



Audrey Perino of the Tuscan Association of Oregon introduces historian Arnie Panitch. (Post photo by Lee Perlman)



Houses in the South Auditorium Renewal Area in South Portland circa 1962. (Photo courtesy City of Portland Archives)

newal district of the Portland Development Commission, which displaced 2,000 residents on 54 square blocks.

The activity was justified at the time by the alleged disrepair and crime in the area. On the day of the lecture, an Oregonian editorial praised the South

Auditorium project.

Panitch provided a different perspective; a 1963 slide showed a sign on a condemned building which said that the political process "makes the Soviet Union look like a constitutional paradise."

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