

Sweeps exact a heavy toll, yesterday and today

"I can only carry so many backpacks on my back at the same time with my precious items," Barbara told me. She was tired, upset, exhausted. Standing alongside her possessions on the shoulder of Airport Way, Barbara was among the campers displaced by the police and park rangers earlier this

month at the Village of Hope, an unsanctioned camp along the Columbia Slough.

Her comment startled me because of the words she chose: In 1942, Japanese Americans

up and down the West Coast were ordered to bring only "that which could be carried" when they were incarcerated by the federal government.

This week marks 76 years since Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the racist Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942, making way for the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans, including Portlanders who were first imprisoned in the Expo Center, about 10 miles northwest on the Columbia Slough from where Barbara stood earlier this month with her possessions.

Japanese Americans were forced from their homes all around Portland in 1942, but in particular, in the Old Town neighborhood where Street Roots now operates our office. This neighborhood was then known as Nihonmachi – or Japantown. Because first-generation Japanese Americans were barred from owning property, some folks managed hotels in Nihonmachi as a means to also house their families. Walking around the neighborhood now, I sometimes imagine children running from hotel to hotel, visiting friends and racing together down to the Willamette River to play among lumber stacked on the muddy riverbank. One of those hotels was the Foster Hotel, which operated above what is now our Street Roots office.

Likely our office was Chitose Laundry, which may have included a bath, too, and across the street from the Street Roots office would have been Oshu Nippo News –

a daily newspaper typeset with Kanji type, which was shut-down when U.S. Navy seized its printing equipment during World War II.

These historical displacements form a strong current under the sidewalks of Old Town. People were rendered homeless and incarcerated by order of the federal government. Their family structures toppled, their possessions reduced to suitcases.

Now, in that same neighborhood, people lug their bags and their sorrows, no home to go to.

All across our city, Portlanders suffering from homelessness are forced to move along by the city, the state and the contractors brought in to do this work. They face the exhaustion of seeking yet another patch of earth on which to bed down. Often in the process, they lose what possessions they have, sometimes because their possessions are mistaken for garbage, sometimes because possessions are taken to a storage facility that's hard to reach and hard to find.

"Walking out with no clothes, no hygiene projects, I don't like having to do that again and again," Barbara told me. "I can't carry it all out myself. I have downsized so many times."

Let that sink in. Those who have the least in our city are forced to lose even those possessions – gifts from beloved people, family photos, identification cards, medicine.

This month, while the Oregon Legislature considers who should conduct sweeps – the Portland city government or the Oregon Department of Transportation – it is worth remembering the toll that sweeps take on the poorest among us.

Yes, it is important that at the very least, folks have better notification, the sweeps are conducted with greater transparency, and people are not displaced during severe weather—all amendments successfully added to House Bill 4054 this week by the House Committee on Transportation Policy.

But fundamental to any discussion around sweeps must be the fact that there are not enough shelter beds in our city, and certainly not enough affordable places for people to live. And left with few to no options, people are forced to contend with the trauma of repeated displacements.



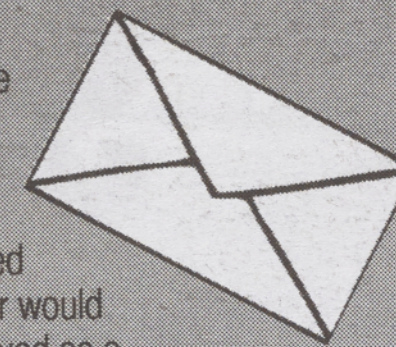
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Japanese Americans are loaded onto trains in Portland, 1942.

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