

BY PATRICIA KULLBERG
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

It was a place of contradiction, at once utopian and Jim Crow, innovative and second rate. It was a town, they joked, with everything but a future. Vanport, the World War II-era, federal housing project on the outskirts of North Portland, was never meant to outlast the war. It was built in a year. It was destroyed in a few hours, engulfed by a massive springtime runoff out of the mountains. But in its brief lifespan of 5 years, Vanport birthed a militant anti-racist activism that would supplant the politics of accommodation which prevailed in prewar Portland.



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You couldn't live in Vanport unless you worked for a war industry. Most worked in Henry Kaiser's shipyards. At its peak the town housed 42,000 persons, the largest wartime federal housing project in the country. People came from all over to work for Kaiser. The majority were white. But by war's end, more than 15,000 African Americans had flooded into the area. Housing was scarce. Families slept in their cars, in cheap hotels, church basements, theaters, trailer camps, on grandma's sofa or behind the bar at their cousin's saloon.

None of them, black or white, was welcome in Portland. Someone had to build the ships,

but the denizens of the Rose City did not want those "coloreds" and "Okies" making a home in their fair city.

The local African Americans – less than 2,000 total in 1940 – were respectable folks who'd worked hard not to call adverse attention to themselves. As described in a wartime study by Robert E Colbert in the Journal of Negro Education, they'd crafted a more or less congenial relationship with white Portlanders, which required a fair amount of looking the other way at local discriminatory practices. They did not welcome their new African American neighbors, those "floaters" and "undesirables," the men so boisterous, the women in their gaudy dresses. Those signs – We Cater to White Trade Only? They'd never seen them before. They were especially



Everything but a future

The life and death of Vanport, 70 years after the great flood



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PORTLAND CITY ARCHIVES

Aerial view of the city of Vanport before and after the flood.

fearful that the newcomers would disrupt the status quo, which, in fact, they did.

Vanport was sunk down in the rich, dark bottom-land of the Columbia River floodplain, crisscrossed by sloughs and two shallow lakes, all muddy in the wet season, dusty in the dry. It was a mile squared off, utterly flat, and enclosed by four dirt levees. Unless you were a curious kid on foot, the only place to exit that swampy bowl was a slant-wise road that climbed the eastern dike.

You could get lost in that town, easy, because the apartment buildings all looked alike. Wood-framed, wood-sided, two-story buildings, they looked like barracks. No building in town was taller than two stories or any shade other than drab and dreary. The town had no center. No central square, no city hall, no commercial hub, no main drag. It had no pool halls, card rooms, bowling alleys, bars, or night clubs, no place where you

might make a fool of yourself and probably that was the point. Liquor was prohibited, which didn't mean you couldn't find it in makeshift speakeasies all over town.

The town had no newspaper. It had no churches. Sunday morning services were staged in school auditoriums and hosted by a revolving cast of ministers. There were parks, a swimming beach, and recreation centers, but the latter were underused and often deserted. Community was not so much dead in Vanport as never come to life, especially among the whites.

But the African Americans who lived there liked to organize dance parties. Just months after deadly race riots in Detroit in 1943, they threw a dance to raise money for the war. At the event, young African-American men invited white teenagers onto the floor. The authorities, sensitive to the feelings of white southerners in Vanport and paranoid about

race riots, shut down the dance. It was the Communists, the story went, who put up the blacks to dancing with white girls.

But really, who had time to play? Sixty-hour work weeks and usually both parents worked. The wages were eye-popping – so long as you were white. In blatant violation of war time federal employment rules, African Americans were offered only the lowest paid and dirtiest work on the shipyards. Kaiser blamed the Boilermakers Local, who blamed the Boilermakers International, who said it had nothing to do with them. Wyatt Williams, a prominent African-American lawyer, helped the Boilermakers to set up an auxiliary union for African-American workers. The auxiliary collected dues but provided no benefits, no collective bargaining, no grievance procedure, no protection against unfair discipline, no pathway for advancement. Despite wartime labor shortages, Kaiser fired hundreds of African-American workers who refused to join the Jim Crow auxiliary.

Folks didn't stand for it. Not Vanporter Julius Rodriquez, founding president of the local chapter of the Shipyard Negro Organization for Victory. Not Vanporter Lee Anderson, who sued Oregon Shipbuilding and the Boilermakers for the right to work as a welder. Not Vanporter and Communist Party member Sam Markson, who was once arrested for being white in the black section of Vanport – no joke – and interrogated by the Red Squad, the unit embedded in the Portland Police Bureau to spy on local activists. Not Reverend J J Clow, president of the local NAACP, which threw itself into the fray and not Bill McClendon, editor of the People's Observer, who covered the conflict in Portland's only wartime newspaper for the African American community. They were all part of the Double V campaign, victory abroad against tyranny and victory at home against racism.

In what might have been the first signal that the politics of accommodation were about to end in Portland, Wyatt Williams was booted out of the NAACP for his "traitorous and malevolent" collusion with the Boilermakers, as Bill McClendon wrote in the Observer.

In November 1943 the feds came to town to investigate the alleged discrimination. They issued cease and desist orders. Kaiser and the Boilermakers ignored the orders. In March 1945 the courts ruled in Lee Anderson's favor, but by then the shipyards were all but shut down. There were no more jobs for anyone.

As detailed in Vanport, Manley Maben's history of the project, Vanport was a town of strangers. Residents worked three shifts a day, coming and going at all hours. It was noisy, cars and trucks and buses night and day, dogs barking, cats yowling, babies howling, never a quiet time. It was trashy,