

too, in the way places got when no one felt attached. Broken windows, debris in the gutters, litter blowing down the streets and collecting against the buildings.

"Cardboard palaces" was what they called the apartments. Corners cut everywhere you looked. Walls as thin as tissue paper so you could hear every nose blow, every radio show, every go at it, your neighbors banging the bed. In winter they turned off the heat and hot water at night and too bad for you if you worked the swing shift and might have liked a shower before hitting the sack. And vermin? You had rats and flies and mice and fleas and bedbugs and cockroaches. Plus, like any place built on the cheap, Vanport was frighteningly combustible. Some 200 fires broke out in the first two years of the project.

Families moved out in droves, the white ones mostly. In 1943 the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP), Vanport's landlord, commissioned a survey, later published in *American Sociological Review*. As documented by authors Charlotte Kilbourn and Margaret Lantis, respondents said they didn't like African Americans and whites in the same neighborhood, especially not in the same schools. The shopping facilities were inadequate and the cooking facilities stank. The place was too noisy, too crowded, and the mud just too much. To top it off, Portlanders discriminated against them.

In fact, the neighborhoods of Vanport were largely segregated and the hospital was Jim Crow. Illegally and by design, although HAP denied it. Not until after the war did activists force HAP to admit to their practice of keeping secret and separate waiting lists for African Americans and reserving certain neighborhoods for African Americans only.

HAP wanted to segregate the schools in Vanport too. But Superintendent James Hamilton refused. Then he made a point of hiring African American teachers at a time when the Portland school system had none. His schools became the crown jewels of the community, winning awards for their innovations, their meal programs, infirmaries, 24-hour child care, after-school activities and summer school.

Kaiser liked Hamilton's vision, because workers who weren't worried about their children showed up for work every day.

Survivors of Vanport, most of whom were kids at the time, have fond memories of the place. They had basketball teams and sewing classes and marching bands and field trips to the beach and the mountains. They could swim in Force Lake or hitch a ride up to Jantzen Beach to ride the Big Dipper and the Rollo-plane, though if you were African American you couldn't swim in any of their three giant pools. The kids made friends of all colors. If they were African American, it was likely the first time they'd ever gone to school with white kids or studied from brand new text books. They were largely shielded from the discrimination their parents faced.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PORTLAND CITY ARCHIVES
Devastation in Vanport after the flood waters receded.

At the end of the war, developers were slaving to get their hands on the land to build a new industrial park. But what to do with all those people? White families blew out of there as fast as they could. But most of the African Americans were stuck, not welcome in Portland, not wanting to go back home to

even worse conditions. Vanport shrunk to less than half its wartime population. HAP began to neglect Vanport's upkeep in earnest. The infrastructure crumbled; the piles of trash grew. They shut down summer school and after school programs. The kids ran wild. A quarter of the apartment buildings were dismantled and shipped off to house construction workers elsewhere.

By then the Vanport Tenants' League, or VTL, had organized to challenge the discriminatory practices of HAP, their Jim Crow housing scheme and their failure to apply federal rent relief policies. The VTL staged large, angry demonstrations, alerted the federal overseers to HAP's deliberate and illegal circumvention of federal rules. They wrote letters and challenged authorities. They drew the NAACP and the newly formed Urban League of Portland into the fight. Eventually they forced HAP to back down.

During the war African-American trainman Robert Folkes was framed for a murder of a white war bride just south of Portland. He was executed in 1945 in the face of widespread protest. Eight months later Portland Police would shoot and kill African-American father and shipyard worker Ervin Jones while in pursuit of another man. When

the police were exonerated, a near riot broke out in Vanport. In 1946 sheriffs chased African-American suspect Bennie Sellers from the site of a burglary in Vanport and shot him to death. In 1948 Vanporter and African-American veteran Wardell Henderson was executed for the murder of a white man, after two jurors signed affidavits that Henderson was sent to the gas chamber because he was African American, to make an example of him. The serial injustices further inflamed and organized African Americans and their allies. There was no going back.

In 1946 hope for rejuvenation in Vanport came in the form of Vanport College, intended to serve the overflow of vets seeking to better themselves. HAP set aside apartments around the college for vets, called Veterans' Village, which boasted new paint and picket fences and gardens. In another point of bitter contention, Veterans' Village did not admit African-American veterans. But Vanport College did. Some of the Vanport kids, white and African American alike, seized the opportunity to enroll and launch careers their parents would never have dreamed of.

The rain began toward the end of May 1948, a warm deluge. Winter's snowpack ran off the eastern peaks and poured into the Columbia River. Army Corps engineers stood atop the levees surrounding Vanport, measured and probed and conferred. The lakes below the western dike swelled to twice their size. The folks who'd scrambled up the muddy slopes to watch might have overheard one of the engineers say to the other: This isn't a levee at all. It's just a railroad berm.

Memorial Day dawned sunny and warm. Early that morning a flyer was slipped beneath the door of every apartment:

REMEMBER:
DIKES ARE SAFE AT PRESENT.
YOU WILL BE WARNED IF NECESSARY.
YOU WILL HAVE TIME TO LEAVE.
DON'T GET EXCITED.

Shortly after 4 p.m. the sirens went off. The dike-not-really-a-dike had burst.

The first rush of water hit the western-most sloughs, which filled and overran their banks. The second wave was a half hour away. Vehicles plowed down shallow but rapidly

rising rivers that once were roads. People on foot struggled with suitcases, baskets, and babies. Cars, trucks and buses jammed the long incline of Victory Boulevard, their only way out.

Within the hour all the buildings were adrift in muddy, swirling waters. Towers toppled over. Cars and buses bobbed like bathtub toys. Some residents were stranded on the roofs. Kids were tossed into boats from the second floors. A chain of men in water to their knees pulled one person after another to higher ground.

Eighteen thousand homeless. Scores injured. Fifteen dead. That was the official count, but certainly there were more. Some of the missing bodies were never recovered, and never counted among the dead. Rumors circulated about dozens of bodies trapped in the Vanport Theater, stashed away in cold storage or shipped out to sea to be returned disguised as dead soldiers. The stories were fed by the suspicion that authorities were secretly delighted to see Vanport destroyed and hoped to deflect attention from their own culpability.

Families lost nearly everything they owned. The buck was passed back and forth between city, state, and feds so fast it flew through the air in a blur. Not until 1952 did a federal court decide that no one was to blame for the catastrophe and no one, therefore, was entitled to compensation.

In her book, *Perimeters of Democracy*, a study of wartime "inverse utopias" including Vanport, Heather Fryer documented the aftermath of the flood. The Vanport Tenants' League joined with other activists to form the Vanport Citizens' Emergency Disaster Committee. They protested not only the lack of compensation, but the housing of flood victims in rotten conditions, in dilapidated trailers and former dormitories for shipyard workers. Meetings were disrupted. Marches were staged. A caravan to Salem was organized. Pickets were dispatched. "No Home Sweet Home for Us, Just Trailers!" "Billions for Europe, This for America!" "Investigate Vanport disaster!"

Six years later many of those same activists, like Sam Markson and reporter Julia Ruuittala (who was fired for writing incendiary reports about the failures of HAP in the wake of the flood), would be hauled in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee and interrogated about their activities after the flood.

The land was never reclaimed for industrial or residential purposes. It now hosts a golf course, a race track and Delta Park. Vanport College was reborn as Portland State University. The railroad embankment was rebuilt, again not as a levee, but only as a railroad berm.

Vanport was never built to last, but rather to service the industrial needs of a wartime economy and, in the process, to maintain certain race and class boundaries. But Vanport activists and their allies took up the fight for a better future for their kids. With their mass demonstrations and pickets and marches and impolite disruptions of official meetings, they were the first to challenge the politics of accommodation that characterized the prewar African-American community. It was these men and women who set the stage for the civil rights protests to come.

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