

BY ERIN GOODLING  
AND DONOVAN SMITH  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNISTS

Hundreds of Portlanders will join the “Big Float” for its eighth year on July 14 to celebrate recent progress in our river’s health, boarding fluorescent pink flamingo inner-tubes and bright yellow rafts to float from Poet’s Beach to Waterfront Park.

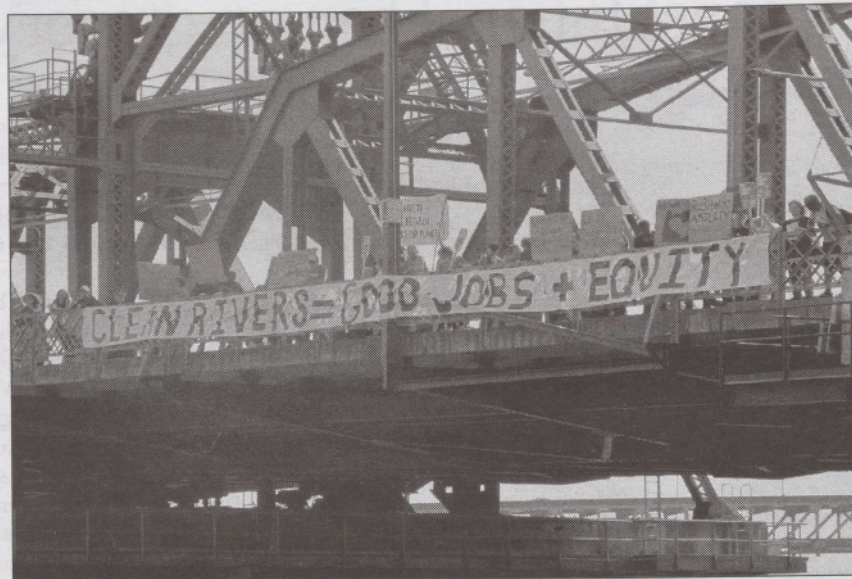
In 2011, the city of Portland completed the “Big Pipe” project, which dramatically reduced stormwater and sewer overflows. Since then, the Willamette has received growing attention as an ideal place to recreate. In spring 2016, mayor-elect Ted Wheeler even delivered his ballot via “tiny triathlon,” ceremonially swimming across the Willamette, biking along the waterfront, walking a few blocks to Pioneer Courthouse Square, and dropping his voting card in the box. A few months later, Mayor Wheeler took another public dip, starting what has become an annual tradition. He remarked, “Today we’re going to swim in the water, the water quality is very good. We’re not going to stop and eat mud on the bottom of the river.”

But Portland’s green façade hides a murkier reality, one that river boosters often overlook.

Although the Willamette may be safe for swimming most of the year, an 11-mile stretch going north from the Broadway Bridge is so toxic that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated it a Superfund site in 2000. It may well be true for the majority of Portland residents that toxins in the mud pose little danger. But they actually prevent thousands of people from safely engaging in cultural traditions and life-sustaining activities, like fishing. The Oregon Health Authority advises against consuming any amount of the harbor’s resident fish, such as bass, catfish, and carp, which feed on benthic organisms contaminated with PCBs and other hazardous substances.

To understand why not everyone is celebrating the Portland Harbor as an urban recreational paradise, it is necessary to examine the history of the harbor from a “people’s view”—from the perspectives of those who have carried the burdens of pollution, dispossession and displacement for decades and centuries.

Prior to the 1800s, approximately 3,000 Multnomah-Chinook people called today’s Portland metropolitan area home. Thousands of members of other tribes also travelled through the Willamette Valley for trading, fishing, and wapato-gathering. But starting in the late 1700s, colonial explorers brought diseases such as smallpox and malaria, devastating native populations. By 1830, disease reduced the Willamette Valley population from 15,000 to 2,000.



## Below the Surface

### *A People’s History of the Portland Harbor*

Two decades later, the U.S. government ratified treaties that tore native people from their homelands, including today’s Portland Harbor, which would eventually become a major hub for exportation of grain, lumber, and other commodities.

While whites flocked west to claim land under the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850, it was illegal for Black people to live in the state under the threat of the lash, until 1926. But with World War II on the horizon, laws changed, and roughly 23,000 black people moved to Oregon. Portland became home to the biggest wartime shipbuilding and shipbreaking operation in the US, in large part thanks to the labor of black and native workers, as well as many Chinese and other immigrants.

Shipyards were exposed to extremely toxic substances on the docks, such as lead and asbestos. Adding insult to injury, black laborers were excluded from the Boilermakers Union, resulting in fewer workplace protections and lower wages than their white counterparts. Starting with the 1948 Vanport Flood, black Portlanders have experienced serial waves of displacement ever since. Other groups, including immigrants, have also been displaced to make way for industry (e.g., when Guild’s Lake became an “industrial sanctuary”).

Just as the shipbuilding industry was gaining steam, public health experts, sanitary engineers, conservationists and well-to-do anglers began a fight to clean up

the Willamette. Activists worried about harmful effects of water pollution on commercial fishing, as well as on tourist and recreation-centered fishing, business and swimming. They successfully pushed for a reduction in pulp and paper mill dumping into the river and convinced the city to build a new wastewater treatment plant. Such remediation efforts helped put Portland on the map as a leader in the nascent environmental movement. Later, green infrastructure construction and the Big Pipe

helped reduce stormwater and sewage runoff even more.

Water quality has improved substantially, and it is now considered safe to swim in the Portland Harbor most of the time. Yet, these advancements have had little impact on pollution buried in the harbor’s sand and sediment. Extremely dangerous substances continue to accumulate up the food chain, ultimately poisoning the bodies of those who eat resident fish—largely black and native

people, immigrants and refugees, and houseless people of all backgrounds.

“It was a past-time and a feeding,” explains Wilma Alcock, a local elder, whose parents were some of the first black shipyard workers in Portland. Her father passed away from mesothelioma, a form of lung cancer. Many people are unaware of risks, while others realize the danger but prioritize practicing important cultural traditions and/or accessing an affordable source of protein.

**Houseless camping in the harbor is nothing new: the river’s bounty of fish and relative seclusion has enticed houseless people to call the riverbank home for over 100 years, including in a “Hooverville” encampment during the Great Depression, and again beginning in the 1980s, with Reagan’s rollback of the social safety net and the defunding of mental health services.**

Portland’s houseless people, who contact dangerous substances such as dioxin and lead in riverbank campsites, are particularly vulnerable. Houseless camping in the harbor is nothing new: the river’s bounty of fish and relative seclusion has enticed houseless people to call the riverbank home for over 100 years, including in a “Hooverville” encampment during the Great Depression, and again beginning in the 1980s, with Reagan’s rollback of the social safety net and the defunding of mental health services.

Even earlier, at the turn of the century, the Oregonian reported that 5,000 people lived in old ship skeletons along the river. From 1909-1911, Portland’s mayor ordered these “scows” and their residents removed. Workers set some shelters on fire and moved others to cheap plots of then-rural land six miles east of the river, in Lents. As police violently sweep houseless people from Portland’s residential neighborhoods today, the river maintains its draw, despite hazards.

Portland’s sustainability successes, including river remediation thus far, have had uneven impacts. The brief history outlined here illustrates why Portland Harbor Superfund site remediation has substantial implications for our region’s most vulnerable residents. It also suggests that the ways in which remediation takes place is important. The Portland Harbor Community Coalition (PHCC), an alliance of grassroots groups and supporters, is currently advocating for a thorough cleanup of the harbor. At the same time, PHCC demands humane treatment of houseless people living along the river, as well as a transparent planning process. PHCC recognizes that Portland’s river cleanup and redevelopment to date, including the green infrastructure lining Portland’s streets and the condos lining the South Waterfront, is part and parcel of the city’s recent boom, which has fueled the displacement and exclusion of communities suffering most from toxic exposure. PHCC is therefore fighting for a substantial portion of the estimated \$1 billion it will cost to remediate the harbor to be allocated toward living wage jobs and job training for impacted communities.

So, let’s continue to celebrate our river, but let’s also be sure to keep in mind how we got here, who’s borne the burden of pollution—and cleanup—and how far we have to go.

*Erin Goodling is a researcher, writer and activist. Donovan Smith is an artist, journalist and community organizer. Both were born and raised in Portland. For more information about the Portland Harbor Community Coalition or to get involved, go to [www.ourfutureriver.org](http://www.ourfutureriver.org).*