

Vanport Revisited...a special focus

Vanport Residents' Profiles: Doll Phillips and Sarah Richey

by Angelique Sanders

Doll Phillips moved over to Vanport in 1944. She was happy in her new community: it was small enough to know all of her neighbors, yet large enough that she didn't need to run to Portland for little necessities.

"It was a nice place for people to live, a nice community..."

Doll was working as a maid in Vanport, supporting her four children. She was 34. They lived near railroad tracks, about four blocks from the wooden dam that held back the river.

Then on May 30, 1948, Doll Phillips was by the railroad tracks, and saw the flood waters heading toward the house. She ran back to the house and rounded



everyone up, telling them what was going on. There was no time to collect personal possessions, barely time to escape unscathed...

"It was terrible," Doll said, shaking her head at the memory. "We're just lucky everyone got out alive," but, of course, that was only within her family. Her neighbors were not all as fortunate.

Doll and her family stayed with a friend until the government relocated many of the flood victims to Swan Island. Of course, the trauma of the Vanport flood will always remain with the survivors.

"It was pitiful," Sarah Richey began, with a reflective sorrow in her eyes. She went on to say that a 15-year old boy had predicted the flood, but was ignored.

At the time of the flood, Sarah and her five children were preparing to go to a movie. When Sarah looked outside, she saw furniture and appliances rushing toward her house. Though in a state of shock, she and her husband kept their wits about them, and packed their children into the car, narrowly escaping. "If it had 'a came at night, I don't think none of us would' a got out," she sighed.



"A lot of 'em [flood victims]...were standing up there crying, wanting to know what happened to their babies, their chil'run," she said. "It was just a sad situation."

Sarah Richey and her family stayed at a church, and the Red Cross provided them with some food and clothing. They boated back to their house later, and were fortunate enough to salvage some items from upstairs.

"Some people--grown people--got drowned 'cause they wouldn't come out, see--they wanted to protect what they had. But, you see, you can get most stuff, but you can't get another life."

What Was the Vanport Disaster?



Refugees crowded Red Cross registration tables as an attempt was made to compile a list of missing persons.



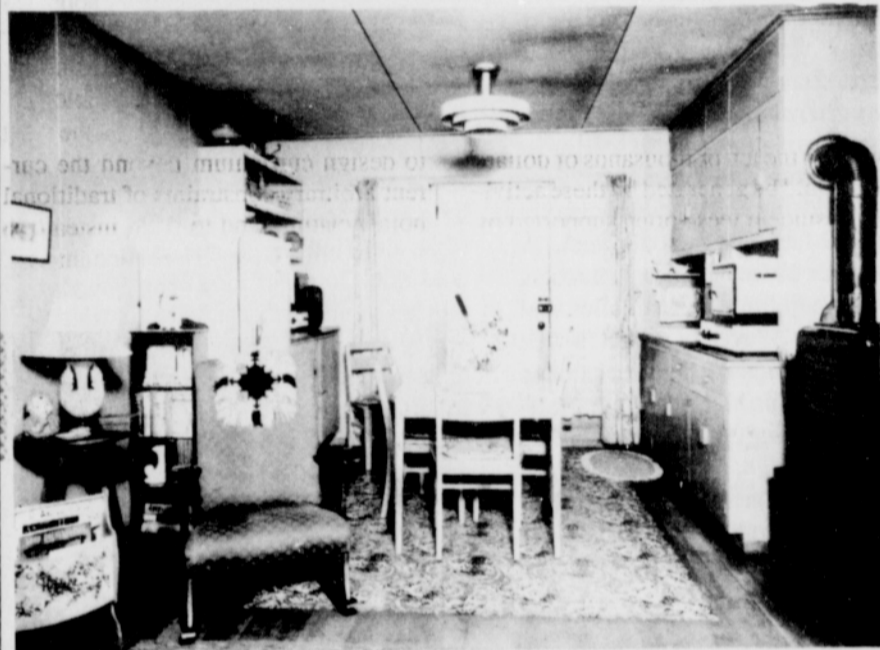
Reverend James Clow, pastor of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church and past president of the Portland Chapter of the NAACP, served as a spokesman for the Black community of Vanport.

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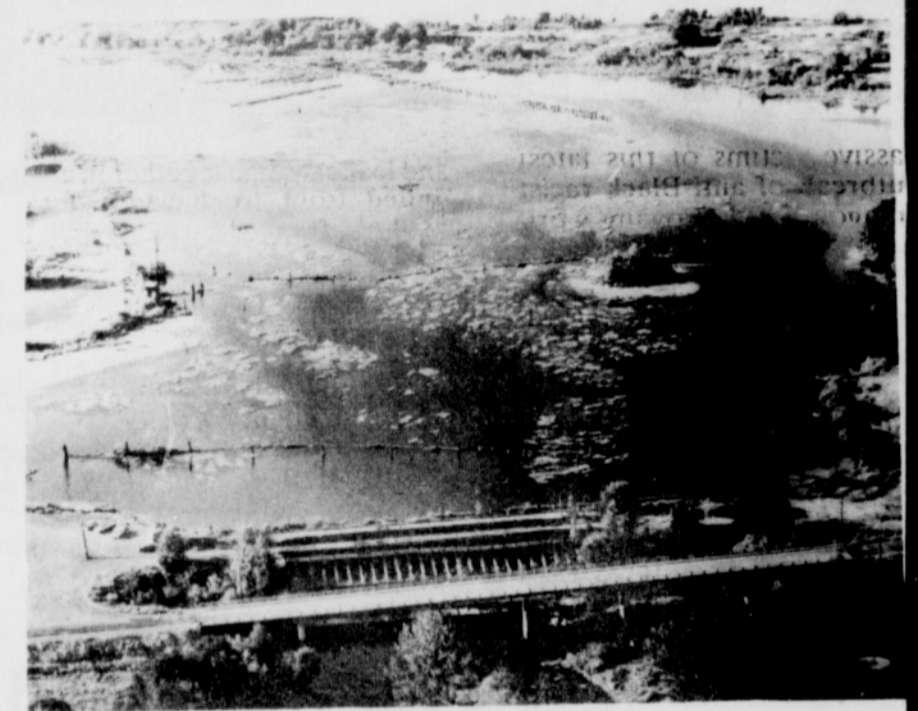
"Vanport was an eyesore. It was a festering ulcer on Portland's landscape. More than that, it housed the "coloreds" who were not really wanted in the area now that the war had ended and cheap labor was no longer needed. When the sand-filled dike on the Columbia collapsed and Vanport City was wiped out, many felt that divine providence had intervened and settled a thorny problem. It had not. Only slipshod engineering and human callousness were at work."



This human chain served as a lifeline for the last people out of Vanport.



Inside view of living quarters before dike broke.



Aerial overview of dike that broke



Flood refugees Mrs. Edna Tidwell and her youngsters found a temporary home at the Portland American Legion Post No. 1.

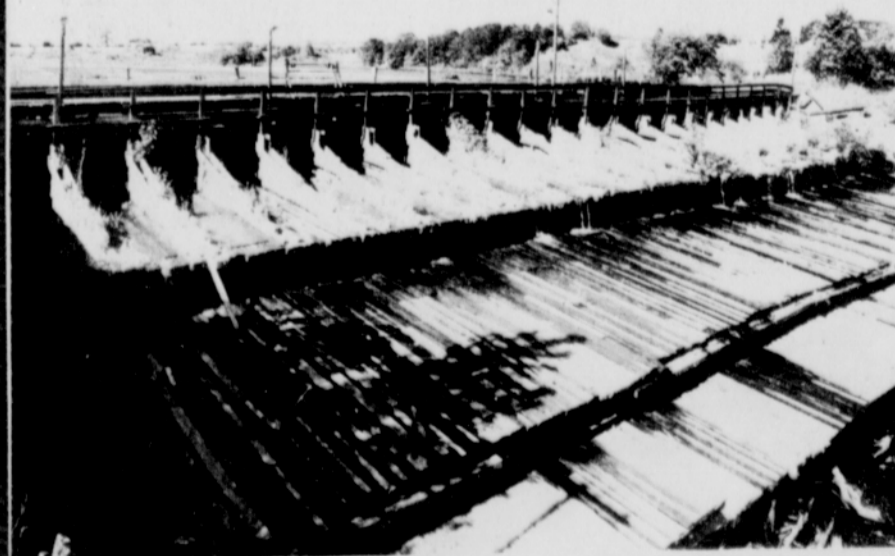


The Portland Observer gratefully acknowledges the contributions of pictures and documentation provided by the Oregon Historical Society, the Portland Chapter of the American Red Cross, the Multnomah County Library, and the Portland Housing Authority.

We also add a special "thanks" to Ms. Doll Phillips and Ms. Sarah Richey both of whom reaches back into a "bit of history" to provide us with much needed information.



Carl Downey carrying unidentified woman to safety. He rescued her from the roof top in the background and wended his way across the plywood plank walkway others laid on top of the floatsam. The woman was too frightened to give her name.



Water is shown rushing thru overflow outlets prior to railroad dike collapsing.