

Vanport Revisited...a special focus

Vanport Calendar, 1948: Timetable For Disaster

by Prof. McKinley Burt

Winter 1948: Rainfall normal, weather typically wet and dreary; Columbia River at normal stage for season. The Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) put the population of Vanport City at 5,295 families or 18,700 "actual registered tenants", 25 percent of whom were Black. HAP had administrative responsibility for the project.

Early spring 1948: Extremely heavy snow in the vast Columbia River Basin--from Idaho to Montana, to British Columbia.

May 15: Weather turns unseasonably warm and snow melts rapidly. Runoff water floods Idaho and Washington farmlands--heaviest surge of water since 1894.

May 22: Near Portland, the Columbia rises and "cocoa colored" flood waters carry dark chunks of debris. The tugboat Robert Gray sinks with loss of two crew members. The Housing Authority of Portland had met two days earlier but the minutes show no reference to any apprehension of danger to Vanport.

Tuesday morning, May 25: Livestock is moved from Hayden Island to the Union stockyards in North Portland. Columbia River was at 21.5 feet,

6.1 feet above flood stage. Water backed into the Willamette River from the Columbia and reached 20.8 feet, three feet above flood stage.

Tuesday afternoon, same day: Housing Authority of Portland and commercial operators begin 24-hour patrols of the dikes surrounding Vanport. HAP decided it would rely upon the Army Corp of Engineers for evaluation of the dike's reliability. HAP recited its inventory of dike repair material and the engineers said, "they had nothing to worry about."

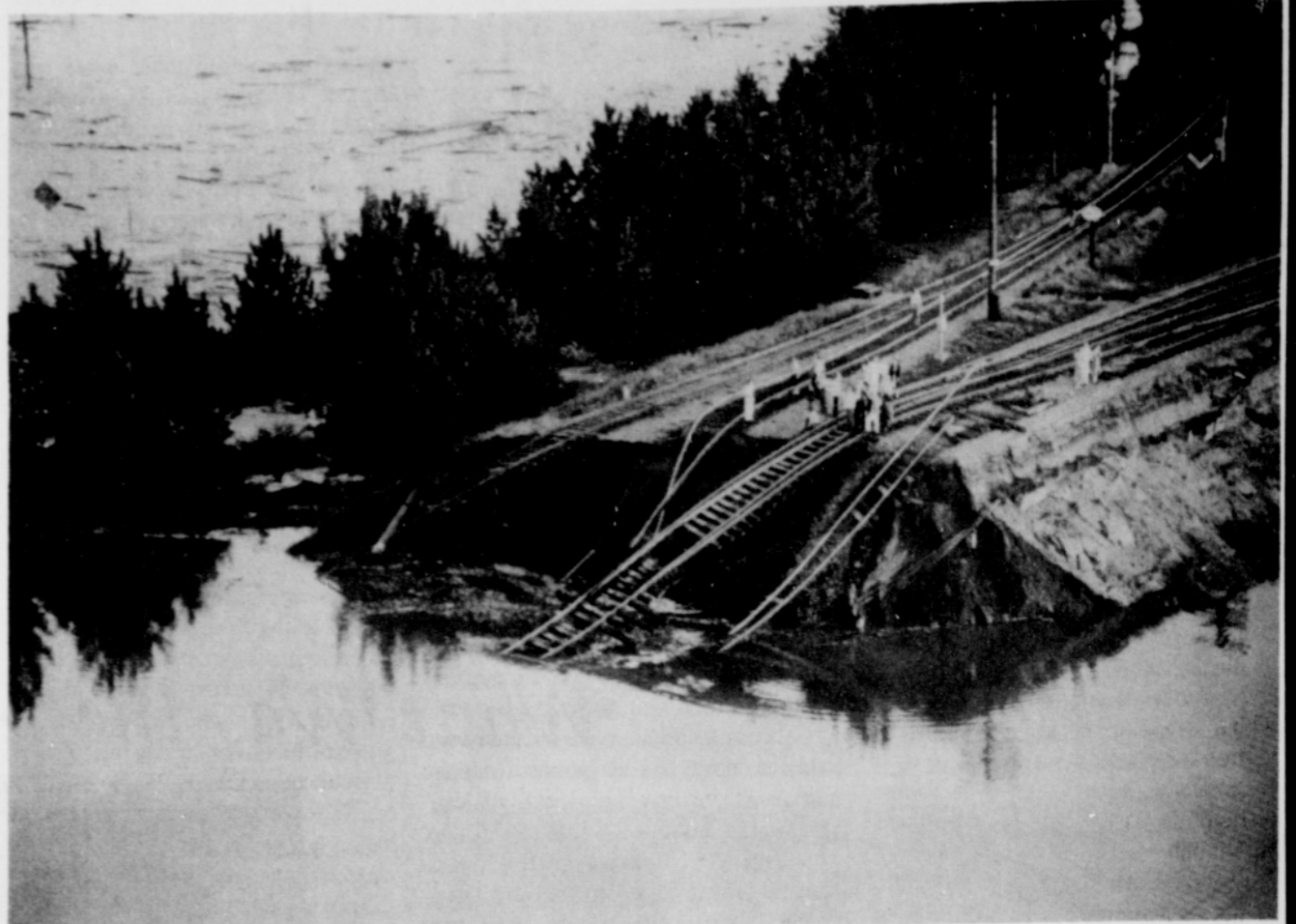
Friday morning, May 28 (copy courtesy of the Portland Today newspaper): The headline of the May 28th Oregonian read, "Portland Area Braces for 30-foot Crest," which meant that the Columbia would come within three feet of its all-time highwater mark, recorded in 1894. Water had reached five feet of the Steel Bridge railroad deck and there were eighteen inches of water over the Columbia River Highway. At 8:30 on Friday the 28th, the Morrison Bridge was forced out of service. The draw span was left open to lessen pressure against the bridge, and electric cables just underneath the bridge were

short circuited by the swirling waters.

The Columbia reached twenty-nine feet and Union Station was flooded. Harry D. Jaeger, General Manager of Vanport City, said, "Vanport City is not in any foreseeable danger." But the water kept rising. There were power shortages and some intentional dimming of power. PGE even "cut off some customers" so the city lights could stay on.

Friday afternoon, May 28: Telephone operators at the Vanport Administration building were put on 24-hour duty. Sleeping quarters were prepared for main personnel. Sheriff's personnel went on 12 hour shifts.

Saturday, May 29: Increasing concern led to a meeting at Red Cross Headquarters where the possibility of evacuation was discussed. The attendees were Red Cross representatives, HAP officials, a representative of the Governor, a county commissioner, Sheriff Pratt, and a health department official. It was decided that they were ill-prepared to handle an evacuation of this magnitude and another meeting was scheduled for the following Monday (May 31).



The Site of the original break in the railroad dike.

Sunday morning, May 30 (copy courtesy of Vanport, Oregon Historical Society Press): The stage for disaster is firmly set when, at 4:00 a.m., a crew of furnace repairmen shoved a message from the Housing Authority of Portland under the door of every tenant:

"... flood situation has not changed ... barring unforeseen developments VANPORT is safe." However, if it should become necessary to evacuate, the ... Housing Authority will give warning at the earliest possible moment by continued siren and air horn. Sound trucks would give instructions. Residents were told, if the warning came: don't panic; pack your personal belongings and a change of clothing; turn off the lights and the stove; close the windows and lock the door. If there were sick, elderly, or disabled persons, the bulletin suggested that, if it were convenient, it might be desirable for them to leave for a few days, but to be sure and register at the Sheriff's Office in case there was any inquiry. Finally the message concluded:

REMEMBER
DIKES ARE SAFE AT PRESENT

YOU WILL BE WARNED IF NECESSARY
YOU WILL HAVE TIME TO LEAVE
DON'T GET EXCITED.

Sunday afternoon, May 30, 2:00 p.m.: Most residents assumed that there was little danger, few had moved. A few had evacuated sick or elderly relatives--others had packed belongings into boxes, and some had hooked up small trailers. A few others had left during the night, but many were away, enjoying the Memorial Day weekend.

Sunday afternoon, May 30, 4:17 p.m.: That section of a railroad fill serving as part of the protective "ring dike" gave way--a sudden six-foot break quickly became 60 feet, and then 500 feet. A wall of water 10 feet high roared through, smashing buildings, automobiles and utility poles. Waves of water flowed over fleeing residents, human chains of rescuers, washing high over stalled traffic and screaming Vanport residents.

Sunday afternoon, May 30, 6:00 p.m.: A floating apartment crashes into one of Vanport's two radio towers, toppling it to the ground. The last of dozens of

"Rose City Transit Company" buses deposit survivors "Up on Interstate" at the east end of Vanport (The "Denver Avenue Fill"). Rescue operations are hampered by throngs of sightseers on surrounding roads. By 9:00 p.m. it is determined that all survivors have been rescued, but at 9:30 p.m. the Denver Avenue Fill collapses, sending a Portland General Electric Company emergency truck and its driver beneath the flood. Red Cross and National Guard set up shelters, serving food and providing shelter. Individual Portland residents, rising to the occasion, did the same, irrespective of race.

Aftermath: For years there was raging controversy over exactly how many lives were lost--and who was responsible; the Housing Authority of Portland, the Corps of Engineers, or the railroad company that built the fill which served as a dike. Despite much litigation, no agency was held responsible for the lives that were lost (eighteen by official estimate--hundreds by tenants estimates), or the tens of millions of dollars in personal property lost by the residents.



Aerial overview of the flood rushing thru Vanport.

The American Red Cross: The Role They Played

On Sunday afternoon May 30th at 4:12 P.M. a call was relayed to Disaster Vice-Chairman E.A. Valentine that the Dike had broke and water from Smith Cake was pouring into Vanport in waves.

Thus, the emergency efforts already in stage were launched. Actually, the Food Sub-committee went into operation at 1:00 P.M. Sunday. Realizing that the first item of Food Necessity would be bread, two bakeries in Portland turned out 15,000 loaves within four hours. The Vanport Emergency Canteen went into 24 hour operation to accommodate the vast food supply. Groceries were supplied by stores in Portland and outlets throughout the state.

Transportation

Transportation was provided by the National Guard units and a Men's Motor Corps was organized to relieve the Women's Motor Corp's and drove 48 hours over the weekend.

The Shelter Committee, though new to their jobs were former Red Cross workers with admirably, transporting over 28,000 evacuees from Vanport.

Medical and nursing was staffed by a well trained chairman who during World War II was the Medical Director of Office of Civilian Defense (O.C.D.). The medical rescue squad manned the first aid medical cart and provided emergency medical coverage along with the Sheriff and salvage crews at the scene for more than two weeks, dispensing drinking water and assisting the County Coroner.

Clothing

Clothing was issued from an already well stocked Chapter House. An outstanding job was performed by the

Clothing Committee who prepared a price list of over 300 items of clothing to be used as a guide for those issuing emergency requisitions from the Auditorium.

Housing

In addition to the many locations for emergency housing, a number of hotels were checked for availability and approximately 30 that accepted African Americans were asked to reserve space. The Portland Housing Authority indicated that they had 400 family units available but most were reserved for whites. The units were in need of repair and were not clean as they were not expected to be used. Also providing emergency housing were the Portland Airbase, facilities at Swan Island, Vancouver Barracks, and churches, as well as Portland Area schools.

On June 21, 1948, less than one month after the Vanport flood, Mr. Basil O'Connor, then president to the American National Red Cross forwarded a letter to the Disaster Committee Chairman of The Portland-Multnomah County Chapter of the American Red Cross. The letter read as follows:

The reputation for efficiency earned by the volunteers of the Portland-Multnomah Chapter in the recent floods is an exceptionally good one. The excellence of this service is particularly pleasing when one considers the unusual conditions surrounding the destruction of the Vanport Housing Area.

An important part of a successful volunteer program is the leadership. In Portland, the direction has been of the best. I congratulate you and

the members of the Disaster Committee on unusual devotion to duty during the early days of the disaster and on your continuing supervision of the flood relief activities.

This proud record again renews our faith in the importance and efficiency of our Red Cross.

Sincerely,
Basil O'Connor



Red Cross Volunteer Comforts two toddlers at Emergency Red Cross Center.

It should be noted that the Portland-Multnomah Chapter of the American Red Cross played a significant role in overcoming obstacles of logistics and racism to help victims of the Vanport Flood. Housing was a major issue as most Hotels had a policy of not accepting African Americans, and while many white victims of the flood were accepted into temporary quarters, the same

did not hold true for people of color. Were it not for the relentless efforts of the Local Chapter of the American Red Cross, the disaster would have been more severe for African Americans.

The April, 1978, edition of the Former Publication "Portland Today" poised a question to Oregonians: "The Flood wiped away Vanport City but did it wash away our sins?"



Mrs. Lizzie Phillips and her children, Cleaven and Ester May, were among many thousands evacuated from Vanport. They were under Red Cross care at the Portland Armory.