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Vanport Remembered

By JOY RAMOS

On Sunday, May 30, 1948, the dikes of the Columbia River broke, destroying Vanport forever. At the time of the Vanport flood, there were about 18,500 people, including 5,000 Blacks living in the housing project.

Vanport was the largest war-time housing facility in the United States. It was hastily built by the federal government, costing \$25 million. What took one year to build was left in ruins within 90 minutes.

There were two children who first saw the oncoming flood. "We heard a noise and looked up and saw a cloud of dust. As the dust settled, we saw a wave of water just like the ocean. We ran and told our mothers, then started getting things together," remembers Freda Love and Finnis.

Another victim of the disaster was Virgil Smith. "Vanport died quietly. The water lifted the wooden structures from their foundations. A swift current was now flowing northward and 15 or 20 housing units were moving with it. A sign, "One Way," stood above the water pointing the direction in which the buildings were moving."

The crowd panicked as people rushed to safety. Prior to the flood, the Housing Authority gave instructions in the event it became necessary to evacuate Vanport. A point made was "Don't panic! You have plenty of time. Take such valuables as money and jewelry. Don't try to take too much." Out of extreme urgency, many fled with nothing but the clothes they were wearing.

McKinley Burt was visiting friends in Vanport when he heard the sirens blaring at 11 AM. "Water was picking up apartment units and turning them around. Everything was gone, smashed to smithereens. Women were crying and screaming over what they had lost."

Their only recourse for safety was to head towards Denver Avenue or the railroad embankment. "The water was waist deep at Denver Avenue, the last street in Vanport. Men were forming human chains to help the people through the swift current. Ropes were fastened to telephone poles across the street to form a handhold to assist people in crossing," described W.A. Garnett, an engineer for the Vanport fire department.

The ravaging waters left thousands homeless and devastated. Outside help had arrived. "The current stopped, but the water kept rising until it stood knee deep on the second floors of



Homes were flooded in Vanport on May 30, 1948. Vanport use to be America's largest, single war-time housing project. Overnight, it was the state's second largest city, surpassing the state capital of Salem.

Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.



Flood refugees found whatever space was available. The bar around Portland American Legion Post No. 01 with slot machines was the temporary home of Mrs. Edna Tidwell and kids. June 2, 1948.

Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

the building. Boats were beginning to arrive. The National Guard and the Red Cross set up. The Salvation Army was there," noticed Virgil Smith, a news reporter.

Relief was given to the people in need of shelter. Portland became "The City of Refuge." Those concerned had displayed selfless acts of good will and Brotherly love towards the flood victims.

"Portland citizens forgot the color line - white women willingly had Negro families in their homes and petted and caressed colored babies as fondly as if they were their own. Colored did likewise with whites," said a Christian observer for the Northwest Clarion newspaper.

A letter of gratitude was written by the President of the Oregon Fraternal Organization to the Red Cross. It read, "You had been very broad and have shown no racial discrimination."

After the flood, many questioned the wisdom and foresight of the government planners in the placement of Vanport. Past warnings were casually disregarded. "We newcomers to Oregon now know what we did not know before. Oldtimers have told us. We have learned that the Columbia long standing warnings from time to time when the Snake and Willamette or other tributaries dumped too much water into her main channel," explained Bob Clark.

If the possibility of a major flood was a gross oversight, it proved costly. Fifteen people had died from the tragedy, maybe more.

The Vanport flood was a major turning point in changing the race relations in Portland. As with any turning point, they serve to move us to another level of growth. It made African Americans responsive to new and difficult challenges. They had to adapt under severe conditions to press forward. Progressively, power shifted to the Black community in their favor. Community was a means of survival.

After the flood, many African Americans were segregated to the Albina area.

"Portland's Black community was profoundly and permanently altered. The war brought new problems and the beginning of solutions to old problems. Black civil rights organizations were strengthened and new ones formed. New visibility resulted in the passage of basic civil rights legislation," wrote Elizabeth McLagan, author of Peculiar Paradise.

Natural forces that created the Vanport flood had also ushered in a new era for the Black community.