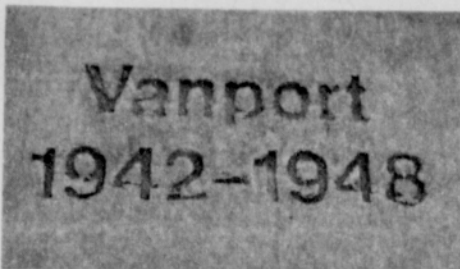


# Vanport Memorialized



Vanport and the dates of its short existence are etched in the sidewalks (above) of the future Max light rail Delta Park/Vanport Transit Center in north Portland. The site is situated where the former city of Vanport was washed away by floodwaters 55 years ago.

A poem telling the story of the African American experience in the vanished city of Vanport is read by S. Renee Mitchell (right), columnist for The Oregonian.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LEIGHTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER



TriMet General Manager Fred Hansen (from left), U.S. Rep. David Wu, Vanport survivor and north Portland resident Marion Craig, City Commissioner Jim Francesconi and Metro President David Bragdon dedicate the Interstate Max light rail bridge in the name of Vanport, the former city that brought African Americans to the Portland area for jobs and opportunities.

*Vanport was never intended to be a permanent city, but what Vanport gave us was diversity and a contribution to our community that was permanent.*

—Fred Hansen, TriMet general manager

## Remembering Vanport

continued ▲ from Front

car culture and bronze cast artifacts of bottles and coins found on the site after the flood washed away.

In 1948, Vanport was Oregon's second largest city, with a population of 80,000 people, 6,000 of which

were African-Americans. Men and women came to Vanport from 40 different states to work in the Kaiser Shipyards during World War II.

Among a handful of flood survivors, O.B. Hill, operations manager for Reflections Bookstore, attended the dedication. Hill was just six years

old when the flood destroyed his family's home and possessions.

"I came down here representing my parents, my brothers and sisters and other people of my race who were in the flood," said Hill. "I'm happy to see this happen. It'll be part of my memoirs."

## 'Vanport Voices'

©2002 by S. Renee Mitchell

World War II started in a decade short on hope

The Great Depression's grip

Was still tight on our throats

Our brave young soldiers were sent to die

In faraway cities that we had trouble finding on maps

But there was no time for pity

America needed its able to be strong and to work

So it built up shipyards

And pushed us out to its ports

White. Negro. Latino. And Japanese

A harmony of refugees

Opportunity explorers. Desperate for work

Alabamans, Oklahomans, and folks from New York

From Iowa and Pennsylvania

And every stop in between

They came

On 17-cars trains, on buses, over desert sands

On Magic Carpet Specials and Kaiser Karavans

They came

To build the ships

To save the land

That was the plan

Their bags were unpacked in Kaiserville

Built in just three months

Just-for-now homes

In a just-for-now time

The tender young town suckled

From the flow of shipyard workers

And was nurtured

At the edges of Columbia River's mouth

Vancouver to the north. Portland to the south

Three shifts, men and women, toiled 24 hours a day

To bring forth Liberty and send it on its way

It was a heady time for Portland

A prosperous time of sorts

A melting pot of races

In the place they called Vanport

But, alas

This make-do town was never meant to last

It was built on a river flood plain

And the buildings went up too fast

A compilation of wood, aluminum and glass

Built by whites who never moved

Beyond their prejudiced past

Who judged color as a certain reflection of a lower class

Portland was too quiet, too quaint to put up with blacks

So residents put up signs instead

They read "White Trade Only"

In the community and the shipyards

There was racial unrest

And for the Negroes who built ships

The pay was much less

Union membership was temporary

And the restaurant doors were closed

Motels? Closed. Amusement parks? Closed

Nightclubs? Closed

Except for downtown's Jolly Joan's

Still, opportunity found a way to bloom its Flowers

Seven Negro teachers. Two sheriffs

Even a few black businesses

Washington created human capital

Dishman served. Ford drove young minds

Shamsud-Din painted a new life

And Peoples grew

Then the war ended.

And the jobs went away

But many Negro families, they wanted to stay

And keep sharing their small spaces with roaches and rats

It was better than where they had come from

They were determined not to go back

Best to stay and squeeze all the life from scarce dollars

Than risk being confronted

By folks who liked to hunt

And hang Negroes from their collars

Eventually the blacks and whites laid off from war industries

Were joined by veterans and Japanese camp refugees

From 30,000, more than half stayed and confronted their fate

In a ramshackle town built with an expiration date

A college was birthed too from the spoils that war spew

The Vanport Extension Center, now called PSU

Its student store sold diapers, baby food and books too

To its 1,000-plus students who lived near the Slough

Memorial Day

Time for church services with family

And picnics with steak

It was Sunday, May 30. The year: '48

The river was rising

But the city handed out notices

Don't worry, they said. Things were just fine

By 10 minutes past four

Police banged on the doors

The dike! It had broken

Forget reassurances 'spoken

The city was wrong

And the river was right

Behind them. Get out now!

As the railroad tie broke from the river tide's force.

The family ties weakened from the Vanport divorce.

The wall of water was high

Ten feet tall, some had said

And with damp, violent shouts

From the river's foul mouth

Fate rushed in

To collect the dead

No time for reflection of cherished collections

Heirlooms? Forget it

Family pictures? Don't bother

They've already been swept into cold, murky water

So to high ground they ran with suitcases in hand

They would have snatched more

If they were given time to plan

Neighbors held hands and hoses to form a chain

To lead the way out for those who remained

"Somebody PLEASE save my baby"

A mother cries out.

But her voice is drowned out by the sirens, the shouts

The water is rising, to the chest, to the shoulders

That mother can't breathe.

She can't swim. No one holds her.

But she cannot go forth and leave her offspring behind

It was a quarter past five and she had run out of time.

Her weak cries were silenced by the river's deafening sound

Fifteen bodies, police said

But those are just the ones who were found

Homeless and scattered

Survivors left that dismal place

Where days after not even a rainbow would dare show its face

Portland opened its homes, its churches

The Y served daily meals

To the thousands of families who ran toward the hills

Red Cross was there too, helping a nation to see

A once-hostile community

Responding with love

To this sad tragedy

Survivors eventually left

To join families back home

The Negroes who remained were broke and alone

They clustered in the only neighborhood

Allowed to embrace them

Then Memorial Coliseum

Then Emanuel Hospital

Came in to displace them.

State government came in too and divided their hood

And put down a freeway where houses once stood

Now blacks are dealing with another forced relocation

From skyrocketing housing prices

And gentrification

And the promised land

So many once thought bore all their dreams

Gave birth to a golf course, a race track and things

That have nothing to do with the reason we're here

Nothing to do with that piece of land over there

We're here to honor memories

Of the lives that were lost

The promises broken; the pain that flood cost

Survivors we call you

And we give you your props

A documentary.

A memorial.

A TriMet light-rail stop.

And we gather today

To say "We won't forget"

And to say "Thank you"

For a legacy of a black community

That just won't quit

Long live the spirit of Vanport!