

BLACK HISTORY

Portland's Katrina



A human chain is formed to help rescue survivors of the Vanport flood of 1948. The multicultural community between Portland and Vancouver was wiped out when a railroad dike collapsed from the flooding Columbia River. (Oregonian photo)

continued ▲ from Front

Ozarks, the Sierras, and the Great Plains.

Many of Vanport's residents were African Americans from the South in search of a better life. Shortly before it was washed away, about 40 percent of the population was black.

"Like locusts, they had moved in upon... before, and had nibbled up all the shelter in sight. A population from many regions, they were exiles from better homes, exposed to new conditions, new climates and new work, and not yet integrated with any community, presents many problems, not only of physical housing, but of human values as well—health, education, recreation, safety, and morale," read an article from the Oregonian when the project was opened up in 1943.

Life in Vanport was gritty. Grocery stores, parks, libraries, shopping centers— all the amenities common in Portland neighborhoods nowadays— were slow to be developed. It was noisy from constant construction, crowded, and far-removed from Portland and Vancouver.

For much of its existence, Vanport had a transitory environment. People lived there because they priced out of Portland due to simple lack. As the war was winding down, 100 families a day were leaving the project.

"We feel that most of the Vanport residents would not be living in a housing project if there were any other living quarters available," Harry Jaeger, the general manager of Vanport, told the Oregon Journal in 1947.

But shortly before Vanport was destroyed, people began to grow roots in a place that HAP created in the middle of nothing. By 1947, it had its own schools and libraries, and Vanport College opened its doors to meet the growing educational demand of returning veterans.



Overturned vehicles and other debris are left in the wake of the 1948 flood that destroyed Vanport, a multicultural community north of Portland's city limits. The town was Oregon's second largest city at the time.

One of the most remarkable things about Vanport was the racial integration that marked the city, especially when the rest of Oregon had adopted the racist public accommodation practices of the deep South.

HAP never made segregation its official policy. And while housing in Vanport was never entirely integrated, public places were—including the schools. The library even hired a black assistant librarian.

But Vanport wasn't exactly a paragon of racial harmony. A study that appeared in a 1946 edition of the American Sociological Review found that a top complaint from white residents was the racial integration of Vanport. For blacks, it was discrimination.

But the experiment was washed away in May 1948, when a leak in a dike turned into a flood that forever destroyed the city and left thousands homeless.

It was common knowledge that Vanport was built on a flood plain, and HAP had to periodically reassure residents of their safety.

Just a week before the disaster, a HAP flier read, "Dikes are safe at present. You will be warned if necessary. You will have time to leave. Don't get excited."

In addition to being in a naturally unstable area, Vanport was viewed as an impoverished and undesirable place to live by many Portlanders, who stigmatized people

who lived there as backward bumpkins. After the flood, the government's response was harshly criticized for not acting swiftly to help displaced residents, many of which ended up in substandard government-issued mobile units— not unlike the infamous FEMA trailers..

But freshly-displaced black residents faced an additional layer of discrimination in a state that had largely widely Southern-style segregation.

"If it is necessary to bring in large numbers of Negro workers, locate them on the edge of the city. It would be much better for all concerned. If they are allowed to fan out through the city it soon will [be] necessary to station a policeman on every corner," said the president of the Central East Portland Community Club in 1942.

Many blacks from Vanport had money, but the racist environment in Portland severely restricted their housing options. Albina soon became the only part of town displaced African Americans could relocate. Interestingly, some people viewed Vanport's destruction as a positive development since it pushed the black population in closer vicinity to the rest of Portland.

However, the community created by survivors of Vanport was soon shaken. This time the flood was the building of Memorial Coliseum and steady gentrification.

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