



Ed Washington talks to people participating in a historic tour managed by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, gives a talk at the site of Vanport, a multi-ethnic community he lived in as a child that was washed away by a flood in 1948.

PHOTO BY JAKE THOMAS/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

# Tour Looks at Oregon's Grim History

## Past discrimination revealed

BY JAKE THOMAS  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

To some, a dog park, the Exposition Center, and PGE Park might seem to be fairly mundane parts of Portland's cityscape. But a historic tour sponsored by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, a group that monitors discrimination in housing, takes a glimpse into how these locations reveal the city's grim history.

Last week, approximately two hundred people interested in civil rights history piled into four buses for a look at Portland's less-than-savory past.

Diane Hess, education director at the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, who served as a tour guide, explained that before Congress enacted landmark legislation meant to end discrimination

in housing in the late 1960s and 70s, Portlanders were routinely denied a place to live on the basis of race, religion, or familial status.

As the bus swung onto North Williams Avenue, once a commercial corridor in an African American part of town, Hess explained that Albina was originally populated by immigrants from eastern and southern Europe in the late 1800s, and was later where blacks, working as railroad porters, put down roots in the early 20th century. Eventually, black residents would mostly occupy the Alberta, Waverly Heights, and Woodlawn neighborhoods.

Hess said that the reason African Americans became so concentrated in those areas was

because in 1919 the Portland Realty Board adopted a policy that realtors were not allowed to show blacks housing in white neighborhoods. Some neighborhoods adopted covenants excluding blacks and Asians, while banks and insurance companies also adopted policies meant to

hospital in the late 1960s and 70s, which was stalled after federal funds failed to materialize.

"We're going to the city of Vanport, which no longer exists," she said, as the bus approached a large dog park on the outskirts of north Portland.

This used to be where the

*Vanport, which was relatively integrated given the time, was washed away in a flood in 1948. The houses, which had wooden foundations, were lifted up by the flood and bashed into each other as flood waters forever destroyed the settlement.*

buttress segregation. In 1959, Republican Governor Mark Hatfield signed into law a fair housing act for the state, but it did little to change prevailing discriminatory patterns. Hess said that occasionally her organization still gets housing covenants with archaic racial language.

As the bus crept up Williams, Hess pointed to a series of vacant lots that surround Emmanuel Hospital. Each one, she said, used to be an African American home or business that was displaced by the expansion of the

location of Vanport, a large public housing settlement built to accommodate the influx of people looking for work in shipyards during the peak of WWII. The shipyards also attracted African Americans who moved into Vanport after being excluded elsewhere in Portland, which prompted the Oregonian to run the headline, "New Negro Migrants Worry City."

One of these immigrants was Ed Washington, who arrived in Vanport from Birmingham, Ala. when he was 7 years old. Speak-

ing before the crowd that amassed after buses emptied, he recalled good schools, lots of other kids to play with, and a house with a big yard during his stay in the settlement.

Now a dog park, he said that he always sees a dog doing its business where his family's house once stood whenever he visits.

"I always think that it's really bad they're doing that at our house," he said to laughter.

Vanport, which was relatively integrated given the time, was washed away in a flood in 1948. The houses, which had wooden foundations, were lifted up by the flood and bashed into each other as flood waters forever destroyed the settlement. Washington knew that he wasn't coming back, and the places where black people could relocate were limited.

People piled back on the buses as tour went further north to the Portland Exposition Center, which hosts events ranging from gun to cat shows. But, it too, is part of Oregon's uglier history.

Tensions had been present since Japanese immigrants began moving to Oregon in search of agricultural work in the late 1800s, but after Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941 by Japan,

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