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Portland Community College Professor James Stanley Harrison is the official historian for the Vanport Mosaic Festival.

On Vanport's History: Expert pens work about 'The Miracle City'

BY CHRISTA MCINTYRE
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Portland Community College Professor James Stanley Harrison is the official historian for the Vanport Mosaic Festival taking place this long Memorial Day weekend at multiple sites in north and northeast Portland.

In 1998, Harrison walked into Terrell Hall on the PCC Cascade Campus and saw a large photo exhibit about the deadly flood in 1948 that wiped out a city with a large black population near Portland called Vanport. It was the first time, although Harrison had spent decades as a historian in African-American history, that he heard of the city.

Harrison has been filling in the gaps by spending the last 10 years researching and writing a new comprehensive book about Vanport. His account, with a first draft expected by the end of the year, will add to the only one of official book on Vanport written in

the late 1980's by Manly Maben, a teacher from Vancouver who was a witness to the Vanport Flood and primarily relied on accounts from the Housing Authority of Portland.

While Professor Harrison believes it's not possible to tell the whole story of Vanport, also called "The Miracle City" in one book, his documentation is bringing new insights about Vanport through his extensive research of other historical documents and interviews with former residents.

One of the myths Harrison wants to dispel is that Vanport was built hastily.

His research found that two major construction firms in Portland built relatively solid structures at Vanport.

"Quickly constructed, yes. But hastily, the term which I have seen, has a different implication," he said.

Harrison said Vanport had one of the most efficient yards for building Liberty Ships during

World War II. Unlike earlier East Coast shipyards, Vanport had a team of welders, instead of riveters and they used a prefabrication assembly line method similar to the automotive factories that Henry Ford developed in Michigan. It would take an East Coast yard 6 months to finish one ship; Vanport once finished a ship in 14 days.

It wasn't just shipbuilding that changed, so did the opportunity for work. Before the war, black Americans could often find only menial jobs or employment as porters on the railway lines making around 40 cents an hour.

In Vanport, black workers learned a skilled trade on equal footing with other workers and could make up to \$5 an hour, which is equal to around \$12 an hour today. The first African American teachers in Oregon taught in Vanport schools and the first African American librarian in the state

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Portland Voters Pass Historic Bond

Portland voters delivered a decisive victory last week to a historic property tax levy to rebuild or remodel Benson, Madison and Lincoln high schools, Kellogg Middle School, and make health and safety repairs to nearly every school building in the district.

Passage of the \$790 million bond follows a similar measure approved in 2012 to support the restoration and modernization of the city's public education facil-

ities. The new measure will also be used to address lead in school drinking water, asbestos and other environmental safety concerns that have plagued a district with aging schools.

The vote-by-mail election also saw three new members elected to positions on the Portland Public Schools board. Rita Moore, Scott Bailey and Julia Brim-Edwards will claim their seats in July.

Moore, who has spent years act-

ing as a watchdog for the district and was endorsed by the teachers union, defeated widely endorsed new-comer Jamila Singleton Munson, a member of Portland's black community. Brim-Edwards, a Nike executive who previously served on the board from 2001 to 2005 will once again resume her seat, and Bailey will be bringing his two-decade's worth of experience working on the PPS budget and policy advisory committees to the board.