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Flood of Change: the Vanport Flood and Race Relations in Portland, Oregon

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FLOOD OF CHANGE: THE VANPORT FLOOD AND RACE RELATIONS IN
PORTLAND, OREGON

A Thesis

Presented To

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

History

by

Michael James Hamberg

June 2017

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Graduate Studies

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Abstract

FLOOD OF CHANGE: THE VANPORT FLOOD AND RACE RELATIONS
IN PORTLAND, OREGON

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Michael James Hamberg

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This thesis examines race relations amid dramatic social changes caused by the migration of African Americans and other Southerners into Portland, Oregon during World War II. The migrants lived in a housing project named Vanport and an exploration behind Portlanders' negative opinion of newcomers will be undertaken. A history of African Americans in Oregon will open the paper and the analysis of events leading up to a 1948 flood that destroyed the housing project and resulted in a refugee and housing crisis will comprise the middle of the paper. Lastly, an examination of whether or not an improvement in race relations occurred following the community's response in aiding flood victims will close the paper. The paper also addresses larger regional context such as the effects of World War II in the western United States and the Second Great Migration.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

At 4:17 p.m. on May 30, 1948, an earthen dike collapsed and waves slammed into buildings while unprepared citizens decamped for their lives with their children and scant belongings. Inundated in an hour, the community of Vanport, Oregon was destroyed with dozens, if not hundreds, presumed dead. Most residents had ten minutes to avoid the devastation while others had no warning at all. This scene was the reality for over 18,000 people on Memorial Day 1948 in Vanport, a World War II federal housing project built near the Columbia River between Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington. At its zenith, Vanport housed over 40,000 migrant workers lured by wartime shipbuilding jobs. Migrants were largely poor uneducated laborers from the Deep South and Midwest and many were African American who entered a state with few blacks. As workers arrived in 1942, many wondered if Portlanders would accept the diverse newcomers. Despite the migrants' economic contribution, Portlanders greeted them with disdain and hostility. Portland community members, leaders, and organizations viewed new workers as undesirables and menaces to their community.

During the 1940s Portland was one of the worst cities nationwide for race relations, and according to one black leader, was “the worst place on the Pacific coast to be black and unemployed.”¹ Historically, blacks in Oregon suffered from grave discrimination and black wartime residents faced hostility and resentment from officials and residents. Following the war over half the migrant workers remained in Vanport and

¹ John Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

Portlanders' opinions about the project turned more caustic. Was this because of the race of the workers, or did Portlanders simply wish to reinstate their prewar way of life? As Vanport residents' unemployment and welfare dependency increased due to shipyards closing, Portlanders worried that unemployed African Americans and veterans would turn Vanport into a crime-filled slum with delinquency and violence. To avoid the impending hazard they believed would arise, the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) and other local agencies called for the destruction of Vanport, to convert its land into an industrial area, and for workers to return home. As western cities struggled with wartime changes, Portland wished to bid farewell to Vanport's migrant workers as local citizens were unwilling to accept them. However, the federal government owned Vanport, so local governments had no power to decide the future of the project, but the project's and its people's fate became clear on that Memorial Day in 1948.

Having known weeks in advance of a potentially major flood, authorities evacuated communities elsewhere throughout Portland, and repeatedly assured Vanport residents of their safety despite Vanport's proximity to the river. The lack of warning given is suspicious and begs further investigation as public opinion before the flood shows Portlanders held contempt for Vanport residents and African Americans staying in Portland long term. The project's large African American population was at least partially responsible for the negligent handling of the flood situation. And so, the flood may have marked the lowest point in relations between migrants and Portlanders (and whites and blacks), however, the more significant question is whether positive change came from the tragedy? Since blacks did not simply leave after the flood, did their treatment and conditions in Portland worsen, stay the same, or improve? Was the flood a catalyst for

social change, greater integration, and acceptance of the black community in Portland or was it simply an event in the recesses of history Portland would like to forget? The flood left Vanport residents without housing, and faced with the prospect of entering a city with little regard for them, poor black Southerners doubted Portlanders would accept them. Surprisingly, immediately after the flood, white families opened their homes to black refugees, and since black citizens moved into more neighborhoods upon leaving Vanport, many Portlanders experienced their first meaningful contact with blacks. Local leaders discourse towards African Americans improved as the leaders increasingly sought to make them feel accepted and give them political power. Opportunities for blacks nationwide improved in the 1940s, yet Portland lagged behind. Would the charity offered after the flood be enough to alter Portland race relations significantly? While the flood forced the city to address racial issues, some scholars and recent publications overlook or downplay the flood's role in Portland's race relations history.

Despite sustained interest locally and nationally in the 1940s, academics have largely ignored Vanport. While Portland newspapers occasionally memorialize Vanport and authors reference Vanport in works on Pacific Northwest history, African Americans in the West, federal housing, or disaster relief, no extensive study of the project's legacy exists. The first decades after the war saw no publications on Vanport and even a recent publication, Zita Podany's *Images of America: Vanport* is a photography book for a general audience. Academic journal articles offer limited discussion on individual topics related to Vanport such as African American housing in Portland, education in Vanport, or the Portland shipyards. Most have forgotten the housing project's effects and most Portlanders, if asked about Vanport, are unfamiliar with it. Yet a spike in public interest

has occurred in the past few years, mainly due to efforts to catalog surviving Vanport residents' stories. Vanport Mosaic, a Portland non-profit, has collected oral histories that preserve stories about the "seemingly forgotten piece of Oregon history."² Due to increased local interest, nationally recognized publications such as *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, and *NPR* have written articles about the flood and African Americans in Portland. Despite renewed interest, serious academic scholarship remains scant and an in-depth look is required to understand the lasting influence of the project.

The only book on Vanport is Manly Maben's 1987 *Vanport*, wherein Maben views the housing project's most enduring and important legacy in economic terms. His "In retrospect" section notes that "Vanport quickened the tempo of life in Portland...Portland never lost the business gains, the quickened pulse, the new city feeling."³ Comparing wartime Portland to gold rushes of the nineteenth century, he believes Vanport's most important legacy is its economic ramifications, while other "legacies...were small and relatively unimportant."⁴ Maben dedicates only one sentence to post flood race relations saying "the integration of black men and women in sizeable numbers into the Portland area...proceeded with little incident."⁵ Written in 1987, an ample length of time to assess lasting effects, Maben fails to fully explore other legacies left by Vanport, such as its effects on race relations and the integration of the black

² "A Forgotten City," *Vanport Mosaic*, www.vanportmosaic.org/.

³ Manly Maben, *Vanport* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1987), 133.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Maben, *Vanport*, 135.

community into Portland proper. While his focus on economic legacies is valid, a glaring omission is the lack of discussion on the project and flood's racial legacy in Portland.

More recently, Stuart McElderry's 1998 doctoral thesis argues the flood had little influence in the city's race relations. McElderry focuses on African Americans in the 1940s as a whole and devotes a section of his thesis to Vanport. He argues Portland followed national patterns of racial liberalism in the 1940s and accepted African Americans and integration due to the work of activists and the Urban League who created a new "racial order in Portland."⁶ McElderry downplays the effects of the flood in changing racial attitudes, and attributes Portland's increased acceptance of African Americans to educational programs.⁷ He believes significant racial change already occurred by the mid 1940s and limits the importance of the flood for improving race relations. By looking at public opinion and the city's national reputation for discrimination and racism up to 1948, McElderry seems to overemphasize the success of educational programs.

While Maben and McElderry minimize the flood's importance on racial change in Portland, Jason Rivera and Demond Miller argue the flood worsened race relations. The two scholars devote a third of their study on African American experiences in natural disasters to Vanport. They argue segregation increased after the flood, whites offered little assistance to victims, "white flight" occurred when blacks entered white

⁶ Stuart McElderry, *The Problem of the Color Line: Civil Rights and Racial Ideology in Portland, Oregon, 1944-1965* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1998), 1-2, 387-388. For an in-depth discussion of efforts made by the Urban League, the NAACP, and other activists, see pages 110-161.

⁷ McElderry, *The Problem of the Color Line*, 142, chapter 4.

neighborhoods, and “lessons were not learned from the Vanport experience.”⁸ Most importantly, they conclude prejudices and discrimination increased in the 1950s without citing sufficient evidence. Likewise, Portland historian Carl Abbott says the city was unwelcoming after the flood and the black community “were an embarrassment and a worry that the white majority would have preferred to forget,” and highlights the rejection of civil rights bills to argue conditions worsened in the 1950s.⁹ For Rivera, Miller, and Abbott, the flood represented a tragedy caused by racism, and African Americans faced greater resentment and discrimination after the flood.

Recent popular journals and magazines connect the flood experience to current racism and discrimination in Portland. By focusing on continued housing discrimination, the rise in gentrification harming black neighborhoods, Portland’s current small black population, and recent minority flight out of Portland, journalists suggest the city never shed its prejudiced reputation and the flood was a negative event where Portlanders refused to change.¹⁰ Despite the city’s current progressive reputation, Alana Semuels offers, “talking constructively about race can be hard, especially in a place like Portland where residents have so little exposure to people who look differently than they do...Portland, and indeed Oregon, have failed to come to terms with their ugly past.”¹¹

⁸ Jason David Rivera and DeMond Shondell Miller, “Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience,” *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 4 (March 2007):511-512

⁹ Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 164-165.

¹⁰ Kenya Downs, “The Time Nature and Racism Teamed Up to Wipe Out a Whole Town,” *NPR* March 2, 2015. See also Natasha Geiling, “How Oregon’s Second Largest City Vanished in a Day,” *Smithsonian* Feb. 18, 2015,

Alana Semuels, “The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America,” *The Atlantic* July 22, 2016. The 2010 Census reported that Portland’s African American population was 6.3%

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Journalists have use the flood to reinforce ideas about Portland's modern day lack of diversity, without fully looking into the effects of the flood. While discrimination and social issues still hurt Portland's black citizens throughout the twentieth century, these sources ignore the positive influences apparent after the flood and throughout the 1950s.

The Vanport flood and the African American community of Portland needs more coverage. Scholarship has covered African Americans in California and Seattle, such as Quintard Taylor's *in Search of a Racial Frontier, African Americans in the American West 1528-1990*, but Portland scholarship is limited. Taylor says his study of Seattle should "prompt" studies of other western cities such as Portland.¹² While some studies analyze Portland's black community in the 1940s, an extensive study that extends beyond the 1940s will show change over time.¹³ This study expands knowledge on the Second Great Migration as well, by looking at African Americans' struggles, changes, and triumphs both prewar and postwar.

Previous studies either ignore the flood's role in changing race relations or argue the flood worsened race relations in Portland. Few consult the sources of the Urban League, local newspapers, prominent Portland African Americans, and Vanport residents, and therefore miss the point that the flood was a transformative experience wherein Portland came to terms with their racist reputation and addressed longstanding racial problems. The tragedy created new relationships between black and white residents and a

¹² Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1998), 9. And Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 Through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 159

¹³ Quintard Taylor, "The Great Migration: The Afro-American Communities of Seattle and Portland during the 1940s," *Arizona and the West* 23, no.2 (Summer 1981).

marked improvement in race relations occurred. Oregon was part of the vanguard in 1950s civil rights legislation and earned distinctions for their progress in race relations and I argue the flood was the driving force behind positive social change long overdue in Portland. This study refutes claims that the Vanport flood was a prejudiced ending in Portland's attempt to return to its prewar lifestyle and oust the black community. Chapter one looks at race relations in Oregon from statehood to the 1940s, helping to set context for the arrival of tens of thousands of African Americans in 1942. Chapter two analyzes public opinion of Vanport during and after the war to show how Portland residents and leaders negatively viewed the project and wished to rid themselves of it. Next, chapter three explores the specifics preceding the decision to not evacuate the housing project to see if a mishandling occurred, and if so, what that says about racial and class prejudice in Portland. This section is directly juxtaposed with the culminating chapter four, which explores the interactions of Portland officials and residents with African Americans following the flood, to see if a change in race relations is noticeable following the flood incident.

Yet, before analyzing the effects of Vanport on Portland race relations, an overview of the history of African Americans in Oregon, from statehood in 1859 leading up to World War II, is necessary. The racial bigotry throughout Oregon's history was responsible for Portlanders' poor opinions of wartime migrants. Thus, understanding the history of African Americans in Oregon is crucial to understanding Portlanders' views of arriving migrants during the 1940s.

Most mid nineteenth-century white settlers who traversed the Oregon Trail to settle the fertile Willamette Valley never envisioned African Americans in Oregon. Peter

Burnett, Oregon trailblazer and eventual governor of California, felt Oregon should “keep clear of this most troublesome class of population” calling African Americans “great evils that have...afflicted the United States and other countries.”¹⁴ Under his authority, the provisional government passed exclusionary acts towards blacks and the state’s 1859 constitution outlawed any “negro, or mulatto” from entering the state, holding real estate, or making contracts and gave public officials the power to forcibly remove them.¹⁵ While many states endorsed exclusion of certain groups, no other free state had it in their constitution. Prominent western historian Richard White explains that Oregon settlers sought to make a “racially pure white community” like the Midwest ones they left.¹⁶ Oregonians took pride in their pioneer past and subsequently viewed African Americans as inferior and suspicious.

Despite a white pioneer heritage, Oregon did not lack diversity. With the completion of railroads linking Portland with major routes in the late nineteenth century, Oregon’s Asian and European immigrant populations soared. By 1890 Portland was an “immigrant city” with its Chinatown second in size only to San Francisco’s, and by 1900 immigrants and children of immigrants comprised fifty-eight percent of the population.¹⁷ Portland had German, Scandinavian, Irish, Jewish, and Japanese enclaves alongside

¹⁴ William A. Little and James E Weiss, *Blacks in Oregon: A Statistical and Historical Report* (Portland: Portland State University, 1978), 21.

¹⁵ Sam A. Kozler, *State of Oregon Blue Book and Official Directory 1921-1922* (Salem, OR: State Printing Department, 1921), 34. The article was not repealed until 1926.

¹⁶ Ken Burns, *The West*, documentary, (1996: Arlington, VA, PBS).

¹⁷ Carl Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries: The Place and the People* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2011), 56-57.

nearly seven thousand Chinese.¹⁸ Unlike Seattle and Tacoma where anti-Chinese violence was prominent, Portland tolerated its Chinese population and immigrants lived without much oppression and violence. For instance, Jewish Oregonians felt accepted and rose to prominent political positions.¹⁹ Oregon was not entirely inhospitable as various groups thrived and grew, so Oregonians insistence on maintaining a small black population hints at a specific bias towards African Americans in particular.

With a new focus on anti-immigration and populist economics, the Second Klan was popular nationwide in the 1920s. While the first Klan's stronghold was the Deep South with vigilantism directed at African Americans, the Second Klan's popularity lay outside the South and its members looked to weaken the influence of Catholics, Jewish Americans, and Communists. Instead of ethnic violence, the second Klan was "more concerned with mainstream reform issues than those of race and ethnicity" and was nativist and economically populist.²⁰ After the Red Scare of 1919, Americans sought to limit foreign immigrants, communists, and radical unions in response to a "rapid pace of social change" and a disappearing "familiar America."²¹ Economics and class were central to the Klan's appeal and in their efforts to keep the country staunchly American, the Klan blamed minorities and immigrants.

¹⁸ Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries*, 57-59.

¹⁹ Ellen Eisenberg, *Embracing a Western Identity: Jewish Oregonians 1849-1950* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2015), 16.

²⁰ Jason McDonald, *American Ethnic History: Themes and Perspectives* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 74-75.

²¹ Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries*, 101.

The Klan harassed local blacks throughout Oregon. By 1921 the Klan found supporters and became involved in cross burnings and “necktie parties” throughout the state while black leaders petitioned the governor to stymie the Klan’s growth.²² While the Klan devoted much attention toward Catholics, they blamed blacks for an increase in “social ills.”²³ In 1922, six Klansmen abducted a black Medford man to the mountains where they tried to lynch him and ordered him to leave the county or be killed.²⁴ The growth of “night mobs” made Governor Olcott request legal action.²⁵ All suspects were acquitted, but an investigation found Portland police members and Klan leaders orchestrated multiple Southern Oregon episodes.²⁶ Falsely accused of having slept with a white woman, Klan members lured Oregon City’s lone black resident, Perry Ellis out of town, planned to castrate, and nearly lynched him.²⁷ When three black servants moved to Grants Pass, the community forced them to abscond for their safety in the night with the next day’s local paper’s front-page reading:

Grant’s Pass always has been a white man’s town, and there is no reason...why it shouldn’t continue to be a white man’s town...The attitude of the people of this peaceful, law-abiding community toward the encroachment of the black, brown, or red races of the land, or the world for that matter is: NIGGER WE DON’T

²² Kimberly Mangum, “The Ku Klux Klan Are Still Scrapping Here: African American Responses to the Oregon Klan, 1922-1924,” in *Voices from Within the Veil: African Americans and the Experience of Democracy* eds. William H. Alexander, Cassandra L. Newby-Alexander and Charles H. Ford, (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 254, 264. “Necktie Parties” were slang for attempted lynchings. A 1923 initiation ceremony in Portland drew 2,000 new members. See also “Negroes Protest Klan,” *Oregonian*, Aug. 20, 1921, 9.

²³ Carl Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries*, 101.

²⁴ “Ku Klux Klan in Jackson,” *Oregon Voter: Magazine of Citizenship for Busy Men and Women*, Aug 12, 1922, 9-12. Also see McLagan, 138

²⁵ “Trials Ordered for Night Mobs,” *Oregonian*, July 7, 1922, 4.

²⁶ “Raid by Police Held Klan Work,” *Oregonian*, July 31, 1922, 1, 6.

²⁷ Mangum, 264, and McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon*, 139. Upon receiving an ultimatum of death or leaving Oregon City, Ellis moved to Tacoma.

WANT YOU HERE-AND WE WON'T HAVE YOU HERE- YOU HAD BETTER ROLL UP YOUR BED AND RIDE-THIS IS TO BE A WHITE MAN'S COUNTRY, YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER... we are dead sure the nigger is not wanted here and he is not going to be allowed to stay whether his number is three or three hundred.²⁸

While bigotry was behind the scathing editorial, fears over adverse changes caused by minorities were apparent as the editorial cited fears of race riots, decreasing property values, and asked "Who wants to see the handiwork of years pass into the hands of a designing black race who don't belong in Oregon and who will only cause trouble if they try to come here?"²⁹ The incident highlights Oregonians' resentment towards minorities and the measures they would take to expel unwanted populations. The story being on a prominent newspaper's front page may hint at community support of such sentiments. In 1924, a black veteran from Marshfield was castrated, killed, and dumped into the bay and Portland's NAACP wrote "Marshfield is infested with the Ku Klux Klan, and...all efforts are being made to cover up the crime."³⁰ Persecution against Oregon African Americans occurred frequently and rarely led to arrests.

The Klan also influenced state politics. The editor of Portland's black newspaper noted Klan persecution saying "Colored people have been run away from their homes and worldly possession, beaten, lynched and murdered by the Ku Klux Klan...and some colored nuts are still heard to say that the K.K.K. ain't after us."³¹ Throughout Governor

²⁹ "Let's Keep Grant's Pass a White Man's Town," *Southern Oregon Spokesman* (Grant's Pass), May 24, 1924, 1.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³⁰ Mangum, "The Ku Klux Klan Are Still Scrapping Here: African American Response to the Oregon Klan, 266 and "Negro's Body is Found," *Oregonian*, July 13, 1924. Marshfield is now named Coos Bay.

³¹ Beatrice Morrow Cannady, "Oregon Stages Near Lynching Party; Perry Ellis, Only Colored Citizen of Oregon City, Victim of Near Lynching by Masked Men in Nearby Country Though to be Members of KKK," *The Advocate*, June 9, 1923, 1.

Ben Olcott's term (1919-1923), he decried the Klan's "fanaticism, racial hatred" and "religious intolerance" and complained that "we woke up one morning in Oregon and found the Klan had about gained the political control of the state."³² In 1922, four of five gubernatorial candidates said they would welcome the Klan's endorsement and did not consider them a menace.³³ Governor Walter Pierce (1923-1927) frequently met local Klan leaders and elected Klansmen to state cabinet positions.³⁴ Waldo Roberts of the Eugene *Outlook* felt voters who are "Ku Klux Klaners first and Republicans second" propelled Pierce's campaign victory by the state's "largest majority" ever and felt Oregon, "politically the most conservative state," was under the "political control" of the Klan.³⁵ Klansmen filled Portland's police bureau and Oregonians were apathetic as newspapers were silent and only Portland's NAACP filed complaints.³⁶ The Klan's popularity withered by the end of the 1920s, but its popularity illustrates Oregonian's

³² Ben W. Olcott, "America Adrift," in *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Conference of Governors of the States of the Union Held at White Sulphur Springs, W. VA. December 14-16 1922* (Madison, WI: Cantwell Printing Company, 1923), 138. See also Ben Olcott, "Proclamation Against the Ku Klux Klan, 1922," (May 13, 1922), Oregon Historical Society archives.

³³ "Five Candidates Answer on Klan," *Oregonian*, May 16, 1922, 1. See also "Four Gubernatorial Candidates Discuss the KU Klux Klan Issue Raised by Governor Olcott," *Oregonian*, May 17, 1922, 5.

³⁴ David A. Horowitz, "Order Solidarity and Vigilance: The Ku Klux Klan in La Grande Oregon," in *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's* ed. Shawn Lay (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992): 199. See also Kristoffer Allerfeldt and Jeremy Black, *Race, Radicalism, Religion, and Restriction: Immigration in the Pacific Northwest, 1890-1924* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 69.

³⁵ Waldo Roberts, "The Ku-Kluxing of Oregon," *The Outlook* (Eugene), March 14, 1923, 490.

³⁶ David A Horowitz, *Inside the Klavern: The Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 5. Also See Kristin Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007) 91.

acceptance of racism and the hostile environment that migrants and foreigners faced when they entered Oregon.

Into the 1930s and early 1940s few employment options and hostile whites made Oregon an unwelcoming place. Early Oregonians exhibited “a definite attitude of resentment” towards African Americans and a “conservative population” had preserved those attitudes.³⁷ Various Oregon cities had sundown laws and featured signs warning blacks, “Do not let the sun catch you,” while conditions for blacks throughout the state were so bad that many left their communities soon after arrival.³⁸ Blacks faced limited housing prospects and businesses who refused to serve them. As the Editor of Portland’s black newspaper described it “Out here in Oregon- God’s country- there should not be any...race antipathy. but there is... lots of it.”³⁹ As of 1930, 88 percent of women and 66 percent of black men labored in domestic employment, with others working as porters, janitors, waiters, or busboys.⁴⁰ Nathan Nickerson arrived with a master’s degree, but worked on a janitorial crew with three blacks with masters degrees and a white foreman with a high school diploma.⁴¹ Kathleen Bogle wrote on her struggle to find employment with local companies, saying “In all these places where vacancies occurred, I was told

³⁷ Daniel G Hill, *The Negro in Oregon: A Survey* (Eugene: OR, University of Oregon, 1932), 41,111.

³⁸ Jon Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting). See Also James W Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: New Press, 2005), 69. And Virgil Davis Jackson, *Social Conflicts in Rural Communities of Oregon* (Master’s Thesis, Oregon State University, 1932), 112-113.

³⁹ Mangum, “The Ku Klux Klan Are Still Scrapping Here,” 254.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier*, 224 and Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

⁴¹ Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

there was nothing about me in my disfavor, except the color of my skin.”⁴² While some procured jobs as blacksmiths or tailors, most worked in the railroad or service industry.⁴³ If black, it was difficult to find economic, social, or political success in Portland. Socially conservative and wary of blacks, few wanted changes to their lifestyle, especially an increase in African Americans.

Discrimination was the norm for African Americans in the 1940s and officials did little to improve racial tolerance. Local blacks saw the city as a “bad town” in race relations, felt it was “just like any Southern town” and was among “the most prejudiced in the West.”⁴⁴ Portland was known as the “worst Northern city in racial relations” and “had a reputation as the most openly racist city outside the South.”⁴⁵ Realtors refused to sell blacks property outside of the dilapidated Albina neighborhood and The Negro Citizen and Taxpayers League felt blacks were “discriminated against in all areas of human endeavor.”⁴⁶ The State Legislature introduced anti-discrimination bills every session for twenty years, but one did not pass until 1953.⁴⁷ Locals remembered segregated drinking fountains, restaurants that refused service to “niggers, Indians, or

⁴² Kathryn G Bogle, “An American Negro Speaks of Color,” *Oregonian*, Feb. 14, 1937, 74.

⁴³ William Toll, “Black Families and Migration to a Multiracial Society: Portland, Oregon, 1900-1924,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17, no. 3 (1998): 38-70.

⁴⁴ “Portland Held ‘Bad Town’ Among Negroes of Coast,” *Oregonian*, April 23, 1947, 10.

⁴⁵ Stan L. Burton, “The Portland Urban league 1945-1965: Two Decades of Change in the Pacific Northwest” (History 407 final paper, University of Oregon, 1993), 3, 21. See also Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

⁴⁶ Sue Bishop, “Negro Housing in Portland” (Senior Thesis, University of Oregon school of Journalism, 1958): 11. See also, Daniel Hill, *The Negro in Oregon*, 111-113 for discussion on housing discrimination.

⁴⁷ Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950* (Portland, OR: The Georgian Press, 1979), 538.

dogs,” and overall a “shameful degree of discrimination.”⁴⁸ To make matters worse, Mayor Earl Riley failed to establish committees on racial issues, which drew the ire from journalists, who felt the lack of committees were the “chief barrier to harmonious relations.”⁴⁹

Vanport brought a diverse migrant population to a homogenous city. Since few blacks lived in Oregon prior to the war, growth was more apparent than in other western cities. Prior to 1940, Portland’s black population failed to reach 2,000 but by 1945 was over 23,000.⁵⁰ Portland’s population increase reflects contemporary trends as San Francisco’s black population increased by nearly 800 percent, Seattle’s by 313 percent, and Oakland’s by 462 between 1940 and 1950.⁵¹ Between 1942 and 1945 fifteen percent of an estimated 160,000 new workers were African American.⁵² Since Vanport housed nearly all new Africans Americans, race would play a prominent factor in the public’s opinion of and treatment of Vanport residents.

Prior to and during the time of Vanport, African Americans faced resentment from a community that did not value their presence. Throughout its history, Oregon was a

⁴⁸ Gordon Oliver, “Urban League’s Early Years Recounted,” *Oregonian*, Jan. 14, 1983, 18.
See Also Marge White, Interviewed by Renee Mitchell, *Wake of Vanport Documentary*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2016.

⁴⁹ Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983),143. See also, Ron, Moxness, “Negroes in Portland: What is their Postwar Outlook?” *Oregonian* (Portland), June 24,1945, 49.

⁵⁰ Ellen Stroud, “Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon,” *Radical History Review* 74 (Spring 1999):9. As of 1940, the African American population was estimated at 1800. By 1945, a 394 % increased had occurred. See also Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 254. African Americans comprised 23% of Vanport schools. This is found in *6,000 Kids from 46 States* (Portland: Vanport City Schools, 1947), 6.

⁵¹ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 254.

⁵² Rivera and Miller, “Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience,” 509.

difficult place for African Americans to live and prosper. While many created successful lives and lived free of violence and incessant terror, racial prejudice and discrimination were ubiquitous, and officials did little to ameliorate local blacks' conditions. While the small Oregon black community bore the brunt of threats and violence, they also operated quite independently from mainstream white society because of their small numbers and near total segregation in Albina. For the most part, "White Portlanders went about their day-to-day activities and rarely encountered a black face."⁵³ All this would change when tens of thousands of blacks entered Portland to work for the shipbuilding industry. The fact that the vast majority of new African American lived in Vanport (and at one time constituted over a third of its population), only intensified the disdain that Portlanders had for the housing project as racial bigotry played a large role in the community's opinions of Vanport.

⁵³ Rudy Pearson, "Breaking Down Barriers: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Portland During the 1940's," (Presentation, History of African Americans in Portland Symposium, Portland Community College-Cascade Campus Portland, OR, Feb. 14, 1997), 1.

Chapter II:

‘US VANPORT FOLKS WERE KIND OF LIKE FOREIGNERS’: THE RISE OF VANPORT AND PUBLIC OPINION, 1942-1948

The United States’ entrance into World War II sent shockwaves throughout the country as rapid industrialization, increased urbanization, and population growth converged to transform countless communities. Portlanders wanted to remain a quiet city that brimmed with natural beauty without race riots or large slums, but the growth of wartime industries made economic and social change inevitable. As poor Southern whites and blacks entered the city, citizens and leaders were anxious and felt their way of life was at stake. Migrants’ socioeconomic and racial makeup resulted in Portland leaders and citizens open disdain and contempt for them and they offered little hospitality and urged migrants to return to their home states. Workers never were fully assimilated into their new community and tension, distrust, and prejudice encapsulated the relationship between residents of Portland and Vanport. As shipyards closed and unemployment racked Vanport, Portland leaders feared Vanport would deteriorate into a ghetto, desired to have it torn down, and encouraged migrants to leave the area, in order to rid the city of its Vanport “negro problem.”¹ The postwar period elucidates Portland’s true feelings about Vanport and shows the community’s prejudice toward Vanport residents, especially African Americans.

The war ushered in a new era for the West Coast as perhaps no event had more lasting effects.² In a mere four years, the war dramatically altered the racial dynamics,

¹ Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*, 596.

² Carlos Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest in World War II* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1986). See also, Gerald D. Nash, “*The American West Transformed: The Impact of the*

economic structure, demographics, and urban lifestyle of the West. As historian Richard White notes “It was as if someone had tilted the country: people, money and soldiers all spilled West.”³ Changes were most apparent on the West Coast urban centers of Northern and Southern California, the Puget Sound, Portland, and Anchorage, where the largest numbers of migrants and industrial plants were. Sprawling new communities like the Tri Cities in Southeastern Washington, or Richmond and Alameda of the Bay Area sprang forth in months, while cities unpreparedly accommodated new arrivals.⁴ The region’s population grew twenty six percent in the 1940s, the Portland Metropolitan Area doubled and Los Angeles and San Diego increased by thirty one and sixty four percent.⁵ Economies industrialized with increases in aluminum manufacturing, shipbuilding, and thriving ports. In total, the war was an “important watershed” for the Pacific Northwest and propelled the region from a backwater “hinterland” into “the modern era.”⁶

While the war brought economic prosperity and national recognition, unchecked growth led to adverse conditions. Across the West, leaders blamed arrivals for increased crime, juvenile delinquency, and slum housing.⁷ Los Angeles’ mayor’s aide summarized

Second World War, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), and James R. Warren, *The War Years: A Chronicle of Washington State in World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), and Carl Abbott, *The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), 3-30.

³ Richard White as quoted in William G Robbins, *Oregon: This Storied Land* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2005), 124.

⁴ Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*, Chapters 3-5.

⁵ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier*, 253-254. See also Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 124.

⁶ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest in World War II*, 3.

⁷ Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*, 93.

the predominant sentiment on incoming African Americans saying “The Negro who was born and educated here fits into our picture, but these Southern Negroes are a serious problem. They don’t get along with the Negroes who were born and reared here, nor with the white residents. If in-migration is not stopped...dire results will insue[sic].”⁸ Leaders would tolerate newcomers for the war, but few wished for large black populations to become permanent residents. Unprecedented development created the need for improved infrastructure, adequate emergency services, and strategies to combat racial tensions. Western cities wrestled with increased urbanization, slum housing, loss of community identity, and racial tensions caused by migration.⁹ Slum areas worsened in Albina Portland, Watts in Los Angeles, Seattle’s Central District, and East Oakland, with de-facto segregation for African Americans.¹⁰ As out-of-state residents poured in, locals wondered if workers would remain at war’s end, and offered workers money to leave their cities.¹¹ Locals feared beautiful cities like Portland and Anchorage would transform into industrial centers filled with pollution, urban decay, and social unrest.¹² Worries were not unfounded as Gerald Nash argues the war “accelerated the deterioration of old neighborhoods and the inner city” and decreased the overall quality of life.¹³ Though the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest in World War II* ed. Carlos Schwantes, and Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*.

¹⁰ Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier*, 266-270.

¹¹ Warren, *The War Years: A Chronicle of Washington State in World War II*, 95. See Also Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* 95-97.

¹² Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier*, 273-274.

¹³ Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*, 74.

war created excitement and opportunity, western cities now faced “the same problems as the older urban centers of the East.”¹⁴

As with the entire West, the war altered Portland and locals opposed the changes. Portlanders’ reaction to incoming migrants is not atypical, but makes sense when placed in the context of dramatic changes the war brought the West. Historian Carlos Schwantes stated Portlanders “did not want the ‘City of Roses’ to become another Pittsburgh...The war...hastened a confrontation between Pacific Northwesterners and the economic, demographic, and environmental problems that increasingly beset their maturing region.”¹⁵ While San Francisco and Seattle had seen similar booms before, Portlanders were unfamiliar with such growth and showed little desire to be a boomtown.¹⁶ As a result, Pacific Northwesterners were “antagonistic to labor’s new masses” and the influx of migrants “made this once comfortable and complacent city perhaps the most uncomfortable and least satisfied along the entire coast.”¹⁷ As Portland City Commissioner Bill Bowes exclaimed in 1943, “I hear people say that they long for the day when Portland can return to what it was before our present industrial progress.”¹⁸ Vanport encapsulated the wartime changes the city wished to avoid, thus reactions against Vanport residents show a city trying to come to grips with life-altering

¹⁴ Nash, 215.

¹⁵ Carlos Schwantes, “The Pacific Northwest in World War II,” in *The Pacific Northwest in World War II* ed. Carlos Schwantes (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1986), 13, 18.

¹⁶ *6,000 Kids from 46 States* (Portland: Vanport City Schools, 1947), 6.

¹⁷ Carlos Schwantes, “The Pacific Northwest in World War II,” 13, 18. See also Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion*, 95.

¹⁸ Carl Abbott, *Portland: Gateway to the Northwest* (Staunton, VA: American Historical Press, 1997), 137.

transformations to their city. Just as Oregonians turned to the Ku Klux Klan and blamed minorities in response to the vicissitudes of World War I, locals blamed black and poor white migrants for the social ills encroaching upon them. The vitriol projected towards Vanport may seem unique, but similar struggles were omnipresent in the West. Vanport brought Portlanders face to face with the modernity the war ushered in.

Vanport accommodated workers needed for the local wartime shipbuilding industry. Shipbuilding magnate Henry Kaiser founded the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation and constructed three shipyards in Portland and Vancouver, Washington by 1942.¹⁹ Countless jobs and respectable pay brought 160,000 workers by 1942 that created “the most acute housing shortage in the country.”²⁰ To keep the pace of production, Kaiser made plans for a public housing project as few housing options impeded worker recruitment, forced migrants to return home, and prevented shipyards from attaining “peak production.”²¹ Kaiser purchased 648 acres of swampland north of the city and the Federal Public Housing Authority began work on September 1, 1942.²² The first families moved into the 9,914 “dwelling units” by December 1942 while construction ended the following year.²³

The brevity of Vanport’s construction amazed many, but the building techniques and its location concerned critics. In a few months, the former swampland was home to

¹⁹ Maben, *Vanport*, 1.

²⁰ “Vanport City,” *Architectural Forum*, August 1943, 54.

²¹ Richard Nokes, “Vanport City: From a Bog, a ‘Zoomtown,’” *The Oregonian*, March 28, 1943, 3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Eager Workers and Families Occupy First Units of Vanport City,” *Oregonian*, December 13, 1942.

over 40,000, while some dubbed Vanport the “the miracle city” and lauded Kaiser for his accomplishment.²⁴ In August 1943 Vanport passed Salem as second largest city in Oregon and was deemed the largest public housing project in the world.²⁵ Indeed, the next two largest housing projects, McLoughlin Heights in Vancouver, Washington and Queensbridge in New York City, were both half the size of Vanport.²⁶ One journalist shared his excitement saying, “Salem took 100 years to hit 30,000....miracle man Kaiser grabbed a hunk of swampland and did it in six months....Vanport is more than a boom town. It is a zoom town.”²⁷ The project featured shopping centers, a fire department, movie theater, hospital, five schools, ten acres of parks, ten bridges, and a college.²⁸ Most had never seen a city rise so quickly, but there was concern over its quality. Former residents recall the buildings were subpar, lacked insulation, and felt the project was “never more than a huge collection of ‘crackerbox’ houses strung together fast and cheap.”²⁹ In addition to poor quality, Vanport was on swampland where mosquitoes and mud were incessant problems. Some called the project “wartime box” since it sat below the Columbia River and made residents feel as if they were “living in a hole.”³⁰ Water

²⁴ “A Weapon 647 Acres Big: PGE Salutes Vanport,” *Oregonian*, November 21, 1943, 13.

²⁵ Smart, “Old Man River Wipes Out War-Spawnd Wonder City,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 4.

²⁶ Richard Sanders, *Glimpses from the Past: The Housing Authority of Portland, Fifty Years of Building a Better Community* (Portland: Housing Authority of Portland, 1991), 29-30.

²⁷ Nokes, “Vanport City: From a Bog, a ‘Zoomtown,’” *The Oregonian* (Portland), March 28, 1943, *Oregonian*, 3.

²⁸ Dale Skovgard, “Oregon Voices: Memories of the 1948 Flood,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108, no.1 (Spring 2007):92, accessed July 15, 2012. See also Smart, *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 4.

²⁹ Rivera and Miller, 510.

³⁰ Bill Gulick, *Traveler’s History of Washington* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Press, 1996), 386.

surrounded Vanport in three directions, it lay between two large rivers prone to flooding and some dikes were weak railroad embankments or mounded dirt with underpasses beneath.³¹ With only one exit, one critic called the project “one of the world’s worst examples of city planning.”³²

White and black migrants felt disrespected and slighted by the people of Portland. By 1942 train caravans dubbed “Magic Carpet Specials” brought over 23,000 African Americans and over 100,000 whites from the South and Midwest.³³ The Kaiser Company placed advertisements in eleven states and most workers hailed from Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma, with others from Kentucky and even New York City.³⁴ One journalist synthesized the situation saying, “The war swept in various nationalities and attitudes...overnight, Portlanders were confronted by brassy New Yorkers and the rural twang of Oklahoma. The shipyards became a Pandora’s Box of cultural change. Portlanders would be unable to stuff the forces of change back into the box”³⁵ Vanport featured Southerners and Easterners from the Ozarks to the Florida Keys Portlanders had never encountered before. Vanport resident Ben Johnson recalled that “Portland was a homogenous white community and here we had all these new people from all over

³¹ MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*, 578.

³²Michael McCusker, “Vanport: The Town Nobody Wanted,” *Metropolis*, Dec. 1973.

³³Karen J. Gibson, “Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000,” *Transforming Anthropology* 15, no 1(Jan. 2008): 9.

³⁴ Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*, 119.
Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion*, 23.

³⁵ Brian Meehan, “When Henry Kaiser Launched a Thousand Ships,” *Oregonian*, Dec. 3, 1991, A01.

America...all of us Vanport folks were kind of like foreigners.”³⁶ Portlanders disdained the migrants as one newcomer wrote “The People of Portland make it clear that an Arkie or an Okie is the most undesirable person on Earth... Plant officials allow supervisors to openly discriminate against them and... the churches and schools openly brand them undesirable.”³⁷ Mayor Riley (1941-1949) commented on the migrants saying, “We are at war and have to forget some of our previous ideas...undesirables-white or coloreds- are not wanted, and if they fail to obey our laws, will be unceremoniously dealt with.”³⁸ Portlanders would tolerate the extra help during wartime, but did not want “undesirables” in their city long-term. Riley admitted black newcomers threatened the “regular way of life” and wanted Vanport gone at war’s end.³⁹ Even a manager for Vanport admitted, “Portland is very smug and limited in its civic, social, cultural, and educational outlook. A change in the status quo, industrially or otherwise, is not desired.”⁴⁰ With new people with seemingly foreign customs and beliefs, Portlanders struggled to fully accept them into their community.

Portlanders expressed discontent with Vanport residents and Vanport residents complained of mistreatment. Vanport residents’ contact with Portlanders featured tension and condescension as seen in the titles of newspaper columns such as “Bellyaching

³⁶ Ben Johnson, Interview by Milo Reed, *Vanport Mosaic*.

³⁷ Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth*, 128-129.

³⁸ Colbert, “Attitude of Negro Residents Toward Recent Negro Migrants in the Pacific Northwest,” 699.

³⁹ Letter, Earl Riley to H.H Jones, July 1, 1943, Earl Riley Papers, Oregon Historical Society, Portland. See also Carl Abbott, *Greater Portland: Urban Life and Landscape in the Pacific Northwest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 101.

⁴⁰ Colbert, 699.

Newcomers” and “Why Arkies Seem lazy.”⁴¹ One Mrs. Oliver, a Vanport resident, replied to the “insulting snob” who told her to go home saying “We’ve left all the comforts of life to help in our small way...As for your being afraid to be nice to us...we are pretty intelligent ‘droops.’ You could learn a lot from ‘fools’ even though we’re not as intelligent or ‘smartly dressed’ as you are...in the meantime stop kicking us, we don’t like it.”⁴² How frequent Vanport residents wrote about mistreatment suggests pervasive negative attitudes towards them. One Southern woman repined that after trying to be friendly “I was snubbed! I have been laughed at, have been insulted, and told repeatedly, ‘we are very conservative people in Portland- very careful with whom we associate.’”⁴³ Locals insulted her appearance, said her husband stole a job from locals, and assumed she had been run out of her hometown.⁴⁴ In closing, the woman offered that “I am through with Portland. I consider the people unfair toward persons from other states...the awful remarks made about the yard employees is, in my opinion, unpatriotic to say the least.”⁴⁵ Newcomers viewed Oregonians as unfriendly “selfish, narrow-minded people.”⁴⁶ At the 1946 Portland Rose Parade, a group of youth and adults broke through a barrier, vandalized a float, stole flowers, and since the parade was cancelled during the war years, many blamed newcomers. A disgruntled spectator wrote the *Oregonian* saying “I can’t

⁴¹ “Behind The Mike with William Moyes, *Oregonian*, May 1, 1943, 16.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Southerner Insulted Here,” *Oregonian* June 14, 1943, 18.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “One Kentuckian Likes it,” *Oregonian* April 19, 1943, 18.

believe any native of Oregon would do such things...we learned something of the new Portland...this pilfering was committed by comparative newcomers, whose education must be undertaken.”⁴⁷ Without evidence, Portlanders assumed only new arrivals who needed training in proper behavior could commit such actions. Because of accusations, one “newcomer” called Portland a “hick town” that would “never be anything else until newcomers from more progressive communities move in...to offset the apathetic and ‘we want no change’ attitude of old time Portlanders. Truly it is a provincial community.”⁴⁸ Another criticized the “short sighted and unkind regional zealots,” and reminded them that new workers gave the city a national reputation.⁴⁹ Editorials written by Vanport residents illustrate the condescension of Portlanders and their disgust of wartime migrants.

Negative stereotypes existed for Vanport residents and HAP created strict rules because of the “Vanport stigma.” Portlanders saw Vanport residents collectively as poor, rural, and backwards farm people and articles referred to them as “riff-raff” and poor welfare-mongering minorities.⁵⁰ Portland high school students ridiculed Vanport students so badly that they walked to school to avoid being seen “taking the Vanport bus.”⁵¹ Stores refused charge accounts to Vanport residents despite their good credit and locals

⁴⁷ Roy Fisher, “Festival Vandalism,” *Oregonian* June 13, 1946, 8.

⁴⁸ W.A Talbot, “Newcomer’s Views,” *Oregonian* June 13, 1946, 8.

⁴⁹ Mervin Shoemaker, “Newcomer Behavior,” *Oregonian* June 18, 1946, 6.

⁵⁰ Kilbourn and Lantis, “Elements of Tenant Instability in War Housing Project,” 61. See also “Vanport: Cross-Section of War Working America,” *Oregonian*, August 22, 1943, 71.

⁵¹ *6,000 Kids from 46 States*,” 56.

tended to “arch their brows when one admits he comes from Vanport.”⁵² Purported discrimination and abuse occurred not just among a few Vanport residents, but many attested to being stigmatized. The main reasons residents moved out of Vanport were because of discrimination by Portlanders, a “Vanport stigma” and because they felt unaccepted in the Portland community.⁵³ During Vanport’s existence leaders saw it as a “muddy, noisy, crime-infested eyesore, filled with poor people, especially African-Americans, that they wished would go away.”⁵⁴ Instead of becoming acquainted with Vanport residents, Portlanders stereotyped them all as lazy, criminally minded people. Due to these stereotypes HAP enacted curfews and a ban on alcohol in Vanport, out of fear of crime and violence among the inhabitants. Despite rules against discrimination, HAP leaders failed to adhere to these ideals and admitted they had intentionally segregated families and denied units to eligible families, while one employee found HAP’s practices to be “entirely discriminatory.”⁵⁵ For example, one critic explained that “HAP’s unwelcoming attitude both to public housing and the wartime migrants affected its management of the projects and its relations with tenants. Vanporters complained of rude treatment and unnecessarily strict regulations.”⁵⁶ All in all, residents were seen as undesirable, poor, and foreign.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kilbourn and Lantis, “Elements of Tenant Instability in War Housing Project,” 62, 65.

⁵⁴ Steve Law, “Vanport Flood Left Changes in Wake,” *The Portland Tribune* (Portland, OR), June 7, 2012.

⁵⁵ “Meetings of a Regular Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland, Oregon,” Jan. 8 1948, *Housing Authority of Portland Records*, Portland City Archives, 2.

⁵⁶ Stuart McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99, no.2 (1998):149.

The Second Great Migration created anxiety among Westerners. Prior to the war, African American communities in the West were isolated and avoided much attention from the larger community.⁵⁷ Since African Americans constituted such a minor percentage of the western population, most racial strife involved the larger Hispanic, Native American, or Asian populations. Western black communities hesitated to stir up resentment whites as Gerald Nash says, “tended to be acquiescent and often almost invisible.”⁵⁸ Yet, as tens of thousands of blacks entered the West, African Americans could no longer stay inconspicuous and leaders believed racial tensions were a long-term issue.⁵⁹ African Americans represented only a portion of a larger migration, but their arrival forever changed the West. Over 45,000 blacks settled in the Northwest, transformed communities, and “permanently” altered racial relations.⁶⁰ While new migrants bolstered black political power, Gerald Nash argues that racial changes “are usually gradual and are accompanied by tensions. These strains were certainly reflected throughout the West during World War II.”⁶¹ As blacks sought for greater acceptance, pushback from the white leadership and community continued.

Portlanders treated new black residents with disdain and feared crime would rise. Portland residents “greeted the new people” with “open skepticism” and black “migrants

⁵⁷ Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

⁵⁸ Nash, *The American West Transformed*, 10.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier*, 254.

⁶⁰ Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community*, 159.

⁶¹ Nash, *The American West Transformed*, 88.

encountered a wall of deeply ingrained suspicions.”⁶² City Commissioner J.E Bennett tried to pressure Kaiser to stop hiring black workers and Mayor Riley complained the city could only handle so many black workers before “upsetting its regular life.”⁶³ Suspicion was especially bad towards blacks since their arrival threatened privileges whites wanted to keep to themselves.⁶⁴ An official spoke to arriving blacks saying, “The local community will definitely take care of its own people first. And it is in no position to take care of any additional problems.”⁶⁵ For Portlanders, black migrants were “problems” and “undesirables” they would begrudgingly tolerate. One city spokesperson felt new blacks should live on the outskirts of the city, otherwise a policemen would be needed on every street corner.⁶⁶ Local judges attributed the rise in criminal cases to “the new element coming to Portland” and a front-page *Oregonian* article entitled “New Negro Migrants Worry City,” spoke of “beat-ups, robberies, and noisy parties” in black neighborhoods.⁶⁷ Locals referred to Vanport as the “Negro project” where “undesirables and criminals” engaged in “immoral relationships,” and local police assumed blacks committed more

⁶² William G Robbins, *Oregon: This Storied Land* (Portland Oregon Historical Society Press, 2005), 126.

⁶³ Ethan Johnson and Felicia Williams, “Desegregation and Multiculturalism in Portland Public Schools,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (2010), 12.

⁶⁴ Rudy Pearson, *African Americans in Portland, 1940-1950: Work and Living Conditions- A Social History* (Doctoral Dissertation, Washington State University, 1996), 2.

⁶⁵ As quoted in Pearson, *African Americans in Portland, 1940-1950: Work and Living Conditions- A Social History*, 3.

⁶⁶ Lucas N. Burke and Judson L Jeffries, *The Portland Black Panthers: Empowering Albina and Remaking a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 31.

⁶⁷ “Negro Migrants Worry City,” *Oregonian* September 23, 1942, 1. See also “Crime Crowds Police Station,” *Oregonian* May 18, 1943, 25

crimes.⁶⁸ Unions initially refused black workers, supervisors refused to hire blacks, and ninety percent of blacks worked as common laborers.⁶⁹ Portland's NAACP wrote President Roosevelt about discriminatory supervisors and many blacks opted to work in Vancouver where blacks were more accepted.⁷⁰ Most Portland leaders concurred with Mayor Riley that black workers "threatened Portland's regular way of life" and collectively "did the minimum to comply with federal regulations on nondiscrimination."⁷¹ Since the population was seen as temporary, few attempted to foster better race relations or improve opportunities for blacks.

The Second Great Migration caused tension between settled blacks and newcomers due to socioeconomic differences and fears of increased racial strife. The first wave of the Great Migration featured urban, educated, and wealthy blacks that "stood atop black society," while the second wave featured, rural, impoverished, and unschooled blacks, which created tension between the two groups.⁷² Southerners entering the North and West were "walking into a headwind of resentment and suspicion," from fellow African Americans.⁷³ Northerners criticized newcomers as "untrained, often illiterate and

⁶⁸ Pearson, "Breaking Down Barriers: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Portland During the 1940's," (Presentation, History of African Americans in Portland Symposium, Portland Community College-Cascade Campus Portland, OR, Feb. 14, 1997), 10.

⁶⁹ Pearson, Rudy Pearson, "Breaking Down Barriers: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Portland During the 1940's," 5-7.

⁷⁰ Pearson, "Breaking Down Barriers," 6-7. See also Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 61.

⁷¹ Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 143.

⁷² Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 167-168. See also, William Toll, "Black Families."

⁷³ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 260.

generally void of culture,” and saw little in common except for racial background.⁷⁴ Wartime migrations caused “widespread anxiety” among settled successful blacks who resented the poor and uneducated migrants and “blamed them for upsetting...equitable relations with whites” with their uncouth behavior.⁷⁵ Because of the settled community’s fears, they offered little assistance and even “solicited money” for migrants’ return to the South.⁷⁶ Portland blacks, who through their own hard work, owned their homes and held jobs, feared bad press about newcomers tarnished the reputation of the entire black community.⁷⁷ Portland Rabbi Joseph Berkowitz drew parallels between the black and Jewish communities saying “All the colored folks ask is that they be not judged by their worst elements...we read statements to the effect that the Negroes who live here are alright. It is only the ones who have recently come that cause the trouble.”⁷⁸ Vanport resident Ben Johnson remembered tension between black communities saying “there were so few blacks for so long they had known what they could do and what they could not do...when we came, we thought we were free. We probably pushed areas and made it uncomfortable so there was this tension. ‘You folks are causing problems that we didn’t

⁷⁴ Wilkerson, 260. See also, Robert E. Colbert, “The Attitude of Negro Residents Toward Recent Negro Migrants in the Pacific Northwest,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 15, no. 4 (1946), 701.

⁷⁵ James N Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 118.

⁷⁶ Quintard Taylor, “The Great Migration: The Afro American Communities of Seattle and Portland during the 1940s,” *Arizona and the West* 23, no.2 (Summer 1981): 118, 124.

⁷⁷ McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 173.

⁷⁸ Rabbi H Berkowitz, “Judaism and the Dignity of Man,” Oct. 9, 1942, Beth Israel Collection, in *Embracing a Western Identity: Jewish Oregonians 1849-1950* by Ellen Eisenberg (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2015), 217.

have before you got here.”⁷⁹ The increased African American presence upset whites and blacks, making Portland an overwhelmingly unwelcome place. The increased black population caused greater animosity and many communities struggled with how to accept, or attempt to oust, newly arrived blacks.

After the war, most blacks remained in Portland, which worried leaders. Local attitudes toward the project were that it “was a wartime circumstance that we had to tolerate...but as soon as the war’s over, we would like to get it back in the old ways as quickly as possible.”⁸⁰ Portlanders believed workers would return home after the war, but over 18,000 blacks wished to become permanent community members and resisted attempts to send them home since they faced less severe racism in the West.⁸¹ This created a predicament for Portlanders as one magazine article said, “How to absorb these people[black Vanport citizens] into the Portland economy, or better still... how to thank them and send them home, is the No. 1 problem in the No. 1 problem city of the area with the most debatable postwar future.”⁸² Portlanders wanted Vanport gone due to parochial racial views, but bringing 20,000 people into a city with a one percent vacancy rate was also a factor in citizens resistance to having Vanport citizens entering the city.⁸³ Urban

⁷⁹ Ben Johnson, Interview by Milo Reed, *Vanport Mosaic*.

⁸⁰ *Vanport: Oregon’s Lost City*, Directed by Sasha Davis and Rebecca Purice (Portland, OR: Oregon Documentary Project).

⁸¹ William H McClendon, “Still Waiting” *Portland Observer* Vol 5, no. 7 (July-August 1946), found in William H McClendon, *Straight Ahead: Essays on the Struggle of Blacks in America, 1934-1994* (Oakland: The Black Scholar Press, 1995), 98. See also Ron, Moxness, “Negroes in Portland: What is their Postwar Outlook?” *Oregonian* June 24, 1945, 49, And *Portland People’s Observer*, Dec. 10, 1945

⁸² “Portland Stalks Postwar Spectre,” *Business Week*, (Nov. 1944): 17.

⁸³ Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*, 131.

League director Bill Berry said postwar Portland was “A hostile environment” as shipyards closed and blacks competed for scant jobs with whites.⁸⁴ The biggest issues on leaders’ minds were how to incorporate African Americans, or get them to leave. After June 1945 meeting between housing officials, local housing leader W.B.D. Dobson felt the “Negro problem was the most serious aspect of our effort to industrialize Vanport” and that “Vanport is now housing many of the colored people. They will undoubtedly want to cling to those residencies until they can get something better... it would be difficult to force people out of Vanport until they have some other place where they can live.”⁸⁵ The wording “force people out” shows leaders’ desire to remove residents if possible. Local black leaders decried the state of affairs and bemoaned that “the current pattern of denial and exclusion as practiced toward Negroes...will have many far-reaching implications. The Negro people in this vicinity will spend another quarter of a century suffering and enduring untold social abuses and economic hardships in their feeble attempts to bring about a few elementary democratic expressions.”⁸⁶ Many felt much needed social improvements were long overdue.⁸⁷ Local blacks believed their condition would never improve and local leaders saw the African American population as a nuisance.

Because of increased unemployment, welfare dependency, and its racial makeup, Portlanders feared Vanport would become filled with crime, poverty and racial unrest. At

⁸⁴ *Portland People’s Observer*, Feb 14, 1974.

⁸⁵ MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*, 596.

⁸⁶ William McClendon, “To Be Truthful,” *Portland Observer*, Jan. 1947.

⁸⁷ McClendon, “Still Waiting,” 5.

the war's conclusion, many Vanporters ended up on welfare, could not afford their rents, and were considered lower-middle-class.⁸⁸ Vanport residents were nearly three times as likely to be on welfare as the rest of Multnomah County.⁸⁹ Black Unemployment estimates ranged from fifty to eighty percent and African Americans constituted thirty five percent of Vanport by October 1945.⁹⁰ Municipal leaders doubted the community could fund Vanport's welfare needs and argued the federal government should cover the costs.⁹¹ These statistics agitated Portlanders more as Vanport was a liability they were responsible to fund. Because of overwhelming "unfavorable publicity," HAP leaders hired a "feature writer" to prepare stories and photos of the "happier family life of the more satisfied tenants," with little success though.⁹² In 1945, the *Portland People's Observer* noted Portlanders were "passively witnessing the development of a first rate ghetto with all the potential for squalor, poverty, juvenile delinquency and crime."⁹³ Local leaders imagined the worst for the future of Vanport and the National Urban League field secretary summarized Portland leaders' fear saying if "The city with everything except a future" was not destroyed after the war, it would deteriorate "into a

⁸⁸ Maben, *Vanport*, 30-31.

⁸⁹ "Threat Faces Welfare Fund: Vanport Hit Hard by Unemployment," *Oregonian*, March 30, 1946, 11.

⁹⁰ Moxness, *Oregonian*, 49. As of April 1947, 33% of blacks were still unemployed. See also, Portland Held 'Bad Town' Among Negroes of Coast," *Oregonian*, April 23, 1947, 10.

⁹¹ "Threat Faces Welfare Fund: Vanport Hit Hard by Unemployment," *Oregonian*, March 30, 1946, 11.

⁹² Minutes of Regular Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland," Aug. 3, 1944, Portland Housing Authority Records, Portland City Archives, 2-3. See also, Minutes of Regular Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland," Dec. 7, 1944, Portland Housing Authority Records, Portland City Archives, 1.

⁹³ Portland People's Observer, July 20, 1945, as quoted in Taylor, "The Great Migration," 122.

slum area, with problems of crime, health, and delinquency. However, if this and other housing projects are dismantled as provided for, the resulting crowding into the remaining housing facilities will result eventually in slum conditions which arise in overcrowded districts.”⁹⁴ The overarching sentiment was that migrant workers, their welfare, unemployment, Southern attitudes, and lack of skill, should pack up and go home, for if they stayed, they would turn Portland into a ghetto. While hysteria may have partially fueled these sentiments, concerns carried credence as Vanport had “acquired a ratty look” to the point HAP received complaints.⁹⁵ With the project near the state border, Oregonians did not want tourists’ first image to be a dilapidated housing project with “broken windows” and abandoned cars.⁹⁶ Despite urban blight, Vanport boasted lower crime rates than Portland even though to many, Vanport was “synonymous with murder, rape, thievery and slums.”⁹⁷

Prominent community members wanted Vanport gone. The Federal government invested millions of dollars into Vanport and had ultimate say over its future, but if local governments owned the housing projects they would have torn them down as soon as the war ended.⁹⁸ One local leader summarized Portlanders thoughts saying, “Portlanders anxiously awaited the end of the war...so that these people [the migrants] can get the hell

⁹⁴ “Speaker Sees Work Problem: Planning Urged for Situation,” *Oregonian*, October 27, 1944, 13

⁹⁵ Maben, *Vanport*, 30.

⁹⁶ W.G Parsons, “Beauty Sacrifice,” *Oregonian*, April 16, 1944, 18. See also Manly Maben, *Vanport*, 30-31, 82-83.

⁹⁷ No Title, *Oregon Journal*, May 29, 1949. See also Jewel Lansing, *Portland: People, Politics, and Power 1851-2001* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2003), 351.

⁹⁸ Harrison, “Postwar Puzzle: What to do with Portland Housing Land,” *Oregonian*, May 27, 1945, 2.

out of Portland.”⁹⁹ After the war, Mayor Riley offered money to Vanport workers to return home and called the project a “headache and a monstrosity.”¹⁰⁰ Russel Payton, local civil rights historian, described Portland leaders’ first meeting with Edwin C. Berry, Urban League director. Local bankers, businessmen, and politicians wrote New York to send Berry and at the meeting “They wanted to know how much will it cost us to get these people sent back home.” Berry responded saying “I am not interested. He said, if you’re interested in integrating the community and seeing these people get jobs, then I’m interested. They finally agreed, and that was the start of the Urban League in Portland. But they were called originally to get those people out of town.”¹⁰¹ The goal was to have workers leave, but since this was futile, local leaders sought other plans.

Leaders saw the advantages of destroying Vanport and converting the land into an industrial park.¹⁰² With its vast acreage, civil leaders wanted the plot for future development or for a rehabilitation center for injured Veterans as keeping Vanport’s flimsy housing intact “would only promote slums.”¹⁰³ The plan to demolish Vanport was unanimously passed at an October 19, 1944 HAP meeting.¹⁰⁴ HAP Commissioner Chester Moores spoke to congressmen in Washington D.C in June 1945 and gave eleven

⁹⁹ As quoted in Taylor, “The Great Migration,” 12

¹⁰⁰ Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*, 157.

¹⁰¹ Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

¹⁰² Stroud, “Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon,” 74.

¹⁰³ “Minutes of a Regular Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland,” Sept. 7, 1944, Portland Housing Authority Records, Portland City Archives, 2. See also, HAP meeting minutes from March 6, 1945. See also letter from W.A. Carpenter to C.A. Moores on September 15, 1944, from HAP minutes. Also found in MacColl, 579-580.

¹⁰⁴ MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*, 700.

advantages that could make Vanport's land "a model concentrated development" that would "convert what might have been a troublesome blighted area into a constructive community asset."¹⁰⁵ HAP and the Portland Area Postwar Development Commission agreed "unanimously" and were "firmly convinced" that the community should cease to exist following the war, but kept their plans secret from the public.¹⁰⁶ On April 19, 1945, HAP Chairman Harry Freeman presented his industrialization plan to the Chamber of Commerce, which was greeted with "considerable enthusiasm."¹⁰⁷ Liquidation began in 1945 and HAP shipped disassembled units to other communities. HAP wanted to tear down Vanport for profit, but also to prevent "troublesome" and "blighted areas" they felt the large black population would create.¹⁰⁸ When those responsible for Vanport favored destroying the community for profit, it is likely remaining community members had similar sentiments.

Portlanders took issue with the growth of the African American community, but all migrants were targets of discrimination. Mistreatment and criticism towards newcomers illustrates Portland's unwillingness to accept growth, diversity, and change in their city. The poor relations between Vanport and Portlanders and the poor race relations is important as it plays a role in the flood event. Portland leaders, HAP, and residents saw

¹⁰⁵ "Vanport's Facilities as an Industrial Area to be Stressed at Washington Meeting," *Oregonian* June 14, 1945, 7. See Also MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*, 595, 701.

¹⁰⁶ MacColl, 593. Also See "Vanport's Facilities as an Industrial Area to be Stressed at Washington Meeting," *Oregonian* June 14, 1945, 7.

¹⁰⁷ "Minutes of a Regular Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland," April 19, 1945, Housing Authority of Portland Records, Portland City Archives, 2-3.

¹⁰⁸ MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*, 595, 701.

no future for Vanport, wished for its residents to leave the community, and feared the increasing percentage of black residents in Vanport would create an African American ghetto. Considering Portland residents' disdain of Vanport blacks, the ability for Vanport to become a profitable industrial site, and fear that keeping Vanport intact would increase crime, poverty, and squalid living standards, the Portland community wanted Vanport gone. The city's reaction to the Memorial Day Flood of 1948 sheds further light on the city's prejudice towards Vanport's diverse inhabitants.

Chapter III:

‘DIKES ARE SAFE AT PRESENT...DON’T GET EXCITED’: THE MEMORIAL DAY FLOOD

Portlanders made their desires about Vanport’s future apparent at the end of the war. Vanport residents endured a myriad of negative stereotypes and Portland leaders did little to improve relations (especially race relations) between Vanport and Portland. As flooding occurred throughout the Northwest in early 1948, there was a tangible risk of Vanport flooding, but the decision to evacuate never came. Due, at least in part, to Vanport’s large African American presence, authorities were negligent toward the projects’ inhabitants and failed to adequately warn and prepare residents for the real threat of flooding. Authorities’ decision not to evacuate Vanport proved disastrous and Vanport residents and its black community blamed HAP and authorities for their poor handling of the situation and accused intentional neglect on the part of the housing agency. The poor management of Vanport during the flood shows a specific prejudice towards the project and its black population and is yet another example of poor race relations in the city.

Signs of flooding were visible throughout Vanport’s region. The Northwest is known for heavy rain and mountain snowpack in winter, which causes flooding as snow melts into the rivers come spring. Major Columbia River floods occurred in the 1890s and in 1943 flooding threatened to “sabotage the local shipbuilding industry” but authorities were unworried.¹ Flood warnings were given on April and May 1 1948 as

¹ Lawrence Barber, “Shipyards Fear Flood May Sabotage War Jobs if 25-foot Rise Reached,” *Oregonian*, April 18, 1943, 18.

rising river levels created leaks along Vanport dikes.² Engineers constantly inspected dikes and though there was concern, HAP and fire departments were confident no break would occur. Vanport Fire Captain Robert English recalled the events on May 28, two days prior to the flood:

We found a boil on the road at the foot of the south dyke[sic]...we discovered more soft spots.... At 9:45 we discovered a leak coming under the concrete sea wall which was sand bagged immediately. Water was bubbling out of the ground by a dyke road. Upon investigating, found water had raised the sod two feet. When I broke the boil, water rushed out and I assured the people, in the immediate area, of little danger...the break discovered... was getting worse... We were still being assured of, at intervals, that there was no immediate danger and I was passing the same information to worried residents as they were calling continuously.³

English's report indicates authorities knew leaks occurred as water broke through multiple dikes. Despite flooding, but HAP and the Army Corps of Engineers told firemen to stay calm and relay the same message to citizens. The morning of the flood, water broke through a dike, but the railroad company "seemed in no hurry to bring in sand" and two feet of water covered roads near Vanport.⁴ Countless firemen encountered leaking dikes days before the flood and dutifully reported the incidents to authorities but despite ominous signs, authorities felt sandbagging and preventative measures were best.

Because of flooding throughout the city, authorities evacuated various areas but ignored Vanport. By May 28, water was within two feet of Vanport's dikes, thousands of

² "Flood Warnings Issued in April," *Oregonian*, June 2, 1948, 8.

³ Captain Robert O English's report as found in Sanders, *Glimpses from the Past: The Housing Authority of Portland, Fifty Years of Building a Better Community*, 52.

⁴ Ed Dachtler, "Housing Authority of Portland, Oregon: Report on Vanport City Flood Disaster," *Oregon Historical Society*, (June 1, 1948): 1.

“lowlanders” had been evacuated, and paper’s reported “the worst is yet to come.”⁵ Considering Vanport was a “lowlander” area, one would have expected evacuation plans. Hundreds of cattle were evacuated and 20,000 acres of farmland near Portland and Vancouver had already been flooded, but HAP superintendent Harry D. Jaeger assured residents that, “Vanport is safe from the Columbia River flood if the crest does not rise above 30 feet.”⁶ Jaeger believed dikes supported by sandbags, which had leaked for days, and a mere three feet of dike would protect the community of 18,700. Ironically, directly adjacent to the article in the *Oregonian* were articles entitled, “Floodwater to Spill Over Seawall on Western Bank,” “Flood Brings Power Drop,” and “Rising River Closes Roads.” As Vanport residents waited to hear from authorities, newspapers reported numerous evacuations, power outages, and busy streets inundated.⁷ On May 28, disaster workers prepared evacuation and rescue efforts throughout Vancouver and Portland.⁸ Another wartime housing project, the Fruit Valley Homes Project in Vancouver, was among those evacuated in “orderly” fashion.⁹ The Fruit Valley project’s proximity to the river was nearly the same as Vanport’s and authorities evacuated its citizens on May 29. No evacuation came for Vanport as authorities argued sandbagging would be enough, even as nearby Savvies Island was “already one-half under water” and had been

⁵ Lawrence Barber, “Columbia Highway Cut, Thousands Flee Waters as River Continues to Rise,” *Oregonian*, May 28, 1948, 1.

⁶ “Vanport Safe Behind Dikes: 3 Foot Margin Seen for Area,” *Oregonian*, May 29, 1948, 3.

⁷ “Floodwater to Spill Over Seawall on Western Bank,” *Oregonian*, May 29, 1948, 3.

⁸ “Disaster Relief Agencies Prepare for Flood Rescue Work,” *Oregonian*, May 29, 1948, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

evacuated.¹⁰ HAP leaders discussed evacuation plans for Vanport on May 29, but an adviser later admitted that “the only place they were at all worried about then was at the Portland Yacht Club, and he [Mr. Valentine, a HAP representative] mentioned specifically one house that was threatened.”¹¹ This statement hints at class, racial, and socioeconomic biases, as leaders voiced more concern over an upscale boating club and one house than a project with nearly twenty thousand residents. Vanport’s residents were deemed less important than other Portlanders. HAP leader John Ward admitted they could have evacuated Vanport in a few hours, but doubts on “where people were to go after leaving the project” prevented the evacuation.¹²

Fearing a breach was imminent, Vanport residents tried to evacuate but HAP reassured them of their safety. Water was breaking through dikes, but authorities told people they would have between twenty-four and thirty-six hours to evacuate. Roy Bessey from the Department of the Interior, in retrospect admitted both firemen and Vanport residents wished to evacuate, but authorities “did not seem to be worried,” despite a two hundred foot crack in a dike.¹³ Community members witnessed rising water levels at the dikes and felt it expedient to leave for their safety so they packed belongings in trucks, but stopped after being reassured of their safety by Vanport management.¹⁴

¹⁰ Lawrence Barber, “Columbia Highway Cut, *Oregonian*, May 28, 1948, 1. Today the island is known as Sauvie Island and is located a few miles Northwest of Vanport in the middle of the Columbia.

¹¹ John Ward, “*Report on Vanport City Flood Disaster, Portland Housing Authority Records*”, Portland City Archives, June 1, 1948, 2.

¹² Ward, “*Report on Vanport City Flood Disaster*,” 3.

¹³ “Meeting Minutes of a Regular Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland,” June 3-4, 1948, Housing Authority of Portland Records, Portland City Archives, 3.

¹⁴ Polishuk, *Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila*, 108. See also William G Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict: The Oregon Story, 1940-2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 67.

One woman tried to phone her family but firemen prevented her and told her to “sit tight,” that “she would have at least 24 hours to get out if danger developed.”¹⁵ Some residents slept in their jeans and shoes for fear a breach could occur at any time.¹⁶ To calm anxious residents, on the Sunday morning of the flood, HAP workers slipped flyers under each doorway that read, “Remember: Dikes are safe at present. You will be warned if necessary. You will have time to leave. Don't get excited.”¹⁷ That afternoon another flyer was put on the front door of each residency which stated:

The flood situation has not changed since the prediction made last Thursday that the highest water would come next Tuesday, that the dikes were high enough and strong enough to withstand the crest, and that barring unforeseen developments Vanport is safe. In the event it becomes necessary to evacuate Vanport, the Housing Authority will give the warning at the earliest possible moment, upon the advice of the U. S. Army Engineers. Warning will be by siren and air horn blown continuously... Don't get panicky! You have plenty of time.¹⁸

Authorities gave assurances, assuaged the severity of the flood, and urged people to not panic. Around the same time HAP gave the flyers, survivors claimed HAP workers removed important documents from offices and money safes from supermarkets in Vanport, “but they didn't move the people.”¹⁹ The decision not to evacuate created chaos in Vanport.

¹⁵ William Smart, “Cause of Vanport Disaster, Late Assurances Draw Study,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 4.

¹⁶ Belya Jean Griffin, Interviewed by Eldrick Bone, *Wake of Vanport Documentary*, Oregon Historical Society, 2016.

¹⁷ Rachel Dresbeck, *Oregon Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival* (Guildford, Conn: Globe Pequot Press, 2006),60. Also found in “Flood Strikes Sans Warning,” *Oregonian*, May 31, 1948.

¹⁸ *Clark V. United States*, 218 F.2d 445 (United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit, 1954). An abridged version of the flyer is found in Gulick, 1.

¹⁹ Polishuk, *Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila* 108.

Authorities did not give warnings until after the dikes had broken. After the discovery of a fifty-foot break, forty men attempted to repair it and the alarm's controller was put on notice.²⁰ Around 4:17 p.m., the main railroad dike gave way as water rushed into Vanport and fireman Oscar Bollinger ran to his nearly submerged patrol car and drove to tell the operator of the break after which the alarm was sounded.²¹ HAP representative Roy Taylor was on the phone with Irving Williams, the stockyard official, when Williams interjected and said, "The dike's going out." Taylor hung up, sent men to investigate, but before they returned Williams called back and yelled, "It's a bad break. You can't stop it. Get the People out!" Immediately after, "Taylor sounded the alarm."²² Another account claimed Williams informed Taylor of the break, and upon not hearing the siren, called back saying, "For God's sake, alert those people." The alarm was heard soon after.²³ Authorities knew a flood was possible all week long and despite assurances that citizens would have between twenty-four and thirty-six hours to evacuate and that sirens would warn them in advance, most had only a few minutes. Many of the first warnings actually came from Vanport College students who ran through the streets shouting warnings.²⁴ Beatrice Gilmore described the scene saying, "People were running and screaming and trying to keep up with their families....as we were going up a hill I

²⁰ Freeman, Jaeger, Taylor, 5.

²¹ Oscar Bollinger, "Housing Authority of Portland, Oregon: Report on Vanport City Flood Disaster," *Oregon Historical Society Archives*, June 1, 1948, 1-2.

²² Ron Moxness, "Buffaloes Hunt Flood Dead but fail to Locate Victims," *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 11.

²³ Maben, *Vanport*, 123.

²⁴ Maben, *Vanport*, 106. See also Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

looked back and saw a wall of water behind the car and I realized how close we were to being washed away.”²⁵

Vanport residents did not evacuate earlier because of faith in the siren system. Vanport resident Henry Doeneka had “believed assurances” that “there was no danger” but were moving out all night.²⁶ No siren was heard in Vanport’s southeast section and all residents lost their cars and belongings.²⁷ While there was no warning, Doeneka recalled two police officers who ran through the project to flee the water, without alerting residents of the impending danger.²⁸ One resident was assured all was fine twenty minutes before the breach and blamed HAP for its “lack of organization” in the situation.²⁹ P.T Putnam, a worker at Vanport College, reported that “We would not leave because we had faith in the siren system...I personally made three trips taking people out of there. On my third trip back I heard the siren for the first time.”³⁰ Resident Sharon Cowley remembered that, “everything that we were led to believe was that there would be plenty of warning if that were to happen.”³¹ Residents attempted to leave but did not because they believed in the siren system.³² People were killed and thousands lost

²⁵ Beatrice Gilmore, Interviewed by Vanport Mosaic, *Vanport Mosaic*.

²⁶ “Eye Witness Accounts Tell Scenes of Panic, Confusion,” *Oregonian*, May 31, 1948, 3.

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ “5000 Temporary Housing Units Need of Refugees,” *Oregonian*, June 2, 1948, 13.

³¹ Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

³² “Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland” June 1, 1948, Housing Authority Records, Portland City Archives, 6.

possessions because they had “faith” in HAP. Yet, sources suggest HAP knew flooding would occur, but failed to adequately warn the people of Vanport. The destruction happened so quickly, that a warning only gave residents time to gather a few belongings and run or drive to higher ground.

A report published for President Truman found those responsible for the alarm system made errant delays. After receiving a message from Irving Williams that “the signal tower was nearly down alongside the bank and that it looked like a tidal wave coming through” Roy Taylor was asked “you didn’t tell the electrician to turn on the alarm at that time?” Taylor responded, “I didn’t. He said the water was coming in but I assumed it was a bad break.”³³ Taylor went outside to survey the damage and when questioned how much time elapsed between when he reentered his office and he sounded the alarm, Taylor responded, “I don’t believe it could have been more than possibly 3-1/2 minutes at the most. That is a hasty answer and I hate to give it because it might be important.”³⁴ Vanport residents were lucky more deaths did not occurred as many sections had little time to escape. Sheriff Martin Pratt admitted that, “Had there not been the ten minute warning a terrific loss of life would have been inescapable.”³⁵ Historians and commentators all agree that ten minutes was the most time any Vanport resident had before the water destroyed their apartments and had the break occurred at night, the death toll would have been devastating.³⁶ Two days following the flood the *Oregonian* reported

³³ “Meeting Minutes of a Regular Meeting of the Housing Authority of Portland,” June 3-4, 1948,” Housing Authority of Portland Records, Portland City Archives, 13.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Flood Crumbles Vanport, Thousands Escape Death,” *Oregonian*, May 31, 1948, 1.

³⁶ Timothy Egan, *The Good Rain: Across Time and Terrain in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Random House, 1990), 7. See also Charles McKinley, *Uncle Sam in the Pacific Northwest:*

that, “From their wholly unprepared homes, the people of Vanport fled for their lives...that there was not great loss of life is providential rather than attributable to any measure of precaution.”³⁷ Without proper warning, many were happy just to be alive.

Immediately following the flood, refugees were put in emergency housing trailers insufficient for their needs. By June 4 HAP relocated refugees into dormitory trailers on Swan Island, northwest of downtown.³⁸ These trailers provided shelter, but some residents lived in them for years as HAP “refused to provide any public housing alternatives.”³⁹ Trailers were so small and rundown that Vanport refugees protested with signs that proclaimed, “We want permanent homes- not kennels on wheels.”⁴⁰ On average, six to ten family members lived in each trailer that lacked bathrooms.⁴¹ The housing was of the bare minimum, for the community had no intent to rebuild housing projects. Chamber of Commerce chairperson Henry Mittleman declared that, “We do not wish to start another project which bears even the seeds of a future slum area. Portland can no longer think in terms of emergency or defense housing. Instead of creating a great potential slum area...we can keep Portland the city of homes, not of gigantic defense housing

Federal Management of Natural Resources in the Columbia River Valley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952.), 19.

³⁷ “The Vanport Disaster,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 12.

³⁸ “Ten Dormitories at Swan Island Taken over to House Vanport Flood Refugees,” *Oregonian*, June 4, 1948, 8.

³⁹ Gibson, “Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000,” 10.

⁴⁰ Thomas Robinson, “Urban Renewal and Removal in North Portland,” (Presentation Given at McMenemy's Kennedy School, February 28, 2010, Portland Oregon. See also Maben, *Vanport*, 118.

⁴¹ Sanders, *Glimpses from the Past: The Housing Authority of Portland, Fifty Years of Building a Better Community*, 53.

projects.”⁴² Even after the flood dispelled Vanport residents, officials politicized the refugees’ situation and feared Vanport residents would create slums.

Guilt for the flood was placed on the shoulders of HAP and the Army Corps of Engineers. A document from a 1955 court case points out that HAP gave “false assurances of safety to Vanport residents.”⁴³ These “false assurances” resulted in the destruction of a community. Maben asserts that, refugees found HAP and the Army Corps of Engineers as the two scapegoats that if an evacuation had occurred earlier, deaths and loss of property would have been avoided.⁴⁴ Victims felt blame had to be assigned and required answers on why evacuations did not occur sooner. Many felt that HAP, along with the Sheriff’s department, had “taken somewhat of an indifferent attitude” during the disaster.”⁴⁵ Politician Mark Haller, with Vanport residents’ encouragement, called for a congressional investigation to assign guilt for the disaster and to find out “what engineers had failed to estimate the danger and why the Portland Housing Authority failed to prepare the area’s inhabitants.”⁴⁶ Two “haggard refugees from Vanport” interrupted proceedings at a June 1 HAP meeting to ask for an “investigation of blame for the tragedy” and for an explanation “why the residents were not properly warned and forewarned.”⁴⁷ Vanport residents led protests outside City Hall

⁴² Ten Dormitories at Swan Island Taken over to House Vanport Flood Refugees,” *Oregonian*, June 4, 1948, 8.

⁴³ *Clark V. United States*, 218 F.2d 445 (United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit, 1954), 1.

⁴⁴ Maben, *Vanport*, 125.

⁴⁵ Maben, *Vanport*, 126.

⁴⁶ “City News in Brief,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 13.

⁴⁷ “5000 Temporary Housing Units Need of Refugees,” *Oregonian*, June 2, 1948, 13.

with signs that stated “We charge criminal neglect caused Vanport disaster.”⁴⁸

Newspaper articles asked why HAP did not evacuate sooner, dubbed HAP “Portland’s Do-Nothing Housing Program,” and blamed them for the disaster.⁴⁹ The *Portland Journal* implored Mayor Riley to “Reorganize Portland Housing Authority” as they had not shown leadership during the crisis and “too often acted in an arbitrary manner.”⁵⁰ HAP, the organization that unanimously voted for the destruction of Vanport, was the culprit to blame for the flood’s damage. Critics saw the flood not as a case of unpreparedness but of governmental neglect and ineptitude.

The African American community lambasted HAP’s role and race played a major role in authorities’ treatment of Vanport. African American minister Richard Steiner declared HAP guilty for the disaster since they did not evacuate Vanport “even as merchants and warehousemen in downtown Portland were moving goods from their basements” and airline companies removed goods from the airport.⁵¹ Jason Rivera and Demond Miller argue that Vanport was a “zone of sacrifice,” and blacks in Vanport felt they were “deliberately allowed to suffer...because of neglect on the behalf of government units,” which is common for African Americans in natural disasters.⁵² Portlanders were “relieved” at Vanport’s destruction as Rudy Pearson notes that black

⁴⁸ Carl Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries*, 126.

⁴⁹ Sanders, *Glimpses from the Past: The Housing Authority of Portland, Fifty Years of Building a Better Community*, 52. See also, William Smart, “Cause of Vanport Disaster, Late Assurances Draw Study,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 4

⁵⁰ Sanders, 54.

⁵¹ Steiner Puts Loss Onus on Housing Body,” *Oregonian*, June 7, 1948, 11.

⁵² Rivera and Miller, “Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience,” 515.

Vanporters believed “white Portlanders allowed the flood to happen, hoping the lack of housing would encourage non-whites to leave the area” and return to anywhere “as long as it isn’t Portland.”⁵³ Portland historian Carl Abbott states that, “Except for the victims, many of whom were black, few Portlanders were upset on Memorial Day, 1948, when high waters...swept away Vanport’s flimsy buildings.”⁵⁴ While other factors such as class contributed, race was certainly a critical reason for authorities’ negligent response to the flood. HAP’s priority was never Vanport citizens but to simply manage the project and “dispose” of it “as soon as possible.”⁵⁵ Vanport preacher Richard Steiner illustrated the general distrust between the two groups and excoriated black Vanport residents who trusted HAP saying those of us who “had our doubts about a Portland Housing Authority whose members have consistently demonstrated their subservience to the policy of a special interest in our community and in spite of our doubts did nothing: We are guilty.”⁵⁶ Steiner argued Vanport’s black community was partially guilty since they had sufficient reason to suspect HAP would betray them and yet did not act themselves.

Citizens were perplexed that few bodies were found, so conspiracy rumors circulated. Authorities expected a high death toll as eyewitness reports came into newspapers. One witness said he saw “five persons in the water struck by a building, and their bodies float away.”⁵⁷ No bodies had appeared days after the flood even though

⁵³ Rudy Pearson, *African Americans in Portland, 1940-1950: Work and Living Conditions- A Social History* (Doctoral Dissertation, Washington State University, 1996), 215. Also Abbott, *Portland in Three Centuries*, 126.

⁵⁴ Carl, Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 157.

⁵⁵ MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1915 to 1950*, 595.

⁵⁶ “Steiner Puts Loss Onus on Housing Body,” *Oregonian*, June 7, 1948, 11.

⁵⁷ Virgil Smith, “Quiet Marks Tragic Scene,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 11.

witnesses retold stories of bodies that floated downriver.⁵⁸ Sheriff Martin Pratt estimated hundreds were dead, others estimated thousands, and one deputy estimated “under the debris, I firmly believe, will be found the bodies of scores of flood victims.”⁵⁹ The swift water made people believe the death toll would be great, yet as weeks rolled by, the death toll remained low. A June 1 article exclaimed, “To the complete amazement of all authorities, not a single body had been reported sighted or recovered by Monday night in the Vanport wreckage.”⁶⁰ A week later, *Oregon Journal* reported 400 missing, yet no bodies, and by June 10 over eighty were on the Red Cross’s missing list.⁶¹ Still by June 16, after the water had receded, the death toll was seven.⁶² With the absence of casualties, Vanport residents believed HAP concealed information. Historian Stuart McElderry asserts that many believed HAP and the Army Corps of Engineers “conspired to disguise the real death toll in order to lessen the magnitude of HAP’s blame for the tragedy.”⁶³ Vanport rumors claimed HAP stored bodies in a downtown ice storage building and shipped victims’ bodies to Japan to send back to the U.S disguised as dead soldiers.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Stuart McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99, no.2 (1998): 139.

⁵⁹ McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950,” 140. See also Lyle Cocking, “Deputies Battle to Block People from Flood Waters,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 17

⁶⁰ “Vanport Homes Swept Eastward in Low Area, Man Plunged to Death,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, 1.

⁶¹ “Vanport Critical list of 80 Names,” *Oregon Journal*, June 10, 1948.

⁶² “Seventh Body Found Afloat Near Vanport,” *Oregonian*, June 16, 1948, 1.

⁶³ McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950,” 130.

⁶⁴ McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950,” 135, 142.

Rumors were so prevalent that the head sheriff, county coroner, and mayor denied any cover-up of deaths and publicly said the rumors were “the most absurd” they had ever heard.⁶⁵ Eventually, authorities recovered fifteen bodies and officials agreed on a total of forty-one deaths.⁶⁶

Conspiracy rumors were fanciful and lacked evidence, but more importantly, they displayed Vanport’s distrust of local authorities. That Vanport residents believed authorities (whom they knew wanted to drive them out of Portland) would hide dead bodies in an effort to escape responsibility is paramount. Stuart McElderry believes “the most important, and revealing, issue is not how many people believed the rumors but why some people believed them... a rumor will spread only if it is plausible to a given population, reflecting shared concerns, assumptions, and beliefs.”⁶⁷ McElderry synthesizes the relationship between Vanport and the Portland community by saying:

The Vanport flood rumors invoked widely recognized tensions between different groups of Portlanders: local officials and longtime residents, on the one hand, and the city's wartime migrants, on the other. More specifically, the conflict between HAP and Vanport's tenants provided the central logic of the conspiracy rumors. The antagonistic relationship between HAP and Portland's public housing tenants can be traced back to the beginning of World War II... general mistrust of government officials and authority provides one possible explanation for the specific content of these rumors.⁶⁸

If Vanport residents and HAP had been involved in a relationship of openness, trust, respect, and tolerance, rumors would have never developed, as people would never

⁶⁵ “Officials Deny Recovery of Any Bodies in Rescue Operations in Vanport Vicinity,” *Oregonian*, June 4, 1948, 1. See also, “Officials Deny Bodies Found,” *Oregonian* June 2, 1948, 1.

⁶⁶ *Clark V. United States*, 218 F.2d 445 (United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit, 1954), 1.

⁶⁷ McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950,” 137, 144.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

assume HAP would intentionally harm them. However, these rumors are understandable because Vanport residents did not trust HAP or Portland leaders and their relationship with HAP was based on discrimination, condescension, and surreptitiousness. Conspiracy rumors illustrate how poorly Vanport residents felt about local authorities because of their “antagonistic” relationship.

Thousands of victims took HAP to court for loss of property and questioned their actions. The Oregon Supreme Court and local courts heard 650 cases with 2,993 claimants and 91 attorneys throughout the 1940s and 1950s.⁶⁹ Plaintiffs argued residents would have moved out but were “allayed” by HAP’s “reassurances.”⁷⁰ HAP pleaded “governmental immunity” and refused to pay property damages unless the Federal government provided funds.⁷¹ Over 216 million dollars’ worth of damage was reported.⁷² Ultimately, no victims were indemnified for lost possessions but the fact that victims brought hundreds of cases against HAP shows they believed HAP intentionally exercised negligence and were responsible for the victims’ deaths.⁷³ Vanport residents Solon and Geraldine Clark went to the U.S district court in 1952 and appealed their case to the U.S Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. They sought to hold HAP and the Army Corps responsible for their “negligent manner in... giving of false assurances of safety,” that

⁶⁹ Maben, *Vanport*, 127. One case focused on a sixty-foot railroad dike crack three days before the break that authorities ignored.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ “Minutes of an Informal Meeting of Commissioners of the Housing Authority of Portland,” Nov. 2, 1948. Housing Authority of Portland Records, Portland City Archives, 1, 3.

⁷² “Clark et ux. v. United States and nineteen other cases Civ. No. 4420 United States District Court for the District of Oregon 13 F.R.D. 342; 1952 U.S. Dist. 3668 September 8, 1952.”

⁷³ Sanders, *Glimpses from the Past: The Housing Authority of Portland, Fifty Years of Building a Better Community*, 54.

most residents relied on.⁷⁴ The flyer given to Vanport residents offered no legally binding protection, but Judge James Alger Fee said “The chief criticism which can be directed at this group [HAP] was that they assumed to be omniscient and radiated an atmosphere of confidence which the situation did not justify.”⁷⁵ HAP refused to inform residents of the true severity and instead conveyed a façade of confidence and control by not allowing residents to act for themselves.⁷⁶ The case also hints at bias towards housing project residents as the national policy was “People in housing projects are like children; they really do not know what they want or what to believe... the designated managers of the housing project should accept the challenge and give them guidance and directions.”⁷⁷ The cases show that HAP’s repeated assurances of safety gave Vanport residents a false confidence in HAP.

Considering the prejudice that Portland exhibited towards Vanport (specifically, black Vanport residents) throughout the decade, Authorities’ differential treatment of Vanport during the flood crisis makes clear the community’s bias toward Vanport and its black inhabitants and is another examples of the poor race relations between African Americans and white Portlanders. While no sources exist to expose an intentional plot to let Vanport suffer in the flood, it is logical to conclude that the race of Vanport’s citizens permeated authorities’ intentions and influenced their decision-making, whether directly or subconsciously. Evacuations elsewhere in the city show authorities considered

⁷⁴ Solon B Clark, Jr. and Geraldine A. Clark, Husband and Wife and Related Cases, Appellants, V. United States of America, Appellee, 218 F.2d 446 (9th Cir. 1954), Dec. 29, 1954.

⁷⁵ Clark v. United States, 109 F Supp. 213 (D. Or. 1952), Oct. 23, 1952.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Vanport citizens less important and that less care was exhibited in the treatment of Vanport. Thousands could have died, but because many were out of town for Memorial Day, the death toll was minimal. The flood marked the lowest point in Portland race relations and convinced many black Vanporters that Portlanders did not want them in their community. The flood represented years of hatred and prejudice by a community that failed to accept the newcomers. Historians have compared the Vanport flood with the Mississippi floods of 1927 and Hurricane Katrina to argue race was a major factor in authorities' actions leading up to and during the disaster.⁷⁸ Yet, while race relations worsened in the aftermath of the previous two disasters, would it be so for Portland?

⁷⁸ See Rivera and Miller, "Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience." *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 4 (March 2007):502-522.

Chapter IV:

‘THE NATION’S MOST IMPROVED CITY IN RACE RELATIONS’: THE FLOOD RESPONSE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN PORTLAND, 1948-1959 AND BEYOND

The flood represented the low point in Portland race relations, yet against all predictions, the actions of white Portlanders (and later local and state governments) in response to the refugee crisis proved Portlanders could change. As thousands of African Americans were homeless in a city filled to capacity, few housing options existed, yet many put aside racial differences, opened their homes, and offered assistance in a myriad of ways. These small acts of kindness often represented the first positive interracial exchanges between black wartime migrants and established white Portlanders and both groups began to see each other in a better light. The disaster brought new understanding, interaction, and an improvement in race relations. While progressive changes were gradual, African Americans lives improved as legislation brought equal opportunities for minorities. Unlike the Mississippi floods of 1927 or Hurricane Katrina, which placed greater wedges between white and black communities, the Memorial Day flood was a positive event that helped Portland to accept migrants as permanent residents and attempt to integrate them into the city. Not only were average citizens more accepting of the black community, as evidenced in opinions on integrated living, but a clear change in the discourse of city leadership is noticeable after the flood, as leaders worked to improve civil rights and viewed the black population as an asset instead of a burden or nuisance. While this local shift can be attributed to the effects of the flood, it also mirrors more accepting national opinions on integration and civil rights due to the effects of the war and monumental victories in the 1940s and 1950s. The flood’s timing is crucial to note,

as civil rights and African American issues were more prominent and opinions were beginning to change nationwide. Without the flood, Portland may have continued its subpar race relations into subsequent decades, but the flood response charted Portland on a path for greater integration, cooperation between races, and allowed African Americans to make themselves a permanent and accepted part of the city. While Portland continued to struggle with race related issues into the twenty-first century, the flood aftermath helped to enact positive political and social change that was rapid and drastic.

Despite poor race relations at the time of the flood countless agencies, churches, charities, and individuals answered the call to aid victims. Two days before the flood an Urban League report highlighted the antagonistic relationship between blacks and whites saying, “Portland Negroes had settled down to a life of dreadful mediocrity and decided that white folks were mean, undemocratic, and hypocritical and that such traits were racial characteristics of Caucasians. Most Portland whites were misinformed, disinterested, or believed Negroes to be satisfied with second class citizenship.”¹ Blacks felt Portlanders would never change their opinion towards them as one Vanport man said “many there [in Vanport] felt isolated and held the belief that Portland would never turn a hand to help them.”² Vanport residents expected little aid or support from the community after the disaster, but would be surprised. As the local government was slow to provide aid, local PTA’s, the Salvation Army, and churches provided most assistance.³ Over twenty local schools and a dozen local churches housed, fed, and supplied thousands of

¹ Lorene Smurthwaite, “Flood Need Proves Races Can Mingle,” *Oregonian* July, 4, 1948, 54.

² Ibid.

³ Quintard Taylor, “The Great Migration: The Afro American Communities of Seattle and Portland during the 1940s”, 120-123.

refugees on their own budget while the YMCA and the Jewish Community Center offered free summers camps to displaced children.⁴ Jackie Winters remembered going to “every Bible class” and “camp that existed. Kids were scattered all over Portland, because that was a lot of kids and people to absorb in Portland.”⁵ The same community that had spurned, insulted, and mistreated Vanport residents, now offered help.

Many Portlanders opened their homes to refugees, regardless of race. A Red Cross report showed that Vanport residents, once registered and fed in school centers, “immediately” went into private homes throughout Portland.⁶ The small number forced to stay the night in shelters was evidence of immediate hospitality and thousands called the Red Cross asking to take in families.⁷ Many whites took in black families as volunteers placed over 14,000 in homes “without regard to color or race.”⁸ The Red Cross believed the opening of homes would be monumental in racial relations as the report said “The open hearted generosity of many white citizens in Portland in taking in colored families at the time of the disaster may have some lasting effect in breaking down lines of prejudice.”⁹ Even though many Portlanders viewed Vanport citizens as a nuisance, once they saw the destitute refugees, many disregarded class, cultural, and racial differences and opened their homes, wallets, and hearts to the stricken people.

⁴ “Recreation to Aid Flood Evacuees,” *Oregon Journal*, June 1948.

⁵ Jackie Winters, Interviewed by Meredith Lawrence, Vanport Mosaic.

⁶ *Vanport City Flood May 30, 1948 Preliminary Disaster Committee Report* (Portland: American National Red Cross, 1948), 27.

⁷ *Vanport City Flood May 30, 1948 Preliminary Disaster Committee Report*, 28.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Vanport City Flood May 30, 1948 Preliminary Disaster Committee Report*, 30-31.

The charity offered changed blacks and whites' opinions of each other. The front page of a July 4 *Oregonian* article entitled "Flood Need Proves Races Can Mingle: Barriers between Negroes, Whites Break Along with Dikes on River" highlighted response efforts that amazed Red Cross workers.¹⁰ Before the flood, Vanporters felt acrimonious towards Portlanders, and Portlanders resisted interaction with black residents, yet this changed as people of all backgrounds "were all washed away" by the flood.¹¹ One white woman urged emergency responders to send refugees to her home saying "I don't care what color they are- black or white, they're human aren't they."¹² A couple from nearby Clatskanie, Oregon offered their cabin rent-free to a Vanport family for the summer saying "Children, pets, people of any race, creed or color are all entirely welcome."¹³ A nervous volunteer drove a black family to a white home, but as they arrived the mother met them and exclaimed "what a darling child, let me take him. Please come in, the home is yours."¹⁴ The Davis family housed four black adults and two children and Mrs. Davis said, "We got along perfectly, and I think the sooner Negro people are accepted...the sooner other countries over the world will begin to take us seriously when we boast about our democracy."¹⁵ One black Vanporter believed God

¹⁰ Lorena Smurthwaite, "Flood Need Proves Races Can Mingle," *Oregonian* July, 4, 1948, 54.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Turner, "Heroism, Drama of Devastating Vanport Flood Remembered on Memorial Day Anniversary" *Oregonian*, May 29, 1949, 26.

¹³ Mary V. McCoy, "Mr. Fixit: Cabin Above Flood," *Oregon Journal* June 12, 1948

¹⁴ Smurthwaite, "Flood Need Proves Races Can Mingle," *Oregonian* July 4, 1948, 54.

¹⁵ Ibid.

brought the flood to improve relations between whites and blacks.¹⁶ A Red Cross worker noticed a distressed African American woman and asked if a family member had died. The woman responded, “I’m thinking of people and their homes...now, the homes are all gone and I’ve been gripped with a great fear, but this last hour here I’ve seen a miracle. White folks care about us and are helping. I guess my troubled heart can feel easier now.”¹⁷ Families who offered their homes did not mention race, Red Cross cafeterias featured no segregation, and one worker believed, “If we could get this feeling of interracial understanding among nations I honestly believe our major problems would be solved.”¹⁸ Countless survivors appreciated the hospitality and acceptance by white Portlanders and journalist Lorene Smurthwaite perhaps foresaw the flood’s role in improving race relations saying, “Historians of Portland may note that the most significant aftermath of the Vanport disaster was its democratizing force.”¹⁹ Blacks noticed white Portlanders’ transformation, and though small, these events may have started the process of improving racial relations and affirming to local blacks that Portland could be more than an unwelcoming and parochial city. This charity in a time of need brought greater understanding and respect.

The hospitality offered refugees amazed commentators and black residents. The Urban League reported “no vestige of discrimination” occurred, nearly all 5,000 blacks had been accepted into homes and treated well, and they already noticed “a great

¹⁶ Turner, “Heroism, Drama of Devastating Vanport Flood Remembered on Memorial Day Anniversary,” *Oregonian* May 29, 1949, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lorene Smurthwaite, “Flood Need Proves Races Can Mingle,” *Oregonian* July, 4, 1948, 54.

¹⁹ Smurthwaite, “Flood Need Proves Races Can Mingle,” *Oregonian* July 4, 1948, 54.

improvement in racial tolerance” in the city.²⁰ One leader felt the city would be a much better place if “The same generosity” offered after the flood “could be shown 365 days a year.”²¹ One article noted how the “commonality of disaster” united black and white Portlanders and felt Portlanders should be “ashamed” by their “former intolerance.”²² Following the flood, local writers, Vanport residents, and Red Cross workers noticed the changes in Portlanders’ attitudes toward blacks. A year later, the *Oregonian* reported “racial barriers” were “shattered” by the “sympathy” the city showed to refugees.²³ Civil rights activist Kathryn Bogle commented that after the flood “There were people who could see beyond skin color and it was to those people who I would give credit [for positive changes]. They opened their eyes, opened their hearts and opened their homes.”²⁴ Otto Rutherford, onetime local NAACP leader believed God allowed the flood to happen in order to integrate Portland, which was “a most segregated society.”²⁵ While the black community of Albina absorbed many refugees, the blacks who moved into white neighborhoods created improved opinions on integration.²⁶ During the war, Portlanders criticized migrants without having meaningful interactions with them. When

²⁰ “Nondiscrimination Praised in Flood Aid,” *Oregonian*, June 4, 1948, 24. See also Smurthwaite, “Flood Need Proves Races Can Mingle,” *Oregonian* July, 4, 1948, 54. See also “Brothers in Disasters,” *Oregonian* June 4, 1948, 16.

²¹ Mrs. Copple Made Chief of Portland PTA Council,” *Oregonian* June 7, 1948, 8.

²² “Brothers in Disasters,” *Oregonian* June 4, 1948, 16.

²³ Wallace Turner, “Heroism, Drama of Devastating Vanport Flood Remembered on Memorial Day Anniversary,” *Oregonian* May 29, 1949, 26.

²⁴ Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Michael McGregor, Interview by Lynn Neary, *Talk of the Nation*, NPR, Sept 12, 2005.

uncontentious communication and exchange between races occur, opinions usually improve, and the entry of Vanport residents into Portland due to the flood provided opportunities for greater interaction.

Evidences of advancements in race relations were an increase in positive African American press and the creation of race relation committees. In the 1930s and 1940s The *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Journal*, “were notorious in their depiction of black people” and echoed negative stereotypes locals held for blacks.²⁷ A study comparing news stories between 1931 and 1948 saw major increases in favorable stories in all papers surveyed with the highest percentages of positive press coming in 1948. In 1931, 45 percent of *Oregon Journal*’s news items were unfavorable, yet by the end of 1948 all news items were neutral, favorable, or very favorable.²⁸ Over half *Oregonian* stories were negative in 1941, but less ten percent by 1948.²⁹ All newspapers studied showed a “steady tendency to increase” positive news items, a decrease in “negro crime stories,” and more articles covering injustices and civil rights issues.³⁰ Once biased towards blacks, by 1948 newspapers employed black writers and were “fair and unbiased,” suggesting increased positive attitudes towards African Americans.³¹ The study’s author felt the positive press mirrored “a more favorable general public attitude toward Negroes” and signified that a

²⁷ Pearson, *African Americans in Portland, 1940-1950: Work and Living Conditions- A Social History*, 128.

²⁸ Johnson, *An Analysis of Negro News and Non-News Matter Appearing in Four Oregon Daily Newspapers During the Years, 1931, 1936, 1941, 1945, and 1948*, 135.

²⁹ Johnson, 138.

³⁰ Johnson, 26-27, 134, 169.

³¹ “Report on the Negro in Portland: A Progress Report 1945-1957,” *Portland City Club Bulletin* April 19, 1957: 369

“gradual easing of the situation [the city’s racial relations] might...be occurring.”³²

Though gradual, Portland’s animosity towards local blacks seemed to wane and positive press was one manifestation of a more accepting community. During the 1940s black leaders constantly complained that Portland lacked civil rights committees, but in 1949 the city created the United Committee on Civil Rights, which sought to “make Portland the nation’s No. 1 city in the field of race relations.”³³ The committee featured prominent business, political, and educational representatives from fifty-two organizations and spearheaded an antidiscrimination law movement in Portland.³⁴ Mayor Dorothy Lee called for more “intergroup relations” committees, while the Urban League created a committee to educate the public on minority issues.³⁵ After the flood, the city addressed serious racial issues by creating committees and hosting forums about race since wartime black migrants were now in the city to stay.

Passage of the Fair Employment Practice Act was a major civil rights victory that provided greater opportunities to blacks. While communities nationwide made strides in race relations in the 1950s, Portland’s was dramatic and swift considering its once poor reputation. One Urban League leader referred to the 1950s as “a decade of triumph” considering the “advances that were made in a relatively short time.”³⁶ At the end of

³² Johnson, *An Analysis of Negro News and Non-News Matter Appearing in Four Oregon Daily Newspapers During the Years, 1931, 1936, 1941, 1945, and 1948*, 172, 178.

³³ “Plan Mapped on Tolerance,” *Oregonian* Dec. 22, 1949, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “Group to Assist Race Relations,” *Oregonian* May 29, 1949, 5.
See also, “City Expected to Push Over Race Barriers,” *Oregonian*, Feb. 19, 1950, 15.

³⁶ Gordon Oliver, “Urban League’s Early Years Recounted,” *Oregonian* Jan. 14, 1983, 18.

1948, the Urban League reported that “boundary lines have been broken” in housing, as hundreds of blacks bought homes outside designated black neighborhoods.³⁷ In 1949, Oregon became just the sixth state, and only the second state west of the Mississippi, to pass a Fair Employment Practice Law.³⁸ The law banned discrimination in employment and offered board hearings on discrimination cases.³⁹ The state house passed the bill 53-4 and only one representative spoke against it. A great success, the law saw African Americans in more skilled positions, only twenty seven cases filed in the first two years, and leaders felt discrimination in Oregon was much “less vicious” than other parts of the country.⁴⁰ In 1947, the Urban League could not find one senator to introduce the bill but by 1949 support from white led organizations and a white controlled press allowed the bill to pass “thanks to real bipartisan support.”⁴¹ Because of more employment options, by 1950 sixty two percent of black high school graduates were enrolled in college and in 1951 sixty five percent prepared to matriculate by fall.⁴² By late 1950 Bill Berry recognized that “For the first time in the history of Oregon, Negro youths believe they have something to go to school for. They feel they can aspire to jobs other than hustling

³⁷ Pearson, *African Americans in Portland, 1940-1950: Work and Living Conditions- A Social History* (Doctoral Dissertation, Washington State University, 1996), 217.

³⁸ Paul Hauser, “House Adopts FEP Measure by 53-4 Count,” *Oregonian*, March 20, 1949, 1. The other five states with existing FEP laws were New York, New Jersey, Washington, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Gladys Turley, “Tolerance by Law,” *Oregonian* March 25, 1951, 105.

⁴¹ Ron Moxness, “Ron Moxness, “Ed Berry Learned How to Lose as Athlete and Urban Director,” *Oregonian* Jan. 1, 1956, 17.

⁴² Gladys Turley, “Tolerance by Law, 105. Also see “Education Tends to Weaken Racial Discrimination, But Legislation Needed, Conclave Finds,” *Oregonian*, Oct. 6, 1950, 29.

bags at the Union Station or working in someone's kitchen."⁴³ Berry was optimistic about the future and felt "definite advances" had occurred.⁴⁴

Portland received praise for its civil rights advances both locally and nationally. In 1945, Portland was "the worst city in race relations north of the Mason Dixon Line," but by 1949 civil rights historian Janus Adams reported, "Portland had a new appellation, the nations most improved city in race relations."⁴⁵ In 1950 Portland became the nation's second city alongside Philadelphia to pass a citywide antidiscrimination ordinance which made it "illegal to refuse service" to all minorities in public places.⁴⁶ The unanimously passed ordinance sparked bipartisan praise and business owners showed solidarity by posting signs which read, "Racial and religious discrimination banned here. We reserve the right to serve all respectable patrons."⁴⁷ Because of the ordinance, The National Conference of Christian and Jews named Portland the most improved city in racial relations for 1950.⁴⁸ Portland was awarded for "making the greatest progress during the year in the field of intergroup relations" and for "progress in developing respect and equal rights for persons of all groups and for giving example and inspiration to other

⁴³ "Education Tends to Weaken Racial Discrimination, But Legislation Needed, Conclave Finds," 29.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Janus Adams, *Freedom Days: 365 Inspired Moments in Civil Rights History* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 6.

⁴⁶ "Portland Council Passes Ban on Discrimination," *Oregonian* Feb. 22, 1950, 1.

⁴⁷ "Businessmen Plan Support of Civil Rights Measure," *Oregonian*, Oct. 22, 1950, 17. Also see. Dan Hortsch, "Most Gains Hard Won for Portland's Blacks," *Oregonian* Nov. 8, 1982, 42.

⁴⁸ "Portland Council Passes Ban on Discrimination," 1. Today the organization is known as the National Conference for Community and Justice. Portland also won the award in 1963.

communities in building brotherhood.”⁴⁹ The ordinance altered the city’s reputation on civil rights and Portland was awarded because of increased “human contact between one and another at close range, the reaching out of a hand to another.”⁵⁰ The charity between races after the Vanport flood played a key role in the city attaining the award. Urban League leader Bill Berry felt the city was “worthy of the award” and Mayor Dorothy Lee addressed the novelty of such an award in Portland saying, “We excel in many things here- but to excel in human rights is the most important advance any community ever made.”⁵¹ Considering how unwelcoming Portland was in the 1940s, Lee’s comments are largely true. Future governor Tom McCall named the award “the greatest honor to Portland in my 30 years as a resident here” and added it was a “magnificent beginning for driving bigotry from the Northwest.”⁵² In a very short time, Portland looked to end racial discrimination by educating the public and creating laws that deemed discrimination illegal. The *New York Times* commended Portland for “showing growing tolerance” and felt the city was an “inspiration to other communities in building of brotherhood.”⁵³ Compared with the entire country, Oregon was oftentimes ahead in civil rights and anti-discrimination laws.

Advances in employment, recreation, and housing were apparent in the early 1950s. *Oregonian* journalist Hugh Scott wrote four articles in April 1952 that highlighted

⁴⁹ “Award Honors City for Human Relations,” *Oregonian*, Feb. 22, 1950, 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “Award Honors City for Human Relations,” 1. See also “Balance Sheet Shows Better Race Relations,” *Oregonian* Nov. 20, 1949, 18, and “Portland Council Passes Ban on Discrimination,” 1

⁵² “Award Honors City for Human Relations,” 1.

⁵³ Lawrence E Davies, “Bias Curb is Issue at Portland Ore,” *New York Times* May 8, 1950, 26.

improvements African Americans experienced. Blacks now lived in sixty of sixty-three census tracts without any incidents, black and white unemployment was the same for 1952, and while over ninety percent of black men worked for railroad companies prior to 1942, only fifteen percent remained in the industry.⁵⁴ More blacks worked in construction, the textiles industry, education, the civil service, the Portland Police Department, academia, and the Fair Employment Practice Act had been “a great boon to the Negro.”⁵⁵ The *Oregonian*, who had earlier refused a paper route to a young Bill Hilliard because of his skin color, hired Hilliard in 1952 as the paper’s first black reporter, and the only black reporter for a major West Coast newspaper.⁵⁶ Changes in public opinions helped produce major gains in integration and most whites were happy to have minority neighbors.⁵⁷ Scott also noted, “The Vanport flood, may have been a blessing in disguise” as it helped to further integrate the city.⁵⁸ Black teachers worked in most Portland public schools and social agencies, recreational facilities, and schools had “reached the happy situation where there is no real Negro problem because the color line had become indistinguishable.”⁵⁹ White parents shared satisfaction with black teachers and recreational centers like the Knott Street Community Center offered “one of the

⁵⁴ Hugh Scott, “Negroes in Portland: Work, Housing Partly Solved” *Oregonian*, April 13, 1952, 1.

⁵⁵ Race Relations Bettered During 1954, According to Urban League,” *Oregonian* April 4, 1954, 38

⁵⁶ Nadine Jelsing, *Portland Civil Rights: Lift Ev’ry Voice*, Documentary, Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2015. Hilliard became the first black executive editor of the newspaper in 1982, the first black editor in chief in 1987, and the first black elected as President of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. He also moderated a presidential debate between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter in 1980.

⁵⁷ Scott, “Negroes in Portland: Work, Housing Partly Solved” *Oregonian*, April 13, 1952, 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Hugh Scott, “Schools, Recreation and Social Agencies Lead in Cutting Color Line,” *Oregonian*, April 15, 1952, 10.

strongest possible arguments in favor of racial integration.”⁶⁰ Even churches, once the most staunchly segregated institutions in Portland, welcomed black members and black reverends encouraged their members to invite white friends.⁶¹ Local African Americans, city officials, and local journalists noticed great strides in civil rights.

The 1950s was a decade of civil rights victories for Oregon. The years 1949 to 1959 saw the end of the ban on interracial marriage, the ratification of the Fair Employment Act, and Oregon’s official ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment.⁶² 1953’s Public Accommodations Law made Oregon the twenty-first state to pass a civil rights bill.⁶³ Made possible by local NAACP advocacy, the bill ensured all people in Oregon “full and equal accommodations.”⁶⁴ The bill passed overwhelmingly, showing changing attitudes among whites.⁶⁵ 1957 saw the ratification of Oregon’s Fair Housing Act that forbade discrimination in housing and business properties and took away licenses of realtors who discriminated.⁶⁶ Local black leader Otto Rutherford acknowledged the white community’s help saying “that couldn’t have happened if we

⁶⁰ Scott, “Schools, Recreation and Social Agencies Lead in Cutting Color Line,” 10.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Elaine Rector, “Timeline of Oregon and U.S Racial, Immigration and Education History, *Oregon Center of Education Equity*, Last Modified May 16, 2010, 16-18, <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bps/article/412697>

⁶³ Joshua Binus, “Signing Oregon’s Civil Rights Bill, 1953,” *The Oregon History Project* Last modified 2003, <http://oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/historical-records/signing-oregon39s-civil-rights-bill-1953/#.V37I33obhUE>

⁶⁴ Binus, “Signing of Oregon’s Civil Rights Bill, 1953,” also see Kimberly Stowers Moreland, *African Americans of Portland* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2013), 83.

⁶⁵ Binus “Signing of Oregon’s Civil Rights Bill.

⁶⁶ Joshua Binus, “Fair Housing in Oregon Study,” *The Oregon History Project*, last modified 2003.

hadn't had some good liberal white friends. We couldn't have done it by ourselves we were too few in number...they helped us get the bills through."⁶⁷ A 1963 article summarized the previous decade in Oregon as a "story of a state which started late-but caught up fast. A state still faced with problems-but with the machinery to meet them."⁶⁸ As of 1949, Oregon had no civil rights laws or amendments, but passed eleven from 1949 to 1961.⁶⁹ Journalist Peter Tugman summarized the radical transformation saying "from a position deep among the least progressive states, Oregon had advanced to a position of eminence among civil rights leaders" while Shelton Hill, Urban League director for Portland said "Today I'm proud to say I'm from Oregon at any national meeting or convention. Delegates seek me out to learn of our programs."⁷⁰ Oregon was late to the civil rights scene, but quickly became part of the vanguard in legislation and were ahead of many states.⁷¹ While national events and sentiment may have played a role in changing opinions, Oregon's white populous clearly changed for the better.

1950s civil rights legislation showed white Oregonians' acceptance of African Americans, but also illustrated the greater political power blacks gained. Western historian Gerald Nash shows the war created greater political activism among Latinos, Native Americans, and African Americans. The era increased ethnic consciousness and motivated groups to fight for political and social rights. Because of their critical war

⁶⁷ Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

⁶⁸ Peter Tugman, "Oregon Started Late in Civil Rights but Moved Ahead Fast," *Oregonian*, Nov. 3, 1963, 34.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

efforts and increased populations, western blacks helped to end many discriminatory practices as “Black ghettos aroused a black consciousness of voting power and...community groups opposed to racism organized to facilitate further integration.”⁷² Disenfranchised blacks who left the South and came to Portland became politically active and fought for better housing, education, and social conditions while the local NAACP and Urban League displayed greater power and influence. While changes among whites explained new legislation in the 1950s, blacks used their newfound political power and influence to improve their communities.

While blacks had greater political influence, national sentiments on race were changing as well. Black’s valiant efforts in the war, both militarily and economically, helped create greater democracy and equality across the country. This was seen in the end of racial discrimination and segregation in the military via Executive Order 9981 in 1948, the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947, and more positive representations of African Americans in popular culture. Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier believed the effects of the war created a “fundamental change in the relation of Negroes to American society” with greater integration and support of civil rights from whites and national leaders.⁷³ This carried forward into the 1950s as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 integrated public schools and the Montgomery Bus Boycott the following year ushered in the most effective phase of the Civil Rights Movement. Michael Klarman notes that *Brown v. Board* and the Civil Rights Movement “transformed national opinion on race,”

⁷² Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*, 106.

⁷³ E. Franklin Frazier as quoted in Russell Brooker, *The American Civil Rights Movement 1865-1950: Black Agency and People of Good Will* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 274.

and northerners became more sympathetic and supportive of Civil rights upon witnessing the oftentimes violent southern reactions against the movement.⁷⁴ While staunch opposition to integration continued nationally, greater support and improving opinions of Africans Americans was occurring and these national events and sentiments undoubtedly played a role in Portlanders easing of prejudice to African Americans. While the flood was the trigger for dramatic racial change in Portland, it came at a time of growing acceptance of blacks nationally.

Compared to national polls, Portlanders expressed greater acceptance of black neighbors and integration. Nationally, most opposed racial integration in the 1950s and early 1960s. A 1957 Indianapolis study found sixty-three percent of white homeowners were not willing to have black neighbors, only twenty nine percent would invite a black family to dinner, and most refused close interaction with nonwhites.⁷⁵ Later studies found that seventy five percent of white Americans agreed that “Whites have a right to keep Negroes out of their neighborhood,” the majority of whites disliked their black neighbors, and many “panic reactions” occurred when blacks entered “all white areas.”⁷⁶ Most of the country was unwilling to have blacks in their neighborhood, refused interaction with blacks, while three quarters believed it was their “right” to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods. As white flight to the suburbs occurred throughout the 1950s, white Portlanders largely accepted black neighbors. Two 1956 reports found “no mass panic

⁷⁴ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004), 275, 466.

⁷⁵ Westie, “The American Dilemma: An Empirical Test,” 531-532.

⁷⁶ Mildred A Schwartz, *Trends in White Attitudes Towards Negroes: Report No. 119* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center University of Chicago, 1967), 53, 58-60.

selling” occurred when blacks entered white neighborhoods, white flight was “just a myth,” and that property values actually increased when black families moved in.⁷⁷ Only once did a black family face opposition from moving in and people who worked and lived near blacks were “more willing to accept” them.⁷⁸ A large 1956 Urban League survey found over half the households interviewed favored integration while sixty eight percent already living with nonwhite neighbors favored integration.⁷⁹ Whites who worked with or attended social activities with African Americans favored integration more than those without such contacts did and those with close proximity to minorities showed “little or no prejudice.”⁸⁰ While three quarters of Americans felt obligated to keep blacks out of white neighborhoods, over a quarter of Portlanders would “act in defense of a negro family” if anyone harassed them.⁸¹ Most whites welcomed black neighbors as Gloria Lavender, originally from Magnolia, Arkansas, remembered moving into Portland as a good experience.⁸² At a time of staunch opposition to integration

⁷⁷ *Nonwhite Neighbors and Property Prices in Portland, Oregon and Residential Attitudes Toward Negroes as Neighbors: Two Surveys by the Urban League of Portland* (Portland: Urban League of Portland, 1956), 4-6, 9

⁷⁸ “Report on the Negro in Portland: A Progress Report 1945-1957” *Portland City Club Bulletin* April 19, 1957: 369. See also “Race Relations Bettered During 1954, According to Urban League,” *Oregonian* April 4, 1954, 38 And *Nonwhite Neighbors and Property Prices in Portland, Oregon*, 10. A similar report done in San Francisco resulted in similar findings.

⁷⁹ *Nonwhite Neighbors and Property Prices in Portland, Oregon and Residential Attitudes Toward Negroes as Neighbors: Two Surveys by the Urban League of Portland* (Portland: Urban League of Portland, 1956), 12-13

⁸⁰ *Nonwhite Neighbors and Property Prices in Portland, Oregon* 17

⁸¹ *Nonwhite Neighbors and Property Prices in Portland, Oregon*, 14, 17.

⁸² Gloria Lavender, interviewed by Kate Szrom, *Wake of Vanport Documentary*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2016.

nationwide, the majority of Portlanders favored integration and appreciated black neighbors.

In addition to favoring integration, Portlanders who had regular contact with blacks held good opinions of them. A 1961 Portland integration survey found sixty-nine percent of whites with “regular contact” with African Americans found integration a positive experience.⁸³ All whites with black neighbors had invited a black family to their home, all allowed their children to play together, and sixty-two percent of blacks found their white neighbors to be friendly, with the rest neutral.⁸⁴ The survey concluded that “Increased contact with people leads to increased understanding and thus imagined problems of interracial contacts are discovered to be non-existent...the prediction might be made that were there more inter-racial contact...more progress would be made in the process of integration.”⁸⁵ After living with black neighbors whites discovered the experience was more pleasant than expected.⁸⁶ One white resident remarked “Living together eliminates stereotyped thinking because in itself it is an educational process,” while others felt getting to know individuals would “break down barriers and create a better informed public.”⁸⁷ The majority believed integrated living led to greater respect,

⁸³ *A Study of Awareness of the Oregon Fair Housing Law and a Sampling of Attitudes Toward Integrated Living*, 6.

⁸⁴ *A Study of Awareness of the Oregon Fair Housing Law and a Sampling of Attitudes Toward Integrated Living*, 8-9, 11.

⁸⁵ *A Study of Awareness of the Oregon Fair Housing Law and a Sampling of Attitudes Toward Integrated Living* (Portland: League of Women Voters of Portland, 1961), 10.

⁸⁶ *A Study of Awareness of the Oregon Fair Housing Law and a Sampling of Attitudes Toward Integrated Living*, 14.

⁸⁷ *A Study of Awareness of the Oregon Fair Housing Law and a Sampling of Attitudes Toward Integrated Living*, 11, 16.

acceptance, and understanding between the races, and that regular activity with minorities harbored positive opinions. The aftermath of the Vanport flood brought about the necessary close contact between races and these personal encounters broke down prejudices.

Life for African Americans in Portland improved dramatically in the 1950s. The Urban league felt Portland had “made outstanding progress in a relatively short time toward wiping out racial injustice” because of “enlightened community action.”⁸⁸ Bill Berry commented in 1956 about the past decade stating “Ten years ago...no City outside the Deep South had the suppression or the compression that Portland had in housing and employment. It was not pleasant to be a Negro in this town. Today, Portland has the reputation of being the nicest large city in the entire U.S so far as the negro is concerned.⁸⁹ Perhaps hyperbolic on being the “nicest” city, the dramatic changes excited Berry, as blacks were finally optimistic about their future.⁹⁰ Better employment, housing, education options, and greater acceptance among whites made Berry remark “What we’ve done in Oregon in one decade has normally required a much longer period of time to accomplish.”⁹¹ Few understood the racial situation better than the Urban League director did, thus his statement speaks volumes on the astounding rapid social changes in the aftermath of the flood and following years in Portland. The city was not meant to last, but its impacts are seen today. Vanport resident Joan Harvey, who had few positive

⁸⁸ *Nonwhite Neighbors and Property Prices in Portland*, 1.

⁸⁹ Ron Moxness, “Ed Berry Learned How to Lose as Athlete and Urban Director,” *Oregonian* Jan. 1, 1956, 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

memories of the “noisy and violent” place, lived in a diverse Southeast Portland neighborhood after the flood and believed “the flood effectively integrated the poor neighborhoods of Portland...the flood was a terrible event, a tragedy for us and many other families. But the flood...made Portland a better place.”⁹² Vanport brought interracial dances and schools, interracial fraternization, and a larger black presence into a homogenous city and had a lasting positive influence on Portland. Fred Flowers, who grew up in Vanport, felt the flood “brought about social integration” as diverse people “made friends, learned things about people, and myths were destroyed.”⁹³ The flood charted Portland on a path to greater acceptance, racial justice, and harmony between black and white residents.

Despite tremendous gains made in the 1950s and early 1960s, blacks in Portland continued to face elements of discrimination and limited political power for the remainder of the century. While continued struggles do not suggest that the Vanport flood was unsuccessful in bringing about dramatic advances for race relations, it is naïve to assume all vestiges of racism and discrimination disappeared. Lucas Burke and Judson Jeffries argue that by 1965 the political influence of black organizations like the NAACP and Urban League waned as the city’s new focus of urban renewal and redevelopment often came at the sacrifice of black neighborhoods.⁹⁴ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the construction of Interstate 5, the Veterans Memorial Coliseum and Rose Quarter, and

⁹² Joan Harvey, “Living with Vanport: The Flood Wiped Out Homes, but Saved a City,” *Oregonian* May 25, 2008, D02.

⁹³ Tuttle, *Local Color*, Documentary, (1999; Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting).

⁹⁴ Lucas N.N. Burke and Judson L. Jeffries, *The Portland Black Panthers: Empowering Albina and Remaking a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 37.

Legacy Emmanuel Hospital razed much of the predominately black Eliot neighborhood, forcing residents to relocate.⁹⁵ Ironically, Portland's liberal attempts at creating a livable, environmentally friendly city, often came at the expense of one of its largest minority and underrepresented populations. Redlining policies hurt home prices in Albina where the black community remained relatively relegated.⁹⁶ Portland saw a resurgence of white supremacy in the 1980s as a group of Skinheads associated with the White Aryan Resistance brutally murdered an Ethiopian exchange student in southeast Portland in 1988.⁹⁷ While in the 1990s Portland was among the top metropolitan areas for desegregating predominately black neighborhoods, the city still struggles with gentrification hurting black neighborhoods. As one critic notes, "Portland is lauded for its livability- but livability for whom?"⁹⁸ However, despite challenges the city faces today, the effects of the Vanport flood made the city a much better environment for its African American population.

The humble migrants who endured much before, during, and after the flood, can lay claim to being responsible for transforming Portland into a better place. It is difficult to ignore the positive impact the flood and newcomers had on Portland long-term, and doing so trivializes the trials and efforts of African Americans and others who helped Portland increase its tolerance and acceptance. Portland was among the worst for racial

⁹⁵ Casey Parks, "Urban Renewal Hurt African Americans, Officials Say. Now Portland Wants to Make Amends," *Oregonian* Nov. 5, 2016, A01.

⁹⁶ Burke and Jeffries, 25, 28, 210. See also Karen J. Gibson, "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000," *Transforming Anthropology* 15, no 1(Jan. 2008): 9.

⁹⁷ Bryan Denson, "Legacy of a Hate Crime: Mulugeta Seraw's Death a Decade Ago Avenged," *Oregonian* Nov. 13, 1998, A01.

⁹⁸ Gibson, "Bleeding Albina," 4.

relations throughout the 1940s, but because of the flood and the subsequent integration it caused, the city would win awards, and change its reputation. While the lack of evacuation encapsulated Portland's intolerant and unaccommodating reputation, Portlanders' response to Vanport victims showed the city's leadership and residents could change. This disaster was the event needed to spark monumental change in the city. From the simple action of whites housing black refugees for a few days, to the passage of civil rights legislations, the flood marked a new era for local blacks. While the flood alone cannot account for all positive strides in race relations, its effects are indelible and cannot be ignored as multiple historians have done in the past, as the flood's aftermath was the impetus for the city's acceptance of its growing African American community.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion:

Today, reminders of Vanport have all but vanished. The land Vanport occupied now features Portland International Raceway, a large sports complex, protected wetlands, and an upscale golf course. The ambitious industrial plans city leaders spoke about never came to fruition. Only a few commemorative plaques along trailheads remind outdoor enthusiasts of the world's once largest public housing project that brimmed with activity and vitality for six important years in the country's history. Yet, everything was not destroyed by the flood. Vanport College moved locations three times before settling downtown in 1952 and changing its name to Portland State University, where today it is a top urban university and the repository for many Vanport documents and photos. Yet, Portland's small yet vibrant African American community, over 40,000 strong, is the most apparent influence of Vanport, as many trace their roots to Oregon back to the wartime development and the shipyard jobs that pulled them from their previous lives. Today the African American community continues to be a vital part of Portland.

In 2003, Oregon Senator Gordon Smith spoke to President George W. Bush during Black History Month and named the flood the most importance event for black Oregonians. Smith also highlighted the story of Dr. Denorval Unthank to show changing racial conditions in Oregon. Dr. Unthank moved four times in 1929 when rocks were thrown through his windows and he received death threats after he moved into a white neighborhood in Portland.¹ Dr. Unthank was named Doctor of the year in 1958 by the

¹ Gordon Smith, "Black History Month," in *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 108th Congress First Session Volume 149 part 2* (Washington: U.S Government Printing Office, 2003), 2576.

Oregon State Medical Society and Portland Citizen of the year in 1962, and an eponymous park was dedicated in Portland only forty years after “rocks had been thrown through” his Portland home.² Smith then described the flood’s aftermath saying the city “rose to meet the challenge of the flood in a display of admirable humanitarianism...new interracial dynamics emerged from the event that, in the long term, helped change the course of Portland race relations.”³ Smith commented on the permanent effects of the flood saying:

The Vanport Flood had a major impact on Portland...The city had to accommodate its black citizens and the movement for positive racial change was on the rise...Portland and the entire state of Oregon went through as many changes in the middle part of the 20th century as did most other parts of our country. In the case of Portland, it was the major catastrophe, the Vanport Flood, that served as one of the major catalysts for positive change. During Black History Month...it is important that we remember the people and events, like Dr. Unthank and the Vanport Flood, that helped shape the history of Oregon.⁴

Like much of the West, the Second World War completely altered Portland’s way of life. It went from a sleepy mid-sized city to an industrial and bustling metropolitan center in a few years. Yet, the most lasting wartime changes were the alteration of the region’s race relations. While increased political power and civil disobedience helped western blacks attain greater rights in the 1940s, for Portland’s black population, it seemed the community would never accept them and conditions would never improve. This was evident in the treatment of Vanport during the Memorial Day flood of 1948. Yet, following the flood, white Portlanders answered refugees’ calls for help and their

Also See Sara Piasecki, “Denorval Unthank,” *Oregon Encyclopedia*, last modified 2016, http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/unthank_denorval_1899_1977_/#.V5kTH474OV0

² Gordon Smith, “Black History Month,” 2576.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

response changed the city. Many look towards the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s as the era of greatest change for African Americans in the twentieth century. For blacks in the West though, World War II was the catalyst for change, and for Portland, the flood and entrance of blacks into the city is what allowed eventual greater integration, civil rights legislation to be passed, and greater acceptance among the general population. The flood helped Portland embrace its future as a major metropolitan urban area, complete with diverse populations and marked a new era of Portland leadership that looked to follow national patterns on racial tolerance. While the flood's effects alone are not alone responsible for all social change in Portland race relations and even though the city continues to grapple with serious racial issues, it is undeniable that even though the flood's immediate aftermath was tragic, it was all for the benefit of the city and its people.

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