

VANPORT AUDIOBOX TRANSCRIPT: SECTIONS

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KEY

Regular text = Audiobox narration (*voiced by Victor Mack*)

Bold text = Vanport resident (*original audio*)

VANPORT AUDIOBOX TRANSCRIPT

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1. INTRODUCTION TO VANPORT: OREGON'S VANISHED CITY

Hello, and welcome to the Vanport History Audiobox. You're about to hear the voices, stories, and memories of people who lived in the wartime city of Vanport, once Oregon's second largest city. Vanport was destroyed in one fateful day in May of 1948, but its legacy—and some of the people who lived there—remain with us today.

Audiobox only: To hear personal accounts about different topics, press the buttons on this audiobox, which are labeled in English and on the sides of the box in Braille. To learn more, visit our website, vanportplaces.org.

The voices you're about to hear were recorded in interviews with the Vanport Placemarking Project or accessed from the archives of the Oregon Historical Society Research Library at digitalcollections.ohs.org.

First, a little background before we begin.

Vanport was in present-day north Portland, just south of the Columbia River and west of I-5, on part of the traditional lands of the Multnomah, Clackamas, Cascade, and other Chinookan peoples.

At its peak in 1943, Vanport was home to about 42,000 people, most of whom worked in the Kaiser Shipyards building warships to fight against Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and their allies in World War II. The Kaiser Company secured federal funding to house the thousands of shipyard workers and their families, who were pouring into Oregon from all around the country. In less than a year beginning August 1942, with the efforts of about 7,000 workers, Vanport was built.

***Ed Washington:* Henry J. Kaiser said, you know, what he was really looking for was for a place where people could live, and live reasonably, and have some semblance of community and home. And Vanport really provided that. Vanport had everything you really needed: shopping centers, it had its own public library, it had a small hospital, recreation centers to accommodate the 40+ thousand people that lived there.**

Ed Washington, whom you just heard, moved with his family to Vanport from Birmingham, Alabama when he was seven years old. He remembers Vanport bringing people together from many different states, cultures, and backgrounds.

Ed Washington: Vanport was a place where your path was going to cross with somebody that didn't look like you. That was just gonna happen. And usually, what really made the difference in that melding together were the kids, because kids don't give one good god-dang about the color of your skin. I mean, you're playing on the same sidewalk, you're playing the same marble games, you're playing the same hopscotch, you're riding on the back of your friend's bike... It's just, it was a city that honestly brought people together in ways that probably impacted all of us, and we never even gave it a thought.

Anna Donner and Howard Lucas, who also lived in Vanport as kids, remember similarly.

Anna Donner: You had a big mixture, and that was the one good thing about it: you were exposed to several different people, you know, and different nationalities and races.

Howard Lucas: It was really a social thing that really changed, I think, the Portland area a lot. For one thing, it brought a lot of Black people down there. They hired a lot of Black teachers and a lot of welders, you know, skilled people for building the Liberty ships. That was the purpose of Vanport.

Although Vanport was built in less than a year, the housing project had a lot to offer its residents. Here's Ida Mae Shepherd and Joyce Nelson:

Ida Mae Shepherd: Well, they had stores, they had dry cleaners, they had everything. It was a city in itself. It had a theater, had churches, had schools."

Joyce Nelson: Vanport had everything. It had stores, theater, clinics, everything. They called it a city. It was Vanport city. It was a city within a city.

Drawn by jobs in the shipyards, families came to Vanport from all over the U.S. For many kids, moving to Vanport was a big change. Here are Franklin Blair and Carolyn Hinton:

Franklin Blair: And the reason I'm out here is after the Second World War, there was no work to be had on reservations. So we migrated out here where we had some relation. And we ended up in Vanport, that was our home. That was in 1946. ... So there's my mother, the person she was married to, my three sisters and two brothers and myself, all in this one Vanport unit.

Carolyn Hinton: My mom and I came out in August of 1944 after a long train ride from Fordyce, Arkansas to Portland, Oregon. It was quite an adventure for myself, 'cause I had never been on a train before. I was eight years old, but I was getting pretty close to nine at that time.

Former Vanport residents still remember their first impressions of Vanport—especially its nearly 10,000 identical apartments, which often led to amusing mix-ups.

Carolyn Hinton: Anyway, all the buildings were identical. So, I can remember on some occasions, some men came walking into our apartment because he thought it was his. (laughs) They all looked alike.

Ed Washington: When we came sorta off Denver Avenue and you could get a look at Vanport, there was just as far really as the eye could see, there were these rows of units that people lived in. And they were sort of a light, greenish color. You know, pleasant to the eyes. But it was just row after row after row of these houses that looked the same. That was my first experience of coming to Vanport.

Howard Lucas: I remember Vanport well because the design of the city was very unique, you know. They had the apartments around like a service building; they have community meeting places there. They had developmental childcare for the people there; they had a Meals-on-Wheels kind of thing for people that were working. And the apartments were nice, but they were kind of like military, with a little bit of fancy stuff on them.

Vanport had a lot to offer its residents, from integrated public schools to a state-of-the-art theater, childcare centers, recreation halls, laundry facilities (with smooth floors that kids loved to roller skate on), and even, later on, a college that became today's Portland State University. To learn more about these and other aspects of Vanport and to hear more stories, select another button on this audiobox.

Although Vanport was short-lived and faced a tragic end just six years after it was built, Vanport has had a lasting impact on Portland, and its legacy carries forward in the memories and stories of the people you hear today. Thank you for listening and remembering with us.

In this audio, you've heard stories from original Vanport residents Ed Washington, Anna Donner, Howard Lucas, Ida Mae Shepherd, Joyce Nelson (Dakota-Sioux tribal elder), Franklin Blair (Anishinaabe tribal elder), and Carolyn Hinton. These stories were recorded in interviews by the Vanport Placemarking Project and Portland State University or excerpted from oral histories in the Oregon Historical Society digital collections. This narration is voiced by Victor Mack. All the audio available in this audiobox is copyrighted to the Oregon Historical Society, Oregon Nikkei Endowment Collection, Portland State University, or Vanport Placemarking Project.

2. VANPORT SCHOOLS & PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

Schools at all levels are a defining aspect of Vanport's legacy. While many schools across the country were still segregated in the 1940's, things were different in Vanport, Oregon. Despite pressure to segregate, the Superintendent of Vanport Schools, James Hamilton, advocated for an integrated education.

***Ed Washington:* The head of the housing authority had directed Dr. Hamilton to segregate the schools. And he told him nope, won't happen. Nope. He says, these kids are here to get the best education.**

For Ed Washington and Regina Flowers, that education was a big part of what made the city special.

***Ed Washington:* Dr. Hamilton, who was the school superintendent, what his message was to teachers when he hired them: he says, you know, I want teachers who really want to come here and be innovative, that really care about kids, and who enjoy teaching. He says, I want every child in this school to have the best educational experience. He said, consider that all these kids that are out here, were brought together through a war that's no fault of theirs, ended up here from 46 different states, backgrounds...**

***Regina Flowers:* After coming out of the South, I had great teachers there, but coming to Vanport, they had outstanding teachers—some of the best. And I got a very value education.**

***Edna Hopkins:* The girls went to school. In Vanport, they went to school in shifts. One of them went to morning shift and the other went to afternoon shift. So that worked out pretty good, you know, that way.**

Despite the busy schedule, lack of funding, and short school days, education in Vanport was strengthened by the caliber of its teachers. These included Martha Jordan, the first Black schoolteacher hired in Oregon.

***Ed Washington:* The education and the care that the teachers took with us—I mean, it was, it was so meaningful. The teachers there really cared about us. And I don't mean us Black kids, but *all* of the kids. And school was fun. I mean, I enjoyed going to school. Vanport—those memories are forever. They took such interest in us.**

One of the students in Vanport classrooms was Leodis McDaniel, who grew up to lead Portland's Madison High School. One of only a few Black high school principals in Oregon in the 1980's, Leodis was beloved and popular with students and staff alike. In 2021, Madison High School was renamed Leodis McDaniel High School in his honor.

Leodis was one of many students who took their early education at Vanport onward to accomplish great things for the Portland community. Ed Washington, who served as the first African American elected to Portland’s Metro Council, remembers Vanport as a big inspiration for his personal pursuit of higher education.

Ed Washington: I think that my school experience in Vanport was probably the reason I went to college.

Higher education, in fact, may be the most important part of Vanport’s educational legacy, thanks to the opening of the Vanport Extension Center in 1946.

Ed Washington: Portland State University started in Vanport. It started in Vanport as the Vanport Extension Center. It started for the GIs that were returning back to Vanport after the Second World War ended. And they did not have a place to spend or use that GI Bill. So that was the beginning of present-day Portland State.

Several hundred students were attending the Vanport Extension Center when the fledgling college—and the homes of its students, faculty, and administrators—were destroyed by floodwaters in May 1948. Remarkably, the institution survived the catastrophe, relocating two months later to the former Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation building in St. John’s.

At this new campus, nicknamed “Oregon Ship,” the Vanport Extension Center grew from 1948 to 1952 and was renamed the Portland State College, acquiring the moniker “The College That Wouldn’t Die” as a testament to its resiliency.

In 1952, the Portland State College moved to its current campus location in downtown Portland. From humble beginnings in Vanport, Portland State University is now among Oregon’s largest and most diverse public universities.

Ed Washington: So many of those people are where they are today because they had the opportunity to either get into a trade school or go to college, you know. Vanport helped more people than just those of us that lived there.

Although many remember Vanport’s education system as being ahead of its time, housing in Vanport was still largely segregated, and many residents of color faced discrimination in Oregon. To learn more about this and other aspects of life in Vanport, select another button on this audiobox.

In this audio segment, you’ve heard stories from original Vanport residents Ed Washington, Regina Flowers, and Edna Hopkins. These stories were recorded in interviews by the Vanport Placemarking Project or excerpted from oral histories in the Oregon Historical Society digital collections. Thank you for listening.

3. DISCRIMINATION & DIVERSITY IN VANPORT AND OREGON

The ideology of white supremacy is pervasive in Oregon's history. Expressed in sundown laws, exclusionary housing covenants, and even the original State Constitution, this ideology has long made Oregon a dangerous and unwelcoming place for Black people and other people of color to live. By 1940, faced with continuing hostility and prejudice, just 2,000 Black people lived in the Portland area. Thanks to Vanport and the shipbuilding effort, by 1944, just four years later, that number had grown to 22,000.

Howard Lucas: One of the things that Vanport did, was introduce a lot of Black people to Oregon. Professional people—they had Black teachers, they had professional welders that came to work on building the Liberty ships.

John Elmore: The Vanport area had lots of firsts. I had my first Black schoolteacher there. Portland and Oregon did not allow it. Portland was very racist. Portland at that time had the largest Ku Klux Klan group in the nation. And all they did was just take the sheets off, and you know, go ahead and be elected governor and whatnot. It was a rough place for Blacks.

Ida Mae Shepherd: I think they were kind of intimidated by all the Black people that had come out here. Because before that there wasn't that many Black people here. They started, you know, being restrictive about places you could go and things like that.

Black folks were not the only people to face intense racism in Oregon. Franklin Blair, an elder of the Anishinaabe Tribe, recalls being called names as a kid in Vanport because of his Native identity.

Franklin Blair: You kind of shied away from being what you were, just because, you know, they were always picking on you for being that. They talk about, nowadays, being, what do you call it, racist? Well, I... that's all we've ever known. Racism.

Many Vanport residents also faced discrimination outside of Vanport, especially when they tried to move from Vanport into Portland.

Franklin Blair: Oh yeah, we were looked down upon. We were from the projects, that meant you're really poor. When you're in the projects, you're poor.

...

If you weren't white, you were not welcome downtown in Portland back then.

Nona Pool: And we had all the papers signed and everything, but when they found out where we lived, they slapped the book together and that was that, we couldn't live there. We was trash, we came from Vanport.

In its time, Vanport was by far the most racially diverse community in Oregon, with Black, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Latino, white, and Native American families from around the

country living in the city. Although Vanport's schools were integrated, the Housing Authority still attempted to segregate the housing.

Isaka Shamsud-Din: Vanport wasn't the integrated place that I've seen some hints of. A lot of the housing was spaced so most white families were closer together, or together, than Black families.

Ida Mae Shepherd: In Vanport, we only lived in certain areas. We lived on Broadacres and then there was Cottonwood and another street, I don't remember, that Blacks lived on. The rest of it was where whites lived.

Segregation occurred not only within Vanport but also across Portland, where restrictive covenants, banks who would not loan to Black folks, and racist real estate practices kept Black people from living in most neighborhoods.

Ida Mae Shepherd: And, you know, in Vanport, it was prejudiced because we were segregated in Vanport. And they considered this area, the Albina area, you know, the "Black Ghetto." That's the only place we were allowed. We weren't allowed to buy houses in other areas. When people tried to buy houses in other areas, they weren't allowed to.

While we've come a long way since the 1940's, the intergenerational trauma and social and economic impacts of this history of discrimination remain with us today.

To learn more about the people of Vanport and their lives, select the next button on this audiobox.

In this segment, you've heard stories from original Vanport residents Howard Lucas, John Elmore, Ida Mae Shepherd, Franklin Blair, Nona Pool, and Isaka Shamsud-Din. These stories were recorded in interviews by the Vanport Placemarking Project or excerpted from oral histories in the Oregon Historical Society digital collections. Thank you for listening.

4. LIFE IN VANPORT

One thing that made Vanport more than just a housing project was its public buildings and social services—rec centers, nurseries, daycare centers, fire stations, a hospital, and most famously, a 750-seat theater, whose concrete foundation remains visible today near the Portland International Raceway.

John Elmore: I attended five high schools. I lived in ten different war housing projects in seven years! Now, out of all the housing projects across the United States, this is the *only* one that had a theater.

Franklin Blair: Well the theater was like, the big draw. So like every weekend we were down there watching movies.

John Elmore: Going to the movies was an event. Some people went three or four times a week because they changed the movies.

Folks who grew up in Vanport remember going to the theater with their friends to watch Westerns and newsreels from the war, and to enter their name in raffles for dishware and other prizes.

John Gould: We'd just gang up and away we'd go. You'd have two main shows, the news, and comedies for all for a quarter. Pretty reasonable.

Ed Washington: Tons of Westerns, but so many it's hard to remember them. But I do remember the Durango Kid—I liked him. Yeah, he was good. Hopalong Cassidy—he was all right. Tom Mix—he was okay. Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, they be kissing their horses, you know. (laughs)

[Clip: *Bonanza: The Gunmen*]

John Elmore: You had live footage of what the war was doing in terms of the newsreels, and I can't express how important newsreels were.

[Clip: *Battle Stations*]

John Elmore: And sometimes, they would have a drawing. And if you went to the movie long enough, and had the tickets, you could acquire a whole set of dishes!

Although Vanport was swept away in 1948, the memories of its residents can help us reconstruct what it was like to live there.

John Elmore: The stove inside the unit was an electric hotplate, not a stove as we know it. No refrigerator. We had an icebox and they delivered ice. And there's a washing machine in a community area.

Ed Washington: They had about four major recreation centers, and each of those large recreation centers had a big gym. And then there were daycare centers. And there was nurseries. And then, and when we moved there, there was only two schools. And I think the most iconic thing about Vanport was the ice houses, because people didn't have refrigerators, they had ice boxes. And so, you had to buy ice. There was an ice man who would come through. I remember his name was Mr. Douglas.

John Gould: So we didn't have a refrigerator. We had an ice box. So I would take the little wagon and I'd walk down the street with this little wagon. And for 10 cents, I buy a 25 (lb) block of ice and then bring it home. ... I do remember the recreational hall area. They'd have cooking classes. Those girls just made cookies. Of course, the grownups teaching them. And of course, you had ping pong and other games you could play down there.

Franklin Blair: And then there was a—down by Victory Circle, there was an entertainment place. I don't know if they drank in there or not, but young people couldn't go in the building. And they would play music at night. And you know the places are, you know, paper thin, so we just sat there with our ears to the wall listening to music. They were big on jazz.
[Clip: *How High The Moon*, recorded 1945, Al Casey Sextet (from Jazz Today, KOMO)]

Although Vanport provided more to its residents than many housing projects, times were not easy.

John Gould: The theater was... that was a treat because nobody had that much money. You know, my mother was a welder. My grandmother was a burner, you know, with a torch. Both my grandfathers worked in the maintenance. My dad was a cutter—the welding machines on the ships.

Isabella Sanders: Well, the walls was thin. But just about everyone was working or trying to sleep, you wouldn't hear too much noise. Everybody was trying to do their own thing, you know, trying to clean up or trying to get ready for the next day or something.

Rosa Dickson: August of 1943. We landed here on the 10th. And September it began to rain. It rained until the next June. And I thought, it's the most horrible place anybody could possibly get into. Of course, we did not intend to stay, but we did. Things changed around for us, and I could see there was opportunity here, and that I could work too, and so, I'm still here. We bought this place in 1944. [Amy Kesselman: And you've been here...?] Been here ever since.

Regina Flowers: With the war on, we had a lot of things—just basic things that we take for granted today—was rationed. So we had ration books for each one of us.

Even so, kids growing up in Vanport found many ways to have fun. We'll hear some of their stories and favorite memories from Vanport in the next section. Press the next button to continue listening.

In this segment, you've heard stories from original Vanport residents John Elmore, Franklin Blair, John Gould, Ed Washington, Regina Flowers, and Isabella Sanders. These stories were recorded in interviews by the Vanport Placemarking Project or excerpted from oral histories in the Oregon Historical Society digital collections. Thank you for listening.

5. GROWING UP IN VANPORT

Vanport residents alive today were children when Vanport existed in the 1940's. In the middle of World War II and without many of the modern technologies and conveniences we have today, life was very different for them. Yet their favorite activities and memories of childhood in Vanport strike a universal chord.

***Ed Washington:* I wanted to get to school as quick as I could and as early as I could, so that you could play on the playground. And that's when all of your relationship building started with your friends. Everybody would go to school early to play on the slides.**

***Franklin Blair:* We used to play street games... "Annie Annie I Over?" That's when one team would be on one side of the unit and another team on the other side, and you have a softball and you throw it over the unit and if the guy caught it, he could come running around the thing and throw it and whoever it hit would end up on their team now.**

***John Gould:* And then, of course, as kids, you know, the big thing during the War was, we would parade up and down the sidewalk and step on cracks to break Hitler's back.**

***Sally Privette:* One of my favorite memories was dancing the maypole dance on May Day. And another one was going to the theater and seeing Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny.**

Vanport sat in a sort of bowl between dikes and berms on low floodplain land, crisscrossed by sloughs and framed by wetlands and lakes. These natural areas afforded many opportunities for Vanport kids to play and explore.

***Ed Washington:* There was always something to do. You'd go out and roam around over at the lakes, you know, looking for bullfrogs, and tadpoles. Spend time at the wetlands. You know, that's where we build our Clubhouse.**

***John Gould:* We could fish, and I even built a raft. So we had a raft in the little stream—kinda like a small river. It was deep enough where the older kids could jump off of the rails and dive into it. And so there was a lot of activity. Swinging on the rope out into the water, and just**

fishing, just hanging out, playing marbles, and running a bicycle rim tire with a fork stick around the yard—things like that.

John Elmore: We had played marbles an awful lot—the girls played hopscotch. Some of the boys were just killers with marbles.

John Gould: I was the marble champion of the whole area, so nobody let me play marbles, but I enjoyed it.

John Elmore: We also had automobile tires. We would have a tire—it would be empty, a worn out one, a carcass, and weirdly enough, we would just run and wheel that thing alongside us with our hand. Why? I have no idea. We'd take those up to the top of the berm and a few boys would run downhill, lie down, and let the tires run over. I had a great boyhood.

Anna Donner: My favorite memory of Vanport... roller skating around Vanport! I used to put my roller skates on, and I had a little dog and he'd pull me and we just would go all around Vanport on my roller skates!

Indeed, the flatness of the floodplain on which Vanport was built—and the smoothness of its washhouse floors—made roller skating an especially popular activity for Vanport kids.

Anna Donner: Then I would roller skate in the—it's called a washhouse, where they had wash machines and clothes for the women to do the family wash. When the women weren't down there, I would get my roller skates on, and I would have my own little roller rink. So that shows that the roller skating was super, super important to me.

Isaka Shamsud-Din: I, you know, used to have roller skates, and I remember we used to skate in the washhouse because it had a cement floor. There were ringer washers.

Regina Flowers: We had skating parties. As I got older, I participated in the band and also participated in girl scouting.

Some youth made long-lasting friendships and relationships in Vanport, which they carried with them far beyond the city's short lifespan. Regina Flowers remembers meeting her future husband Fred in Vanport.

Regina Flowers: *(laughs)* I love this story. I met him in John Marshall Grade School—it was sixth grade. And we wasn't in the same class, but you begin to get new people, and he was new people. We say, well "Fred lives two sloughs away from us." We had to cross two sloughs to get to Broadacres. And that name is still—it exists today in that area. And that's how we measured everything. But I met him in grade school. Then, from then on, we've been friends, and whatever, forever. *(laughs)*

Ida Mae Shepherd: I lived there in Vanport with my mother and my stepdad and my stepbrothers and sisters. And I met my first boyfriend (laughs) when I was 17. And we used to do a lot of things in Vanport.

Anna Donner: And one of the boys, Leodis, was one of my best friends. And he just had a high school in Portland named after him. [Leodis McDaniel High School]

As is often the case, the relationships that formed in Vanport endured even after the city was gone. Although only the foundation of the Vanport theater remains of the many buildings in which children played and families lived and worked, Vanport remains foundational to the lives, stories, and identities of many Oregonians, past and present.

But what really brought people out to Vanport and Oregon was work in the shipyards, building ships to fight in World War II. Press the next button to learn more.

In this segment, you've heard stories from original Vanport residents Ed Washington, Franklin Blair, John Elmore, Sally Privette, Anna Donner, Isaka Shamsud-Din, Regina Flowers, and Ida Mae Shepherd. These stories were recorded in interviews by the Vanport Placemaking Project or excerpted from oral histories in the Oregon Historical Society digital collections. Thank you for listening.

6. WARTIME SHIPYARD WORK

Vanport was built to house the tremendous influx of workers hired to build World War II ships by the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation, owned by Henry J. Kaiser. The Kaiser Company owned three large shipyards near Vanport: the Oregon Shipyard in St. Johns, the Swan Island Shipyard, and the Vancouver Shipyard. These shipyards operated 24/7 during the war, churning out over 750 Liberty and Victory warships and employing 97,000 workers at their peak. This intense shipbuilding activity relied on workers bussing and trucking out from Vanport around the clock.

Ed Washington: **Vanport was a busy city. People were always on the move. They were going somewhere, and particularly during the week, they would be catching the big transport to take them to the shipyard. And that went on 24 hours because the big transport came through at each shift. They came in a little bit early to pick up the swing shift. And then they dropped the swing shift off at 11 o'clock at night, pick up the graveyard shift. Drop them off at 7:30 in the morning, pick up the day shift.**

Rosa Dickson: **They had to go to school. One went in the morning and one in the afternoon. My husband worked swing shift, this one daughter worked day shift, and I worked graveyard shift. So we were coming and going all the time. I got home at seven o'clock; I went to bed. By one o'clock I was up and out and gone again. I did the laundry, I went downtown, I did the shopping and I did all these things for the family and to keep these two girls in school and to keep up with them.**

Kaiser's yards, they used cattle trucks to transport their workers to work. What I'm talking about is old-fashioned with the slats made out of wood.

With so many working-age men gone to fight in the war, the Kaiser Company hired women in unprecedented numbers to work as welders, steel layers, ship builders and construction workers. Women helped build Vanport in 1942, the same year that the first woman welder was hired by the Kaiser Company. By January 1944, as many as 35% of the shipyard workforce was female, employing over 31,500 women. Despite their equal responsibilities to men, women were often paid less, and Black women in particular were typically given more dangerous and unpleasant work for lower pay.

Rosa Dickson: **Well, I worked 17 months straight graveyard shift. That was because of my children and of my life with the rest of the family. I put everything away nice. I could slip out and be down there at 12 o'clock at night.**

Edna Hopkins: **They said, well, I could go to work in the blueprint shop – loft, I guess they called it – but they only paid, gee I don't know, 80 some cents an hour, and I could make \$1.20 welding. So I said well, no, if I'm going to work 8 hours a day, I'll just make the most I can. So I'll take the welding. Pipe welding was all they had.**

Beatrice Marshall: Painter's helper—the job was in the bottom of the boat. I don't mean the lower deck, I mean the hull that sits on the water. We had to go through holes – manholes – and we had to crawl on our hands and knees and carry a light and extension cord to see because it was pitch dark in there. And we had a little tool, a spreader, where we scraped the rust off of the bottom of the boat. We had to wear masks because it was so much dust in there until you couldn't hardly breathe and you had to come up, you know.

Beatrice Marshall undertook a two-month training and was certified to become a drill press operator and steel layer, but when she arrived at the Oregon shipyards, they refused her and her other Black colleagues any job but sweeping or scraping rust as a “painter's helper.”

Beatrice Marshall: I showed them where I was really qualified and how many hours we had spent training for that.

He said, “Well, there just isn't any openings for you.”

I said, “Yes, there are openings.” I said, “But they just won't let me have it.” So he called the machine shop to see if there were openings. And the man at the machine shop, he told him that there were openings, but they just wasn't hiring Blacks.

And our first day at the shipyard, after we came out of the holes from the work, I really was embarrassed to get on the bus to go back home because of the condition of our clothes. And I wish you could have seen us. When we come out of that hole, we were just nothing but rust, and dirt in our hair, in our—just all over. Because when you are down in a hole where you just can't hardly move and scraping, and the rust and the dust from that is coming up in your face, you just can't hardly make it. And when we got home and took a bath, it was just nothing but rust in the tub. And we just couldn't take it. But we had to keep that job until we got a payday.

Despite the second-class treatment of women, their work in wartime industries was also promoted and celebrated, especially in characters like Rosie the Riveter and Wendy the Welder. Across the U.S., over 6 million women worked wartime jobs in factories, helping advance the social and economic independence of many women in America.

Rosa Dickson: They had been tied down with the apron strings: Your place was in the kitchen, your place was to have babies. And that was it, to a great extent. Well, this was just a revolution for the women to advance to where they could get out and go get a public job.

When the war ended in August 1945, however, women were laid off from their jobs in the shipyards and other wartime industries and had difficulty finding new ones. Returning male veterans were typically given hiring preference over women, despite women's experience as welders, riveters, electricians, and construction workers during the War.

Edna Hopkins: I think I was working day shift, and it was in the afternoon that we heard the war was over, and the foreman came in and he said “the war is over,” and everyone stopped working and gathered around him, you know, to hear the news. And then they just kept

standing around, and I had a pipe going in my booth, and I decided that I'd go back and work on my pipe. So then the boss, he comes over, and he says, "Shorty, what are you doing working on that pipe?" He said, "You can do that tomorrow." He said, "The war's over, there's no hurry now. Nobody's working but you." And I said, "Well, uh, I want to finish this pipe. This is the last pipe I'll ever weld." And he laughed, you know, and he said, "Oh you're kidding, Shorty." He said, "You'll be here tomorrow." And I said, "You wanna bet?" And he walked away, and I went ahead and finished my pipe, and that was the last pipe I welded. They laid me off the next day.

Amy Kesselman (interviewer): "Did they lay everyone off?"

Edna Hopkins: All the women. All the women in the pipe shop.

Karen Beck Skold (interviewer): Were there a lot of people who had trouble getting jobs after the shipyards closed?

Isabella Sanders: Oh yeah, it was hard to get a job. A lot of us went to the farm, like picking strawberries, at harvest, you know. I worked in a strawberry field, too. That's the hardest job I ever had in my life, picking strawberries. Make about \$1.50 or \$2 a day.

Despite their essential role in the war effort, women faced discrimination not only in hiring but also in broader society, as the post-war era saw a return to traditional gender roles and reduced socioeconomic independence for women.

Nona Pool: They acted like we didn't belong here because we'd come for the shipyard. And I'd had them even make remarks as much as 1950, that (in falsetto) "Well I had no desire to work in the shipyard, because I thought those women wasn't very ladylike."

While the end of the War in 1945 signaled the end of emergency shipbuilding operations and the loss of thousands of shipyard jobs, especially for women, it was not the end of Vanport. Although Vanport's population shrunk from its peak of about 42,000 people in 1943, many families stayed and thousands of returning veterans moved into Vanport.

Discriminatory housing practices in Portland made it particularly difficult for Black residents to find housing elsewhere. Despite its purpose as a temporary wartime housing project, Vanport was still home to 18,500 people in May of 1948, when disaster struck.

To learn about Vanport's tragic end, select the next button on this audiobox.

In this segment, you've heard stories from original Vanport residents Ed Washington, Rosa Dickson, Edna Hopkins, Beatrice Marshall, Isabella Sanders, and Nona Pool. These stories were recorded by the Vanport Placemarking Project or excerpted from interviews from the Northwest Women's History Project and other interviews in the Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Special thanks goes to interviewers Amy Kesselman and Karen Beck Skold.

7. THE FLOOD OF 1948: VANPORT'S TRAGIC END

In 1948, a cold spring followed by sudden warm weather and heavy May rains caused region-wide flooding, threatening the 6-year-old community of Vanport, which had been hastily constructed between dikes and railroad berms in the Columbia River floodplain. Although built to serve the temporary needs of housing for wartime shipyard workers and their families, by 1948, Vanport was still providing essential affordable housing to about 18,500 people, including many World War II veterans, and Japanese Americans who had been unjustly incarcerated during the war. An American Red Cross disaster report from 1948 reads:

“At the time of the flood, Vanport has home to about 12,600 whites, 5,000 African Americans and 900 Japanese Americans. It was easily the most diverse community in the State.”

Many other communities, including Latinos and Native Americans, were also living in Vanport that fateful spring. As snow melted and rains came down, the waters of the Columbia River rose higher and higher, cresting 15 feet above the river's floodplain and filling the area west of Vanport, where Smith and Bybee Wetlands exists today.

Ed Washington: Starting that Saturday, people were going up to see the river and they come back and they says, “You gotta go up and see the water, it is SO high.”

Despite the mounting floodwaters, the Housing Authority of Portland assured Vanport residents that there was nothing to worry about, and that they should stay put.

Franklin Blair: And the day of the flood, the engineers sent a flier out with the Sunday paper stating that if there was going to be any kind of a flood, it would be just a foot or so of water. So knowing that, my mother went up to Celilo, there's a celebration going up there. And then I had to play a baseball game over in Vancouver that afternoon, so she left me with my kid brother in the apartment.

Joyce Nelson: My mother and dad had gotten a piece of paper, and they thought the dike would break. They didn't know when, but if it did, it would be like no more than a foot of water. They had told everybody, if it did break, you didn't have to take anything, just to put everything up, you know, so it wouldn't get waterlogged.

Isaka Shamsud-Din: There was a note that was slid under our door — because it was Memorial Day and my mother was cooking and so forth — telling us not to panic and that they would tell us when to evacuate.

Ralph Bennett: So I sat down at a typewriter and wrote a little piece about — that went on the front page, that was a headline something like “River Flood Circles City,” and it said that everything was under control, and that everybody would — the Housing Authority would give people notice, and there was no need to worry, and I believed that. And the Housing

Authority put out, you know, flyers and said that if anything happens, we will give you plenty of notice, and there'll be sirens go off, and people will go around telling you what to do, and so on. And I believed all that. And then I think it was on a Sunday of that week, somebody came to our apartment — I think we were having somebody there for for lunch, yeah, and somebody said, "Hey, the water's coming through!"

And indeed it was. The railroad embankment on the west side of Vanport had sprung a leak.

Ralph Bennett: **We'd gone around and looked at some of the dikes and stuff, and you could see where there was boiling up through — water was boiling up through the side of the dike, and they'd put sandbags around it to hold it, but we were always assured that everything was under control...**

Joyce Nelson: **We were in the show. And here the manager went up on the stage, they turned the lights off, and they said "Go home as soon as you can. The dike broke."**

Thanks to the Housing Authority's assurances, most Vanport residents were completely unprepared for what came next. Over 70 years later, they still remember exactly where they were when the floodwaters hit.

John Gould: **When the flood hit, we weren't notified. We were in the theater. So we 'scaped out of there, I dragged about four other kids, went in a line and dragged them all the way home. We got home, jumped in the car, and left. Left everything. All our Sunday dinner was in the oven and table's all set. We couldn't get clothes, nothing.**

Carolyn Hinton: **Well, yeah, I, I remember the day, the day very well, because that was one of the days that I was bugging my mother about going to the movie. And I asked her if I could go and she said no.**

"Well, I wanna know why. Well, why, Mom?"—you know how kids are. And she says, it would, it might not be safe because the dike might break. And I reminded her that, that morning that they had gone around and putting notices on everybody's door, saying it was safe. They told us it was safe. So why can't I go to the movies?

But she still said no. So I kinda went away, walking with some of my girlfriends. And we walked up to, what we called, up to Interstate. During the time, when we were up there, we saw a pack of rats, just running. And later I was told, they probably sensed the danger of the flood. They were getting out of there, you know?

After the railroad berm was breached, Vanport residents had just 35 minutes to escape.

Ida Mae Shepherd: **I didn't get a chance to grab anything. My mother had cooked a turkey that day in the roasting oven, and so she took that turkey and wrapped it up in a dish towel and put it in a shopping bag. And she said, "We're going to take this with us."**

And then the buses came down there, the Rose City Transit came down. Because we didn't have a car, we got on the bus to go out of Vanport.

I looked back and this wall of water higher than the buildings came down the street. I couldn't believe it. I looked — I thought, "So much for us putting stuff up on the bed."

Joyce Nelson: And there was three families that was in that pickup, and it was a little pickup. It was all the Murrs, all the Steeles, and us, and we all had big families. And I remember we were going up the hill to get out, and that water was right there by us. And we looked and here it was turning those great big units like they were little cardboard boxes.

Ed Washington: There's this large gasp and that was that first big wave of water that came through and the dike really gave way down by where the theater was. And I mean, it rolled in there. It was a huge wave. You could see it and there was this collective gasp of "ah." And then people I think realize that we weren't going back.

Frances Sumida Palk: Well, for one or two days we had heard that the levee was starting to leak, and that day, Memorial 31st, it burst. I remember a man—and this haunts me—I remember a man running through the water, where it was like a waterfall into this gulch area, and I remember him running across the top of the waterfalls, and I never knew what happened to him. I don't know if he got swept away, because there were some deaths involved. There was one Japanese elder that lost his life.

At least 15 people died in the flood.

Ida Mae Shepherd: I know there was more people killed than they said. I know there was.

And we met this one man. He had a little baby and he said that his wife drowned because she had gone back to get something. And he saved the baby, but she drowned.

Franklin Blair: My kid brother and I are just playing catch, and we heard this boom. And I looked down Cottonwood—here come the water. So I grabbed him. We run up on the ramp there up on Denver, and we watched it all unfold right in front of us. And it was just mayhem. People were, you know, scratching to get out of there. And then we saw a bus go down... the water just went right over a gray bus. I don't know how many people were on it, but it was disappeared quickly.

Carolyn Hinton: When we start driving down Cottonwood—that was the street we lived on—I looked back out of the rearview window and I saw a wall of water. It was, it was way far back, but it was high and it was coming. It was rushing towards us, you know?

Although most Vanport residents survived the catastrophic flood, everyone lost their homes and most of their possessions. Residents remember being able to salvage just a few things from their homes before the floodwaters arrived.

***Isaka Shamsud-Din:* We didn't have a vehicle and so we ended up losing everything. We made it out, but there was a trunk that we lost. A little white radio is the only thing that I remember that we saved. Our belongings, our valuables were in that trunk, and we didn't get that trunk. That's the way it was.**

***Joyce Nelson:* You could go over afterwards if you could find your apartment, but ours was completely demolished. Was nothing.**

***Ed Washington:* So that was a day I'll never forget, and not out of fear. I had never seen so much trauma in my life.**

***Carolyn Hinton:* And I stood up there, and I looked back, and I could see buildings floating. They were floating off the foundation. They were crashing into one another and it made a terrible sound. Just the sound of it, I can almost still hear it. It was... oh, it was terrible.**

So anyway, we stood there and I looked back and I said, "Mom, you think we'll be back by Tuesday." And she looked at me and she says, "No, I don't think so." And then I heard another crash and I knew then we would not be back by Tuesday. We never went back, not back to live.

Having suddenly lost their homes and possessions, Vanport residents were offered temporary shelter in schools, churches, and private homes. Many Vanport evacuees lived for years afterwards at Guild's Lake, where they paid rent to live in overcrowded surplus war trailers parked on muddy lowlands.

***Franklin Blair:* We spent the rest of that weekend in Salvation Army, found some halls in schools, and set up some cots. And that's where we stayed for several days until they found permanent housing for us in a place called Guild's Lake.**

Finding housing was especially difficult for Black families, who were excluded from living in many parts of Portland and given lower priority by the Housing Authority as housing options became available.

Despite the tragedy, loss, and discrimination they endured, many Vanport residents eventually found housing in Portland, with most Black families settling in the Albina neighborhood. Today, Vanport residents and their children and grandchildren form an essential part of Portland's population. They carry with them the memories of that haunting day in May of 1948.

In this segment, you've heard stories from original Vanport residents Ed Washington, Franklin Blair, Joyce Nelson, Isaka Shamsud-Din, Ralph Bennett, John Gould, Carolyn Hinton, Ida Mae Shepherd, and Frances Sumida Palk. These stories were recorded by the Vanport Placemaking Project or excerpted from oral histories in the Oregon Historical Society Research Library and the Oregon Nikkei Endowment Collection archives.

8. VANPORT'S LEGACY

Although Vanport itself only lasted six years, the country's largest federal wartime housing project had a profound impact on Oregon's people, demography, and culture. Many Oregon families can trace their arrival in the state back to Vanport, and the diversity of the Portland area grew exponentially through the city's brief existence. The peculiarities of life in Vanport and its disastrous end remain vivid in the memories of its living residents.

***Ed Washington:* I think Vanport, not only did it change the life of the city of Portland and the greater Portland area, but it changed, I think, the lives of every one of us that lived there. Most of the people are gone. They really are. But there's just something, there's just something about the Vanport spirit.**

Today, few physical remnants are left of the city that was once home to over 40,000 people.

***Ed Washington:* That was all. That was all. Everything else, everything else we lost. The only thing we saved was our lives and our memories, and our friendships that have carried on with those of us that are still around.**

***Carolyn Hinton:* I took a tour maybe four years ago down through Vanport and they stopped where the theater was. I think there was a slab of cement or something kind of still there, but that was all. It just, it looks so weird down there now. It, it looks like, as if nothing was ever there. I don't know, it seems like it was in another world. When I think about it, it seems like it was somewhere far away, long ago. It just doesn't even seem real anymore.**

The landscape has changed profoundly since the days of Vanport. Today, the Vanport site is occupied by the Heron Lakes Golf Course, Vanport Wetlands, and the Portland International Raceway.

***John Gould:* That's where I learned to swim when they threw me into the river. When we went back years later after the flood, that river was about 12 inches wide. All filled in with dirt and mud. No water in it.**

***Christina Felix (interviewer):* So have you gone back to Vanport?**

***Franklin Blair:* Yeah, I went there and watched a guy play golf. And then I went there and watched them race right over my house. (laughs)**

Although the city may have vanished long ago, Vanport resident Ed Washington reminds us that there's still much to learn from Vanport today.

***Ed Washington:* One of the greatest legacies—we haven't necessarily followed it—that Vanport left is that, you know, we can do it. If we can build a city in less than a year's time... It was built strictly out of the sense of urgency. And it had to be very utilitarian. If we would just**

take a look say, step back about 60, 70 years, we'd probably find a lot of things that we could put to play today that they put to play. I think there are a lot of opportunities, and a lot of answers. Particularly in the area of housing.

Living in Vanport brought people together from around the country, from different traditions and cultures, and in the end, it also tore their lives apart. Even though Vanport was lost in a flood, its residents carry forward the lessons and stories of this unique place.

Ed Washington: So I think the lesson for it is that you know, given the right set of circumstances, you can do anything. People can get beyond themselves. And people that lived in Vanport—it doesn't make any difference who they are. They will always talk about Vanport. You know, white people talk about Vanport, Asian people talk about Vanport, Blacks talk about Vanport, Filipinos talk about Vanport. It was... it was their home.

And I'm proud that I was a part of Vanport. I really am. I learned a lot.

Thank you for listening to the Vanport History Audiobox. We hope you have enjoyed hearing the stories of some of the original residents of Vanport. To learn more about Vanport, visit our website at vanportplaces.org.

We are grateful to the many Vanport residents, living and departed, who have shared their memories, including Anna Donner, Beatrice Marshall, Carolyn Hinton, Edna Hopkins, Ed Washington, Anishinaabe tribal elder Franklin Blair, Frances Sumida Palk, Howard Lucas, Ida Mae Shepherd, Isaka Shamsud-Din, John Elmore, John Gould, Dakota-Sioux tribal elder Joyce Nelson, Nona Pool, Ralph Bennett, Regina Flowers, Rosa Dickson, and Sally Privette. Their stories were recorded in interviews by the Vanport Placemaking Project or excerpted from oral histories in the Oregon Historical Society Research Library and the Oregon Nikkei Endowment Collection archives. This narration was voiced by Victor Mack. All the audio available in this audiobox is copyrighted to the Oregon Historical Society, Oregon Nikkei Endowment Collection, Portland State University, or Vanport Placemaking Project. Special thanks to support for this project from the Oregon Heritage Grant, Collins Foundation, Oregon Community Foundation, and Portland Parks Foundation. We welcome any feedback on these audioboxes, which can be sent to info@vanportplaces.org. Thank you for listening!