

Highlights of Racism... the Tour! Bus Tour Showcases Portland's Racist History

by [Sarah Mirk](#)



FOUR BUSLOADS of housing advocates, city employees, and journalists rolled out to a large gravel parking lot on the edge of a North Portland field last Friday, April 23, to see Ed Washington's childhood home. Washington stood next to a historical marker and pointed into the empty field. His home was right about there in the predominantly African American neighborhood when the Vanport Flood washed it away in 1948.

The Fair Housing Council of Oregon celebrated its 20th anniversary last week with a citywide bus tour featuring highlights of Portland's not-so-distant racist past.

Ever wonder why Portland ranks as the whitest city west of the Mississippi? Maybe it has something to do with the Oregon Constitution banning black people from the state until 1927. Or that the Ku Klux Klan performed initiation ceremonies in the Rose Festival during the 1920s. Or that Portland real estate agents excluded African Americans from buying homes in the city during World War II, forcing them to set up in the nation's largest housing project, Vanport, which was then destroyed in a flood when a government-built dike broke.

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PHOTO BY SARAH MIRK

Ex-Vanport resident Ed Washington at the site of his childhood home.

Oregon Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian, who came along for the bus tour, says the state has handled approximately 200 cases of housing discrimination in the past two years, taking on cases of landlords or real estate agents who won't rent or sell a home to someone because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or a disability. Fifty percent of those cases involve discrimination based on a disability.

The recent mortgage crisis revealed discrimination of a different sort: An Oregon Center for Public Policy study in 2008 showed that Oregonians of color were twice as likely to get a sub-prime loan than whites of the same income level [["It Will Get Worse,"](#) News, Nov 27, 2008].

Fair Housing Council of Oregon Education Director (and official tour guide) Diane Hess wobbled in the aisle of a charter bus heading down North Williams last Friday, clasping a microphone in one hand and a fact sheet in the other. "The Portland Board of Realtors wrote into their code of ethics that members could not sell homes in white neighborhoods to 'Negroes or Orientals,'" Hess told the crowd. "This was on the books until 1952."

Hess pointed out bus windows to the vacant lots and chain-link fences that line North Williams between Broadway and Fremont. "This was the central, vibrant artery of Portland's African American community. There were a lot of nightclubs, restaurants," said Hess.

In 1960, 80 percent of African American Portlanders lived in this neighborhood. Then urban renewal swooped in, allowing Legacy Emanuel hospital to demolish 10 blocks of homes and businesses for a planned expansion. The plans fell through. The lots remained vacant. The neighborhood lost half its population. A 1993 city study of the area noted that skeptics referred to "urban renewal" as "negro removal."

But there's no time to pause on North Williams! The buses roll on to the site of the Vanport Flood and then to the Expo Center, where Oregonians of Japanese descent were forced to live in farm animal stalls for months after Pearl Harbor, before being shipped off to internment camps.

The tour takes an upbeat turn as the buses squeeze down the streets of New Columbia, the North Portland public-housing complex that recently reopened after a \$135 million remodel. The original Columbia Villa, which used to inhabit the site, was the very first project of the Housing Authority of Portland, the city's public housing agency, back in 1941. When it was first built, though, the Villa's 480 units were white-only. These days the residents of the 800 homes speak 22 languages.

Other Portland landmarks zip by as the buses crisscross the city: PGE Park, which as Multnomah Stadium in the 1920s hosted Ku Klux Klan rallies against "Koons, Kykes, and Catholics," the building on NW 10th and Hoyt (now a Rite Aid and condo complex) where Portland's Mayor Earl Riley housed the city's Romani Gypsy population in the winter of 1944, before he scored federal funds to ship them in cars to Texas.

And then in the quiet Laurelhurst neighborhood, the bus pauses outside a nondescript apartment complex on SE 31st and Pine. Pear trees are in blossom. Two cyclists ride by. This is where skinheads beat Ethiopian immigrant Mulugeta Seraw to death in 1988.

"We still live with the aftermath of these policies," says Hess. And the bus rolls on.