

Tour examines Oregon's grim history

POSTED BY ADMIN ON APRIL - 28 - 2010

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

Jake Thomas

jthomas@portlandobserver.com

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

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

Diane Hess, education director at the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, who served as a tour guide, explained that before Congress enacted landmark legislation meant to end discrimination in housing in the late 1960s and 70s, Portlanders were routinely denied a place to live on the basis of race, religion, or familial status.

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

Hess said that the reason blacks were concentrated in this part of town was because in 1919 the Portland Realty Board adopted a policy that realtors were not allowed to show African Americans housing in white neighborhoods. Some neighborhoods adopted covenants excluding blacks and Asians, while banks and insurance companies also adopted policies meant to buttress segregation. In 1959, Republican Governor Mark Hatfield signed into law a fair housing act for the state, but it did little to change prevailing discriminatory patterns. Hess said that occasionally her organization still gets housing covenants with archaic racial language.

As the bus crept up Williams, Hess pointed to a series of vacant lots that surround Legacy Emanuel Hospital. She said each one used to be an African American home or business that was displaced by the expansion of the hospital in the late 1960s and 70s, which was stalled after federal funds failed to materialize.

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

People disembarked from the bus at the park near the Portland International Raceway. This used to be the location of Vanport, a large public housing settlement built to accommodate the influx of people looking for work in shipyards during the peak of WWII.

The shipyards also attracted African Americans who moved into Vanport after being excluded elsewhere in

Portland, which prompted the Oregonian to run the headline, "New Negro Migrants Worry City."

One of these immigrants was Ed Washington, who arrived in Vanport from Birmingham, Ala. when he was 7 years old. Speaking before the crowd that had amassed, he recalled good schools, lots of other kids to play with, and a house with a big yard during his time in the housing settlement.

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

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

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

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

Tensions had been present since Japanese immigrants began moving to Oregon in search of agricultural work in the late 1800s, but after Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941 by Japan, the government began rounding up Japanese families, seizing their money and businesses, and interning them. The Oregon Exposition Center was where many ended up.

At the time, the center was the site of many agricultural events, and was hastily prepared for the influx of Japanese, explained Valerie Otani, an artist who built two traditional Japanese gates outside to remember the event. The gates are lined with newspaper plates, brandishing headlines like, "Portland to be First Jap-Free City."

"While it's a sad place, it's a significant place for our community," she said.

She said over three thousand Japanese filled the center, which was lined with barbed wire, who were allowed to take only what they could carry in their arms, and were assigned to stalls that previously housed animals.

"There were flies everywhere," said Otani, who described it as unbearably hot in the summer, and saturated with a strong stench leftover from the animals.

Back on the bus, the tour headed toward downtown passing by PGE Park, where the KKK once held rallies.

"It's another one of those ghosts," said Hess, who explained that anti-black sentiment marked Oregon from its inception. Its original 1857 state constitution was the only one to ever explicitly exclude black people.

Although the exclusion provision was seldom enforced, its legacy continued well into the 20th century as racist public accommodation practices became common, including sundown laws, which excluded people from a town after nightfall, said Hess.

The Klan also built up the largest presence west of the Rocky Mountains, with estimates ranging from 35,000 to 200,000 members, she said. Its membership included a governor, numerous other elected officials, and police chiefs from across the state, who wielded considerable power in the state before they withered after the 1920s.

As the tour wrapped up, the bus traveled through southeast Portland to a site of more recent racial violence, where Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian immigrant, was beaten to death by skinheads in 1988- a reminder that white supremacists continued to have a presence well into the 20th century.

Hess mentioned that it's no accident that Oregon is one of the whitest states in the union and that the north and northeast parts of the city have been hubs of the black community for a reason. Historical powers have shaped the city she said, and, "basically, we live with the aftermath of those powers."