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Portland tour showcasing discrimination, segregation warns riders to 'Buckle up'

Published: Saturday, July 07, 2012, 10:38 PM Updated: Monday, July 09, 2012, 8:46 AM



By [Michelle Cole, The Oregonian](#)

The tour is called "Fasten Your Seat Belts ... It's Been Bumpy Ride," which is ironic because the Blue Star bus that carried 30 passengers around Portland on Saturday didn't have any seat belts. But there were jolting moments in an itinerary designed to show some of the highlights -- or lowlights -- in the city's history of discrimination.

Speak up

Oregonians are invited to share their thoughts about race and housing discrimination Tuesday during "Race Talks," a free event sponsored by the city of Portland Human Rights Commission. The conversation begins at 7 p.m. at McMenamins Kennedy School, 5736 N.E. 33rd Ave., Portland.

First stop: A statue of Martin Luther King Jr. outside the Oregon Convention Center. In 1968, shortly after King's assassination, Congress passed the landmark Fair Housing Act. But [a recent investigation by The Oregonian](#) found decisions by local government and agencies have meant



Michelle Cole/The Oregonian Ed Washington, former Metro Council member, stands in front of a grassy field that once was home to thousand of Oregonians. Vanport was built in 1942 to house workers in nearby shipyards. It was destroyed by a flood in 1948.

the Portland area has failed to fulfill the goal set out 44 years ago: to replace segregated neighborhoods with something better.

"History gives us an idea of how we got where we are and the challenges that we face," Alyssa Cudmore, a manager at the Fair Housing Council of Oregon and Saturday's tour guide, said as the silver bus rolled toward Portland's Albina District.

At one point more than half of Portland's African American population lived in Albina, she said.

In 1919, the city's Realty Board prohibited

its members from selling homes in white neighborhoods to African Americans, Asians and other groups.

Many of Portland's outer suburbs adopted covenants restricting who could purchase homes there. Bus passengers were shown an example of one of those covenants that read: "No person of any race other than the Caucasian race shall use or occupy any building."

The bus continued north to the former city of Vanport, a giant federal housing project built in 1942 to hold an influx of thousands of World War II shipyard workers and their families. Ed Washington, a former Metro Council member, moved there in 1944. He was 7.

Through a boy's eyes, Washington saw Vanport as a great adventure. But he said his mother cried as soon as she saw street after street of identical green-gray units.

African Americans were assigned to live in some areas, whites in others.

He vividly remembers Memorial Day weekend 1948 when the Columbia River flooded, destroying thousands of units, including Washington's home.

It took 2 1/2 years for his family to find another permanent home.

At the next stop, Portland's Expo Center, artist Valerie Otani talked about what happened to Oregon's Japanese residents after Pearl Harbor.

Families rounded up after the attack spent the summer here, in the livestock barns, until they were taken to internment camps further inland.

Within hours after the bombing, Otani says many Japanese leaders in Portland were jailed. The city suspended Japanese business licenses, she said, and many bank accounts were frozen and the funds inaccessible for years.

Tour passenger Jeff Bissonnette, a member of the Citizen Review Committee that oversees the Portland Police Bureau, said he knew that Japanese families were held at the Expo Center. But he was stunned Saturday to read an old newspaper headline enshrined on a public art exhibit there that proclaimed in a derogatory way that Portland would soon be free of Japanese.

It's important to keep history in mind, he said, as we make decisions today.

Heading south again, the bus passed by Jeld-Wen Field, where the Ku Klux Klan once held rallies.

At one time, Cudmore reported, Oregon had the largest concentration of Klan members west of the Rockies.



Oregon Historical SocietyThe Ku Klux Klan was once active in many parts of Oregon. This photo shows a Klan march in Ashland in the 1920s.

As the bus navigated through the crowded Pearl District, passengers were pointed toward a new brick loft building built on the site of a former warehouse. Gypsies, also known as "Romanis" lived there in the early 1940s, Cudmore said. In 1944, the Portland mayor ordered all the Romanis rounded up and shipped to Texas.

The final stop was in southeast Portland, where Ethiopian student Mulugeta Seraw was beaten to death by white-supremacist skinheads in 1988.

The murder was the first test for Oregon's new hate crimes law, said Randy Blazak, who teaches sociology at Portland State University and was a speaker on the tour.

Cleophas Chambliss, who lives in Northeast Portland, said she's glad she spent three hours on a sunny Saturday to take the tour.

"I love history," she said. "I want to be educated and share what I learn with other people so we can have a dialogue."

--[Michelle Cole](#)