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A Bus-sized Window into Portland's discriminatory past.

BY ARI PHILLIPS

People wanting to learn the sordid local history of housing discrimination can now have it put right in their faces.

Along with about 20 students from George Fox University, I signed up for a 2 1/2-hour bus tour of historically notorious spots around town, organized Dec. 12 by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon.

The "Fasten Your Seat Belts—It's Been a Bumpy Ride" tour is led by Diane Hess, education director of the fair housing council—a private nonprofit that fights housing discrimination based on such factors as race, religion, national origin, marital status, source of income, and sexual orientation.

As I listened to the history of local discrimination, I also learned the topic isn't a dead letter. The council fields more than 2,000 calls a year on its discrimination hotline (800-424-3247).

Housing accessibility for people with disabilities has been a hot topic recently. Five years ago, the council examined the design and construction of more than 100 housing projects and found that 90 percent had inaccessible features. The council persuaded a number of these buildings to perform the necessary retrofits to meet existing accessibility regulations.

Here's what else the tour teaches.

1. OLD ALBINA NEIGHBORHOOD

Unthank Plaza, North Williams Avenue

In 1919, the Portland Realty Board prevented property sales to African-Americans and Asians in white neighborhoods. That restricted them to inner North and Northeast. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Williams Avenue was the African-American community center. Then, urban renewal displaced many.

2. VANPORT CITY

Delta Park West and Portland International Raceway

Vanport was built in 1943 to house shipyard workers. Home to 40,000 people, about 40 percent of whom were African-American, it quickly became the nation's largest public housing project. On May 30, 1948, a dike collapsed and 15 Vanport residents were killed. Flood survivor Ed Washington told the tour he and his family had to "start from zero."

3. EXPO CENTER MAX STATION JAPANESE GATES

After Pearl Harbor, 3,700 Japanese-Americans were detained in the Expo Center before being interned in camps. Artist Valerie Otani lived in the center's "hastily converted stalls" and designed the traditional Japanese gates now at the Expo Center MAX station.

4. BRACERO PROGRAM

Agricultural land along the Columbia and Willamette rivers

Between 1942 and 1947, the government brought in 15,000 Mexican agricultural workers to fill the void left by Americans departing for the battlefields. After the war, many bracero workers remained in squalid and overcrowded conditions.

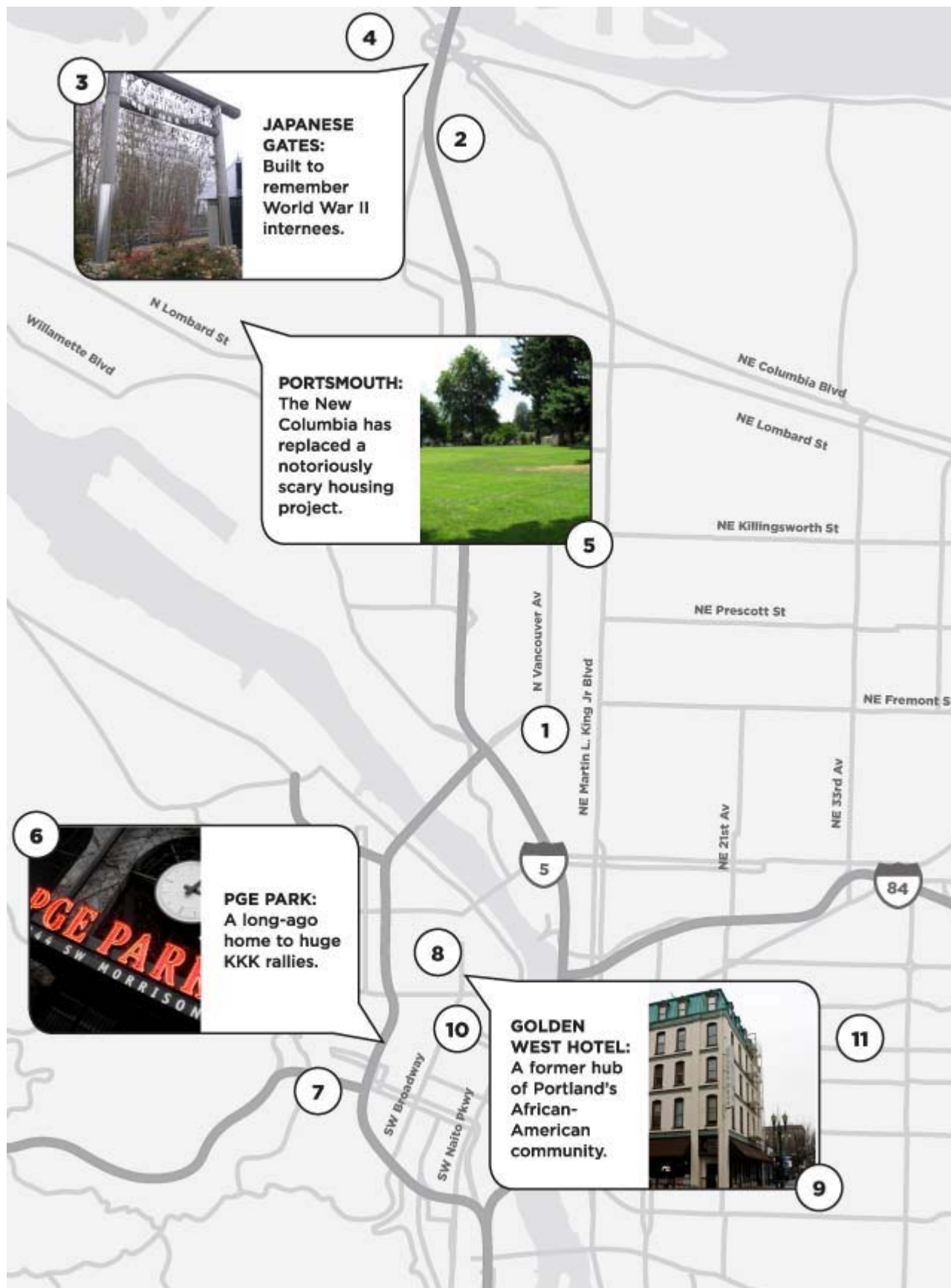
5. NEW COLUMBIA/COLUMBIA VILLA

Portsmouth neighborhood

As we drove through the clean streets and brightly colored housing units of New Columbia—an 854-unit mixed-income community in North Portland's Portsmouth neighborhood—it was hard to imagine the Columbia Villa project that once stood there. Built in 1942, as housing for World War II shipyard workers, the 462-unit project was "whites only." By the 1960s it had become low-income housing, and by the 1980s, our tour guide informed us, it was a "pretty scary place," rife with gangs and violence.

6. PGE PARK

In the 1920s, Oregon had the largest Ku Klux Klan contingent west of the Rocky Mountains, with about 70,000 members and over 50 "klaverns" (KKK chapters) statewide. The KKK held rallies at Civic Stadium, now PGE Park, when voicing its opposition to "Koons, Kikes and Catholics."



7. CHINESE GARDENS, NORTHWEST HILLS
Multnomah Athletic Club

A 21-acre area in the hills was once home to Chinese terraced gardens. From about 1879 to 1910, Chinese shared in the labor and

profits of growing vegetables and peddling them. They had to give up their gardens by 1910 and move because of city ordinances asserting they blocked urban progress.

8. OLD TOWN, "GYPSIES"

Rite Aid, Northwest Hoyt Street and 10th Avenue

In late 1944, after Portland's Gypsy community had grown to nearly 100 with the influx of World War II shipyard workers, then-Mayor Earl Riley ordered Gypsies to vacate the city. The mayor claimed they "had flocked here under the pretext of becoming war workers" and were "a blemish on the fair name of the city." Riley convinced the Roosevelt administration to provide the Gypsies with enough gasoline to drive four "jalopies" to Texas. The mayor warned them they would be prosecuted if they used the gasoline for anything other than driving to Texas.

9. GOLDEN WEST HOTEL

Northwest Broadway and Everett Street

The Golden West opened in 1906 and originally catered to African-American railroad men away from home. However, it soon became the hub of Portland's African-American community before the Great Depression. Many of the African-Americans in the small community surrounding the Golden West Hotel then moved across the Willamette to the Albina neighborhood. Not until 1953, when Oregon passed the Public Accommodation Act, was there another hotel where African-Americans were welcome.

10. CHINATOWN GATE

By 1900, Portland had the second-largest Chinese population in the country after San Francisco, although Oregon's constitution prevented anyone of Chinese ancestry from owning land. Riots across Oregon and along the West Coast against Chinese immigration were followed in 1887 by the murders of 31 Chinese gold miners at "Chinese Massacre Cove," along the Snake River.

11. MULUGETA SERAW

Southeast 31st Avenue and Pine Street

The tour's most powerful moment came when our guide pointed to where 28-year-old PSU student Mulugeta Seraw was fatally beaten Nov. 12, 1988, by a group of three White Aryan Resistance skinheads. The killing drew national attention.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *To schedule an individual or group tour, visit fhco.org or email information@fhco.org.*

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