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Looking Back, a tour through Portland housing discrimination history

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She promised a bumpy ride but nobody expected this. The drive through Portland's housing discrimination history made everyone on the bus gasp. We fastened our seat belts for the hidden stories; they happened right here in Portland. In three hours condensed from what could be three days, the Fair Housing Council of Oregon's guided tour brought it all home.



The tour began at North Broadacre Road, the site of Oregon's second largest city before the 1948 flood leveled the area.

"I moved to Vanport from Birmingham, Ala., in 1944," Ed Washington said. "My father came out in 1942 when the shipyards opened. As a 7-year-old, it was an adventure. There were recreation centers, and shopping centers like Fred Meyers but not as fancy." Before World War II, tour leader Diane Hess explained, 2,000 African Americans lived in Portland. When 23,000 came from across country to work at the Kaiser shipyards, the Housing Authority of Portland steered them to Vanport.

Of course, discrimination didn't start during World War II. According to Hess, laws restricted the Oregon Territory to white settlers. The policy remained on the books until the 1920s. Theaters, parks, roller skating rinks ... African Americans could attend at specified times. Twenty Oregon towns including Eugene and Salem told Blacks and Asians to get out by sundown.

"We're turning left on Broadway," Hess told the packed bus. "This was the red line area designated for African Americans." Settled by German immigrants, Albina's Union Pacific Railway and terminal yards attracted Blacks from their community near Union Station. "Ninety-eight percent of Portland's African Americans worked for the railroads," Hess said. "Others were janitors or domestics. They were the only jobs available to them."

Institutionalized racism or tacit agreements kept communities separate. Like the 1919 provision the Portland Realty Board added to their code of ethics.

"Realtors would be drummed out of the Portland Board if they sold property in a white neighborhood to African Americans or Asians," Hess said. "They defined white neighborhood as a four-block radius. Segregated housing patterns solidified in the 1920s. By the '30s, Albina was almost all African American."

Hess talked about Betty Jean Lee's experience growing up Chinese in Portland. The Jewish Review later interviewed Lee by telephone.

"Around 1941, my dad and his uncle built the Pagoda Restaurant on Northeast 39th and Broadway," Lee said. "It was the first Chinese restaurant outside Chinatown."

The family's Southeast Portland home became inconvenient but the Realtor refused to show them a listed home near the restaurant.

"My dad decided he would get a petition. He went around the four block radius to see if neighbors would object to our living there," she remembered. "When nobody objected, the Realtor showed us the house. My father was a proud person. He was born in Guangyang,

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China.”

Passing the Portland Expo Center brought chilling reminders to artist Valerie Otani who often accompanies tours. When President Roosevelt authorized the U.S. Army to remove Japanese Americans from the Pacific Coast, 3,700 were detained here before their deportation to camps outside the state. Standing near the traditional Japanese gates Otani designed for the Expo Center Max Station, she talked about the hardships Japanese families faced during and after the war.

“Hood River was one of the worst places,” she said, recalling how locals produced a full-page newspaper advertisement telling former Japanese residents not to return. “Many Japanese had been in the farmer’s association. They saw the names of people they thought were friends.”

A few stops later, we arrived at the Northwest Portland site where Roma (Gypsies) once lived. When Portland’s Mayor Earl Riley decided they too weren’t wanted, he sent them back to their native Texas and even provided rationed gasoline.

A Dec. 28, 1944, Oregonian editorial explained: “It should be recorded of Mayor Riley that in getting rid of at least half the gypsies who have been afflicting the city, he will perform not one notable feat alone, but two that were considered to be just about impossible... He persuaded the Romany folk to move on, didn’t he? And to facilitate their departure he persuaded OPA (federal Office of Price Administration) to issue them gas for the long trek to Texas. We are right proud of our mayor.”

Housing discrimination took several forms from racist laws and restrictive covenants to landlord preferences. For example, more than 60 percent of Oregon’s rental units once excluded children. Portlander Carol Danish remembers house-hunting with her parents in the late 1940s.

“It was Portland’s first gated neighborhood,” she said. “A sign on the gate said No Colored, No Jews. It was my first brush with anti-Semitism.”

“Forty-one years ago it became illegal to discriminate based on race, religion, national origin or ethnicity,” Hess said referring to the 1968 Fair Housing Act. “Forty-one years later we’re still pretty busy over at the Fair Housing Council of Oregon.”

In 1974 fair housing protection was extended to gender; in 1988 the Fair Housing Amendments Act extended protection to families with children and the disabled.

“The Fair Housing bill came up over and over again but didn’t pass until shortly after Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated,” Hess said. “Fair Housing was the most controversial piece of civil rights legislation. President Johnson called it the most important bill he ever signed.”

“Fasten your Seat Belts ... It’s Been a Bumpy Ride: A Tour of Portland’s Discriminatory History” is available for classes, offices, associations and other groups. For details, contact Diane Hess, education director of the Fair Housing Council of Oregon, at 503-412-6000, ext. 108 or dhess@FHCO.org.

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