

Intersections



TriMet Interstate MAX Light Rail Community History Project

Intersections

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Front cover: Regina Flowers and students at Ockley Green Middle School: (left to right) Joshua Lathan, Courtney Nguyen, Scott Moyer, Rebecca Sunde, Jacob Bettis, Amber McClaurin, and Claudia Alvarez.

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TRIMET

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Judy Blankenship

Photographs by Julie Keefe

Stories from Interstate Avenue 

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Preface

Portland's North and Northeast neighborhoods share a rich history of traditions, tragedy, and triumph. As we at TriMet worked with the residents along the new Interstate MAX line, we had the good fortune to hear many people's stories. We were inspired by what we heard, at the resilience of the people, and their commitment to the well-being of their neighbors and their communities.

This history project captures a few of the voices we heard, and offers current and future residents a glimpse of their past. This is important, as I believe that no true progress can be made without sharing and honoring our collective history.

Residents of North and Northeast Portland endured change and hardship, but they also reaped the benefits of burgeoning new industries that brought jobs, economic growth, and security. They lived through the devastation of the Vanport flood and the decimation of their neighborhoods in the name of urban development, but they also found exciting new lives and educational opportunities.

Some residents suffered from racial and ethnic prejudices, including restrictions on where they could live and detainment during World War II, but they worked hard to maintain

their cultural traditions and close community connections.

TriMet appreciates the importance of community and is proud to work with neighbors and businesses to provide transit options that connect the people and places of our region. As you read these stories in *Intersections*, *TriMet Interstate MAX Light Rail Community History Project*, I hope you are moved, as I am, to support community-building in your own neighborhood.

Fred Hansen

TriMet General Manager

Foreword

In 2000, the TriMet Public Art Advisory Committee commissioned a team of artists to investigate the North Portland communities through which the new Interstate MAX Light Rail line would travel. The team's charge was to discover what was unique and important about the area and draft an art plan. Through personal conversations, community meetings, and archival research, the team put together the Interstate MAX Art Plan, which was used as a framework for the art program and as a guide for the station artists. A document rich with historical themes, the Art Plan captured the diverse cultures, ethnic groups, and economic changes in North Portland; the information was so compelling that the TriMet Community Affairs staff used it for the Interstate MAX project tours and presentation briefings.

Inspired by the excitement generated by the plan, the public art program was encouraged to create a written and photographic record of the North Portland neighborhoods using personal life stories. This resulted in *Intersections: TriMet Interstate MAX Light Rail Community History Project*.

To create *Intersections*, a team with diverse perspectives and cultural experiences was needed. Judy Blankenship,

Julie Keefe, and Samuel Treviño, the writer, photographer and designer, came together in a partnership that resulted in an exciting and inspiring project. Their words, photography, and layout carry the reader through neighborhoods along Interstate Avenue with a look at their past and present, and with hope for the future.

My special thanks to Jan Shaeffer, whose enthusiasm and insight gave rise to the idea of capturing the incredible history of a community in a lasting way. Also to Fred Hansen, TriMet's General Manager, without whose approval and support this project would not have happened. I greatly appreciate the strong leadership of our history project advisory committee: David Milholland, Amber Ontiveros, Bob Hastings, and Mary Priester, and the Interstate MAX Art Advisory Committee, who first approved the project. Finally, I am thankful for the steadfast support and guidance of Mary Priester, TriMet Public Art Manager, who helped ensure that this would be a project of which we all would be proud.

Stacey Drake Edwards
TriMet Public Art Coordinator

Introduction

Storytelling, one of the most meaningful activities we share as humans, is surely as old as our spoken language. Stories told around the campfire (or the dinner table), whether about an eccentric uncle's trip to Tierra del Fuego, life in the segregated American South, or a funny incident that happened to us last week, serve both to keep the past alive and transmit it to the next generation.

Stories give us access to the imagination, allowing us to experience lives not our own, visit places we'll never see, and conjure times long gone. In my own family, my father's wonderful tales took us back to the Depression years when he was a young man in a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Arkansas; to his "Wild West" years, when he built power lines across desolate expanses of Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho; and to World War II, when he helped to build the Hanford site in eastern Washington without any knowledge of its purpose. "If you've heard this one before, don't stop me," he would begin, "because I so love to tell it."

Intersections is the result of a yearlong project gathering the stories of men and women who grew up or lived significant periods of their lives in North and Northeast Portland. Of the eleven

individuals we chose, each represents a chapter in the history of the city, a neighborhood, a people, or a particular time.

As the writer, it was my job to give shape to the stories I heard, to arrange the events of a complex life into a coherent narrative, and to provide a wider historical context. Although I began each interview with a theme in mind that determined the questions I asked, those points I pursued and those I let slip by, it was ultimately the storyteller—the man or woman talking into the microphone—who steered the ship. "Turn off the tape recorder for this part..." I sometimes heard, or "This might not be what you want to hear, but let me tell you..." It was often the side stories—those incidents that a person thought uninteresting or irrelevant—that gave emotional depth or critical background to the narrative.

As with all oral history projects, I had to reluctantly give up on a couple of intriguing leads. I recall one man who seemed a perfect interview subject, wonderfully eloquent over the phone in describing his experiences during a particular historical time. But when I asked to make an appointment for a tape-recorded session, he replied, "Oh no, I couldn't possibly meet you in person, and I definitely will not have my photograph taken."

But for the most part I was met with enthusiastic cooperation, and the people I called were eager to talk about their lives. Through the process of transcribing and editing the interviews, I was constantly reminded of my responsibility as I selected what to leave in, what to take out, and how to organize the material. As I listened to the tapes, there were, of course, the inconsistencies and contradictions that inform all our lives when we remember back over many years, as well as unfinished sentences and interruptions (often my own, I realized with chagrin) that mixed up the narrative. Follow-up phone calls, and sometimes a second interview, helped bring order and accuracy to the stories.

Finally, in crafting the final drafts, my challenge was to remain true to both the facts of a life—dates, pivotal anecdotes, important events—and the emotional essence of the individual's story. As much as possible, I want the readers of these accounts to hear the rhythm and tone of the voices I heard, to experience the humor, passion, and poignancy with which these eleven individuals shared their life stories. So although I served as the filter through which these histories passed, I hope I have been a fairly transparent one.

Some of the narratives in *Intersections* give us glimpses into a world gone forever. Paul Knauls, entrepreneurial pioneer in Portland's African-American community, colorfully describes his life as a mover and shaker in the vibrant nightclub scene

on the city's eastside that began in the thirties, had its heyday in the fifties and sixties, and vanished with the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968.

Marion Craig, a young schoolteacher from Presque Isle, Maine, came to Portland in 1945 with her husband and baby to live in Vanport, the nation's largest wartime housing project. The family was still there on May 30, 1948, when the swollen Columbia River burst the protective dikes and Craig's first home, along with all of Vanport, disappeared under water in a single day.

Les Jorg allows us a glimpse into his childhood world of Kenton, a North Portland neighborhood that in the 1920s and 1930s was a bustling, self-contained village, the commercial heart of a thriving meatpacking industry.

Other life stories in *Intersections*, although they are about the past, carry special relevance for our lives today. At a time when Portland Public Schools are in crisis for lack of adequate funding, Regina Flowers recalls how her family's move to Portland from the South in the 1940s offered an educational as well as an economic chance. Then as now, education was a vehicle of opportunity and equality.

Toni Linne's story of a young woman's patriotic fervor that took her to work in Kaiser's Swan Island shipyard in the early years of World War II does not feel so remote when we turn on today's news.

Roslyn Hill's account of watching her eastside neighborhood disappear under the wrecker's ball to make way for Memorial Coliseum and Interstate 5 reminds us that development projects always take a human toll. They are as much about the disruption of families, businesses, and cultural milieu as they are about progress.

Sue Sakai's experience as a young Japanese American interned with her family at the Portland Assembly Center during World War II strikes a chord today as we bear in mind that although our civil liberties are of timeless concern, they are particularly vulnerable during times of unrest.

Finally, three stories fall into categories of their own. Paris Nunes and his adoptive mother, Gladys Nunes, remind us that Native Americans were the original inhabitants of Portland, and that they continue to play a crucial role in the cultural life of our region.

Jeanette Lattanzi, born into an immigrant Polish family and married into the Italian community, represents the rich ethnic mix that has made Portland a vibrant, multicultural city.

Rudy Trujillo, a businessman active in the Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs, reinforces what we instinctively know: that it is our neighborhood hardware store, grocery, and corner restaurant, along with all the other small businesses, that remain central to this nation's economy in creating local jobs and sustaining diverse communities.

Words tell only part of the story, however. If you are like me, you also want pictures. Photographer Julie Keefe has given us wonderfully evocative images to accompany each story: a central portrait that captures the individual in a significant setting, and a smaller photograph that speaks to a detail of that person's life.

For me as a writer, this past year has been the best of literary adventures. Pursuit of my stories has taken me to places I never expected to go and to encounter people I never would have known. It has moved me to research historical events I knew little about, and explore Portland neighborhoods that were mysteries beyond the flat surface of the map. In particular, I recall a convivial lunch for retired employees of Swift & Company at North's Chuck Wagon on Sandy Blvd.; a trip out N. Columbia Boulevard to visit the old city incinerator in Chimney Park, now the City of Portland Archives and Records Center; a poetry reading and "crazy hat day" at Ockley Green Middle School; and—one chilly February morning—having my hand ceremoniously kissed by a Polish-American gentleman after I attended early Polish mass at St. Stanislaus Church on N. Interstate Avenue.

Judy Blankenship



Roslyn Hill

"When there is no evidence of your past"

“When I was growing up, every neighborhood had a corner grocery store within three or four blocks,” Roslyn Hill remembers. “It was usually dark inside, with wood floors that creaked when you walked, a ceiling fan going around, and a radio playing somewhere. The store had a familiar smell like your grandmother’s house, and it offered anything a kid could want: pickled pigs’ feet in a big jar on the counter, penny candy, and my favorite—Hostess snowballs. If you only wanted one snowball, the man behind the counter would cut the package in two for you, because someone else would come along and buy the other half. To this day, I love walking into old stores and buildings with that intimate feeling of embracing you, of being in a womb.”

Hill, a designer and grassroots developer who has been a moving force behind the revitalization of Alberta Street in Northeast Portland, recalls her childhood world in an eastside community that disappeared in the 1950s to make way for the Memorial Coliseum and Interstate 5.

The neighborhood where Hill lived, a roughly sixteen-square block area just to the north of the Broadway and Steel Bridges, was called Lower Albina, part of the larger eastside district of Albina. Since the first decades of the twentieth century, when the Broadway Bridge replaced the Albina Ferry and opened up the east bank of the Willamette River for residential development, a “colored” community of middle-class homes,

businesses, churches, and clubs had flourished. By the time Hill’s family moved to the area in the late forties, however, this bustling inner-city neighborhood had already been targeted for extinction in the cause of urban renewal.

Although Lower Albina would vanish without a trace a few years after Hill moved there, the essence of the place—its

“At the time, the real estate people decided where African Americans could live in Portland, and not many neighborhoods were available to us.”

evocative sounds, sights, and smells—remains very much alive today in her memories.

“My mom came up from Morlton, Arkansas, to Portland in the 1940s to join a friend who was a domestic worker for a wealthy Portland family, the Zells,” says Hill. “Mother also got a job with the Zells, and after my dad came up to marry her, he worked as the Zells’ butler and chauffeur. They lived in Vanport, where I was born, because it was the only affordable housing available at the time.”

After the catastrophic flood on May 30, 1948, that destroyed Vanport, the Lower Albina community responded



by opening its spare rooms and church basements to absorb many displaced families, Hill's among them. Suddenly homeless, the family faced the daunting prospect of finding a place to live in a city that had been labeled "the most segregated city outside the deep South."

"At the time, the real estate people decided where African Americans could live in Portland, and not many neighborhoods were available to us," Hill says. It was an open secret that many realtors refused to sell houses in most areas to people of color, and restrictive covenants were routinely written into deeds of home ownership specifically excluding African Americans, Asians, and others, practices that persisted well into the 1960s.

After a brief stay in temporary housing, Hill's parents rented a downstairs unit in one of the huge, Portland-style four-plexes that dotted the Lower Albina neighborhood. "When you walked in the front door, you saw a beautiful place with hardwood floors, dark stained woodwork, and leaded glass windows," Hill recalls. "I especially remember the Murphy bed in the living room that pulled out of the wall, because my brother and I would get into it and pull it up so we could look

out the window behind. From there, facing west, we could see Interstate, which was a two-lane highway then, the train tracks, the river, and, across the river, downtown.

"Ours was an older, mixed neighborhood that felt like a small town, bounded by the railroad tracks and major streets. Although I don't remember seeing any whites or Asians, I know some lived there," says Hill. "The streets were wide, with only a few trees, and the houses sat up close to the sidewalk, with small yards. I remember we crossed Broadway by going through a tiled tunnel underneath the street, and we'd shout and make noises to hear echoes."

In an era before shopping malls and fast food franchises, communities such as Lower Albina offered everything within walking distance that one needed for daily life, from lunchmeat to car parts, movies to haircuts. Among the many area businesses owned by African Americans were the Keystone Café, Charlene's Tot and Teen

Shop, the Beacon Cab Company, Johnny's Tavern, and one mixed-use establishment called Charles Maxey's Better Buy Grocery and Barbershop.

"But as children, our nucleus was the porch of our house,



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and the corner of the street where we lived,” says Hill. “My mother was protective, so we weren’t allowed to go much farther than that. I remember sitting on the front steps and making a Coca Cola doll. Remember them? You’d take a twelve or sixteen-inch piece of hemp rope, tie a knot in it, wet it, and shove it down into the top of a Coca Cola bottle. Once the rope dried, you’d unravel it for the doll’s hair and then you could comb or braid hair all day long.”

Although Hill’s parents left the area for work, she says the family’s social life, like that of their neighbors, took place within the tight confines of the neighborhood and was centered around the churches—Vancouver Avenue First Baptist, in the case of Hill’s family—and in private homes. “I don’t think there were a lot of public places where blacks could go in those days,” Hill recalls. “I remember the black-owned Elks Club on the corner of Williams and Tillamook, but mostly my folks went to private parties at other people’s houses. Later, my dad and a group of friends from Texas bought a building up on Alberta Street, and called it the Texas Club. This was where they met, socialized, played “bones”—dominos—and had parties in the ballroom.”

By the early 1950s, however, the world outside Hill’s childhood idyll was already caught up in a rush of changing times. The term “urban renewal” was on the lips of city planners, politicians, and developers, all envisioning a bright future of freeways, shopping centers, high-rises, and modern public ser-

vice buildings. Older, inner-city neighborhoods such as Lower Albina were seen as outmoded impediments to the buoyant, post-war vision of urban American life.

In November 1956, after much public debate over the best location for a war memorial sports center, the citizens of Portland voted to build the facility on the east bank of the Wil-

“Everyone knew the Coliseum was coming and that we would have to move out.”

lamette River. According to the Coliseum Area Report, written the previous year, 476 housing units lay in the path of construction, along with businesses and churches.

“Everyone knew the Coliseum was coming and that we would have to move out,” Hill says. “Rentals were disappearing as the developers bought up property in the neighborhood, and the same thing was happening with the area around the Lloyd Center, which was being planned at the same time.”

As time for demolition approached, Hill’s parents tried to buy a house in the Lents neighborhood. “The owner accepted their offer, but he later called to say he was sorry but the neighbors were up in arms because they did not want blacks to come in, so they—the neighbors—bought the house,” remembers Hill.

“My mom and dad finally found a rented house near S.E. 42nd and Cora, in the Sugar Hill district, where African Americans had lived since before it was incorporated as part of Portland. Later, my parents bought the house next door directly from the owners, and they lived there until they died.”

Many years later, Hill recalls, the City Club of Portland asked her to speak at a brown bag lunch about arts and the community. After thinking about what she wanted to say, she decided to use her childhood experience as an illustration.

“To start with,” she began, facing a group seated around a large table in a City Hall conference room, “I was born in Vanport, which no longer exists. I lived in a house on Vancouver Avenue that no longer exists. I moved to a house that was torn down to build Memorial Coliseum. I went to a Catholic day care on the corner of Graham and Williams that no longer exists. The first grade school I attended, where the Lloyd Center is now, no longer exists.

“Think about it,” she continued. “What if you wanted to take your children or grandchildren around to show them where you grew up, and you had nothing to show? And there hadn’t been a war or any type of social upheaval that has caused all this to be lost. When there is no evidence of your past, what this says to you, to your family and your community, is that you have no value. You’ve been removed, not only physically and mentally, but culturally.”

Everyone around the table sat stunned and silent, Hill remembers. This was not what her listeners had wanted to hear. What they were expecting instead was Hill’s “other story,” the one about her role in the transformation of N.E. Alberta Street from an area of abandoned buildings and barred storefronts to what has come to be known as the Alberta Arts District.

“What if you wanted to take your children or grandchildren around to show them where you grew up, and you had nothing to show?”

After years living outside Oregon, Hill returned to Portland in 1990 to care for her ailing mother. She was ready to make an investment in property, she recalls, but when she looked around, “I noticed there was a lot of building going on downtown and on the northwest side, but nothing in the inner northeast.” In the preceding years, the neighborhoods along Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. had been blighted by a series of problems, including urban renewal displacement, abandoned buildings, lack of new housing, high unemployment, and racial tensions. Developers and investors stayed away in droves.

Within a few months of her return, Hill bought a rundown

Victorian house on N.E. Thompson Street near Legacy Emanuel Hospital, and went to work restoring it herself. “I bought this house to show the community that it doesn’t require a lot of money to make a derelict building look better—just hard work, tenacity, and imagination. I moved into the upstairs and opened an art gallery on the first floor, called Shades of Color. My friends thought I had lost my mind.”

Hill began talking to others in her new community about real estate opportunities that seemed perfectly obvious to her. “There were so many properties with good potential in the inner northeast—in bad condition, maybe, but with infrastructure like sewer and water lines and utilities already in place. It was actually a gold mine, and I didn’t understand why people were so reluctant to invest.

“We had lots of meetings to talk and strategize, but I found people didn’t really want to move on anything,” Hill continues. “I heard someone say recently that a vision not acted upon is an hallucination. Well, I met a lot of people in those days who liked to hallucinate.”

So Hill moved on alone. After two years, she sold her Thompson Street house for a tidy profit and bought her first property in the Alberta district, an abandoned building at the corner of 14th and Alberta Street offered at auction as a tax foreclosure.

“I bought that property for one reason—I wanted to maintain African-American ownership. I did not have plans other

than to clean it up and rent it out as a commercial space, but with certain requirements: no bars on the windows, and no locked doors during operational hours. I feel that an important part of having a business or living in a community is interaction with your neighbors,” Hill says, remembering her childhood experience. “If you have a feel for each other and for the neighborhood, you know what’s going on.”

Hill eventually opened her own coffee house business on Alberta Street, and created a public garden beside it. She bought a house nearby, moved into the neighborhood, and began to develop other properties and promote the area. Today, Alberta Street is a vibrant mix of new businesses, art galleries, and artists’ lofts, mixed with apartments, older houses, and community organizations.

“One of my visions when I started out on Alberta Street was that I wanted to see an heterogeneous neighborhood, by which I mean “diverse” in all its aspects—ethnic, economic, national, and religious. Now I walk down the street and hear all kinds of music and see all kinds of people who are moving here because they want that diversity. This part of my vision has come true.”



Paul Knauls

"It's time for me to go buy a nightclub."

Interstate/Rose Quarter Albina/Mississippi Overlook Park N Prescott St N Killingsworth St N Portland Blvd N Lombard TC Kenton/N Denver Ave Delta Park/Vanport TC Expo Center



“Around 1962, when I was living in Spo-

kane, Washington, I looked in

the bank one day and realized I had saved this bunch of money. So I thought, it's time for me to go buy a nightclub,” recalls Paul Knauls, a long-time leader in Portland's African-American Community . For the previous ten years, Knauls had been working two jobs; during the day he repaired typewriters for the Royal Typewriter Company, and at night he was a wine steward and waiter at the Davenport Hotel. But he'd never forgotten the advice of Mr. Johnson, his first boss at a hot dog stand in Fort Smith, Arkansas, who told him that if he wanted to be successful and make a lot of money, he had to be in business for himself.

“I came to Portland and visited all the nightclubs, and there was one that didn't have any business. I asked the owner, Mr. Thompson, if he'd ever thought of selling, and he said, 'I've been trying to sell, but no one has any money.' So I told him I'd like to come down to work on weekends, without pay, and if I liked the place, I'd buy it. Mr. T, as everyone called him, agreed because he wanted out of there. That was the Cotton Club, at 2125 N. Vancouver Avenue.

“For about two months I came down to the club and Mr. T introduced me around as the new owner. When people heard a change was coming, they liked the idea and business got good. One Friday night around the first of June, I came

in and the place was just packed, and Mr. T said, 'I think I've decided not to sell. Business has picked up.'

“'But Mr. T,' I replied, 'that's because they know a new owner is coming!' So I didn't go back for several weeks, and it wasn't long before Mr. T called me in Spokane and said, 'I guess you were right, because they stopped coming. I'm ready to sell again.'”

Knauls inaugurated the “new” Cotton Club on July 17, 1963, and it was an immediate success. “I had put down new

“If you give your customers what they want, no matter what color they are, they're going to come out.”

carpet and brought in two cocktail waitresses and two bartenders from Spokane,” he recalls. “When we had our grand opening, the drummer with the band was Mel Brown, who at the time was an accounting student at Portland State University. He went on to perform with The Four Tops, Martha and the Vandellas, Diana Ross, and the Supremes.”

As Knauls had discovered from his years at the Davenport Hotel, success was all about public relations and service or, as he puts it, giving them what they want. “We'd open up at 11:00 in the morning, and I was there until 3:00 or 4:00 the

next morning. A lady never walked into the club alone who had to look for a table or a seat at the bar," he recalls. "I'd greet each one and escort her to her seat, and if it was a group of ladies I escorted them one by one. They knew I would be there to meet them and greet them and tell them how great they looked. Guys used to say, 'Paul you've got lipstick on your cheek,' and I'd say 'If I go home without it, my wife won't think I've been to work!'

"The Cotton Club was the spot to be, because we ran a good operation, with the best music, best food, and great camaraderie," Knauls says. "The word was out and the money was soon flowing. Our Sunday jazz jam sessions were instantly popular, and many of the local musicians well-known today came through the club: Dan Balmer, Ron Steen, Jim Pepper, Tom Grant, and Calvin Walker.

"I got in touch with a booking agency in Oakland to start sending us singing and dancing acts. I'd book them into Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, so that gave the groups three weeks on tour, and if they were good, I'd have them stop again at the Cotton Club on their way down."

Portland's African-American community had a long his-

tory of small clubs and "after hours houses" going back to the 1920s, but in the immediate post-World War II boom an already vibrant music scene exploded with new nightclubs on the eastside: Dude Ranch at 240 N. Broadway, co-owned by African American and white partners; Fraternal Hall at 1412

N. Williams, with a bar downstairs and a ballroom upstairs; the jazz club McClen-don's at 1500 N. Williams; L'il Sandy's at 1516 N. Williams; and Paul's Paradise at 19 N. Russell. With good venues and eager audiences, world-class musicians such as Billy Eckstein, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington made Portland one of their West Coast stops.

"All the celebrities who came to Portland in those years ended up at the Cotton Club," Knauls recalls. "When Joe Louis came to town, he hauled in there; the Mamas and the Papas, the Kingston Trio—they all came because they wanted to hear our

rhythm and blues and jazz. One night Sammy Davis, Jr. came to the club after a concert downtown, at the invitation of my wife, Geneva. He got up to sing a couple of songs, and he was soon doing the boogaloo and ended up staying until 4:00 in the morning. He asked Geneva to keep the women away so the tab-



loids wouldn't shoot any photos that would upset his wife."

In the 1960s, despite the civil rights movement, de facto segregation still existed in Portland. But Knauls recalls that—at least at the Cotton Club—color lines blurred when it came to entertainment. "If you give your customers what they want, no matter what color they are, they're going to come out. Monday through Thursday, the clientele was mostly white. All the car salesmen from the big dealerships along Broadway and Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. came to the club as soon as they got off their afternoon shifts at 3:00, and they spent big money. You could see Mayor Shrink in our place, the city commissioners, and all the other heavyweights. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, blacks came to the club. Later in the evening, after the working folks went home, the night owls came out. So we had the best of all worlds."

The commercial heart of Portland's African-American community lay only two blocks from the Cotton Club, along Williams Avenue. As far back as the 1930s, former railroad men, hotel workers, and others had established small businesses to serve the growing black population concentrated around the east side of the Broadway Bridge. By the late 1950s, however, with the construction of the Memorial Coliseum and Interstate 5, many businesses had been forced to relocate to the north, along Williams Avenue and Russell Street. Knauls recalls the area with vivid detail. "There was Citizen's

Fountain Lunch, a drugstore; the Blue Ribbon Barbeque; Lew's Men's Shop, where you could buy those red, green, and purple suits popular at the time; the House of Fortune Café; a pool hall and a soul food place," remembers Knauls. "That was our neighborhood, where everyone met."

The 1960s brought changes to the eastside nightclub scene. "Mr. T moved up the street and took over another

"The Cotton Club was the spot to be because we ran a good operation, with the best music, best food, and great camaraderie."

nightclub called The Texas Playhouse, with a dance floor upstairs and Sally's Soul Food Restaurant downstairs," Knauls says. "The owner of The Flamingo, previously Paul's Paradise, got into trouble with drugs, so in 1965 Geneva and I bought that club from him. Three years later we bought another club, at 4228 N. Williams, which we called Geneva's. So now there were five clubs on this side of town, and Geneva and I owned three of them. Two were basically black clubs, and the Cotton Club served both white and black clientele."

Things remained good for Knauls until April 4, 1968, the

day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. “I closed all my businesses during the time of the riots,” Knauls recalls, referring to the racial tensions that led to demonstrations along Union Avenue, now Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. “You don’t want alcohol involved in all that.

“After the riots, I could tell right away a big change was coming, because I knew the whites wouldn’t come any more. There was even tension with the white drivers who delivered beer and wine to the club. They’d come early in the morning and be out of the area by the time the customers came. Business at the Cotton Club fell off right away,” Knauls says, “but I was able to sell it and keep the other two. Then in 1970, Emanuel Hospital bought the properties on Williams and Russell and tore everything down but the building where the Cotton Club had been. Thirty-two years later it’s still there, abandoned.”

It was the end of an era. Urban renewal, the construction of the Memorial Coliseum and Interstate 5, and the expansion of Emanuel Hospital led to the demolition of the Fraternal Hall, McClendon’s, L’il Sandy’s, Paul’s Paradise, and other clubs. A lively, colorful chapter of Portland’s history was closed forever, with hardly a trace other than fond memories.

“I knew it was going to be a long time before the African-American Community recovered,” Knauls says, “and it was actually about twenty years, although we don’t really have a

community as such any more. In the 1970s, when Emanuel Hospital bought so many of the houses and businesses along Williams, most of our people moved to Parkrose out on Sandy Blvd. Then in the 1980s we went through bad times when the gangs were here, and blacks just moved out of the area. Now, if you go block by block, there’s probably not four businesses owned by African-Americans in the same block.”

“After the riots, I could tell right away a big change was coming, because I knew the whites wouldn’t come any more.”

In 1990, Paul and Geneva bought a building that had been a Winchell’s Donut House, on N.E. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., near Killingsworth, and turned it into a beauty salon and barbershop, Geneva’s Shear Perfection. “When we came to MLK, everything was boarded up,” Knauls remembers. “Fred Meyer was closed, J.C. Penny had pulled out, and the lot next to Kentucky Fried Chicken, across from us, was full of old refrigerators and tires and couches. The whole avenue was terrible. After we painted our building, I called the KFC manager and asked if he’d taken a look at his prop-

erty lately. He came out, took a look, and then the company painted their building and planted shrubbery.”

Today, Knauls says, the heart of the African-American community can be found in the beauty shops, barbershops, and churches of North and Northeast Portland. “You can go to a nightclub, or the movie theater, or a restaurant, and you may be the only African-American person there. But when you go to church, you know you’re going to see the people you grew up with. Or if you come to Geneva’s Shear Perfection, with its fourteen full-time employees and constant stream of clients, you know you’ve arrived at ‘news central.’ We often get calls from out of town—someone’s coming in from Seattle for the weekend and they want to know what’s happening in the city of Portland. Where can I find soul food? Where’s the Urban League? We make sure they find out.”

In 1987, Knauls put together the Cotton Club Revisited, a reunion of all the musicians and entertainers that had played the club in the 1960s. “We held it at the Royal Esquire Club, on Alberta Street. I flew all the musicians in and put them up at hotels. Some recording artists like Jim Pepper came from New York, and others came from Los Angeles and Las Vegas. I sold about eight hundred tickets, but by the time I paid the flights, hotels, and all, we just broke even. But it was an overwhelming success because everyone who remembered those days came—it was such a joy!

“I don’t really miss that time because I remember how hard it was,” Knauls says, recalling his years of nightclub life. “You had the drink, the drugs, and the women, and if you weren’t strong, any one of those could bring you down. So I don’t miss it at all, but I certainly enjoyed it. I’m writing a book now called *Twenty Years Behind the Bar* and I’m telling all these stories.”



Jeanette Lattanzi

"To know that I came from somewhere"

“Around 1931, when I was a baby, my parents moved into a house in the Overlook district, just two doors down from St. Stanislaus Church, on N. Interstate Avenue. The house is still there, boarded up now. Later, I remember dancing around the wood stove in the middle of the living room, pulling my brother on a small wooden wagon. Daddy used to walk to Swan Island to gather driftwood so we could have heat in the house.”

Jeanette Slowikowski Lattanzi, with her sister Wanda Vrivilo, sits in the sun porch of the St. Stanislaus rectory, not a hundred feet from her childhood home, and recalls growing up in the heart of Portland’s Polish community. The sisters’ father, John Slowikowski, emigrated from Poland to the United States as a teenager in 1913, swept up with the great wave of East European immigrants escaping politics and poverty in their homelands.

John joined his older sister, Adela, in Chicago, and when she married Steve Bartnik, they all came west, landing on a farm in Pumpkin Ridge, Oregon. There, John discovered he was not meant to be a farmer, and when Adela and Steve moved to Portland, he came with them to settle in the bustling riverfront area on the eastside known as Lower Albina. Inexpensive housing and job opportunities for unskilled, non-English-speaking workers like John Slowikowski were plentiful, and he soon found a job laying hardwood floors.

Portland’s Polish population numbered four or five hundred families in the early 1920s, when Lattanzi’s father arrived here. The religious, social, and political life of the community revolved around a nexus of three buildings: St. Stanislaus, the small Romanesque church on Interstate Avenue built in 1907–08 by the first generation of immigrants; the adjacent Polish Library Hall, a cultural, education, and social center constructed in 1912; and—a half mile to the south on N. Russell Street—the White Eagle Tavern. There, Polish men

“When I was five and almost ready to go to school, my parents realized I spoke only Polish.”

gathered for drinks and political discussions after their shifts in the railroad yards, docks, and waterfront mills, and those without relatives in town could rent boarding rooms on the second floor of the tavern.

Today, all three buildings are historic landmarks. St. Stanislaus Church and the Polish Library Hall remain central to the religious and cultural life of the Polish community, and the White Eagle Tavern, while no longer linked to the community, still operates as a bar and live music venue, with newly restored guest rooms upstairs.



“My father went to night school to learn to speak and read English, and to get his citizenship,” recalls Lattanzi. “He married in his twenties, but his wife died after less than a year and we know very little about her. Then, when he was about thirty-two, my aunt Adela went shopping for another wife for him. She knew a Polish family in Brush Prairie, Washington, and she took my father to ask one of the daughters, Margaret, to be his bride. Margaret said she didn’t want to marry my father, but Anna, her sister, who was only about seventeen, said ‘I will marry him.’ And that was that. Our mother and father were married on May 31, 1930, at St. Stanislaus Church.” Lattanzi was the first of three children; a younger brother, Melvin, was born in 1933, and her sister Wanda in 1936.

“Although both my parents spoke good English, Polish was the language in the home,” Lattanzi recalls. “When I was five and almost ready to go to school, my parents realized I spoke only Polish, so they sent me to my grandmother’s farm in Brush Prairie for a year. There, they thought, I would learn English from my two aunts who still lived at home.”

Lattanzi came back to Portland speaking English and

started first grade at Boise Elementary School, where she stayed for eight years. “I was bi-lingual for a long time, speaking Polish to my parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles,” says Lattanzi, “but when my brother and sister started school, the three of us spoke English to one another. Now

I can still understand Polish, but I no longer speak it very well.”

Around 1935, the Slowikowski family bought a house on N. Haight Avenue, and Lattanzi has fond memories of growing up in her North Portland neighborhood. “Captain and Mrs. Moran were our neighbors and we played a lot in their yard. He was blind, a retired tugboat captain, and he’d sit on the back porch and tell us stories. Mrs. Moran had been a nurse

in the 1918 flu epidemic, and she remembered when everyone wore garlic around their necks to protect them from getting infected. Sometimes she’d take us into the living room and show us stereoscopic pictures of Paris.

“By then our father had a car, and our family outings consisted of going to the beach, the mountains, or visits to our Brush Prairie grandparents. Every Sunday my grandmother cooked dinner on her wood stove: fried chicken, mashed po-



tatoes, vegetables, and for dessert we always had a delicious cheesecake called *sernik*. After dinner, she would light the kerosene lamp—they didn't get electricity in Brush Prairie until the early 1940s—and set it on the table and pray. My grandparents were religious, but it was too far to go to church, so they practiced their religion at home."

When Lattanzi was eight, her father borrowed money from his sister Adela to start his own hardwood floor company. "I remember mother and father sitting in the living room, talking about starting the business," Lattanzi says. "My mother was worried, but they went ahead and did it."

Her mother needn't have worried. The Interior Hardwood Floor Company thrived for over twenty years, during a time when almost all new homes had wood floors and all the work, including sanding, was done by hand. "For the first few years, the business operated out of our home," Lattanzi remembers. "My dad ran a crew of six or seven men out of the garage, which was his warehouse, and my mother, with her eighth-grade education, ran her end of the business from a desk in the house, handling everything from bookkeeping and scheduling to payroll and taxes."

The family's social life revolved around the local Polish institutions. "My father was active in the Polish Library Hall from the time he arrived in Portland," Lattanzi recalls. "We went to a lot of dinners and dances at the hall—any excuse to celebrate—

and my parents were big card players. Poker and Pinochle were their games. On other occasions, all the Polish community would come out for picnics at Oaks Park, or at other parks and family farms, where there would be horseshoes, cards, drinking, and good food."

Following World War II, the second wave of Polish immigrants arrived in Portland, mostly as displaced persons fleeing

"I had a feeling of not belonging, sometimes because I was Polish and other times because I was Catholic."

the chaos of post-war Europe. Among them was Lattanzi's cousin, Stan. "A lot of people in Poland were sent to concentration camps during the war, and Stan was one of them. He was about fifteen years old when he was arrested, simply out walking down the street after hours one night when a truck came along and swooped him up. After the war, my dad brought him to Portland and gave him a job. That was in about 1950."

Lattanzi went to Jefferson High School, where she remembers having only one close friend. "I was very shy. I didn't belong to any of the clubs, and there didn't seem to be many other Polish kids my age. I didn't realize it then, but looking back, I think it's because I was a child of immigrants. I didn't assimilate very

well, and I had a feeling of not belonging, sometimes because I was Polish and other times because I was Catholic.”

After high school Lattanzi enrolled in the Portland Secretarial School, where on her first day she met another student who was her husband-to-be, Charles “Chuck” Lattanzi. From a southeast Portland Italian family, Chuck attended school during the day and worked nights at the Chevron gas station at 33rd and Sandy. “He was my first boyfriend, and our first date was on my eighteenth birthday,” Lattanzi recalls. “My parents insisted that Wanda, who was only thirteen, go with us as a chaperone.

“Chuck took me to Roakes, a hotdog place out on McLoughlin Boulevard, where I remember we each had a foot-long Coney Island. To this day, we still go to Roakes at least three times a month for Coney Islands—we used to have two each but now we’re down to one—and we see a lot of people our age there. The place hasn’t changed one bit since the fifties.”

Lattanzi graduated from secretarial school and worked for a short while before she married Chuck, at St. Stanislaus Church, when she was twenty. Then, she says, her career was strictly having children: Deborah, Bernadette, Stephen, Matthew, Christopher, Rebecca, Brenda, Patricia, and Craig.

“It wasn’t easy having nine children; but I have a great husband, and he was a good father who enjoyed his kids. After the first three, I didn’t know if I could handle any more, but then

it got easier because the older ones took care of the younger ones. When my last child was born thirty-two years ago, I was thirty-eight or nine, and we went to talk to the priest. He said, ‘You’ve more than done your duty.’”

The Lattanzi family lived on S.E. Sherman Street, alongside the grounds of the Hosford Elementary School. “Our house was tiny. We had no dining room, just a kitchen, and we ate sitting wherever we could,” Lattanzi says, “but we did just fine. That

“It wasn’t easy having nine children; but I have a great husband and he was a good father who enjoyed his kids.”

big school playground next door saved us. It seemed like our house became the gathering house for all our kids’ friends. They liked the feeling of it, and of having a mother at home.”

However, between having and raising children, Lattanzi did sometimes take jobs outside the home. “For a couple of years I worked the 3-11 shift at Libby’s, packing pickles, and Chuck’s Italian grandmother, who lived next door, watched the kids. When my children were older, I worked for ten years at the Waverly Children’s Home as a nighttime childcare worker.

That was hard, but I really enjoyed the work and I needed to supplement the family income.” Chuck Lattanzi made his career at Chevron, retiring as a maintenance supervisor after forty years.

“After my mother passed away in 1968, my father got more active in St. Stanislaus, but by then so many of the original parishioners had died that the Archdiocese of Portland was actually thinking of closing the church,” Lattanzi remembers. Construction of Interstate 5 had displaced some of the original Polish families, and many of the second generation, like Lattanzi and her sister, had moved to other parts of the city and joined other churches. By the late 1970s, St. Stanislaus was down to about thirty families, and the parish had been without a Polish-speaking priest for twenty-five years.

In the early 1980s, with the repression of the Solidarity movement in Poland, another wave of Polish immigrants and political refugees arrived in Portland, and St. Stanislaus and the Polish Library Hall were rejuvenated with young families interested in maintaining their Polish heritage. In 1982, under pressure from the parishioners, the Archdiocese appointed a Polish-speaking priest, and funds were raised to repair and make improvements to the church.

Today, St. Stanislaus parish has again grown into a thriving religious and cultural community. Masses are held in Polish, English, and Croatian. A Polish School, jointly sponsored by

the church and the Polish Library Hall, offers classes in Polish language, history, literature, and folk dancing.

Once her children were grown, Lattanzi renewed her involvement with the Polish community. For the past fifteen years, she and her sister, Wanda, who lives in Tigard, have met for mass on Sundays, and again on Wednesdays for the arts and crafts club in the church basement. Since 1994, they have volunteered at the annual Polish Festival, a weekend celebration of dance, music, food, and crafts held each September that draws thousands of Portlanders to the grounds of St. Stanislaus and the Polish Library Hall.

“It’s wonderful having a community, both Polish and Catholic,” says Lattanzi. “Getting involved again has been an important connection to my past, to my parents, and aunts and uncles who are all gone now but were such a big part of our growing up. It gives me a warm feeling to know that I came from somewhere, and my sister and I keep hoping to draw our children and grandchildren back to their Polish heritage.”



Toni Linne

"When you're young you can handle all that stuff."



“As soon as the war started, Swan Island was transformed from an airport and a lovers’ lane—where we parked and smooched with our boyfriends—to a war site for shipbuilding,” recalls Toni Solem Linne, at the time a Portland high school student. “Before, the island had a beautiful drive all around it, with manicured lawns, shrubs and trees, and a view of the water. The change is imprinted on my mind because everything disappeared very suddenly and up went these stark buildings for the shipyards.”

On December 8, 1941, when President Roosevelt declared the United States at war, Portland was poised to become one of the major shipbuilding centers in the United States. Deep-water port facilities and cheap hydroelectric power had already attracted industrialist Henry J. Kaiser to the area, where he was anxious to bring the innovative mass production techniques he had learned constructing Boulder, Bonneville, and Grande Coulee dams to his newly-created Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation.

With a contract from the U.S. Maritime Commission, Kaiser stepped up construction on three huge shipyards in the area: Oregon Shipyard near the St. Johns Bridge, Vancouver Shipyard on the Washington side of the Columbia River, and Swan Island Shipyard on the site of the Portland Municipal Airport. While the other yards would produce Liberty Ships and aircraft carriers, Swan Island was contracted to produce

huge, 16,500-ton oil tankers, the largest vessels being built by workers in the Kaiser shipyards.

In March 1942, construction crews moved onto Swan Island with pile drivers, bulldozers, tractors, and graders, and began uprooting the 640 Japanese cherry trees around the outer periphery of the island that had drawn sightseers every spring at cherry blossom time. Working day and night for

“We became productive people, with equal pay, and not just girls men had to take care of.”

six months, the crews transformed Swan Island from “one of America’s most beautiful airports into one of the nation’s most efficient tanker yards,” according to *The Bo’s’n’s Whistle*, the Kaiser Corporation publication.

By January of 1943, 18,000 men and women workers were building one oil tanker every seven days, or four a month, an incredible production schedule that depended on a “twenty-four-seven” workforce.

Meanwhile, Linne, the only child of Norwegian parents, was busy learning to be a secretary at Commerce High (now Cleveland High School) and thinking about her high school sweetheart. “I passed Swan Island every day going to and from

school, and on my way home to North Portland the bus was always crowded with shipyard workers,” Linne remembers. “One day as I passed Swan Island, I thought, ‘I should do something besides work at the USO.’ I knew I could make it from school to Swan Island in time for the afternoon shift, so I went down and applied for a job. I was sixteen, just going into my senior year.

“My father was against me working because he wanted to be the sole support for his family,” Linne continues, “but I convinced him it was patriotic. All the boys in my neighborhood were going off to war.”

Linne went for the job interview at Swan Island Shipyard full of teen-age confidence. “When the man asked what I could do, I said, ‘Any kind of office work! You name it, and I can do it!’” In those days, Linne adds, Commerce High was where you went to learn shorthand, business machines, office procedures, filing, and typing. “It was a very good school, and if you applied for a job as a secretary or a bookkeeper, you usually got it over anyone else.

“‘Okay,’ the man interviewing me said, ‘can you run a comptometer?’

“Yikes! You didn’t learn that until your senior year, but I

said, ‘Oh yes, I can do that.’ Being Catholic I was fearful about lying so I didn’t say I *knew* how to use one, just that I could.” (A comptometer was an early kind of calculator that required both hands to manually multiply, add, subtract, and divide.)

“So I went back to school and told Mr. Huron, my business appliances teacher, that I had to have a crash course in the comptometer.

“‘And why is that?’ he asked.

“‘I just do,’ I said. I couldn’t tell him I was going to work in the shipyard, because the law at the time stated that a student couldn’t work more than four hours a day. So he said, ‘Oh, you have a little part-time job?’ and I said, ‘Yes.’”

Mr. Huron gave Linne a quick course on the machine, and she was hired in the Cost Department at Swan Island Shipyard. “They never asked me how old I was, although I was probably younger than anyone there. They didn’t care, as long as I could do the work.”

Toni Linne was one of tens of thousands of women across the nation swept out of their kitchens, offices, and schools into wartime jobs. In Portland alone, in the peak shipbuilding year of 1943, 16,000 “feminine shipbuilders” were on the Kaiser payroll, working as welders, pipe fitters, electricians,



and machinists, as well as those, like Linne, who worked in clerical jobs in the shipyard offices and warehouses. “Henry Kaiser was important because he recognized the abilities of women,” Linne says. “We became productive people, with equal pay, and not just girls men had to take care of.”

Kaiser was a progressive, far-sighted employer in other ways. In addition to building housing to accommodate the wartime workforce, in 1943 the company announced a non-profit, pre-paid medical plan for shipyard workers and their families. For sixty cents a week, Kaiser employees and dependents would receive full medical services, including doctor’s visits, ambulance service, and hospital care.

At sixteen, however, Linne was not concerned about medical plans, although she did later become a lifetime member of Kaiser Permanente. For her, the war was simply an exciting time to be a young woman, or rather a girl anxious to be a woman.

“After school I’d go home and shuck my school clothes—saddle shoes and bobby socks—and put on a nice skirt, silk stockings, and high heels,” says Linne. “In those days, once you passed eighteen, you didn’t dress like a teen-ager, nor did you want anyone to confuse you for someone younger. You were an adult, and you dressed like one.”

Special buses provided by the Maritime Commission carried workers right to the Swan Island Shipyard entrance, where guards at the front gate matched picture ID badges with work-

ers. “Then you’d walk on to whichever building you worked in, but you didn’t go any further unless you had a reason,” says Linne. “Our Cost Department offices were close to the main entrance, but periodically I would get sent down the ways, where they built the ships, to do inventory. One of my jobs, for example, might be to figure out how many screws were left in a case of screws with twenty-four boxes, a thousand screws in

“You were right in the midst of it all—cranes lifting and floating, little carts driving around, someone with a blowtorch going, and the noise was horrendous.”

each box, and one-and-a-half boxes used. Then I’d click away with my two hands on the comptometer.

“The only thing I never, ever, wanted to do was go down below decks where they were building ships,” says Linne. “It was scary. You were right in the midst of it all—cranes lifting and floating, little carts driving around, someone with a blowtorch going, and the noise was horrendous, with hammering and pounding. It was chaos, and I would look around and think, ‘How does everyone know how to make this whole

thing come together to be a ship?’ It was incredible, really.

“There were about twelve of us in the office, three or four men and the rest women. Everyone was polite,” Linne recalls. “We worked very quietly and talking was frowned on. The only time we could talk was when we went to the ditto room—today you’d call it the copy room. The ditto-room girls were a laughing, joking bunch, and it was more fun there.

“Everybody got paid the same, except, of course, for our boss, Mr. Hurlbert, a nice-looking but pompous man who dressed to the nines every day in a dark suit and tie. I can’t remember now how much I got paid, but for the time it was astounding. Everywhere, people were leaving their jobs to work in the shipyards. Sure, people were patriotic, but it was the same as today—people go for the paycheck.”

After Linne got off her shift at 1:00 a.m., she would go home, put her hair up in curlers, and go to bed. At 6:00 a.m. she was up, dressed, and on her way across town to school. “It was a full schedule, but it was an exciting time, we felt patriotic, and when you’re young you can handle all that stuff,” she says. “Besides, I’m Norwegian and I think Norwegians have a lot of stamina.”

On her evenings off from the shipyard, Linne and her girlfriend, Gadge, volunteered at the downtown USO. “We had to be checked out before we could work there, to prove that we were good girls,” says Linne, “so my priest wrote a letter. The

people at the USO asked us about our special talents. Gadge was a pro ping-pong player, so they put her on the ping-pong tables to play with the fellows. And I was a very good dancer, so I was one who danced with all the men.

“I could tell which part of the country the boys were from by their style of dancing. I loved to dance with the California boys because they could *dance*. They knew the balboa and the jitterbug. The boys from the South and Midwest were mostly clodhoppers—they just didn’t have it. But you danced and you smiled because that was your job. Then between dances I’d ask, ‘Would you like a cup of hot chocolate or a cookie?’ There was another area of the USO where the girls were serving food and drink, so I would take the boys there and hand them over.”

Linne was also good at writing, she recalls, and so she found herself doing another job at the USO, writing letters to wives and girlfriends for the enlisted men. “It’s amazing, but a lot of these boys couldn’t write. Today, the service would not take those boys, but at that time it was accepted.”

Linne graduated from Commerce High School June 7, 1943, and continued working at Swan Island for a few months more. But by then she had married her high school sweetheart, and when he was sent to the Great Lakes Naval Base near Chicago, she wanted to join him. The Cost Department gave her a stupendous sendoff, she remembers, with cakes and gifts.

“That year I spent at Swan Island was exciting because it opened up the world to me,” says Linne, looking back. “Kaiser’s shipyards brought a lot of people here from different parts of the country, and I learned a lot about different ways of thinking. Also, I think it was a kinder time. We all worked

“That year I spent at Swan Island was exciting because it opened up the world to me.”

hard, and everyone was considerate and helpful. If a man saw me carrying something heavy, he would jump to help. If I was down where the welders were working, they would look up and smile through the flying sparks. Everyone was trusting, and you just didn’t worry.”

N Killingsworth St



Regina Flowers

"High expectations for all"

Lawrence/Rosa Quarter Albina/Mississippi Overlook Park N Prescott St N Killingsworth St N Portland Blvd N Lombard TC Kenton/N Denver Ave Delta Park/Vanport TC Expo Center

“I was ten when my family came to Portland from Muskogee, Oklahoma, a small town about sixty miles south of Tulsa. My dad was too young for World War I and too old for World War II, but he wanted to work in the shipyards,” recalls Regina Flowers, parent-community coordinator for Ockley Green Middle School and tireless education advocate in North-Northeast Portland.

“This was a big step for us to come so far,” says Flowers, who was then Regina Johnson. “Dad left for Portland first, in January of 1944, and once he had a job and a place to live, he sent for us. The following October, my mother, three brothers, and I traveled on the train with several other families from Muskogee. The trip took two or three days.”

The Johnsons and their neighbors rode west on one of the “Kaiser Specials,” seventeen-car trains sent around the country by industrialist Henry Kaiser to transport wartime workers and their families to his West Coast shipyards. The train trip proved to be a pivotal moment in Flowers’ young life.

“I was born and raised in a segregated society,” she says. “In Oklahoma we had colored schools and white schools, and, because we lived in Indian country, we even had Indian schools. When we left Muskogee on the train, it was in segregated cars, but when we got to Kansas City, Missouri, and changed to a train car going to Oregon, we were integrated. Just like that!”

On the way to Portland, Emily Johnson told her young

daughter that they would be living in a public housing project. Flowers couldn’t figure out what that meant until she saw the row upon row of two-story, gray-green buildings in a place called Vanport. Constructed the previous year by the Kaiser Company as wartime housing for shipyard workers, Vanport had grown to become Oregon’s second largest city, with a population nearing 40,000, by the time the Johnson family arrived.

“In the South, the whole community was involved in the education of its children, and the expectations were high.”

In her new home, the young Flowers found life totally different from anything she had known in small town Oklahoma. “Vanport was a community that never slept,” she says. “Shipbuilding went on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. People came and went like nomads. They’d get a little money in their pockets, and move on.”

Vanport also had stable families, of course, such as the Johnsons, who knew even then that they would never go back to Oklahoma. There was no future for them in the South. The wartime economy offered an opportunity, and they had come



North to stay. To support his family, Fred Johnson worked two jobs—at Oregon Shipyard and Vancouver Shipyard—so the children rarely saw him. “He made a lot of sacrifices so we kids could have a better life,” Flowers recalls, “and when he was home, we made sure that Dad was king.”

Mostly, Flowers was concerned about school. She had been a good student in Muskogee, and she was looking forward to starting fifth grade in a new school.

“Education played a very important role in our family,” says Flowers. “In the South, if you lived in a small town, your classroom teacher might also be your Sunday school teacher, and her husband might own the grocery store. The whole community was involved in the education of its children, and the expectations were high. We didn’t want to let anyone down.”

On a dark, rainy October morning shortly after the family had settled into their Vanport apartment, Flowers excitedly dressed for her first day of school. Friendly neighbor children guided her and her older brother through the maze of muddy streets to John Marshall Grade School, a single-story frame building with brick veneer. It was one of five Vanport elementary schools



built in record time in the past year to serve some 5,000 children who had arrived with their job-seeking parents.

Flowers could not have known at the time that the federally subsidized Vanport school system was a unique experiment in public education that would receive national attention. To accommodate parents working around the clock, schools were

open for double shifts, morning and afternoon, twelve months a year. Schools provided breakfast, lunch, and snacks, and extended day care that began at 5:45 a.m. and lasted until 6:30 p.m. For pre-school children, there was twenty-four hour care, including meals and sleeping facilities. High school students were bused out of Vanport to Roosevelt or Jefferson High.

Unlike many families where both parents worked, Emily Johnson stayed at home to watch over her four children. “When it came to raising children, my mother had a real gift,” Flowers says. “She

had been a school teacher in Oklahoma, and she made sure our homework got done. She always said nothing was going to stand in the way of our education. Period.

“At school, we had good relationships with the white kids,” Flowers continues, “but we didn’t do a lot of playing

together out of school, except for band practice and Girl Scouts. I met wonderful young people in Vanport who are still my friends; in fact, I'm going to see some of them at my 50th Lincoln High School reunion this year."

Certainly the most significant friendship Flowers made in sixth grade at Vanport Junior High was with her future husband, Fred Flowers. "He was from Shreveport, Louisiana, and we were in band together. He played trombone and I played French horn, and I've still got the photos of us in our band uniforms."

On May 30, 1948, after days of heavy rain and warm temperatures, the massive railroad fill that served as a dike along Vanport's west boundary broke, and a wall of water from the Columbia River rushed into the city. "That day was a holiday," Flowers recalls, "and most of us kids were at home getting ready for our eighth grade graduation. It was going to be my first time to wear nylon stockings—still a novelty then because of rationing—and I had new patent leather shoes and a turquoise dress. I had fair skin, freckles, and red hair, so my mother thought this dress would be just the thing.

"Vanport flooded in forty-five minutes so we didn't have much time, but the Lord was with us that it happened in the afternoon. My younger brother, Horace, grabbed a suitcase and we left everything else behind. My graduation dress was in that suitcase, and I still love Horace today for saving it—in fact, I still have the dress! But we didn't save the shoes. We started walking

up Cottonwood Street. They sent buses to pick us up, but you don't get on a bus when there's a flood, so we walked about a mile, until we got out and up on N. Denver."

Vanport was washed away in a single day, leaving thousands of homeless families. The Johnson family was billeted at two inner northeast churches—Hughes Memorial Methodist and Bethel AME Church—before being sent to live in Guild's

"Vanport flooded in forty-five minutes so we didn't have much time."

Lake, a smaller wartime housing project in an industrial area near Linnton, on the west bank of the Willamette River. There, the family lived in two trailer homes, sandwiched with others between the river and the highway.

Flowers was ready for ninth grade, and once she and her family got their bearings, they discovered that Lincoln High School was the only secondary school on the west side of Portland. Fred's family had also ended up at Guild's Lake, so in the fall of 1948 the two young friends started Lincoln together; four years later, they would attend their senior prom together, as a couple. "Lincoln was an interesting experience," recalls Flowers. "A lot of students were from wealthy families, and we got a real eye opener about who runs Portland."

Two years later, when Guild's Lake closed down, the fam-

ily moved to yet another wartime housing project, St. John Woods, at the far north end of Portland. Again, the question of where Flowers would go to school arose. “My mother didn’t want me to go to Roosevelt, the high school nearest St. John Woods, because she thought I had a good start at Lincoln,” she recalls. “We appealed to the school district, and they said that since I was an excellent student I could continue at Lincoln if I could get there by bus. So every morning I got up at 6:00, caught the bus at 7:15, then took another bus, a trolley car, cable car, and finally a traction bus up Broadway to Lincoln High School, where Portland State University is now.”

Flowers finished Lincoln in 1952, “an average student.” She dreamed of going to Howard University, a black university in Washington, D.C., but because her mother refused to let her go so far away, she settled for Portland State University, “right there in the same old building where I’d been in high school. That just didn’t ring a bell with me, and I felt those familiar walls were holding me back,” Flowers says. “I was a free spirit, a thinker, and a wanderer, and I wanted to travel and see places. I was not really ready for college.”

After two years at PSU, Flowers opted for a job and marriage with Fred, then a scholarship student at the University of Portland. By the time he left for the military, a year or so later, Flowers was expecting their first baby.

“Fred came back from the service in 1956, and he went brief-

ly back to school—he had promised my mother and his mother that he would finish college—but our kids were coming so fast that by the time the last one was born in 1960, Fred, bless his heart, was working very hard for a pharmaceutical company.

“We were such young parents,” Flowers continues. “We had five children by the time we were twenty-six, but even then we knew all our children were going to go to college. We both came from southern roots and a segregated society, where education was your way out of poverty. But there was still a lot of racism in Portland that limited educational opportunities. Housing patterns, for example, determined where you could send your children to school, and some schools lacked facilities and used outdated textbooks.

“When our children started at Humboldt Elementary School, Fred and I became school parents. We attended all the meetings, got acquainted with the teachers and principal, had a good understanding of the curriculum, and knew where our kids stood before and after testing,” says Flowers. “We not only followed our kids through primary school, but through junior high and high school, and on into college. We were always school parents, but meantime we set an example.”

Flowers remembers a moment years later, when the children were older. Fred had completed his master’s degree at PSU, and his career in civil rights with the State Department of Labor was blossoming. “He looked at me and said, ‘Now

it's your turn. Whenever you want to go back to school you can. You've got a brain, and I love the way you think.' So I started taking classes part-time."

As her children grew up and left home, Flowers continued to take courses and workshops while holding down a full-time job. For many years she worked for Portland Public Schools as an executive secretary to the supervisor of elementary school libraries. In 1990, when Oregonians passed Measure 5, the

"He looked at me and said, 'Whenever you want to go back to school you can. You've got a brain, and I love the way you think.'"

property tax limitation law that radically cut funding to the state's schools, Flowers' department was downsized and her position cut. But she saw a welcome opportunity for change.

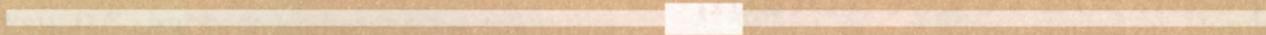
"Because I had seniority, I was given the chance to come into the schools to work with children," Flowers says. Two principals offered her jobs, and she chose to go as a library assistant to Ockley Green Middle School, in the neighborhood where she lives. Although she planned to stay only until her retirement date, Flowers recalls that, "One day the

principal said to me, 'You know, we've been looking for a Title I parent coordinator, and we think you would be the perfect person.' She had noticed that I knew everyone in town, and she liked the way I dealt with the parents." Flowers took the job, and five years later she's still there—for the last year as a volunteer—with no plans to retire anytime soon.

"My message to parents is: keep communication open with your children. At Ockley Green we offer parenting classes to give ideas to parents on how to set an example for their children: have books in your home, watch educational programs on TV together, use the Internet for educational purposes, take courses yourself."

And to provide a good example herself, Regina Flowers continues her lifelong pursuit of a bachelor's degree at Portland State University.

N Portland Blvd





Gladys and Paris Nunes

"We fell in love with these kids."

Interstate/Rose Quarter Albino/Mississippi Overlook Park N Prescott St N Killingsworth St N Portland Blvd N Lombard TC Kenton/N Denver Ave Delta Park/Vanport TC Expo Center



“I was born here in Portland and adopted when I was six months old by Gladys and Jack Nunes. I know them as my parents, but I call them my grandparents because they were much older. I am Nez Perce, and I have two adopted sisters, Celeste and Willow, who are “blood sisters” from the Athabascan and Sioux tribes. They’re close to my age—nineteen and seventeen—so we grew up together.”

Paris Nunes lives in the North Portland community of St. Johns, in a rambling white house comfortably cluttered with family photographs, children’s art, and his grandmother’s doll collection. The family’s home sits near the Columbia Slough, not far from where Lewis and Clark landed in April 1806, looking for “a great River called by the Natives the Mult-no-mack,” according to William Clark’s journal.

Of course, native peoples had lived along the Pacific Coast for thousands of years before Lewis and Clark arrived on the banks of the Willamette that spring day. Clark’s journal tells of being greeted by a band of Chinooks, a highly developed tribe of canoe builders, navigators, fishermen, planters, and traders who lived in a scattering of villages on Sauvie Island and the site of present-day Portland.

Lewis and Clark no doubt responded with a ritual they had carried out all across the country when encountering a new group of Indians. After explaining to the Chinook chiefs that their land now belonged to the United States, and that a

man in the east, Thomas Jefferson, was their new “great father,” Lewis and Clark gave the Indians a peace medal with Jefferson on one side and two hands clasping on the other, along with some trinkets for gifts.

The Chinooks welcomed the white men as friends and gave them food, little realizing that they were hastening the course of their own sad destiny.

“I’ve always known I was Native American,” says Paris, who

“I’ve always known I was Native American, but I don’t know yet if I’m a tribal member.”

is seventeen. “I knew my mom, who is Nez Perce, but I don’t know yet if I’m a tribal member. Last night my sister asked me to sign some papers so I can be recognized by the tribe. When I have the resources, I’d like to visit the Nez Perce reservation and know my family and other Nez Perce people.”

Reticent and modest, Paris says he loves basketball and skateboarding but neglects to mention that he is an advanced placement junior at Jefferson High School with a 3.3 average. Or that he is a member of an elite organization for Native young people, Youth Leadership Academy (YLA), a Title VII Indian Education program that selects twenty Native youth

from around the state recognized for their leadership potential. One Saturday a month, Paris and other NYL youth meet on college campuses with Native professionals to develop leadership skills, increase self-confidence, connect with their Native heritage, and get acquainted with Native students from other tribal backgrounds.

It is Paris' grandmother, Gladys, an elder much honored for her work in the Portland Native American community, who talks of these things, and weaves her story in with his.

"I was born on a farm in Minnesota, and my mother left me to be raised by my grandmother," says Gladys. "She was full-blood Cherokee and my dad was French Indian." Forced to leave school in seventh grade to help out on the farm and attend to ailing family members, Gladys established a pattern of caring for others that has defined her life. "I always regretted I was not able to continue studying," Gladys says, "and I tell my children that it's a privilege and honor to go to school."

Gladys eventually left home, married, and had two children. During World War II, while her husband was in military service, she left her job as a waitress to drive semi-trucks from Minnesota to the Dakotas. After the war, the family came to Portland, where Gladys' father owned a bar and grill in St. Johns, LaVoy's. Gladys worked as a cook in her father's restaurant for several years, and after she and her first husband

divorced, she married Jack Nunes, a longshoreman and fisherman who was a regular customer at LaVoy's.

"Jack was Portuguese, and he liked kids," Gladys recalls. "After we finished raising my children, we became parents to three grandchildren when my married daughter died. And I've been taking care of kids ever since."

For the next fifteen years, the Nuneses took care of a series of foster children for the state Children's Services Division (CSD) before they were certified as a Native-American home. "Since I have Indian blood, we were allowed to have Indian children, because Indian children are supposed to be in Indian homes," says Gladys.

"In the meantime, we'd bought a building right in the heart of St. Johns, on N. Lombard, and we opened a restaurant called Gladys St. Johns Café. It operated twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for twenty-four years," Gladys recalls. "Our customers were truckers and fishermen, and I also catered a lot of meals to the elders who lived in Shrunk's Towers. Every Christmas we'd close the restaurant and have a dinner for the elders."

In the same building, Jack ran a volunteer community center for the youth of St. John's. "Captain Jack," as the kids called him, maintained the center during the school year, to keep the young people off the streets. In the summer, he went to the coast, where he fished and chartered his two boats."

Gladys likes to tell the story of how Willow, her youngest daughter, came into their lives. “We were already foster parents to Celeste, and her mother came into the restaurant once in a while to see her. One day, when Celeste was about three, her mother came in with this little baby. ‘You can have her, I don’t want her,’ she said to me. I thought she was kidding, but she wasn’t, and so I took this little baby, only eighteen days old, with just the clothes she had on. That was Willow.”

To help out, regular customers and the waitresses at Gladys St. Johns Café threw a baby shower for Gladys. “We all laughed because I was so old to be having a baby shower, but we got a lot of nice things, and everything worked out fine.”

Less than a year after receiving Willow, CSD sent Paris to the Nunes family as a foster child. He was six months old. “We knew nothing about his parents at the time,” Gladys remembers, “but from a little yellow piece of paper that came with him, we knew his mother’s name and that she was Nez Perce.

“We fell in love with these kids to the point where we wanted them to be ours,” Gladys says, recalling the decision to formally adopt the three foster children. “Jack and I both had tough lives as children, and we wanted to give them a home they wouldn’t otherwise have had.”

Jack and Gladys were well into their sixties by then, but according to CSD rules, age cannot be held against adoptive parents if they are Native American. “So it wasn’t hard for us to

get these kids. CSD looked at our health records, and maybe our financial records, but mostly they were looking for a caring home. And we certainly had that.”

Paris grew up secure and happy, unaware that his circumstances were special. “My childhood was pretty normal,” he says. “I’d play outside with my friends and my sisters—get dirty, have fun, like all the other kids. I have a lot of good memories of how this neighborhood used to be.”

“I’ve done the best I can, because these traditions are slipping away very fast.”

From kindergarten to fifth grade, Paris and Willow attended Sitton Elementary School in North Portland. But when it was time for middle school, Gladys was worried; one of her granddaughters had gotten into trouble in middle school. So Gladys arranged for Paris and Willow to attend the private Seventh Day Adventist School in Scappoose, where a family friend offered to pay the tuition. “Academically, the school was good and the teachers and students treated us well,” says Paris, who, with Willow, went from sixth to eighth grade there, “but it wasn’t very diverse. My sister and I were the only Native American kids.”

In ninth grade, Paris attended another private school,

Portland Adventist Academy. Again, he was happy with his teachers and his courses, but he didn't feel like he fit in with the other students. "The school was expensive, and I had to work after school, so after my freshman year I transferred to Jefferson High School," says Nunes. "I'm in eleventh grade this year, and I'm glad to be at Jefferson. It's way more diverse."

When the Nuneses adopted the children, one of the CSD stipulations was that Jack and Gladys maintain awareness in the children of their native culture. "We went to pow-wows at Delta Park, Warm Springs, and Grand Ronde," recalls Gladys. "Jack helped organize the pow-wows, and I made a lot of fry bread. We taught the kids how to bead and dance, and how to put up teepees.

"I've done the best that I can because these traditions are slipping away very fast," Gladys continues. "The younger kids don't seem to be so interested, although Celeste, who is eighteen—and sometimes Willow—go to the Bow and Arrow Club at the Native American Youth Association (NAYA) every Friday night, a get-together where young people practice drumming and dancing. And I enjoy my weekly potluck and bingo with Pi-nee-waus Elders' Club that also meets at NAYA."



Two years ago, when Celeste graduated from high school, the Indian Education Project at Portland Public Schools honored Gladys with a Pendleton blanket.

Paris says the Indian education program in the schools has been a good influence on him. "We do artwork and read about our culture. Now I'm getting more involved in this

Youth Leadership Academy, where they teach us how to be leaders. We get together to know each other, learn about our culture, and learn how to be tolerant of other ethnic groups. I guess YLA could help set a path for me, but it's up to me to walk it."

Although he has no particular career goal in mind as yet, Paris admits to being drawn to law and criminal justice. "I'm doing a mock trial at my school right now. We have this legal case, and we play different parts. I really like playing the lawyer, arguing and making a point—my grandmother will tell you that—and I like the whole aspect of defending or prosecuting someone.

We had a mini-competition a couple of weeks ago. There was no real verdict but just comments on how you did. I did pretty well, but I need some improvements."

When Jack died in 1994, the Portland Native American community honored him for his many years of friendship and

volunteer service. “More Indians than whites showed up for his funeral,” recalls Gladys. “There was drumming and a special tree planting in Jack’s name along the Columbia Slough, where he loved to walk.”

Gladys, now eighty, looks wistfully back over her life, fairly satisfied with what’s she accomplished, yet wishing she could have done more. As she speaks, her four-year-old great-granddaughter, Claudia, sits on her lap. Gladys has had her since

“I guess the Youth Leadership Academy could help set a path for me, but it’s up to me to walk it.”

birth, and is raising her with the help of her three other children. Willow, the family chauffeur, has just graduated from Jefferson High School; Celeste works but still lives at home; and Paris plays the role of the older brother.

“Sometimes I lie awake at night and wonder at how many kids I have raised; if I were younger I’d probably take in more. But it’s not an easy job, and I’m getting tired. There are an awful lot of us grandparents raising our grandchildren, but we just take it in our stride.”

N Lombard TC





Rudy Trujillo

"Start with a seedling and pretty soon it's blossomed."

Interstate/Rose Quarter Albina/Mississippi Overlook Park N Prescott St N Killingsworth St N Portland Blvd N Lombard TC Kenton/N Denver Ave Delta Park/Vanport TC Expo Center



“My ancestors came from Barcelona, Spain, in 1723 and settled near Santa Fe, New Mexico, where they came with the first Catholic bishop, Bishop LeMay, to help build the original missions. Another part of my family is French. My dad, Andrew Trujillo, moved to Idaho during the Depression in the late thirties, when people went to wherever they could find work. During World War II, right before he went into the service, he married my mother, Connie. She was French-Spanish, and also from Santa Fe, which is where I was born.”

Rudy Trujillo, owner of the Island Landscape Company, speaks proudly of his Hispanic heritage, although while growing up near Spokane, Washington, among the children of wheat ranchers and timber workers, he felt the sting of prejudice for looking different and having a Spanish name.

“I had a brother and a sister, and we grew up speaking English in the home because my dad said if we wanted good jobs we needed to speak English. Later, my grandmother came from Santa Fe to live with us for several years, and that’s when I learned some Spanish. She was a big influence in our lives, with her strength and toughness—she could still chop wood at seventy—but she was also very caring and loving.”

Trujillo’s father worked as a forester for Potlatch Corporation, a Spokane-based company that harvests timberlands across several states and produces wood and paper products.

“My dad was very aware of ecological issues. He understood how trees grow—what, where and why—and knew when they could be harvested,” says Trujillo. “He stayed with the company until he retired.”

When recalling his childhood, Trujillo, the youngest of the family, says his strongest memory is of hard work. “My parents were adamant about our chores and responsibilities, whether in school or at home. The whole family was like that. My dad,

“My dad understood how trees grow—what, where and why—and knew when they could be harvested.”

my mom, who was a practical nurse, and my grandmother—work is all they ever did. That lesson has carried over with me to today; I always want to finish what I start and do a good job.

“My dad loved to travel so we did take vacations,” Trujillo continues, “but we always ended up at the big redwood trees near Eureka, California. When Dad was standing in the trees, he didn’t even want us kids to play around him. It was like he was in church.”

Trujillo’s first ten years were spent happily on a farm located between Spokane and Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, where, he recalls, “we had every conceivable farm animal, and there was

plenty of work to go around.” When the family moved into Spokane, Trujillo felt lost without his animals. “One day my dad said, ‘You’ve got to stop feeling sorry for yourself. We’re going to find you a new hobby.’ So he helped me build a small greenhouse on the side of our garage, and he introduced me to his friend, a German horticulturalist. I helped this man af-

“I settled in the Portland area because of the wonderful plants here. All the rhodies and azaleas were blooming, and I just went nuts.”

ter school and on Saturdays, and in return he’d give me little starts of plants, which I’d grow in pots. This was very rewarding for me, and I had a lot of show-and-tell for school.

“From that point on, I knew what I wanted to do. Even before I hit high school, I knew the Latin names of many plants. I took science courses. At one time I was thinking about developing species of plants, but things evolved in a different direction. I had some art talent, and it made sense for me to do landscape design. But I still had that farm-boy attitude and always liked digging around in the earth.”

After high school graduation, Trujillo attended Washing-

ton State University in Pullman, where he earned a degree in landscape architecture while working part-time for a landscaper. His first job, installing athletic fields for a community college in Spokane, introduced him to the broader profession of landscape construction and design, which has become his specialty.

“I settled in the Portland area because of the wonderful plants here,” Trujillo recalls. “In 1973, when I came here for the first time to visit my sister and her husband, they suggested I go see the gardens in Washington Park. It must have been April or May because all the rhodies and azaleas were blooming, and I just went nuts. I was like a kid in a candy store.”

After a few years of varied jobs, Trujillo was hired in 1977 to create and head up the landscape division of Hayden Corporation. The old Jantzen Beach amusement park had just been torn down, and the company was dredging sand from the Columbia River to build up Hayden Island and develop it into a commercial and residential area.

During the seven years Trujillo was employed by the Hayden Corporation, working with a crew of up to seventy-five workers, he designed the landscaping for the new Jantzen Beach shopping center, installed trees and shrubs for new condominiums on the east end of the island, and designed and laid irrigation and plumbing lines for the boat moorages along the Columbia River, among many other large-scale projects. “My

work was much more involved than planting shrubs,” he says, “and I realize now what a valuable background it gave me.”

When a larger company bought out Hayden Corporation in 1985, Trujillo saw a chance to establish his own business. He purchased the landscape division from the new company, and Island Landscape Company was born. “That was a big step because I didn’t have the capital to go along with it,” Trujillo recalls. “I was fortunate in that I still had the contract to maintain the Hayden Island properties, and that kept the cash flowing, but I couldn’t take on large new projects without working capital.”

Trujillo made the rounds of banks, asking for a line of credit so he could bid for commercial jobs. “I had a long list of jobs I’d done with Hayden—huge, big-budget jobs like Riverplace—and a business plan, and a good work history. The banks still wouldn’t loan me a dime. I could never understand that.

“It is very hard to get a small business started. President Bush said recently that small businesses are the key to getting the economy going again, but bankers don’t seem to realize this, or that they have to take chances too,” continues Trujillo with a touch of bitterness, remembering the years when he struggled

to keep his head above water. The business survived, in part, with personal loans from friends Trujillo had made during his years at Hayden. “I’d show them a contract for a job, and they’d write me a check so I’d have the cash to do the work.”



At one point Trujillo took on a partner, but that turned into a bad experience. “He wanted to grow the business, and I wanted to keep the quality under control. When we peaked out at one hundred employees, we had a falling out and dissolved the partnership.

“Then the Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs came along and saved me,” says Trujillo. “It was 1988, and OAME was just getting started. Sam Brooks, its director, told me the purpose of OAME was to help minority entrepreneurs who were starting businesses.

“I received one of the first loans OAME made to a small business, with a five-year payback schedule at a low interest rate. I never missed a payment, but Sam said that if I ever had a problem to let them know at OAME. They were there to help.” After Trujillo had paid his OAME loan in full, he went back to a bank and finally got a line of credit.

OAME, a non-profit organization launched in 1987 to

promote opportunities for minority businesspeople and to reduce discrimination and racism in the marketplace, was created on the premise that community development depends on the economic health of small businesses. Beginning with eight members and the motto, “If you are in business and you’re not making a profit, you’re going out of business,” OAME has grown to 620 members. In 2000, the U.S. Small Business Administration recognized the organization with a Vision Award for Excellence.

Trujillo has served on the OAME board of directors for seven years, never missing the monthly breakfast meetings that bring together contractors and small businesses. “It’s a wonderful place to network,” he says. “People from all the municipalities, counties, and construction companies come to these breakfast meetings. We get a chance to tell them what we do, and give them our card. These are people you’d never get to see in a month of Sundays, even if you knocked on their door.”

In May 2002, Island Landscape bought its own building on N.E. Vancouver Way. “We had a chance to get this building because I had known the person who owned it for years, and he offered to carry the mortgage,” Trujillo says. “It was built in 1960, so it needs a lot of work.” Today, in addition to a general manager and office staff, the company employs twenty to twenty-five workers through the year, and up to thirty-five in the summer. “I have some wonderful employees,” Trujillo

adds, “several who have been with me for over fifteen years. In the landscaping industry, many workers come and go. Some work here only a few months a year; they’re gone in the winter but come back in the summer and ask for their jobs back.

“I know my niche, and I don’t want the business to get too big,” says Trujillo. “I always say you’re only as good as your last job, and so quality control and word of mouth is a big thing with us.” His wife, Paula, a CPA, recently joined the business as a part-time bookkeeper, and he calls her the “steering

“I know my niche, and I don’t want the business to get too big. I always say you’re only as good as your last job.”

wheel” of Island Landscape. And while Trujillo is kept busy figuring bids and dealing with clients, his first love, he says, remains “going out to dig in the dirt. I must be the only crazy guy in town who likes to weed, but it gives me a sense of accomplishment.”

Recent contracts include landscaping for PGE Park, a rooftop garden for the downtown St. Francis apartments, design and construction of the first nine holes at Delta Golf Course, landscaping for the new Pearl District development—a contract that will last three to four years—and TriMet’s Interstate MAX.

“TriMet has extended a hand to minority entrepreneurs during the different phases of the Interstate MAX,” says Trujillo. “I got a contract to move seventy-eight large trees that were in the right-of-way, some of them up to thirty-feet tall. We dispersed them free all over the neighborhoods, some to elementary schools and others to neighbors of Interstate, in Kenton and Overlook, who wanted these trees in their yards. TriMet liked the work we had done for them, so we got another job restoring properties torn up by the MAX construction. That’s turned into a sizable project.”

Trujillo looks forward to years more of successful business for Island Landscape, but he will never forget that he owes its success to OAME for having faith in him as a small businessman.

“A lot of people like me got their start with help from OAME. Very few loans go sour, because once you’ve made that commitment you know you have to get that money back so it can be loaned to someone else. It’s like growing a plant. Start a business with a seedling, and pretty soon it’s blossomed and paid off.”

Kenton

N Denver Ave



Les Jorg

"In Kenton we had everything."

Interstate/Rose Quarter Albina/Mississippi Overlook Park N Prescott St N Killingsworth St N Portland Blvd N Lombard TC Kenton/N Denver Ave Delia Park/Vanport TC Expo Center



“As a child in Kenton, one of the first things I remember is the man who came along every evening with a lantern and a ladder to light the streetlights. Martin Brower would climb the ladder, pull down the arc lamp, ignite it and put it back up and then move on to the next one. You never see anything like that anymore.”

Les Jorg was four years old in 1924 when his parents bought a small house on Schofield Street in Kenton, the North Portland community that lies at the base of the peninsula formed by the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia rivers. Jorg spent his growing-up years in this historic neighborhood, absorbing the sounds, sights, and smells of a complete, self-contained world that felt far removed from the rest of Portland.

“Hardly anyone had cars then, but half the people had horses, which they tied to rings at the curb. All of us kids played in the street, where you could lie down and go to sleep and never be run over because there was no traffic. Every night at 9:00, Mr. Hansen, the policeman, would come along and say, ‘You kids go home now.’”

Kenton owed its existence to Swift & Company, the largest meat company in the world at the turn of the century. In 1906, Swift bought out the local Union Meat Company and purchased 3,400 acres along the Columbia River (bounded by present-day Denver Avenue, Marine Drive, N. Portland and Columbia boulevards) for a meatpacking operation. Knowing its 1,500 new

employees would need housing, Swift also purchased 400 additional acres on a rise two miles south of the proposed plant to establish a company town, called Kenton. According to promotional materials designed to draw families to its new model community, Kenton was situated advantageously in relation to the new facilities, “thus dispelling and dissipating disagreeable odors attendant with the plant’s operation.”

“My father was hired at Swift in 1920, and by the time he retired, forty years later, he knew everything there was to know about the place.”

On September 15, 1909, Swift inaugurated a three million dollar complex that included stockyards, meatpacking plant, cattle company, wool warehouse, livestock exhibit building, and banking services. Other meatpacking companies were soon drawn to the area to take advantage of the new facilities, and by 1912 Armour, Wilson, Hammond & Company, and Cudahy had set up plants nearby, with others soon to come, making Portland the central livestock market in the Northwest. Cattle and other livestock were shipped in directly by rail or, on some occasions, unloaded in the Albina Railroad Yards to the south and

driven on foot through Kenton's main street to the Swift plant. There, they were slaughtered, carved into sides of beef, and sold to local and regional butchers and wholesalers.

But it was not only meat that drove Kenton's growth. The 1913 completion of the North Bank railroad bridge across the Columbia River made Northeast Portland accessible by both rail and water, and thus ideal for manufacturing. Soon, factories and mills were springing up along North Portland Harbor (Columbia Slough), producing everything from wooden pipes and tanks to bank vaults and pre-fabricated houses. All this economic activity translated into local jobs, and Kenton quickly became a booming, fast-growing community.

"All my family was involved in the meat industry," Jorg recalls. "My father was hired at Swift in 1920, and by the time he retired forty years later, he knew everything there was to know about the place. He had operated the hide cellar, glue factory, wool pullery, beef kill, and the hog fuel and fertilizer plant. My grandfather was the night watchman at Kurt Schellher, another meatpacker that slaughtered horses and made dog food; my uncles worked at Swift or

Kenton Packing; and my mother worked at Northwest Packing Company, a cannery on Columbia Boulevard. My father lived to be ninety, and if my mother had taken better care of herself—she lived to be ninety-two—she would still be alive. But all she wanted to do was eat pork."

When Jorg was a boy in the 1920s, Kenton was still very much a company town. Swift and its subsidiary companies owned or controlled the local bank, land development company, building construction, transportation system and, of course, a good deal of the job market. Jorg remembers the grand, fashionable houses Swift built for its executives on the east side of Denver Avenue—many still stand today—and the single story, frame houses for workers



on the west side. At the crossroads of Denver Avenue and Kilpatrick Street, Kenton's main intersection, stood the Swift & Company offices.

"In Kenton we had everything," recalls Jorg, "a theater, beer parlor, pool hall, hotel, and post office." A page of illustrated ads in the local paper, circa 1925, gives a fuller picture of the commercial life of the place: Kenton Pharmacy ("Why

not spend your money in Kenton?") J.P. Finley & Son Morticians ("As one lamp lights, another grows less"), White Rose Market ("Fresh, Salted and Smoked Meats"), and the Stockmen's Hotel, where visiting cattlemen and unmarried working men could rent rooms for \$2.50 a week.

Like any small town, Kenton was full of colorful characters, and Jorg remembers them all fondly. "We had a Russian prince and an Englishman we could hardly understand. There was a man we called 'Frenchie,' whose real name was Leo Pou-

"Depression times were pretty bad, and it was important to me to try to help."

gi, who had won the Croix de Guerre in World War I. He lived in the back of Fred Castatina's shoe shop and shined shoes. Mali Singh was a Sikh with a beard and turban, who owned twenty-one houses and ran a fuel yard. The Italian owners of the big spaghetti factory, the Scarpellis, lived right across the street from us. Big Pete and Little Pete, who were Greeks, ran the Blue Ribbon Market and lived in that big Victorian house that still stands up above Interstate."

The Japanese were also an important part of Jorg's childhood world. "The Okazaki family owned a small vegetable

store right up on Denver and Lombard, and George Takahashi had a truck farm down where the racetrack is now."

Jorg, an only child, started school at Kenton Elementary, and from age ten he worked after school and on Saturdays. "There were no child labor laws then, so all we kids worked," he says. "During the week I raked balls in the pool halls, cleaned the beer parlors and the Chinese restaurant, and ran errands for the madam who managed the prostitutes at the Kenton Hotel.

"I also peddled Chubb Rollie's bathtub gin and whiskey," Jorg continues. "It was Prohibition, remember. I took the bottles in my wagon, covered them with newspapers, and went to the fire station and the police station, where I got paid fifty cents a bottle.

"On Saturdays I worked at Swift. I swept and bagged the manure from the ramp running from the stockyards into the slaughterhouse, and after I stacked the bags the man from the office would give me a nickel for each one. I earned about ten dollars a week, which was not bad in those days. Depression times were pretty bad, and it was important to me to try to help."

When Jorg was fifteen, he got a full-time summer job at Swift, "shaking hides." After the cattle were killed and skinned, the hides were stacked and covered with rock salt to remove the moisture and make them pliable enough to handle, Jorg explains. "Then, about eight of us stood around a slotted table

holding onto a hide. The man in charge hollered, ‘Yup,’ and we shook the hide up and down to knock the salt out of it. Another man grabbed the hide, rolled it up and tied it. Then the hides were stored in the cellar until there were enough to sell as a lot, something like five thousand. At the end of the season, we loaded the hides on boxcars. We started shaking hides in July and loaded the boxcars the last week of September, just before I went back to school.”

Jorg attended Jefferson High School for a couple of years, but his heart was not in his studies. “I joined the Naval Reserve, mainly for the uniform so I could impress the girls, but about a month after I turned eighteen, I was taken into the Navy. World War II was coming, and we may not have known it, but the military did, because they took all of us reservists into active duty.”

After eight years in the Navy, during which time Jorg saw action in the North Atlantic and South Pacific, he returned to Portland with a citation from the Secretary of the Navy. After a short stint working in a plumbing supply warehouse—during which he met his wife, Helen—Jorg went to work at Swift as a truck driver. It was June 1947, and he earned \$1.42 an hour, 40 cents more than he had been making before.

“With a veteran’s loan, Helen and I bought a house on Minnesota Street—about ten or twelve blocks from where I grew up,” says Jorg. “We had three children, all boys, all born in No-

vember, a year apart. It was a good place for children to grow up. My parents still lived nearby on Schofield Street, and the boys grew up running all over that neighborhood and roaming Delta Park, where the racetrack is now.”

But Jorg found that the old values that held the community together were gone. “When I was a kid, God help you if you ever took anything from a store that didn’t belong to you. The merchants trusted the kids, and they tried to help us by giving

“Of course nothing can stay the same after a war like that, but it was the loss of the people that really changed our lives.”

us jobs. By the time my kids came along, the community had changed, and that trust didn’t exist anymore.

“Of course, nothing can stay the same after a war like that, but it was the loss of the people that really changed our lives. I especially felt the absence of the Japanese, who were a very important part of our community. Damned if I can understand why they put the Japanese in prisons, while nobody bothered about my mother, who was German and pro-Hitler. Also, the old timers started dying, and no one wanted to take over the

shoe repair shop or the barbershop, so they just closed.”

Even after the construction of the I-5 freeway took Jorg’s house and the family had moved to Southwest Portland, he continued to drive a truck for Swift for many years. He liked the job not only for the long-term job security, strong union, and good money (Swift paid the industry’s highest wages, and provided bonuses and pensions), but for the independence it allowed him. “When I pulled out of Swift, that truck was mine, and whatever happened was my problem. In the beginning they gave me a small truck, and my route took me to St. Helens and Scappoose. I gradually moved up to the bigger trucks until I was driving a full truck with two trailers, delivering meat to butcher shops, schools, restaurants, and nursing homes. In 1948 I took over the Newport-Astoria route, and I stayed on it for twenty years. Eventually I drove to Seattle with a big freight-liner, or ‘set of joints,’ as truck drivers say.”

In June of 1979, Iowa Beef Packers (IBP), a new company started by two former Swift executives, bought out Swift & Company. It was the dawn of the fast food revolution, and the new mass production systems were eliminating the need for skilled workers and transforming the beef industry. IBP soon closed down the Portland operation.

“We either got paid our pension, or we were paid off for the number of years we’d worked,” says Jorg. “By that time, there were only about thirty of us left.”

As Swift went, so went Kenton, wrote Alta Mitchoff in her *History of the Kenton Neighborhood*. With the meatpacking industry gone, and the disappearance of the mills and factories along the Columbia Slough, Kenton’s role as an economic engine of Northeast Portland was over.

“Growing up, I never thought of Kenton as a special place. It was just my home, and I was proud to live there,” says Jorg. “But being around all the different ethnic groups gave us kids a chance to see what other people were like, and how they lived. Now I know that Kenton was a progressive town, open to innovations and new things. Places like Portsmouth and St. Johns couldn’t hold a candle to it.”



Marion Craig

"I'm glad people remember there was a place called Vanport."

“I think Vanport was near capacity with about 40,000 people when we got there, in January 1945. I’d never seen so many buildings in one spot, all painted gray-green, and with no trees anywhere. I was twenty-six, and my husband Adam was thirty. He was from Montana, and I had met him when he was stationed with the Air Force in my hometown of Presque Isle, Maine.”

Marion Craig, a petite octogenarian who retains the nonsense air of the primary school teacher that she was for nearly thirty years, recalls her early married years with a nostalgia tinged with sadness. Her husband, Adam, had been given a medical discharge from the service for ulcers, and Christmas of 1944 found the young couple, with their six-month-old baby, visiting Adam’s family in Billings, Montana, wondering what the future would bring. “Harry, Adam’s brother, lived in Vanport and worked at one of Kaiser’s shipyards,” Craig says. “He thought Adam might be able to do some work there that wouldn’t be too heavy.”

The Craigs drove in their 1936 Ford to Oregon, where Adam quickly got a job as a welder in the shipyard, and his brother arranged for the young couple to rent an apartment in Vanport. “Our building was on Denver Court, just below Denver Avenue. It had sixteen apartments, seven above, seven below, and one on each end,” Craig remembers. “The place was pretty bare, but this was our first home, we had this little baby boy, and we were

happy because we didn’t know any better. It was an adventure, and after the war was over we planned to go back to Maine.”

Two years earlier, when President Roosevelt declared the United States at war, industrialist Henry Kaiser had expanded his Portland shipbuilding operation into a twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week operation. The city was not prepared to absorb the massive influx of shipyard workers that resulted.

“The place was pretty bare, but this was our first home and we were happy because we didn’t know any better.”

By January of 1943, seventy-five thousand men and women had poured in from all over the country in response to Kaiser’s newspaper ads promoting patriotism, high wages, and “no experience necessary.” Thousands more were arriving every day.

A housing crisis of epic proportions developed in Portland, with shipyard workers sleeping in cars, in tents pitched along stream banks, and in overcrowded rooming houses, tourist cabins, and trailers. When they weren’t sleeping or working, workers were on the streets, jamming restaurants and filling local theaters, where box offices stayed opened to 3:00 a.m.

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Realizing that a “miracle” wartime production depended on a workforce that had decent housing, Kaiser Corporation bought 650 acres of swampy floodplain along the Columbia River in the northern outskirts of Portland, and announced plans to build the largest wartime housing project in the nation.

By August 1943, construction workers had completed nearly 10,000 pre-fabricated living units, along with utility and recreation buildings, schools, and fire stations, as well as an administrative center, library, infirmary, police station, and jail. When Vanport was dedicated on August 12, 1943, families were already moving in, and by the time Marion and Adam Craig arrived in early 1945, Vanport had grown to become Oregon’s second largest city, its residents representing every state but Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Delaware.

Craig vividly remembers her first home, which came furnished with all the essentials for living except bedding, dishes, and cooking utensils. “Each apartment had a combined living room-kitchen area in front, a tiny bathroom with a shower stall, a closet, and a bedroom in the rear. For cooking we had a tiny, two-burner hotplate—called a rangette—with a box you could put over one burner to make an oven. And it worked!

“We always kept our place looking nice outside; we planted flowers around the edge of the building and kept the grass green. One day, somebody knocked on the door and said, ‘Congratulations, you’ve won first prize in the home beauti-

fication contest!’ We didn’t even know about the contest, but our prize was the opportunity to move across Denver Court into a building with only four apartments. There, we had two bedrooms, a front door and a back door, real wallpaper, and white woodwork. It was homey.”

Youth and optimism, Craig admits, colored her perspective. “I liked pushing my boy, Jerry, around in his little stroller and seeing and hearing the talk of people from other parts

“I liked pushing my boy around in his little stroller and hearing people talking in English dialects from other parts of the country.”

of the country. We had a library in Vanport, recreation centers, and shops where you could buy groceries or flowers. You could take home a bouquet of flowers! That was very new to me. I had never seen camellias, and I thought they were so wonderful, coming out in February.”

With three years teaching experience in Maine, Craig wanted to substitute teach for the Portland Public Schools, but a requirement was a private phone, which was not easy to come by during the war years. “When we finally got a phone, my first

job was at Kenton Elementary School, on Interstate and Lombard,” Craig remembers. “I used my next-door neighbor as a babysitter; our apartments were joined in a way that we could open our bedroom door right into their bedroom.

“I made \$9 a day, and with my first paycheck I bought each of us a pair of slippers.”

Even before the sudden end of World War II, in the summer of 1945, shipyard layoffs had begun and an exodus of wartime workers had reduced Vanport’s population to 26,000; a year later it was down to 15,000. Although Vanport had been designed as a temporary housing project, intended to be dismantled after the war, a sudden influx of returning veterans, combined with a post-war housing shortage and Vanport’s cheap rents, forced the Portland housing authorities to keep the project open. Vanport College (later to become Portland State College) was established, serving primarily veterans but drawing others to the area. The city’s population grew slightly, and by 1947 it had stabilized at about 18,000.

“About three years after the war, Adam was one of the last ones let go at the shipyard. Although we had always planned to go back home to Maine, I was pregnant with our second child by then,” says Craig. “So he got a job at Crown Zellerbach, and we looked for a larger place to live, but there weren’t many apartments in Portland at the price we were paying in Vanport. So we decided to stay put.”

In the warm, rainy days near the end of May 1948, an exceptionally heavy snowmelt from six western states and the Canadian Rockies surged into the Columbia River and began to swell in the broad delta of lakes and marshes surrounding Vanport. Although built on a floodplain well below the water level of the river, a false sense of safety had always existed for the residents of Vanport, in part because the tall, “impervious” dikes built by the U.S. Corps of Engineers meant that no body of water was visible in any direction.

Even as the Columbia River inched up the dikes to fifteen feet above ground level, and sightseers came to gawk, Vanport residents were repeatedly assured that no immediate danger existed. The authorities announced that if a flood seemed imminent, there would be plenty of time to evacuate. In the meantime, everyone was to remain calm and in their homes.

“On the day before the flood, Jerry was about to have his fourth birthday and we were getting ready for the new baby,” remembers Craig. “We were pretty well settled in now, with a brand new, shiny, white refrigerator—I mean a real, all-paid-for, electric refrigerator, not a little box under the counter that you had to keep ice in. I had a sewing machine. Adam had just planted croft lilies all around the building, and we were sitting pretty.

“On the morning of May 30, Memorial Day, we were having breakfast when Adam’s brother called us from Northeast Port-

land to say that he heard there was going to be a flood,” Craig continues. “He suggested we should come get his trailer and move some of our things for a few days. Now, I thought a flood meant water washed in, it washed out, and you cleaned up the mud. That was all I ever knew.

“We got the trailer at Harry’s place, and we were pulling it back to Vanport behind our 1936 Ford when we got as far as Denver Avenue. A line of cars, bumper-to-bumper, was trying to get out of Vanport.”

At 4:17 p.m. that day, the Columbia River had breached the massive railroad dike on the western edge of Vanport. As water surged through the dike—by one eyewitness account in waves ten-feet high—it picked up cars and crashed into buildings with such force that the flimsy structures came apart like matchsticks. Sirens blew, and students from Vanport College fanned out to spread the alarm, allowing a ten-minute warning that saved hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives.

Taxis, buses, ambulances, and private cars rushed to the area to evacuate residents, but rising water and traffic con-



gestion made it impossible for most vehicles to get in, or out. In the immediate rescue, children were handed down from second story windows into the waiting arms of rescuers in boats, and human chains formed to pull people to safety. It took about three hours for the flood to cover Vanport, and as the waters rose, those apartment buildings that had escaped the first onslaught came unmoored from their foundations and floated around like stately ocean liners.

Denver Court, where Craig and her husband lived, was furthest from the dike break. “Looking down from Denver Avenue, we could see our place, so Adam went over the bank, hoping to save some things from our apartment,” Craig recalls. “But by the time he got there, the water was up to his knees. He didn’t know what to save, so he put some things into a big canning pot, and

threw a few clothes over his arm. But he didn’t save any of Jerry’s birthday gifts, or his teddy bear called Ted. Years later Jerry would say, ‘I’ll bet Ted is cold down there under that water.’

“We climbed back into the car and went to stay with friends in Southeast Portland,” says Craig.

By the following day, May 31, Vanport was fifteen feet under water. Only a few floating apartments houses and brick chimneys remained as stark evidence that a community of 18,000 people had existed there the day before. Although an initial search for the dead turned up no bodies, eyewitnesses described having seen people disappear under the roiling waters. Rumors flew that officials had concealed hundreds

“The flood was a very traumatic affair, but I couldn’t let myself give in to despair.”

of victims to cover up their irresponsibility in not giving adequate warning. Eventually, the official number of dead was fifteen, but certainly many more people were swept away and not counted; the actual figure will never be known.

Five and a half years after Vanport was built in the rush of wartime fervor, it was gone—washed away in a single day.

“The flood was a very traumatic affair, but I couldn’t let myself give in to despair,” Craig says. “However, months later, something happened that brought it all back. When we lived in Vanport, I had done some sewing for the Lutheran Church’s children’s choir, making buttonholes for their robes. They paid me for it, and with that money I had bought a pair

of pinking shears. One day that summer after the flood, we were at the house of some friends, and I walked into a bedroom and saw a pair of pinking shears on the dresser. Well, the floodgates broke. I just cried and cried. I’d forgotten all about those darn shears until that moment.”

After the excitement of the flood died down, Craig remembers, the people of Portland didn’t really welcome Vanport refugees in their midst. “And this was true for both blacks and whites. If they heard you were from Vanport you were supposed to hang your head. It’s still a little bit that way today about those of us who live in North Portland.

“But I’m glad people remember there was a place called Vanport. It’s good it’s not there anymore, because I don’t like to see people living that crowded, but I’m not sorry we were ever there.”



Sue Sakai

"There's a lesson here for everyone."



“By the time the war came along, our family had been farming in the Yakima Valley for about twenty years,” remembers Sue Sakai, a retired medical social worker who has lived in Portland for many years. In the fall of 1941, Sakai was nineteen, just beginning her sophomore year at the University of Washington.

“Right before Thanksgiving, my father asked me to come home because of the ominous things in the news about the relationship between the United State and Japan,” she recalls. “He was fearful that if anything happened we would be separated. We were the only Japanese-American family in our area, and although our immediate neighbors were supportive, there were lots of anti-Japanese items in the news, and there had been a few problems in the community—talk mostly—but we began to wonder what was going to happen to us.”

Years before, when Sakai’s father, Fukumatsu, was a young man, he had made the long boat trip from Japan to Seattle, where he worked as a houseboy to earn enough money to send for the wife he had left behind. When the Yakima Valley was opened for truck farming in the 1920s, Sakai’s parents moved to the small town of Satus, where they rented land—the 1921 Alien Land Law prevented non-citizens from owning land—and started their family. When Sakai was thirteen, her mother died, leaving her the oldest of four children.

“Pearl Harbor happened on December 7, 1941, and then, of

course, another part of our history began,” Sakai says. “President Roosevelt proclaimed the Pacific region west of the Cascades a military zone, and restricted the mobility of Japanese Americans. We couldn’t go near power plants, railroad stations, or any place the government deemed of military significance. There was a curfew, and for us that was the beginning.”

“As we got off the train, we were greeted by military personnel with guns, as though there was going to be an uprising or something.”

Two months after Pearl Harbor, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, ordering the evacuation of 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living in California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona. Many were U.S. citizens. On that day, as Roosevelt lifted his pen from signing the order, he shattered the future plans and dreams of Sakai and tens of thousands of other young Japanese Americans her age.

“Evacuation in Washington began in early May,” Sakai remembers, “and each geographical area of the state was assigned a date. In the Yakima Valley, signs on telephone poles

and along the roadways informed us that we were to be evacuated by the first week of June.

“When the time came, we were told we could take only what we could carry. This was a great dilemma for us because, for one, we didn’t know where we were going,” Sakai says. “Should we take warm clothes or summer clothes? Should we take pots and pans, or were we going to be fed? What kind of housing arrangements were being made? None of that information was available. In the end, we took some clothing and bedding, and left most of our belongings in the care of neighbors.

“We got on the train in a little town called Toppenish and arrived the next morning in Portland.”

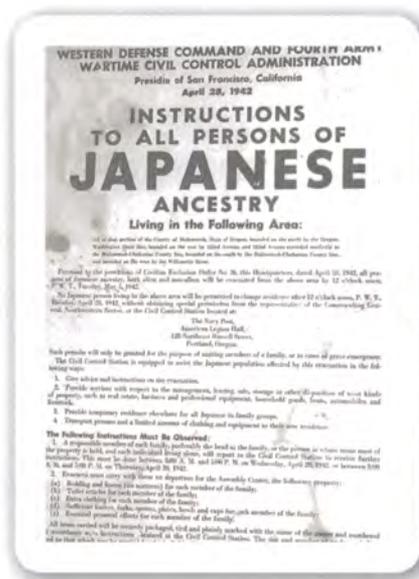
The Portland Assembly Center, today the Portland Metropolitan Exposition Center, was one of seventeen temporary locations along the West Coast where Japanese Americans were held between May 2 and September 10, 1942, while more permanent internment camps were being built. The Portland center, an eleven-acre site near the Columbia River, had for many years been the Pacific International Livestock Exposition Pavilion, where cattlemen showed and sold their livestock at auction to nearby packing plants. In the hot sum-

mer months of 1942, a total of 3,676 Japanese Americans from the Portland area and central Washington were held there while awaiting an unknown future.

“As we got off the train, we were greeted by military personnel with guns, as though there was going to be an uprising or something,” Sakai says. “We were led through heavy metal gates and into this cavernous building that was the old livestock exposition place. It was a great shock to me because I had never seen so many Japanese in my life. As soon as we checked in, we were given large canvas bags and led to piles of straw and told to make up our mattresses. Our family of five was assigned a sleeping unit, which was really just a horse stall. Partitions extended up only about six feet, so we could hear everything and know what everybody else was doing. There was no door other than a canvas flap, and no furniture other than our canvas cots.

The wooden floor planks had huge cracks between them.

“I still remember our first breakfast,” she continues. “We were led into a huge dining area that had been the arena for showing animals. There, we were greeted with large stacks of pancakes—cold and stuck together. I took one bite and couldn’t swallow, so I just left.”



Japanese Americans from Portland, who had already spent a week at the center, warned the Sakai family of the realities of communal living: strange food served en masse, uncomfortable sleeping quarters, bathrooms with no internal partitions, and a total lack of privacy. To add to the discomfort, it was the hottest summer on record. “With all the people, the place became stifling,” Sakai remembers. “And the flies! Everywhere you turned you saw coils of flypaper, which were black as soon as they were hung.

“One day, one of the men decided to cool off the place by hosing down the floor. He didn’t realize that the floorboards were laid over piles of dry manure, so with the water and the heat the stench became so unbearable that we had to go outside. It really was a miserable summer.”

Sakai spoke indignantly to her father about the pledge of allegiance she had recited every morning at school, with its refrain, “liberty and justice for all.”

“So this is the result of all that?” she remembers asking him sarcastically one day. Sakai has never forgotten his reply: “Don’t ever become bitter over this because it will gnaw at you and be a knot in your heart, and you won’t ever be able to live a normal life.”

“My father was a remarkable person. He still had a great deal of faith in the American government, and he thought that down the road people would come to their senses and

things would be better,” she says. “In the meantime, he reminded me, we just had to accept what was happening and do the best we could. Looking back, I see that I get a lot of my optimism from my father.

“All the adults at the assembly center had to sign up for a job,” recalls Sakai. “They asked me what my interests were,

Her father said, “Don’t ever become bitter over this because it will gnaw at you and be a knot in your heart, and you won’t ever be able to live a normal life.”

and when I said my major in university had been food and nutrition, they said I could be the dietician. There were three pay categories: eight dollars a month for menial labor, twelve dollars for middle-range jobs, and sixteen dollars for professional jobs, such as doctors and dentists. Somehow my job fell into the professional category, so I got top pay even though I didn’t know a thing about nutrition.”

As the summer of 1942 wore on, life at the assembly center settled into a routine. “As I think back, it was a fairly orderly place for the number of people and the amount of space,” Sakai says,

“and most tried to go about their daily lives as best they could. The first real problem that I can remember was probably in July, when a seven-year-old boy died from complications of measles. There was a great deal of unrest at that point. Some people felt the boy hadn’t gotten adequate medical care; others were frightened they might contract the disease. We were all cooped up in this miserable place, and the boy’s death became a kind of rallying point for a lot of discontent that was under the surface but hadn’t manifested itself.”

Fall approached, and as the evacuees realized their days at the center were numbered, the overriding concern became where they were going to be sent next. “We had heard rumors that camps were being built in isolated spots, but we didn’t know where,” Sakai recalls. “Then the first group was moved out to the Manzanar camp in northern California, and the Portland group went to Mendota, Idaho. Those of us from the Yakima Valley were moved out the first of September. We still didn’t know where we were going—we were simply put on a train and told we were going to a more permanent place.

“We ended up at a camp called Heart Mountain, near Cody, Wyoming, and I had never seen a place so barren, so desolate and stark. It seemed to me like the end of the world.”

Heart Mountain, with over 10,000 Japanese American internees from California, Oregon, and Washington, was home to Sakai’s family for the next three years. During that period,

however, some young people were allowed to leave for military service or to continue interrupted educations. Sakai was one of the lucky ones. The United Presbyterian Church in Granger, Washington, sponsored her to attend Sterling College, a Presbyterian school in Sterling, Kansas, where she got her undergraduate degree.

Sakai had just started graduate studies at the University of North Carolina when the war ended, in August 1945, and she returned to Washington.

“After the war, my family went back to Sunnyside in the Yakima Valley, and my brothers and sisters finished high school,” Sakai says. “My father was pretty old by that time, and after my siblings were all in college, he moved back to Seattle where his old friends were. He lived to be eighty-five.”

Sakai continued her graduate studies at the University of Washington, where she reconnected with Walter Sakai, a young man from the Yakima Valley she had met at the Portland Assembly Center. Although there had been little chance for privacy there, she recalls, they occasionally were able to find time to sit and talk on the grandstand seats, above what had been the arena. His family was later sent to the internment camp in Mendota, Idaho, but she and Walter stayed in touch through the war. He was allowed to leave the camp for military service, and after the war he attended the University of Washington on the GI bill. Walter and Sue married in 1949.

“For the first ten or fifteen years after we moved to Portland, in 1962, I wouldn’t go near the Expo Center,” Sakai recalls. “Finally, the Japanese Americans held a special program there to commemorate the signing of Executive Order 9066, and I was involved, so I had to go. It had changed, of course, but it brought back a lot of memories.

“How has this experience affected me? Whenever there is unrest in any part of the world, I quickly worry about what is

“In times of crisis or war, it’s so easy to slip over that line regarding civil rights, and I think we need to be very careful.”

going to happen to people from that particular country who live in the U.S. Right now, of course, I’m very concerned about Muslims and Arab Americans. In times of crisis or war, it’s so easy to slip over that line regarding civil rights, and I think we need to be very careful.

“That’s one of the reasons Japanese-American communities work to keep our story alive. Some people say it’s best to forget about it and move on, but I think there’s a lesson here for everyone.”

Acknowledgments

An oral history project is by its nature a collaborative one, involving not only the talker and the listener, but others who help facilitate the process. In this case, those others include various individuals in Portland's north and northeast communities and at TriMet, who led me to sources of background information and suggested men and women to be interviewed.

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Finally, heartfelt thanks to the men and women who gave so generously of their time and entrusted me with their stories. I hope I have done them justice.

Judy Blankenship

Captions



p. 3: Roslyn Hill in her garden on Alberta Street



p. 4: Coca Cola bottle doll



p. 10: Paul Knauls and Mel Brown at Jimmy Mak's



p. 12: Sammy Davis, Jr., Geneva Knauls, and Paul Knauls at the Cotton Club



p. 19: Jeanette Lattanzi and her sister Wanda Vrvilo in St. Stanislaus Church



p. 20: Family picnic of Slowikowski family



p. 26: Toni Linne at Cascade General Portland Shipyard on Swan Island



p. 28: Comptometer, courtesy of Ken Shadbolt at Desks, Inc., with thanks to Mark Vichas of Office Mart Liquidators



p. 35: Regina Flowers with Ockley Green Middle School students



p. 36: Fred and Regina Flowers, Lincoln High School prom



p. 42: Gladys and Paris Nunes, Kelly Point Park



p. 46: Mask by Paris Nunes



p. 50: Rudy Trujillo at Interstate/Rose Quarter MAX Station



p. 53: Seedling



p. 58: Les Jorg in the Kenton neighborhood



p. 60: Swift truck at intersection of Interstate Avenue and Denver Avenue



p. 67: Marion Craig at Force Lake, last remaining landmark of the city of Vanport



p. 70: "Ted"



p. 74: Sue Sakai at Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center exhibit, "Can History Repeat? Detained at the Portland Assembly Center"



p. 76: Original evacuation order poster from Nikkei Legacy Center exhibit

All photographs by Julie Keefe, with the exception of Sammy Davis, Jr., Geneva Knauls, and Paul Knauls, courtesy of Paul and Geneva Knauls; the Slowikowski family photo, courtesy of Jeannette Lattanzi; Regina and Fred Flowers at Lincoln High School prom, courtesy of Regina and Fred Flowers; the Swift truck, courtesy of Les Jorg; evacuation order poster, courtesy of the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center.

Notes

Intersections

Interstate/Rose Quarter Albina/Mississippi Overlook Park N Prescott St N Killingsworth St N Portland Blvd N Lombard TC Kenton/N Denver Ave Delta Park/Vanport TC Expo Center

