ALBINA HISTORY

Aerial view of Vanport. Vanport inundated and refugees. (from Oregon Historical Society)

POPULATION

Albina has traditionally been a destination for immigrants. Germans, Scandinavians, Poles, and Russians lived in tight knit communities. There are still pieces of these old ethnic neighborhoods but assimilation and shifting populations have diluted the formerly strong ties. However, there are new immigrant populations coming from countries in South and Southeast Asia as well as Latin America.

During World War II, Portland saw an increase in population, mostly due to work available in the Kaiser Shipyards. In this time the small black population increased 400% causing racial tension in the majority white city. The one place that was open to African American newcomers was the federal housing in Vanport.

If it is necessary to bring in large numbers of Negro workers, locate them on the edge of the city. It would be better far all concerned. If they are allowed to fan out through the city, it will soon be necessary to station a policeman on every corner.

President of Central East Portland Community Club, 1942. (Ibid p.43)

Vanport was built as temporary housing for shipyard workers but continued to be occupied after the war. In May 1948 a massive flood destroyed the area and permanently displaced its 6,300 African Americans, who comprised 20% of its population. Albina, which was already home to the majority of Portland’s black citizens, was the primary destination for the Vanport refugees. This was no accident. Portland has had a history of active segregation. A typical restrictive covenant reads:

…street known as US Grant place & no building thereof shall be used or occupied otherwise than for strictly residence purposes, and shall not be used or occupied by Chinese, Japanese, or Negroes except that persons of such races may be employed as servants upon such premises.

(Oregon Black History, p. 72)

Albina, though overwhelmingly white was designated as the city’s black area, over strong neighborhood objections. This designation has shaped the area’s history ever since.