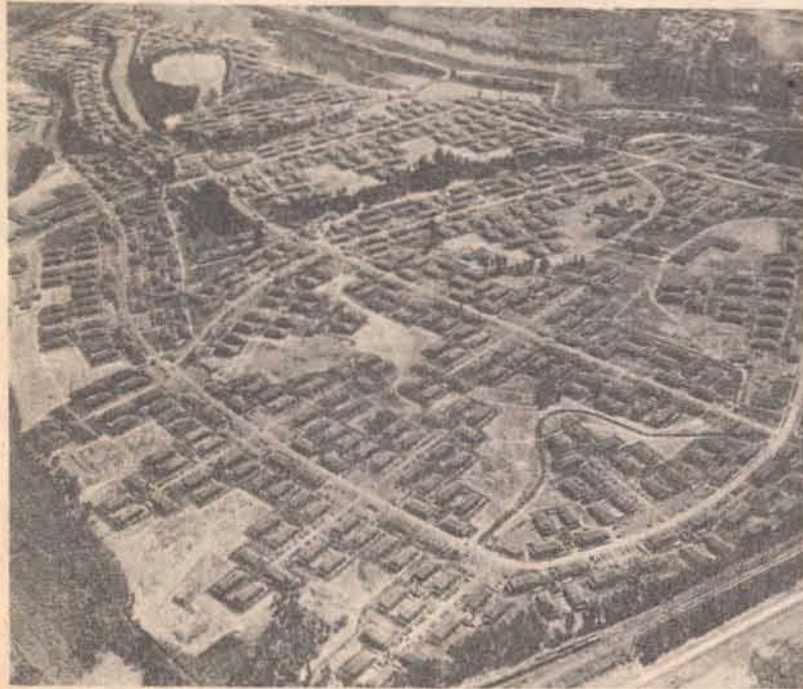


City of Vanport died suddenly in 1948 flood

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SLEEPING CITY — Oregon's second largest city lies sleeping in the sun Sunday, May 30, 1948, before disaster.



TERROR STRIKES — Bewildered boy clings to father's neck as rescuers struggle to help Vanport residents flee silent waters pouring through broken railway fill.



BREACH — Saturated fill of railway grade gave way "like toothpaste," widened rapidly under weight of water piled up west of fill in Smith Lake area. Fifteen persons died in flood.



AND SO A CITY DIED — Floodwaters rolled in from the marshes, sweeping huge apartment buildings aside with bulldozer force, herding them like barges into the southeast corner of the city, blocking all escape roads.

By LEVERETT RICHARDS
of The Oregonian staff

It was 27 years ago, Memorial Day, 1948, that I saw a city die.

At 4:15 p.m., Vanport was a city of sleepy suburbanites dozing in the Sunday sun, lulled by the laughter of children at play. By 5:15 p.m., Vanport was a city of silence, covered by the black waters of the flooding Columbia River.

Never has a city grown so big so fast, lived so short a life and died so suddenly, yet with so little loss of life.

Vanport was born during World War II to provide housing for some 40,000 workers for Kaiser's shipyards in Portland and Vancouver, Wash. Construction was started with wartime haste Sept. 1, 1942. The first shipyard workers swarmed into the wooden apartment buildings Dec. 12, 1942.

Within a year, Vanport was the second biggest city in Oregon, the largest war housing project in U.S. history — a city that wasn't a city, a city without a

mayor, a council, a court of law, a chamber of commerce, or a single homeowner; a city without local taxes or local government; a city without a head, a heart or a soul.

Five-and-a-half years after this drab war baby was born, she was dead. By that time, her population had dropped to 17,500. Among modern disasters, the death toll is considered low: 30 the length of the Columbia, 15 in Vanport.

The Vanport flood followed 30 days of hot, dry weather throughout the Columbia Basin of Washington and British Columbia, sparked by warm rains in the mountains.

By Memorial Day, Sunday, May 31, the Columbia River at Vancouver had reached 28.3 feet, topping many dikes and breaching others along the river.

Fears of lowlanders had been lulled by notices from the Army Corps of Engineers, delivered that very day, assuring residents, "The dikes are safe at present. . . Don't get excited. . . ."

Nevertheless, many had moved out, wary of the foam-flecked floodwaters that rose ever higher on the river dikes protecting the two-story wartime apartments. Most of the other residents had gone fishing or sunbathing at the beach, the mountains or the old swimming hole.

The backwaters of the Columbia and the Willamette rivers seemed to be sleeping in the sun, lapping only gently at the SP&S Railway fill that crossed the swampy bottomland east of Smith Lake. A work train was chugging along the fill toward Vancouver, when suddenly there was a breach in the fill, 75 to 100 feet wide. The swampy foundation had given way like toothpaste.

"There was no warning. There was a 60-foot breach, then 300 feet, then 600," said Calvin Hulbert, seaplane pilot who was circling overhead at the time.

The sullen waters snaked quietly through the widening breach, spread out through the ditches and marshes

and massed their strength for the assault on the city.

Dr. Stephen Epler, chief biologist at Vanport College, founded during the war in shipyard buildings, was in his office involved in paper work when he looked up at about 4:15 p.m., just in time to see the railroad fill give way. He rushed to his pickup truck and raced toward the residential section of the city, like Paul Revere, shouting, "Get out, the dike has broken! Take to the dikes!"

A motorcycle policeman also raced through the streets spreading the alarm. But no one heeded. "Why get excited?" they asked. "Where is the water?" Suddenly, there was water, rolling out of the marshes like a tidal wave, nudging huge buildings aside with bulldozer blows. Hugh Ackroyd and I had flown down to Clatskanie in a tandem seaplane to photograph the broken dikes in that area. We returned just in time to see the wall of a two-story apartment



HUMAN CHAIN — Rescuers formed human chain to help pull victims out of flood, when cars stalled.



REFUGEES — Fleeing residents carried everything from dishes to diapers, bags and bicycles in rush for safety of dike.

burst like a balloon under the impact of the current. Suddenly kitchens, bedrooms and parlors were laid bare. People were scurrying around like actors in a horror movie.

An old man ran ahead of the racing waters pulling a wagon with two screaming tots in it. The water overtook him.

Calvin Hulbert, seaplane pilot, saw people running around trying to save furniture and clothing, dogs, cats and children. "I hollered at them to run for their lives, but they couldn't hear, of course," he said. "I got sick to my stomach and went back to base. It looked like hundreds of people were being drowned or crushed as buildings smashed together."

Ackroyd and I watched two men paddle desperately in the current, half-submerged on a section of board walk. Another man lay on his stomach on a mattress, paddling hard with both hands.

There was some panic at first — women screaming for their children, men shouting urgent warnings. But, mostly, Vanport died quietly.

Within an hour, the water was 12 feet deep. All buildings were afloat or grounded against the dikes. At 5:44 p.m., a wandering apartment house, goaded by the dying current, nudged the flagpole that stood at the entrance to the silent city. The pole wavered, hesitated, then went down.

"That's the end of Vanport," someone said. And it was.

Rumors of bodies stacked up like cordwood persisted for weeks, but in the end only 15 bodies were found. Seven other bodies were never accounted for. Vanport was a city of transients.

It is quiet as the grave there now — except on weekends when drag races are held on the asphalt track. No one has lived there since that fatal day in May, and no one will under present city plans.