

Ed Washington_Uncorrected_ZOOM0013_Tr1

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SPEAKERS

Thomas Meinzen, Dave Hedberg, Ed Washington

Ed Washington 00:00

Forget. Yeah. Before you know it, you look up and 2030 years have passed. Yeah, no. And you just, I think when you were just talking about the band for theater, you know, just it seems just like yesterday, to me that we were rummaging through the trash cans trying to find pop bottles. Or, if we're lucky to find a note bottle that was a nickel, worth a nickel back in back in the 40s. Most pops were just bottles with just two cents. I think a little little beer bottle was a penny. They weren't canning, they didn't have very much. And then big they used to make these big bottles. And I think those were worth three cents. But you know, it, you could always find enough bottles to to go to the show, you know? And that was just it was such a such a part of growing up experience. You know.

Thomas Meinzen 01:09

I remember getting collected in soda cans. Yeah. For Kids.

Ed Washington 01:12

Yeah. Yeah, kids got a allowance. Mostly kids whose parents had money. And most kids parents. Kid was lucky if you got a 15 cent allowance was a lot. And of course, parents will say, you got to put a nickel of that in the bank. You got to give a nickel to church. So you're left with a nickel, you know, but sharing. Well, are you ready? Yeah,

Dave Hedberg 01:42

yeah, everything's is rolling. Right?

Thomas Meinzen 01:45

I guess just to start us off, would you like to introduce yourself and and tell us how old you were when you move to the airport. And what brought your family there?

Ed Washington 01:56

Oh, my name is Ed Washington. And I was seven years of age when my family moved from Birmingham, Alabama, to Vanport City, Oregon. And my dad had came out here a couple of years before to work in Kaiser shipyards. And so the idea between him and my mom was that he would go out and find a place for us to live and get the job. And then we would follow, which we did. It took him two years to get all squared away before we came out. But that's how I got the Vanport. Never heard of it didn't know anything about it. My father never said anything about we would be living in Vanport or nothing. So it was quite a very pleasant experience for me. And a very interesting experience.

Thomas Meinzen 02:53

What do you what were your first impressions, you remember?

Ed Washington 02:57

Well, my first impression of Vanport. When we drove from the train station on Sunday, I don't remember the exact day but it was Sunday. We got in to town on a Sunday, my dad met us and I don't remember if somebody I think a friend picked us up at the train station and brought us a van port. And what I remember most about van port was that when I walked when we came sort of off Denver Avenue, and you could get a look at Van port there was just as far really as the I could see, there were these rows of units that people lived in. And they were sort of a light, greenish color. They were not a grayish Colossi greenish gray, but I don't think I don't think green and gray goes together. It was more of a light, greenish color. Not bright, but you know, pleasant to the eyes. But it was just row after row after row of these houses that look the same. That was my first experience of coming to Vanport. But my first real experience coming to vamp what was after we got there. And a couple of days. After we got there, we went out and start exploring. And I guarantee you probably there wasn't a kid in Vanport that did not get lost because you always went to somebody else's apartment thinking it was yours because it was all the same. If you didn't know your number, you go knock on somebody's door and where's my mom? You don't live here. Where are you from? And then, I don't know I thought this was my apartment and then somebody in the back myself. Those are those new kids. They live down straight, you know, just write down two rows down. So that was all that was always. Everybody got lost at least once it probably in some cases twice because really, everything was identical.

Thomas Meinzen 05:15

Wow. Yeah. Several other folks that I've interviewed also mentioned that didn't happen. I was curious, what are some of your favorite memories? Fan part?

Ed Washington 05:27

I think my most favorite memory of the van port was arriving into van port. And because I had never been in a, I guess you could call it a project. We had a house in Birmingham, we had a own back yard front yard wasn't a mansion, but it was a pretty large backyard and so in our neighbors was at least 30 feet away from us, plus those who were across the street, so I, I think I had never seen that many people. And I had never seen that many houses. And Vanport I think the biggest surprise at Vanport was a busy city. People were always on the move, they were going somewhere and particularly during the week, they would be catching the the big transport to take them to the shipyard. And that went on 24 hours because the the big transport came through. At each shift. They came in a little bit early to pick up the swing shift. And then they dropped the swing shift off at 11 o'clock at night pick up the

graveyard shift. drop them off at 730 in the morning pickup or maybe a little bit of a pickup the day shift. So it was just discontinue was give us just a busy place. But it wasn't bad. It was very, it was very stimulating. You know, there was tons of kids to play with tons of kids, you know, tons of tons of kids to skate with on the sidewalk. Not very many kids had bicycles. But sometimes if they did, they would share a ride with you. But most of us skating and we made our own toys. That was that was the exciting part. You know, just learning how to get along.

Thomas Meinzen 07:42

You mentioned lots of identical apartments. What other buildings did Vanport have?

Ed Washington 07:48

Well, you know, Vanport, I think the apartments was the dominant aspect of Vanport housing, but within the community of Vanport. Because they had they had about they had about four major recreation, large recreation centers, and each of those large recreation centers had a big gym. So there was about four or five big what we call a rec centers and in there was about six to nine small recreation centers, sort of strategically place in between where the big ones were. And then there were daycare centers. They were specifically in certain neighborhoods, but there were daycare centers. And there was nurseries. And then and when we moved there, there was only two schools. And I think the the most iconic thing about Vanport was the ice houses, because people didn't have refrigerators, they had ice boxes. And so you had to buy ice or the most of the kids you saw there was a ice man would come through. I remember his name was Mr. Douglas, he would come through but also all that Mr. Douglas couldn't catch kids would would deliver ice using using again, they make their own cart. And they would deliver ice and grocery. So those were the stores. That was the you ask about the buildings there was I think there were three shopping centers, large shopping centers and Vanport. And really quite up to date, you know, they had more than one line, one checkout line, they it was really well laid out to help a cop, you know, help people to be accommodated at such a time that everybody was so busy. So those are the things in the schools. I remember the schools and the rec centers in the library. When you went into the area where the library was, was where people paid their bill. So there was where the hospital was in a small jail post office was there. Whenever I do talks about Vanport, I always refer to that as downtown Vanport. It was very small, but it had all of the services that people need. And then there were the fire departments, there was three, maybe four or five fire stations in Vanport. And, of course, then the theater, which was down at the far southwest end of Vanport, almost very close to where the railroad tracks where you didn't hear the trains going through in the theater, but it was in that area. So it was what I called in the deep southwest section of an airport. And there were nursery schools, also those nursery schools for take care centers, you saw all those things. And but I would say the most iconic was the ice houses. And it was strategically placed because people needed ice, and you need to go get it yourself, but much easier for calling a kid and they bring their they go get your ice and you give them a nickel, and they were happy they made money.

Thomas Meinzen 11:23

You mentioned in schools and Vanport. What was your experience like and in the schools and Vanport?

Ed Washington 11:28

I think that my school experience and Vanport was probably the reason I went to college. And I didn't, I couldn't afford to go to college in four years. It took me a while. But I think I think the foundation, of course, the foundation for my education started in Birmingham, because I started school in Birmingham when I was four years of age. Because the teachers knew my mother, and the schools were segregated in Birmingham, and that was one or probably maybe two blocks from where we live. So I started very early. And because the teacher told my mom that I was big enough to be in school, and I had learned to identify pictures and things like that, with my older brothers and sisters help. And so I think that this this schools were just when you asked about my memories, it's just the education and and the care that the teachers took with us. I mean, it was it was so meaningful. I don't remember. I don't ever remember a teacher ever asking me why was I there? You know, nothing like that. The kinds of experience that I know, particularly African American kids experience in other schools after they left Vanport, there were teachers who were just insensitive enough to say, you know, you should have stayed in Vanport, I know you're here because, you know, that was not the case in Vanport. The teachers there really cared about us. And I don't mean as black kids, but all of the kids and in school was fun. I mean, I enjoyed going to school. I never, there wasn't a day, I did not want to go to school at any time. But Vanport those memories are forever. Such they took such interest in us. But when you read about the history of the schools in Vanport, and you read, particularly people would read what Dr. Hamilton who was a school superintendent, what his message was, to teachers, when he hired them, he says, You know, I want teachers who really want to come here and be innovative, you know, and that really care about kids. And who Ben Joy teaching. He says I want every child in this school to have the best educational experience. He said, You know, he says when you consider that all these kids that are out here, were brought together through a war that's no fault of theirs, ended up here from 46 Different states backgrounds, and he said, and the superintendent, the the head of the housing authority, had the rector Dr. Hamilton to segregate the schools. And he told him nope, won't happen. Nope. He says these kids are here to get the best education and he says That's why I want teachers who have done I think that, that I did not know he had said those things until years later. But when I read about him years later, when I started speaking about Vanport, Dan, I appreciate it, why we were given such good access and care. And really, it was just don't hear that many kids ever talk about the bad school experience and Vanport and you just don't hear it. It was great. It was really great. That's wonderful. Yeah. It was really great.

Thomas Meinzen 15:40

I was curious, you mentioned in other interviews that you felt like Vanport was ahead of its time, in some ways. I think. I just wanted to ask you more about that. What ways? Well, I think,

Ed Washington 15:51

I think it was ahead of his, you know, part of us that we may be all we're a step or two ahead of our time, and really did not understand it, until we were put to the test. Because just about everybody in Vanport, just I'm sure, just about 99%, probably 98% of every African American student that was going to school example, probably came from a place where it may not have been that much, but may have came from a place where schools were segregated. You know, and if they came from the Deep South, they were and but there were other schools in the Midwest where kids went to school with white kids, and many I've heard people say, but many times they were only one of baby 10 in the school. And but I think that, that, I think that was just I just think it was it was a place I I always felt welcome in Vanport.

And I had no idea that Vanport was segregated. Now it it stopped by the time it was, they were letting up by the time we got there. Because people were coming in so fast. They had to stop it, they were trying to put all blacks in one place. And they did a good job of that. But toward the end when we got there that was coming to an end. And I never knew that I never felt like I just knew there were not that many white people in the area where I live, but there were white people there. But, but I also had no idea that that Denver at the you know, the the apartments up on Denver Avenue, were predominantly white and down in the area of force Avenue and, and places like that. I just don't read. I just it wasn't it wasn't carried out. Nobody had a sign that say you couldn't come in. So I didn't realize it until years later when they when they act. And I think what really came home to me it was when they said that this, that the housing authority at conduct asks the superintendent to desegregate the schools and yes, it's ridiculous. That's ridiculous in a war, man. It's ridiculous. I understand. 40s. But, yeah, that's ridiculous. That's crazy. You know, and I think the fact that everybody was in the war together, everybody was in vapour together, and everybody in Vanport, was probably just about cut from the same cloth. They were just poor people coming out to Oregon, to get a good job at the shipyard to either go back home, or just to improve themselves. I think everybody out there knows. That was the requests. And I think that sometimes you sometimes kids would say things to you, that was inappropriate. But that's kids and kids know how to take care of that. You know how to take care of that you're gonna have a little tussle if you want to be a good customer because if you're good don't ever call you a silly name like that. If you can get a good pop in just gets the first pop. And that's it, you know? And or if you if you'd have something that that kid really wants to play with, you got a bike and he wants a ride. All of a sudden you're his best friend and it and not because that's what he was taught. It's just because that what some of their parents would say and you know, kids we opt in to follow up here as well. Oops. I don't know if I'm making any sense.

Dave Hedberg 20:02

Did you have a bike? That

Ed Washington 20:05

No, no, you know, I did. I had a outs, you know, somebody gave me a bike and I can't remember all the details of it. And just as quick as somebody gave it to me, somebody took it from me and I lost the bike and I think it ended up in the slew and I can't remember who, but I had a bike and but as far as if we were just couldn't afford a bicycle. I was six kids, you know. We've had other people's bike but not not that many kids had bike. I mean, it's really funny back then. They Montgomery Ward's Sears, and there used to be a store called Eastern in downtown. And then you had Schwinn. So you had trying to think, I think, Oh, I think Montgomery Ward's bike, I think was JC Higgins brand if I'm not mistaken. And I believe that, um, what was the next month? No, Sears was a Hawthorne, I think that was their brand. And then there was somebody that carried a brand called Columbian. But then the Cadillac of all bikes back then was Schwinn. And the snowman bike, cost about 35 \$40. In the Schwinn silver King, I think costs maybe 50 to 60, or \$70. I only only knew of one kid that had swin, silver King, only one kid. And I not that many kids had the big Schwinn bikes, because they were the Cadillac of bikes. They had a nice rack on the back where you could sit and ride your little brother or sister of both them at the same time. And they had these big balloon tires, and they had it mounted in the middle of the, of the bar. They had a horn, you know, it was the battery operated on. And they had a big light on the front, that if you put a generator on your bike, you get constant light as long as you're so it was it was a Cadillac of

bicycles. So no, I was lucky that I got what that bike that I got and had a stolen that was the only bike and No, I never, I never owned a bike. When I was a kid growing up, I never owned a bike, rode a lot of bikes, but use it somebody else's, you know, always find somebody with a bike.

Thomas Meinzen 23:05

Everywhere my mom growing up with one of her older brothers when one vote and it was a whole household

Ed Washington 23:12

book Schwinn was Schwinn was it was it was the Cadillac of bikes it was, it was bigger, it was heavier. And they were just they were just, man, they just the head place for a big light and horn. Big handle bars. It was it was it was it was a deluxe bike. But you know, \$60 So a lot of money. Sometimes that was more money than what some people earned in a week. So you're gonna put it all on a bike? Not hardly. It's amazing how our parents manage, manage to survive, take care of everything. And still, most of us had a pretty decent life. We really did. We got a lot of stuff. And I mean, when you think about what your parents earn, of course, everything was I think probably Mother's Day in a family office. We're so good at you know, I just think that if you let your mom I'm sure that if they let their wives handle the the expenses, money left over because women just do out and do it. And they knew how to pinch away a penny here a penny there so that your brother could get that back and might take her three years though, but That's just the that's just the wisdom of, of a mom. And I think that when you talk about memories of Vanport such a presence of mothers in Vanport. And, and they weren't just your mom, they were mom to every other kid, every kid you knew. Or if you didn't know, mother's, if they saw you doing something that you had no business, they would say something to you. And it was very hard to not listen to a mom. When the mom would say, young man. What would your mother think? Oh, Lord, you know, my mom? No. But I'm gonna get to know her. What's your name? And then, my dear. Mother, dear is what we call. What's her name? My dear. My dears. What's her real name? So what's your last name? And then they would say something like, oh, so your verges on? Oh, oh. That's, that's, so I think that, you know, those are, those are, I'm rambling, I think a little bit, but those are, those were all the kinds of memories of Vamp are down at that hole. But everything you guys experienced, probably in your neighborhood, there was just there was a limit of what you could do, you know, and you're not going to push the button. I think kids push it a little more today. But so yeah, it was, it was it was really, and I think I think another one of my, my fondest memory of that board, I have to say that was just school, and all the things that they they did for us field trips, and many times a field trips would be about Vanport you walk away with what is now the wetlands, those that were wetlands then and they which go down to the slew and collect tadpoles, you know, in the spring and you know, just just had a chance to, to just dabble in, in that world. And I think those are the memories I think I'm able to do today what I do, I tied back to strictly back to the interests and and really the love that I had of school and the teachers. I mean, I truly, truly enjoyed it. And that's why it's so easy for me to talk about it. Because it's it's who I am really. Foundation is really laid there.

Thomas Meinzen 28:02

That's pretty cool. Both at that nation.

Ed Washington 28:04

Yeah, it was it was quite a place. It really was it was it's just one of those. It was such a it was just such an interesting time. I mean, I can remember there were soldiers and sailors. I mean, you see them everywhere. He went, I mean, going through the train station on our way out here. It's just there's there was never an absence of soldiers. Because we were at the height of the Second World War. But I think that Vanport left a lot of legacies. And I think one of I think one of them port's greatest legacy, and it's not because I worked there went to school there, but really, it was Portland State University. Really, that was I, I remember when the Vanport extension center open, and back when I remember it. And I remember people talking about it. And saying that, you know, we have a college here now. And but just think about what it gave. help give to those soldiers. So many of those people of where they are today because they had opportunity to either get into a trade school or go to college, you know, become a teacher. I was. So Vanport was Vanport helped more people than just those of us that we have there. It left a legacy and I think one of the one of the greatest legacies, we haven't necessarily followed it. That Vanport left is that you know sort of like, we can do it if we can build a city in less than a year's time. And it wasn't like New York City, it wasn't like of some rich, posh city, but it was not rundown raggedy or don't. It was it was built strictly out of the sense of urgency. And it had to be very utilitarian. And I think that those are my deep memories of Vanport. And what it what, it's a lesson that we could learn from today, if we would just take a look say, step back about 6070 years, probably found a lot of things that we could put to play today that they put to play. Somehow or another we seem to think that once it's done, it's over. But I think a lot of a lot of opportunities, a lot of answers. Particularly in the area of housing, particularly.

Thomas Meinzen 31:09

Yeah, feeds right into a question I want to ask you, which is why do you think the story and legacy Vanport is important for people to know about today?

Ed Washington 31:26

Think Vanport, not only did it change the, the life of the city of Portland in Greater Portland area. But it changed, I think the lives of every one of us that live there. Most of the people are gone. They really are. But there's this something, there's something about the Vanport spirit. And you know, in that spirit, was just not confined to one group or one gender. It was confined to everybody that live in Vanport. And Vanport was a large African American population, but the largest population was white. But then there were a few Chinese, a few Japanese who had to come back after being interred during the Second World War. And many of them didn't have any other place that they could go. They had a family, what was the only place that they could go? And vamp? What was the only place a lot of Blasket go and I'm sure Vanport was the only place a lot of whites could afford to that. So I think the lesson for it is that you know, given the right set of circumstances, you can do anything people can get beyond themselves. And I think that that to me is I think if we just if we could just every now and then step back and look at how that brought us all together not that we it was Kumbaya, I don't mean that. But everybody found their place. And, and people that live in Vancouver don't make any difference who they are. They just they will always talk about Vanport. You know, white people talk about Vanport Asian people talk about that for blacks talk about bamboo, Filipino soccer landport. Like it's all the same. It was just this. It was it was their home. And I know I'm proud to grew up. I'm proud that I was born. I really am. I learned a lot.

Thomas Meinzen 33:57

And you You certainly shared a lot of that with the rest of us, which is really special. I was curious about when you live there what you enjoy doing in your free time?

Ed Washington 34:09

Well, yeah, what's really funny, I was thinking about not that question, because you but I was thinking about free time growing up in Vanport. You know, for me. I wanted to get to school as quick as I could and as early as I could, so that you could play on the playground. And that's when all of your relationship building building started with your friends. Everybody would go to school early to play on the slides and what are they up to not to you? What do you call them that when you go up and down these seesaw? Yeah, and then we had these but they had swings And they had this some, it's a machine it was like, like a merry go round, but you would hold on to it. And you would run and it would spin you it was a merry go round. But it was on a pole. And it was all metal. And, and as kids was running, and it would get faster, and they would just sort of go out and you could get hurt on it. And we did. But yeah, that's what we did. And after we got out of school at 315, we would stay there for 15 or 20 minutes or go home and come back to school to play again. And it was just an I was always sad. When school was over, in the summertime, however, as soon as school was over, we go back to the school to play on the playground. It was really funny. It was just, uh, you know, there were a lot of other things, you know, in the summer, you're picking beans and stuff like that, but just I think it was just the friendships. The end in this schools that that is my most fondest memory of Vanport was the friendships school, and, and just how people cared about you. And for you. They really did. And you knew that. And I can remember, you know, they had specialists. I mean, we had art teachers in grade school. And kids were given the opportunity to just express themselves not doing something silly, but I mean, if your interest was art, I guarantee you you had it. They had an art teacher there who was going to help you if your interest was woodworking, they had a woodshop in Vanport. At each school, it was just every tool that you can possibly think of was down there. You can operate the dangerous ones, you know, like the drill, a drill press, big band saws, but the shop teacher would use those things to help you make your boat that you could put into regatta at was at East Moreland park every year. And so yeah, those are the things that I just remember the My fondest memory is just there was always it was it was never, there was never downtime. You were you weren't push, but it was always something to do you. And once you got tired of that, then you go out and roam around over the lakes. You know, look for bullfrogs that rolls. Spin time at the wetlands. You know, that's where we build our Clubhouse out in the wetlands because the small trees and it was just it was just there's always something going on. Those are those are my memories. If that was the last question you asked me. I hope I'm answering you correctly.

Thomas Meinzen 38:18

Absolutely. Yeah. You mentioned that your your dad came to work in the shipyards. And do you remember much about what his experience was like?

Ed Washington 38:28

What do you have never talked a lot about his shipyard experience. I think my father worked more in the shipyards probably his first year. My dad was in Birmingham. My dad was a bellhop at, I believe it was the Adams hotel. I can call that name because I had been doing research on my family. And I've been able to trace where my dad worked. He worked at the Adams hotel. And he was a Bellman. And,

you know, back during that period of time in the south, there was certain jobs that African Americans could do. A lot of them worked in the steel mills, but they didn't. Those were tough jobs. You know, you might work in a steel mill for 30 years in Birmingham or longer. And you were a furnace, man. I mean, what you did you kept a big blast furnace going so when you go to work in the morning, you had a big pile of coal behind you. And that's that's what you did. That's what you did. Until until it was time for you to go home. You know, you got your breaks. So I have a feeling. My mom and dad separated. When I was about 910 years of age. My dad moved to Los Angeles and we were supposed to move to Los Angeles. My mom said no She was also supposed to go back to Birmingham. And and I think when my dad said, No, I'm not going back, we're gonna go into California. And that's where they had a meeting of the minds. And so but might someone do that never talked a lot about it. But my guess this is just my guess is that my father I don't think my father really ever planned on going back to Birmingham in the first place. I think my father had had enough of the South. And, and I'm sure that was his way out. And so when he went to Los Angeles, that's about as far away as you can get from Birmingham out on the west coast. So I just have a feeling that he never intended to do that. So my dad never talked a lot. I was never around him in my latter years. And, and when we would talk, I never asked him those questions, there are a lot of things that I wish that I would have asked him. But you never think about it, you know, until, until they're gone. But I wish I would have had that opportunity to. But that wasn't important to me, because my mother had provided all the nurturing possible for us. During my father's absence, so I wasn't sure of, of understanding and my mom, her conversations was never about my dad and, and her separating, and that was never, there was never anything that we were reminded of on a daily basis, we were reminded to just keep on keepin on. And to respect our Father. We knew where he was. And we knew we were his kids. So that's so that so I never, I think I just think that my dad probably said, you know, after working in Birmingham, as a Bellman and then doing a year so at the shipyards, I think he probably said, it's time for me to find my own depth, his own depth in the water. And I think that's why he went to LA. So I never knew a lot about his experience other than Him saying, you know, it was dirty work in the shipyards. And it was hard work. And it was dangerous work. So I do know, I do remember him saying those things. But I think my dad's vision went much farther than shipyard.

Thomas Meinzen 42:58

I was also curious, I know you're still at Vanport when the flood happened in 48. Like that, I always have to ask about the flood because everyone has really strong memories of that. I was curious what yours are.

Ed Washington 43:16

One of the most interesting ending of a day that I've ever had in my life. Because we knew that we know that there was a possibility that that van port could be flooded. We didn't think it would ever happen. But we knew that that they had been sandbagging and and they had warned us of what to do if we knew that they were building dikes around Vanport to keep the water back. But I had no idea how high the water was. Because on the day of the flood. We were on our way up with my mom and a very good friend of hers. We were on our way up to see how high the water was it because during that, that Memorial Day weekend, the water was really at its peak. I mean it was about as as high as it could get and not just let go. And so people had been they'll probably that was Memorial Day weekend. So probably starting that Saturday, people were going up to see the river and they come back and this is

you gotta go up and see the water it is so high. And I can imagine if you go out to where Expo is and go across the street, you know, cross the highway there. And look, you can look right over in the Columbia and I'm sure that water was probably almost at the top of the bank. That's a law The water. I mean, that's a lot of water. And so after dinner that day, my mother and her friend Mr. Levy said, Let's go up and see the water. Everybody's talking about it. So we started out, but we had already been warned that if the dikes didn't hold that solar winds would go off and people need to get out. But we had no, I had no idea of what a dike looked like or how it worked or didn't dawn on me the power of water, especially when in Vanport, you are literally below the waterline if you're standing on the ground and Vanport the Columbia River is like 1015, maybe 20 feet above your head. It's just being held back by the dikes. And so we were on our way up to see the dikes and they had said that if the dikes failed to hold that sirens would go off and policemen would come through this street. Firemen would come through with the sirens to get out of here as quick as possible. So we were on our way to see how hot water was. This arms went off. I mean literally went off we were up at we were up like about on Fourth Avenue if you know where force Avenue is. We were midway between Meadows which is that last Street and Vanport before you get to the to the little lake over there. And we were walking north. And it's just so happened that a policeman on Multnomah County because they provided police protection for Van poor Noma county deer. He came by on his motorcycle and he just with a siren going. He said where are you folks going? And Mother dear and Mrs. Hilson, we're going to see the the river see how how to water he is. He said Well Don't you hear the sirens he says he says the dike is breaking. And he says our has broken I think he had already broken through down in the area where the theater was. And he said you need to get back home and get what you can and get out of here as quick as you can. He says this place will probably be underwater within 30 minutes. And we got flooded at home. I think Mother day and Mr. Silva said, Oh Lord, we hot footed at home. And my mother grabbed the little suitcase and made sure that there were a change of clothes under clothes, particularly for us that only comes about all she got was under clothes and a few important papers. And lo small suitcase got this big. And that was it. And we a neighbor was getting out. And so he gave us a ride up to where the light rail at that level. And so we got up there. So it was about we were up on the on that area, probably for about nothing that's referred to as a Denver Avenue dive. We were up there for probably about a half an hour. And people were talking about you think we'll be going back tonight and people say oh yeah, we'll be going back and and if not tonight, we'll definitely be going back tomorrow. So you can just low water, it's probably going to come in and you know, tomorrow we come down we get our brooms, and we'll sweep the mud out and sweep that water out and then we'll go right on living. So now this I'm not worried that you know, just this will will be fine. And probably about 15 minutes after that. There's this large gasp and that was that first big wave of water that came through and the dike really gave way down by where the theater was. And I mean, it rolled in there. It was a huge wave. You could see it and now is this collective gasp of awe. And then people I think realize that we weren't going back. I was not going to be going back not that night. I think we expected we would go back. That water came through and that what you see a Vanport today that entire area from the Portland highway on the west to the Columbia slew on the south and the actual the only place where that water go that the die cannot broken over in the north side which would be a long Marine Drive but All that water that was backed up, Smith and baby Lakes at that time has a lot of water. And we were fortunate that Denver Avenue is a dike and it gave way the next day, you know, hit the water broke through that day, I think that next that Sunday, and took water all the way over to what would be considered the Union Avenue or present day MLK, dyke. It wasn't MLK in those days, but over where the race track used to be and all that want to

use look at a picture, you see it and just just feel it up. So that was a day. I'll never forget, and not out of fear of I had never seen so much trauma in my life. I mean, he was it was just I mean, all of our houses were floating around and and no one knew. But where they are apart because they all look the light, you know, they were all stacking up against the Denver Avenue dike. You know, the water houses were big enough. So it was just stacking up and crashing into each other. And that's why we lost everything. I mean, my my mother, there was a notice in the paper that said they had found something some belongings belong to Virgie Washington, my mother's name. And when Mother dear went down to pick up those belongings, she said it was just a small bundle of wet envelopes letters, she couldn't even make them out. But it was they can make it out enough to know that the address. That was all. That was all. Everything else, everything else we lost everything. The only thing we say was our lives and our memories, and our friendships that have carried on with those of us that are still around. So that that was it was dramatic. And I think you know the but then the excitement started again. That night of the flood. We were housed at aqua green grade school that evening. And that was exciting. I think for kids because they brought in all these army cots and course you know all this food. You know, you could just eat as many apples as you want. You just get one and go back and get another one or sandwiches. I mean, it was that. For me it was that sleeping on the army caught. I thought that was so exciting. That was like playing war, I guess. And you know, I never thought about Was it exciting for my mom with six children there. There were no babies. But you know, and but we managed to get sleep that night at aqua green grade school. And then we got up Sunday morning and had breakfast. And while we were there after breakfast man got up honestly to have an announcement to me. And he said, you know there's a church, small church over on North Russel Avenue between Williams and Union Avenue, B MLK and Williams today. He said that they would be happy to take some colored families wasn't that many colored families that are Clean Green School? So I'm sure we all looked at each other. I didn't in the same way our parents probably did. We know that, that we're supposed to go down to the church. So we volunteered. And it turned out to be a wonderful, wonderful friendship. The little it was really the small Lutheran Church. And it probably had a population of maybe going to it may have had it might have had 100 people. But I think the intentions of the Lutherans when they open that church was to serve that community but also those African Americans who were Luther As in most African Americans are not Lutherans we're mostly Baptists and Methodists and, and we used to call sanctified Church of God in Christ, you know, where people use the tambourines and they let loose. You know, that's, that's, that's what we do. But there were a few African American who were members of that church. And the pastor of that church was a gentleman name. His last name was like cough. I just remember, I don't know how you spell it. But we call him his, uh, I'm gonna guess that Reverend like off, may have been in his late 40s, maybe early 50s Because he had daughters that was in high school and, you know, that relationship that we've my family form with them. Between my mom and Reverend Lai cough and his wife and his daughters. They corresponded up until the time I think the daughters passed on. My mother Darius always, they always exchange Christmas cards. And he was a nicest person, he never. I never heard him preach to us about anything. He was doing what he went to why he became a pastor that was to serve people. And so he didn't care what they look like. I never had that discussion with him, but I didn't have to because just by his action in his families, you knew they knew they were there. And so that was a that's a long story about the day but sort of that how that day finally ended up with us staying there for about two weeks in the church, and then we moved to Swan Island, and stay there at this old shipyard, bad barracks departments. We live stay there from like, June, up through September. And in September of 1948, starting in the late summer of 1948, they

had bought in trailers over in Geils lake where the 1908 exposition was and were all the railroad was right next to the railroad tracks. I don't know why they put blacks next to the railroad tracks but but it was and but the tracks are much greater over there now because all that area where the trailers were located, and there were apartments in Geils lake also they had been there for the since the beginning of the Second World War. And so we spent the winter of 1948 and 49. That fall through winter spring and over in those trailers. My family had two trailers. And you didn't have a bathroom inside the trailers you had to go out at night. If you have to go to the restroom, you go out, trips over to this community bathroom shower, something else and then we after that, spring of 1949 My mom with the help of my dad, they weren't back together but he was there to help when where he could found an apartment on North interstate. And we stayed there from probably April of 1950. March or April and then we moved back to Swan island a taking those barracks really made very nice apartments. And then we stayed there through the fall of 1950 Extra say through our lesson in my parents, my dad again and helped us find a place house. We could rent over on my mom could rent over on North East cook street between Present day MLK and seven Irving which were Irving Park is. So we stayed there until the time I finish after I finished high school, got married. And that's pretty much the legacy of my Vanport there's a lot more experienced than that, but really that's sort of where Vanport ended when I started at Irvington grade school in 1958. I've never seen another experience. There's just there wasn't one that was urban. It was a wonderful experience. I really enjoyed Irvington. But I had good teachers. And I'll just close this part of the story and you can ask me questions. I think there's, there's something about. For me, I've never really thought a lot about it. But I had such a wonderful experience of teachers in in Vanport Vanport was, you know, prior to the Vanport flood, I think they're, I think in the early 1940s, the Portland school district had hired one African American teacher. One, one lady, her name was Mrs. Stone. If you ever do any work on the Episcopal Church, where Reverend elsina boozier used to be the pastor down there, that church was started under the auspices of the Episcopal Church, and the Minister for that church was an African American man named Father stone. And here's why, I believe certainly was her was the first woman hired by the Portland school district. In this modern era, I think there had been one or two black teachers back in the day ease, but they taught black kids only. And so I think, what that goodness of, of education experience for me, really transferred from Vanport. I was very fortunate to get good teachers at Geils Lake School at Swan Island grade school. And then when we went to Irvington, I was in the seventh grade. And I had a teacher there, and my seventh and eighth grade teachers, she liked the students so much her name was Mrs. Hazel he'll h i ll. Mrs. Hill was our seventh grade teacher, and my eighth grade teacher. And we had I, I think we got a special relationship. I don't mean I didn't go to her house or anything like that. But I think she really cared for me, but she never once ever said to me that she cared for me, because of the color of my skin or because things were tough, and that we never had that conversation. But fast forward. After she had retired. For some reason. I always stayed in touch with her, I would stop by school to say hello to her and let her know how I was doing in high school. And, and if I was doing well, you know, she would always say, Well, I'm so proud. I hear about these things about you and etc. But, you know, she had retired from Irvington grade school and, and I would always check in with her not every day or every week, but when the urge had I would just call and see how she was doing. And so I ended up knowing that she, after she left Irvington, her husband died she a little bit later on and years, she remarried and she moved to Junction City. And but I would call her and so when summer I was doing a I was doing a trip doing a we're taking kids from Mount Olivet Baptist Church out in a way sharing the Vanport experience with them not we never went to Vanport but the kinds of things that we did in school. I

wanted to replicate some of that with these kids, but in but instead of going to the frog ponds and Vanport we went to places like Mount Hood and the Dalles Dam and to the coast, you know, they would have and so I Mrs. Hill was such an excellent teacher. And I loved how she taught Oregon history. She never ever said anything to me about you know, the Constitution, you know, prohibiting blacks. We never had that conversation. And she never shared with me that I think it was Jim Bridger. There's two or three of those mountain man's but one of one of those mountain man's was actually part African American. I can't remember which one it was, but she always talked about them, but maybe she I don't know if she knew it. She may not have known that. So when she came I Call her when Diana says I'm taking our kids down to shampoo Park, because we went to shampoo park when I was in eighth grade. And so I just want them Mrs. Hill to see a little bit of the things that I had the opportunity to see. And I knew about the story of shampoo we. And so we did and she and her husband drove up from Junction City, Oregon, so that she could talk to the kids. And I noticed that while she was talking to the kids, her hands were shaking. And I didn't think it was anything. I don't think it was palsy. She was nervous. She was really nervous. And after it's all said and done. And the kids were settled doing some other things. And I went over and spent some time with her. And I said Mrs. He OSA is so happy that you were able to come and spend time with these children. I said, I know they loved and I said they really I could just tell by the tension that they were given you. They love your conversation. They love your your stories. And she says Edward she says, You know, I said Mrs. Heal. I said I noticed your hands shaking. And I said, Were you nervous? She said, Oh, yes. And I haven't taught. I haven't been in front of a classroom for like 1516 years. She says yes, I was nervous. I say well, that's fine. I said they enjoyed it. And I said but missed the seal as I was so surprised that I didn't think you would ever be nervous teaching anything. She says Oh, yes, Edward, she says after you've been away from it for a while. And then we started chatting. And she says Edward, and I said yes. She said when you were at Irvington grade school, she said I always got the impression that you were treated well, and you and the kids got along. She never said anything about race, but I know what she was. That's it. Yeah. I said, you know, that was not hard for me at all. I said, you know, I just treat people the way I want to be treated. She says Edward, she said, Do you remember this certain teacher and? And she said, Yes, I remember him. And I think he was a PE teacher he was. And she says, Edward, she said, Did you ever think that he was prejudiced toward to be prejudiced toward you? And I said he was very prejudiced toward me, Mrs. Hill. I said, I didn't have to think about it or talk about an essay. I surely didn't have to go to anybody about it. I said, but I knew exactly the kind of person he was. She said, Edward, she says, I'm so glad that I that that you were able to handle that the way you did. She says, you know, she says, I don't know if you remember this particular incident. She said, But one day, we were, I think she had come to the gym to pick up the class. And I guess for some reason or another, he braided me up and down. I remember the answer. I don't remember why. She says Edward, I just want you to know, Jesus. And I do remember that I remember she brought she got us in line, brought us back to the room and told the class, take out your books. She says I'll be back in about 10 minutes. I remember her leaving the class. She says I want you to know Edward I went to him. And she says I want you to know at what I put my hand right in his chest. And she says I told him just like this. She said, If you ever talk to Edward, or any of my kids, like you did, Edward today, she says I'll go right to the principal and do what I can to get you out of here. And she says I don't know if it helped Edward I said, you know, he did change after that. He never mess with me again. But I had no idea that she had gone to him. And so that's that. That's you know, so when you take good teachers, whether they are Irvington or Vanport. Know, wherever you went to school, if they are teachers of goodwill. Only thing they see is their students they know Oh, a

student is black or Asian or whatever they know that. But that's what a good teacher will do for you. And you know, so that those are sort of probably had nothing to do with Vanport. But that just thinking about that, yeah. Those, those Hazel heal, she's gone live to be 100 and 101 101 years and six months. And I remember going into her service. And because I would even up to that point, I would call her. I would just sort of I remember the last time I had call Junction City and she was she we talked and she says I'm moving to Seaside and she stayed in touch with me and and, you know, so interesting her when she passed and had her service. Her, I asked her she used to has she had all this wonderful material. So I asked her and asked him Is this he'll, oh, those that stuff that you used to use when we were studying Oregon history? Yes. Did you have any of it? around the house, she saw what she says, you know, she says as you get older, everywhere you move your materials disappear. Because the people that were taking you in, and only they only have room for this, Jesus saw over the years and would have lost us about all of it. I told last night I was gonna ask you, if you had any left send it to me, I don't you're putting it to good use because you teach them all this stuff. And so I think that's an aside, but but you know that i That to me is misses he'll never taught in Vanport. But for me, that was really, that's an continuation, I think that those those teachers are out there, we just don't know who they are, whose people are out there. We don't know who they are. But every now and then somebody gets as lucky as me, you know that these things my life, my experience, crosses generations crosses boundaries. But there's there's a connection to them, there is a connection to them. And I know that if Mrs. Mrs. Heal, had wanted to teach in Vanport that's she would have been that kind of a teacher in Vanport. You know, she would have been that kind of a teacher. And I just I just applaud all I do I just applaud those teachers and Vanport. They were so special. And everybody talks about all the people who are you, most of us, most of them are gone now. But they all talk about their school experience. They talk about their school experience. So you know, Vanport left, a legacy, way, way, way beyond the fact that it was a home where people could go to and naked, and they got in there quick. And they probably had no idea that they were being forced into a certain place because blacks of of that generation always knew that blacks lived around blacks, you know, not in all cases, but But you know, so they probably never even gave it a thought. But by the same token, I think that they made Vanport was a place where your path was going to cross with somebody that you that didn't look like you. They just couldn't happen. And usually, I think what really made the difference in those melding together were the kids, because kids don't get one good goddang about the color of your skin, you're scared if you got a baseball bat in your head, or if you got a bat or if you got a tennis ball, or if you got some extra marbles, that's all that—or iif they can come into your clubhouse—that's, oh, that's that's the only... kids don't give a damn. They just don't you know, and if we, if and I think, you know Vanport was such that people had to leave the kids alone. They couldn't. They couldn't control all those kids. I mean, the kids weren't out of line. I mean, you, you're playing on the same sidewalk, you're playing the same marble games, you're playing the same hopscotch, you're riding on the back of your friend's bike. It's just, it was a city that honestly brought people together and ways that probably impacted all of us. And we never even gave it a thought. We probably never truly understood what was, what was this great sociological thing that was not planned. It's just normal. It's just natural and Vanport Vanport was a place that allowed that to nourish.

Thomas Meinzen 1:15:50

Well, that's a terrific way I think to, to finish up. That's lovely. Just thinking. It's been such a pleasure and honor to talk with you. My pleasure. I did want to ask if you were if there is any, any last things you'd like to share? Before we stop recording?

Ed Washington 1:16:09

Well, I think I'm just glad that you all are doing what you're doing. Because I think that, that you find that you know what, your contribution is very much needed. And somebody that you will never even know is going to be impacted by what you're doing. Somebody's PhD thesis might run up on something and come to find, you know, we've, we've created a lot of new things. We really have, we think, but it's a lot of the same thing just presented in a different way. So I think your contribution is very, very important. And Mr. Hedberg here, you know, he's, I'm a goddess. It's what he's doing is, you know, he's, he's helping us to, he's helping us to understand and no one and love our history. Pretty special. Yeah. Somebody will be looking at it.

Dave Hedberg 1:17:38

Do you remember going to see a movie at the theater? Will you remember what movie it was?

Ed Washington 1:17:42

You know, I, there were a lot of movies, you know, that tell you the truth? Honestly. We never, never paid attention to the name of the movie. All we cared about was we knew that it was going to be a Western. Some kind of Western movie. And that would depend on that would be Tom X. And it's me. So Tom Mix. Oh, rah Rogers and Trigger the Durango Kid. Red Rider with little beaver, Lone Ranger and Tonto. There was always but you know, as far as the other movies. I don't remember the titles. I remember. I do remember there was there was one I don't know why this one really? stuck with me. But the name of the movie I know. It's called Hi, h i g h bar ba re Hi, Bart burry. And I for some reason I remember that picture, probably better than any other. Now you always look forward to we knew about the shows. The big all the surely tempo shows and all the big productions like one that they don't even show anymore was called Songs of the South. With they were just telling a story that this African American gentleman they call him Uncle Remus. And they don't even do that anymore. They don't even show that movie anymore because of of what it really stood for. But as far as kids, we didn't know what it really stood for. We just knew about Brer bear Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox but never ever. I never equated them with being a character as exaltation of that person, you know, there was just these three counting gods but when you look at it today you can see you can see the undertones in the racism of it. I actually have that movie at home on on a disk and I watch it every now and then. And it's it was about it's probably the epitome of I can't think of the word I want to use a mimicking how some people how blacks were supposed to be seen, you know? Not smart, but when you really look at the stuff that they pull on each other. You can't be dumb to do that. But it just wasn't, you know, I can see why they're not but red Ryder and Lil beaver it's sort of the same way red, little beaver was native young, he was a Native American kid. Of course, Tonto and Long Ranger. Tonto never said a whole lot of words. In the movie, he was probably said more non verbally than he ever said, verbally, you know, but it was still, you know, and then there are a lot of other movies that were a lot worse. But you know, I it's really funny. I do remember. I don't. I think I saw Song of the South when I was a kid. But mostly, I remember high Barbary for some reason that when it was Van Johnson and I forget the lady was his. I'm gonna say June Haven, but that's not it's not it's not June Haven, but it was hyper harbor. He was he was a

Navy pilot. And his plane went down. And the South Pacific. And while he was there, it was a reflection on his uncle had I forget his uncle's name, but his uncle what was in the Navy, he would always tell them when they were little kids, he stories about this place out in the Pacific call. Hi, Barbara Re. And that's it. You can still find it. But if for some reason that when and I think it was probably based on the kids who were in the movie. And some of the music that was in the movie. I remember it, you know, just but i don't i I'm sure I saw two years before the mass. I think I think that would have been what's a British actor that was I can't think of his name. But yeah, I mostly I saw a lot. I saw a lot of tommix movies, a lot of Robert Rogers movies, and there's tons of them. And lots of lots of westerns. Oh, yes. And then it was the serials you know, I can't remember the name of that one either, but I do, they'll cereals or something else. And then also another one the East Side kids. That was that they were I think they I think they're referred to as the East Side kids, but they were very, very popular. And then our game, you know, with buckwheat and all those guys it sort of they sort of ran their gauntlet in the 20s and 30s. Because my mother talked about told me that she remembers seeing our game when she was a little girl watching movies. So all of those kinds, but for some reason, the one that I can say I remember watching high Barbary i but tons of Westerns but so many um, it's hard to remember. But I do remember that the Durango Kid I liked him. Yeah, he was good. Hopalong Cassidy and he was all right. tommix It was okay. Gene Autry. Roy Rogers they be kissing their horses and you know.

Dave Hedberg 1:24:32

Do you remember if the theater wasn't segregated seating?

Ed Washington 1:24:37

No. And I think this theater in Vanport only had one floor, no balcony. And I think that was done intentionally because important Portland you know, we refer to over here as in Portland. Blacks had to sit in the balconies most of the theaters and like One African American gentleman told me back in the 20s, you couldn't even get in to sit in the balcony. Lot of the movies downtown, they didn't let you in. Sit in the balcony? No, he's a you would have been happy to be able to sit in the balcony if you want to see the movie. But no, there was not any of that in Vanport. And I have a feeling that that's why that was a one story theater, because I'm certain that if they had had two stories, they would have done that. Somebody would say, Well, you got to put the colors up there, you know, so no, it was not segregated. Yeah. And, you know, kids didn't really care about some kids would, you know, they may come if they're from the south, and they're gonna sit next to this card kid, I don't sit next to him in the south. So I'm sure they would say that. And you know, they would probably get a dusting up, you know, not necessarily by a black kid, you know, they've gotten my up and dust them up and says, you know, James, my friend. And they probably would say, in the south, well, you're not in the south, that's my friend. And that's how those changes really took place. But no, they, I think they took every step to try to eliminate that, because the worst thing you would want is to have this small community of 40,000 people, which is a large community 40,000 people, you don't want them at each other's throat. And they surely had to go to school together. So I mean, and that probably is what started the whole change of things for because there was a lot of southern whites and Vanport. Does anybody know the place to go either? So you go home and you say you don't want to live next to somebody? Well, you got some decision to make, you're gonna stay out on the ground? Nope. So people begin to put away their foolishness. But no, it's, I think, I think they, I think they really, and the fact that the kids were in school together, and they played at the rec centers together. I mean, they did everything together. And kids,

kids have a way of really changing their parents. You know, because if their mother is, is had the work, and if their best friend was a black kid, and it's time for dinner, and the kid would follow you home for dinner, and then get got the word black or white, just save your pants. Are you have you had your dinner yet? No. Are you hungry? Yeah. Then the mother gets home. And where did you eat? Mrs. Jones house? Really? You know, that's so all of those kinds of things, I think, help shape us all. And force us to deal with life's certainties or uncertainties whenever they occur. Yeah, so number Do

Dave Hedberg 1:28:15

you remember? Any, like Native American kids are Native American families?

Ed Washington 1:28:20

Only a few. Yeah, not there. Were not very many Native American kids. I remember. Yes, matter of fact, I I remember Virgil. Note that there were not very many Native American kids in Vanport. There were Native American kids in some of the other schools, but you know, it that I didn't realize how tough of an adjustment it was for the Native kids. I mean, when I knew Native kids, but you know, I, I know, a lot of times, they wouldn't be at school, but it never dawned on me that, that they or their families were fighting some tough stuff. I mean, you know, mostly, probably the toughest thing that those kids had to deal with, probably with their parents were probably the drinking, you know, and I don't think people realize how, how tough that was on some of those families. And I went to school with a couple of kids, Native kids, and, you know, as those kids got older, you know, because if you're coming home, and you're you're dealing with that every day, I mean, you gotta it's gonna be hard to not escape it, you know? But no, so I have a few Filipino students and Vanport not a lot but a few and no Japanese. One or two Chinese. You know, it's really funny. Probably all the Japanese had to say was that I'm Chinese, and just depending on you know, it's like saying, so buddy, I'm African shoot was good disagree? No matter what tribe, you still have similarities, you know? And and, you know, with a few exceptions I mean I think that, you know, if I really want to put my mind to it, I probably think that person's Chinese and that yabbies. But Dad, you can be wrong. It's just best alone because you don't know. So, so yeah, so there was some there was a bit vample was a good place. It was a it was a good growing up experience. I'm glad that I had it.