

Field Notes for Frank Blair Interview  
David B. Hedberg, Public Historian

12/12/2022

I had the pleasure of assisting in an interview with Mr. Frank Blair with Christina Felix.

Christina has been in contact with Mr. Blair several times over the past month or two and consulted a pre-interview over the phone discussing his youth living in Vanport and witnessing the flood. She had let me know that Frank did not consent to being videoed for the interview and after I suggested we try to pitch the video for its nonverbal documentation and for the ability for Frank to share a copy of it with his friends and family, he was still uninterested. This had all transpired before the interview date.

The morning of the interview I was feeling well and had had a productive couple hours of morning work before meeting Christina and Mr. Blair in the lobby of the Mamook Tokotee apartments at 4610 NE 42nd. I arrived at 10:55 and wore a kn94 mask. Christina also wore a mask and Mr. Blair put his mask on once he gave me a fist bump welcome. After we had quick introductions we then proceeded into the large community room where Mr. Blair and Christina sat in armchairs and I began setting up my recording equipment and used a stackable chair to form a triangle conversation with each of us a few feet apart.

I used a Rode Shotgun mic on a small mic stand pointed at Mr. Blair and ran it to my zoom h5 recorder. I also used the stock mic on the recorder as a backup pointed toward Christina to pick up her and my voice. I pressed record quickly after setting levels.

We immediately began discussing Mr. Blair's family history as a Mississippi Band of Assiniboiné from White Earth Minnesota and his family arrival in Vanport in 1946. His mother worked in the shipyards and he and his little brother witnessed the flood. He had vivid memories of playing and the exact landmarks such as streets and Vanport institutions. He discussed the social and cultural segregation he felt and on several occasions mentioned that he did not want people to know he was Native American at the time. He also discussed going to Celilo Falls often to experience native culture, with comparisons to salmon and smolt fishing to the types of fishing he had done back in Minnesota. He offered many vivid memories about Portland and places that had changed over time, many of the places and spaces he frequented then are now gone and were associated with the African American community. He noted occurrences with the police and Matt Dishman, and boxing and rough play with friends. The second half of the interview became more about his life, service in the military, and connection to eastern medicine and travel, ultimately which brought him back to Portland.

He and Christina had an obvious rapport and she followed up with questions and prompts about stories he had told her previously. I noticed a warm engagement when I asked him about fishing and visits to Celilo. Some of my other questions about the larger native community in Portland and Vanport did not prompt much response, in part because he said that he often did not

advertise his native identity until later in life. The interview concluded about an hour and twenty mins later after I outlined the process for editing and his ownership of the recording. He signed a waiver and granted us full permission to use the interview how we like.

After thank yous and goodbyes I followed Christina to my car and we discussed sending him a thank you note with a gift card for Trader Joes and perhaps some sardines, which he had mentioned were a favorite of his.

My initial impression of this interview is that it reveals much about urban natives in Portland and Vanport in the wartime-immediate post war. It also reveals some important connections between the segregation of african americans and intercultural friendships in n and NE Portland, as Guilds lake, columbia villa, Williams, Knott Street, Jazz Clubs, were all discussed.