

## Memories of the 1948 Vanport Flood

by Dale Skovgaard

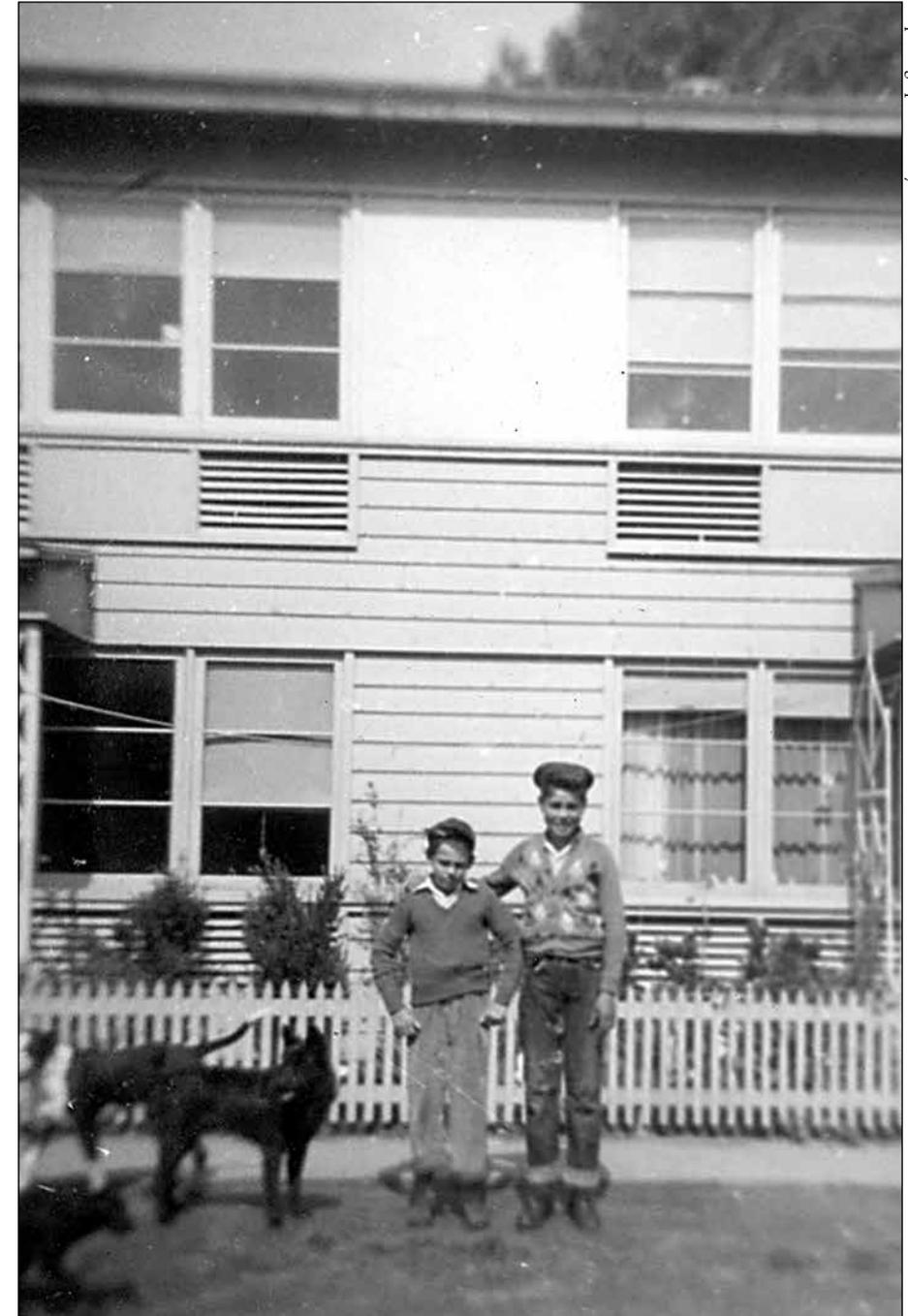
ON MEMORIAL DAY, May 30, 1948, Vanport — a city of 18,000 people — was destroyed in the matter of a few hours by floodwaters from Smith Lake and the Columbia River, which broke through the SP&S north-south railroad line landfill. As I began to write this article, the memories and images of that day came back to me so clearly that it seemed like it happened only yesterday. In this story, I hope to provide a clear picture of my experiences in Vanport before and during the flood, and I will begin by providing a little background of my family and my impression of the place before leading into that awful day in 1948.

My parents, Herman and Agnes H. Skovgaard, and my sister, Delores, had come to Oregon in 1942, when my father volunteered to work in the Kaiser Shipyards. Dad got a job as a pipe fitter at the Swan Island Shipyards, where they were building Liberty Ships — cargo and fuel-carrying ships needed to support the Navy. Once he was settled, he called my mother in Hills, a small town in a farming community in

southwestern Minnesota, and told her to pack up, sell our house, and travel to Portland. He told Mom that he had found an apartment in Vanport, a wartime housing project.

With that news, Mom finalized everything in Hills and purchased our tickets on the Great Northern. We were all quite excited about this new adventure, especially me. The farthest I had ever been away from home was to Rochester, in the eastern part of the state. It was an outstanding trip. I got to see some of the most beautiful country in the world, and the train was full of people, mostly soldiers going to Fort Lewis, Washington. We were all on a delightful high when we arrived at Portland's Union Station and saw Dad standing on the platform.

The Kaiser Shipyards had recruited people from all over the United States to come to Portland and work in the shipbuilding yards, and the government had authorized the Vanport Housing Authority to erect apartment buildings to house them. The buildings were quickly and cheaply built.



All photographs courtesy of the author

Shortly after moving to Vanport, the author (left) stands with his friend Vincent, dog Max, and another neighborhood dog in front of their apartment building on Island Avenue in Vanport.

With the exception of a few single-story buildings at the east end of the city, all of the apartment buildings were constructed using an identical design. On the first floor, there were six two-bedroom apartments with single-bedroom apartments located on each end of the ground floor. Access to the apartments was via a stairwell situated between every two apartments. Four of these apartment buildings were connected to a central plant that provided heat, hot water, and electricity. Storage space for each apartment was also located in that building, as well as a laundry facility with four wringer

washing machines. Upon arrival in Vanport most families were assigned to a two-bedroom apartment. Large families were assigned to two, two-bedroom apartments on the second floor in the same stairwell, with a passage way through the wall so the two apartments could function as one.

All of the apartments had the same floor design — a living room and dining area and a small efficiency kitchen with a few cabinets and a counter space with a two-burner electric stove and a small sink. Underneath the counter was a small two-shelf icebox that held a twenty-five-pound block of ice that had to be replaced every third day. There was no insulation in the outer walls of the buildings and no sound-proofing material between the interior walls, only plaster board nailed to the studding separated the rooms. Thus, we could hear loud conversations or radios in other apartments quite easily.

Household furnishings consisted of a couch that could be made into a bed, a chair, a small end table, and a floor lamp. In the kitchen was a table with four chairs. There was one bathroom with a sink and a small shower. Each apartment had two bedrooms, one with a double bed, one small end table with a lamp, a four-drawer dresser, and a small closet and the other with twin beds, an end table with a small table lamp, a four-drawer dresser, and a small closet.

Our first apartment was located on the western end of Victory Avenue, the main east/west artery in Vanport. The building was located at the end of a long parking area that was connected



*The author's father poses for a photograph before going to work at the Swan Island Shipyards.*



*This pre-flood photograph shows the apartment building on Victory Avenue where the author and his family lived.*

to the avenue and a short distance from the Number 2 Shopping Center on Cottonwood Avenue. It was the area where the most recent construction had occurred, and there was a lot of barren space with no grass, shrubbery, or trees to provide a homey feeling. The open spaces between the buildings were quite large in some places and good for playing football or baseball, but when it rained it was just one big mud puddle. Our apartment was on the second floor, and when I looked out across the area from our living room window all I could see was more apartment buildings, all of them the same.

I was a little nervous when we first arrived and spent the first few days just staying around the apartment — keeping out of my mother's way as she unpacked and did her best to make the apartment look nice. Dad was already going to his job, and so most of the work fell on my mother's shoulders, with some help from my sister. My job

was to take care of my dog, Max, and keep out of the way.

I was enrolled in the Number 2 School, where I attended the fifth and sixth grades. There was no school bus service, so I walked to school. Because of the large number of children, classes were arranged on a two-shift basis — from eight in the morning until noon and from noon until four in the afternoon. I was lucky enough to get assigned to the morning shift, so I had my afternoons free to do other things. If you wanted to attend classes in music or art, you had to attend in the free hours. I took coronet lessons for a while, and I had to walk home after regular class hours and get my coronet and then walk back.

After we had lived in the Victory Avenue apartment for about a year and a half, Dad put our names on a list to get another apartment nearer to some of our friends and our church. We were holding Sunday services in

the auditorium of a nearby small elementary school located on the edge of a large athletic field, east of Island Avenue. One day, to our pleasant surprise, Dad came home and told us that we could move to an apartment on Island Avenue. That was great news. Following dinner, we drove over to see our new home.

ISLAND AVENUE WAS a small street with the Bayou Slough on the north and west sides and Bayou Lake on the east. To enter the street from Victory Avenue, we had to cross a small wooden bridge over the slough. Because of its location, the Island Avenue community was quiet and well kept. There was no difference in the size or design of the apartment from our previous one, except that this one was on the ground floor. The first building on the left-hand side of the street heading south, it had a large grassy area in back where my friends and dog Max could play and there was a large treed area along the slough. It was only a short distance to my new school.

In some ways, living in Vanport was like living on a military base. We had a lot of rules and regulations to follow, such as permitting inspectors from the housing authority to enter, inspect, and repair property in the apartment, curfews for people under eighteen years old, and a ban on unnecessary noise and disturbances. But in the end we all adjusted.

The city had two large shopping centers, a good fire department, a good police presence with Multnomah County sheriffs, and a well-staffed hospital. A movie theater not too far

from home showed double features plus newsreel excerpts. And, of course, there were the large community centers located in different parts of the city where young people could play sports under adult supervision, learn different arts and crafts, and study music. It kept a lot of young people off the streets and out of trouble.

One of the nicest things about living on Island Avenue was its closeness to the Number 1 Shopping Center and the Housing Administration building at the corner of Force and Victory avenues. The shopping center had a large store with individual checkout counters, a butcher shop, a bakery, and an area where Dad could buy his Sunday newspaper, cigarettes, and pipe tobacco. There was also a cafe that had great food. Weather permitting, we could walk to church on Sunday. Dad was the choir director, and he generally left home earlier on Sunday morning than we did. He liked to get there a little early to make certain everything was set up.

There was a bus stop on Victory Avenue, and all we had to do if we wanted to go down to Portland or up to Kenton was walk across the bridge and catch the bus. Had it not been for the flood, we probably would have lived in that apartment for many years.

During the war, families were issued food and tobacco stamps for use in buying rationed food. My dad, of course, had to have his ration coupons to buy his cigarettes, but not his pipe tobacco. Mom received ration coupons for those items also, and since she didn't smoke Dad generally had sufficient tobacco to last him. If he ran



*Vanport residents shop and visit at the Number 1 Shopping Center.*

out of his coupons, he would tell me to take out a cigarette-rolling device he had, and we would sit at the table and roll homemade cigarettes using his pipe tobacco.

The grocery store was Mom's domain, and she had ration coupons for items such as meat and butter. She would make certain that she kept a certain amount of coupons on hand so we would not run out of our monthly allocation. To save on the butter coupons for special occasions, Mom started buying margarine that came in a clear plastic package with a small packet of food coloring. We had to break that little packet and squeeze the food coloring throughout the margarine until it looked the color of butter. It was not very tasty, but after a while we all got use to it.

To save on the ration coupons for meat, Mom sometimes took the car, if we had enough extra gas coupons, and

drove up to a butcher shop in St. Johns in the North Portland district to buy a roast of horse meat. I never thought I could eat horsemeat, no matter what, but once I got the thought of what I was eating out of my head it wasn't bad-tasting. It seemed to be a little more stringy in texture than a roast beef, but it was still passable and didn't require meat stamps. When Mom put the platter with a horsemeat pot roast on the table, Dad would sometimes joke, "Now nobody say *Whoa!*"

Mom and Dad, like many of the other adults in the area, planted flowers in the little patches of yard in the front of the apartment buildings. My Dad even put up a small white picket fence around the edge of the patch. I caught a couple young pigeons one summer and raised them as pets until my mother told me I should let them go. Apparently their cooing was starting to bother the neighbors. I kept

them in a small cage with a roof out in the front area next to the building. I trained them to sit on my shoulder, and we would go off walking through the woods together. Once mother told me to get rid of them, I took them back up to the stockyards where I had caught them and turned them loose.

backgrounds, had come from different parts of the country, and who spoke with different accents. Also, Vanport was a twenty-four-hour city that seemed to have something going on all the time. The shipyards never closed, and there were people on the move at all times of the day and night.



*This photograph from Victory Avenue faces east toward Lake Avenue.*

At first, I thought they might come back to the apartment, but after a couple of days I decided they had not been trained enough to return. It was better anyhow. Up at the stockyard they had a lot of pigeons to fly with.

Looking back at the early days of our arrival, I must admit that I suffered a mild shock when we first arrived. In Hills, half the town's population were my relatives on one side of the family or the other, and I had many cousins and friends to play with and nothing to worry about. In Vanport, I had to get accustomed to the smallness and sameness of the buildings and the people who had different ethnic

At the time of the flood, I had just turned fifteen years old and had started high school. There was no high school in Vanport, and we could choose either to attend Roosevelt High School in the St. Johns district, located in North Portland, or Jefferson High School in the Killingsworth area near the city's bus barns. The schools had worked hard to build temporary classrooms to handle the increase in student population from Vanport. Like me, most of the kids picked Roosevelt High School, although my sister Dee picked Jefferson High School. Later, when the population had decreased in Vanport, it was determined that all high school

kids would go to Roosevelt. To get to school we walked to the Number 1 Shopping Center and caught one of the designated buses that carried us to our respective schools. I think we had three or four of those old gray-colored, government bluebird buses. Each bus was loaded with students, and the last

job was to take care of the horses and act as trail guides for those who came to ride. We always got there early and saddled one of the two horses that had been left in the barn overnight. Then one of us would ride out to the pasture area along the lakeshore and bring the other horses into the corral,



*This west-facing view of North Cottonwood was taken from Denver Avenue.*

ones to board had to stand all the way to school. I remember that the trip took about a half hour.

In addition to school, I worked part-time for Ted Smith, who owned and managed the Smith Lake Riding Academy on the west side of the North Portland Road near Smith Lake (or Five-Mile Lake, as some folks called it). It was a seven-day-a-week operation, and Ted hired me and two friends of mine — Donnie Dill, who lived on Island Avenue not far from where I lived, and Louie Sulovich, who lived outside the city. It was a great life for a young guy like me. I had grown up in farm country, and being around horses and livestock felt great. Our

brush them, and saddle up a few for the first customers. Then we would then head off to do some other chores. I had been working fulltime for Ted for two summers and then part-time during the school year.

When the floodwaters began rising in Smith Lake, Ted kept the academy open as long as he could. Finally, the overflow from the Columbia River caused the lake to rise so much that Ted decided to close the academy and truck the horses and equipment out to a farm in Scappoose. At the time, I don't believe anyone thought the lake would get so high that it would flood all the buildings around the lake, but Ted didn't want to take any chances.



*Donnie Dill (right) and the author pose together after getting ready to go to their jobs at the Smith Lake Riding Academy.*

down near the Number 2 Shopping Center, which had become Vanport Junior College, and walk up a path by the railroad fill to the area where the two sets of railroad tracks came together at a switching station. From there, I walked down the other side, where I could cross the road and get to the academy grounds. Sometimes, Dad or Mom drove me down to the end of Victory Avenue and dropped me off. Other times, I rode my bike and hid it in the trees near the path going up to the top of the railroad fill.

At the end of work that day, on Saturday, May 29, Ted asked Donnie and me if we would be willing to come out the next day, which was Memorial Day, to help clear up the rest of the work. He didn't think it would take too long and told us we should be able to get home in time to do something with our families. That, of course, was fine with Donnie and me. I knew my family had not planned on doing anything special that day except to go to church, and so I was ready to work as needed.

**THE MORNING OF** May 30 came, and it looked like it would be a beautiful day. At the breakfast table, I told my folks that Ted had asked me to work. Dad wanted me to go to church with the family, but he agreed that I could go. My mother decided to stay home and do some work around the apartment. In the end, Dad and Delores went to church that morning. Later, Dad told us that the conversation at church that day had been mostly about the rising water and the concern people had about flooding. The Housing

Authority and the Corps of Engineers were still telling the residents that everything was fine. They distributed flyers announcing:

DIKES ARE SAFE AT PRESENT  
YOU WILL BE WARNED IF NECESSARY  
YOU WILL HAVE TIME TO LEAVE  
DON'T GET EXCITED

But Mom had the feeling that we had not been told all the truth. Looking back, her premonitions were right on target.

Since it was a beautiful day, Dad had gotten up early and had walked down to the Kenton Slough Dike to see if he could talk with one of the Corps of Engineer people who were checking on the condition of the dike. When he got back, Dad told us that he had told him that everything was okay, but Mom still had the feeling that something bad was going to happen. She said she didn't believe the Corps of Engineers or the Housing Authority notices and that she couldn't shake off the feeling of a pending problem. I learned later that at the same time people were being told everything was all right the powers-to-be were meeting at the administration building, making plans about what to do in case there was a need for an evacuation.

Dad dropped me off at the Number 2 Shopping Center and went off to church. When Donnie and I finished work at about three o'clock in the afternoon, I decided to walk home. I walked to the small bridge that crossed the Kenton Slough, where the ground was high enough to be out of the water. I crossed there and crawled up the side

of the railroad fill and then walked north along the tracks until I came to the switching station.

The work at the shipyards had been slowing down, and many people had found other jobs in the Portland area, found other places to live, or returned to their homes in other states. As they left, those who lived in the western part of Vanport were relocated to apartments in the center or eastern end of the project, or they were encourage to find housing outside of Vanport. As a result, the apartment buildings in the western end of the city had been torn down. It felt sort of lonesome walking through that area.

As I walked up to the switching station, I noticed two men standing on the station platform, leaning against the railing and looking out over the flooded scene in front of them. I must admit it was frightening to look out over all that water, which was flooding much of the land and buildings around the lake, especially on the north end where a lumber company, a radio station, and other businesses were located. All the buildings on the south end of the lake were now underwater, including most of the riding academy buildings. By now, the lake had risen sharply and had completely covered the road near the Columbia River. The river, the lake, and the Kenton Slough were now one large body of water, which continued to get higher as melting snow continued to feed the river, which in turn flowed into the lake and slough.

I walked over the tracks and started down the narrow path that led through a patch of young trees that had been

planted on the hillside to help prevent erosion. As I walked, I noticed streamlets of water trickling out of the hillside and running down the hill. It didn't make me nervous, but I did think it was strange to see all that water coming out of the side of the hill. The hill was made of old timbers, rocks, and fill dirt that had been dumped high enough for the trains to travel on a level track. Years later, while looking through an old album of newspaper clippings my mother had kept, I came upon an August 8, 1951, *Oregon Journal* report of a federal court hearing where an engineer named John H. Suttle testified that "he had been responsible for building the lower part of the railroad fill and said the reason it failed was because the lower part of the fill was built on soft mud." Apparently, no one had paid attention to that at the time.

I walked across the parking lot heading toward the Fire Department sub-station at the corner of Victory and Cottonwood avenues. As I got near the sub-station I got the feeling that something or someone was coming up behind me. It was a strange feeling, and it made me stop suddenly and turn around to see who or what was there. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The hillside was moving forward. I stood there, mesmerized.

As the hillside moved closer to the parking area, the small trees I had just passed were moving down the hill as if they were descending on an escalator. The mass moved forward onto the edge of the parking lot, swallowed up a lone car that had been left there, and moved ever so slowly toward me. It was very weird and scary. The

trees started to fall down and became part of the blob coming toward me. The switching station was still on the tracks, but a space was starting to show between it and the hill. I couldn't see the men.

Then a massive wall of water burst through the northern part of the railroad fill and began to spread out across the cleared land. Because of the openness of the area, the water seemed to spread quickly and flatten out as if it was filling up a bathtub. As a result, I couldn't see how deep it was becoming or where it was flowing. I could still see water raging through the side of the railroad fill, but I couldn't see the enormity of that wall of water as it broke through the crumbling opening in the railroad fill. After the initial burst, the water seemed to level out into a mass of water that nothing could stop. The initial break in the dike was about thirty feet wide, and in minutes it expanded to a gap of between three hundred to four hundred feet, with the water from the lake and the water from the Columbia rushing into Vanport.

I turned and saw that the switching station was now hanging in midair, as the dirt had completely crumbled away from underneath the building, leaving it dangling over an ever-widening gap. I thought I could see the men's figures against the sky. Then the station and the tracks seemed to bounce once and then twist slightly, one way and then the other. When the tracks broke apart, the station fell into the large hole of swirling rushing water below. I thought the men were goners, but I later heard that they had been injured but had survived.



*Vanport residents purchase gas at a station on the corner of Lake and Victory avenues.*

While it seemed that everything was moving slowly, it was really only a matter of minutes before I came to my senses and realized that I had better get moving. Fortunately, when the fill broke apart the water headed toward the northern side of the project, so I had some degree of protection. After I saw the station fall, I turned and ran past the sub-station, heading home as fast as I could. I yelled that the dike had broken and floodwaters were coming and started running up Victory Avenue as fast as I could.

I don't know where I got the energy to continue to run, but fear can be a great motivator. I ran past people who were sitting on their porch stoops, talking to one another. Others were listening to a radio. Kids were playing catch, and people were washing their

cars and enjoying a beautiful Memorial Day afternoon. Some looked up at me as I ran by, yelling that the dike had broken, but no one seemed to pay attention. I did see one man get up from his stoop and walk into his apartment, but he may have been going to get a cigarette or a beer. They may have thought that I was just a noisy teenager. Anyway, the people didn't move.

By the time I reached the gas station at the intersection of Lake and Victory avenues, the siren finally went off. Then all hell broke loose. People ran into their apartments to gather up personal items before heading out in their cars toward the Denver Avenue exit ramp. I didn't look back after that. I just kept running as fast as I could, stopping and walking at times to catch



*Traffic became jammed on Denver Avenue shortly after the flood began, causing many Vanport residents to abandon their cars.*

my breath and then running again. As I ran past the hospital, I saw people trying to take care of the patients. I ran by the library and finally reached the Number 1 Shopping Center. Now I knew I was close to home. Finally, I reached the bridge that crossed the Bayou Slough and ran up onto the porch and charged through the apartment door, shouting, "The dike has broken and we have to get out of here!" Dad, who had been reading the Sunday paper, jumped up and said to Mom, who was folding some towels: "Come on, Netta. We have to get going!" Mom just looked at him

and nodded: "I just knew something bad was going to happen today, I just knew it!" Then she began telling us what items we had to get into the car. The afternoon had exploded.

Fortunately, Dad had parked our car right in front of the apartment, and it was a quick trip to pack the things Mom had designated into the small car trunk and backseat. Clothes, of course, were one of the first items on the list of priorities. Our little dog, Max, really got excited. He loved to go on car rides, and I told him to go out and get in the car. He immediately jumped in the front seat, ready to go. We also had

a cat that had recently given birth to three kittens. Mom put the cat and her little family into a large birdcage and gave it to me to put somewhere in the backseat of the car. Our niece, little Janet, was staying with us, and Mom wrapped her up and placed her in a clothes basket. I took her out to the car and put her in the passenger side of the front seat. I knew Max would look after her, and she didn't seem to mind being left by herself while the rest of us scurried around.

Mom and Dad thought that he and I could drive to a family friend's house in the Killingsworth area and drop off our cargo along with Janet, Max, and the cats. Then we would drive back to get Mom and another load of stuff. We didn't get ten feet up the road when Dad and I looked back and saw that the water had already reached the shopping center and was starting to flow over and down the banks of the slough. People were running past us, carrying suitcases and other items,

and I regretted that we had no space to offer them.

Dad made a quick U-turn and drove back across the bridge and right up to our front door. He yelled; "Come on Netta, leave the rest, we haven't got time! The water is rising too quickly, and it will be here any moment!" Mom grabbed a few more things to stuff into the car and climbed up on the running board next to Dad. I climbed onto the running board on the passenger side and held on as Dad drove across the bridge again and onto Victory Avenue. Thank God for cars with running boards! I looked back toward the shopping center and saw the water already moving up the street behind us.

Water was quickly filling the western end of the slough and was beginning to flow over the opposite bank. Dad drove east on Victory, heading toward the large traffic circle at the entrance of the city. He turned to the right and started to head for the exit ramp that connected the Vanport traffic with

*Buildings and flotsam drift against Kenton Slough dike.*





*This human chain served as a lifeline for some of the last people who made their way out of Vanport. The author is second from the left, wearing a cowboy hat.*

Denver Avenue, heading south toward Kenton. The two lanes of cars headed up the ramp had come to a complete stop, and Dad backed up and drove up the entrance road instead. He said he didn't think anyone would be coming to Vanport that day. When we reached the top of the ramp, we saw that traffic on Denver Avenue was a total mess, so Dad drove up onto the grassy side of the road and parked.

At the time, no one knew where my sister was. Dee had gone off with her boyfriend, Stan Smith, right after church to go for a walk along the Kenton Slough Dike, a great place for kids to run around and an interesting place to look at the city. We decided that Mom and I would stay and look for Dee and Stan, and Dad would take Janet and the dog to our friends' house in Killingsworth. The Drapeaus

had said they would put us up for a couple of weeks until we found another place to live. With all the people being flooded out, that was going to be a chore.

Mom and I split up to cover more ground. I headed across Denver Avenue, running between cars that were trying to head south. It was a sad scene. Traffic had come to a complete stop, jammed up all the way into Kenton. I started walking south on the western embankment, where most people were going. Hundreds of people were going up the side of the embankment to get away from the water that was surging toward the east end of the Denver embankment. People were also running up the Kenton Slough Levee. Some were carrying suitcases, and some were still wearing their Sunday-going-to-church clothes. Some



*After the flooding water stopped moving, some parts of Vanport were left in ruins like these.*

had nothing but the clothes on their backs, and I even saw a couple of men in their pajamas.

Looking out over the western and central part of Vanport, I could see the water starting to lift up the apartment buildings and send them slamming into each other like they were bumper cars at an amusement park. Some of the buildings just broke apart, and the debris floated away, much of it drifting into the embankments in Vanport's east side. Many of us stood and stared in awe at what was happening to our town. It was just so hard to believe. After all, we had been told that the dikes would hold and everything would be all right. The Housing Authority had sent out a flier telling us that there would be enough warning if anything happened and that everyone would get out safely.

WHEN I REACHED where the exit ramp joined Denver Avenue, I started looking around for my sister, but it was pure chaos. Cars were jammed up in both directions all the way to Kenton. Thousands of people were on foot, with seemingly no place to go. Some were running, others were walking or scurrying up the side of the two dike embankments. Some were in a daze, and some were looking for loved ones. Then the water reached the base of the Denver Avenue embankment, and it didn't look like it would stop rising any time soon. It looked like Vanport was now totally covered with water. More of the large apartment buildings were being lifted off their foundations and sent slamming into one another. The broken remains were being pushed up against the dikes as the water continued to rush into Vanport. The

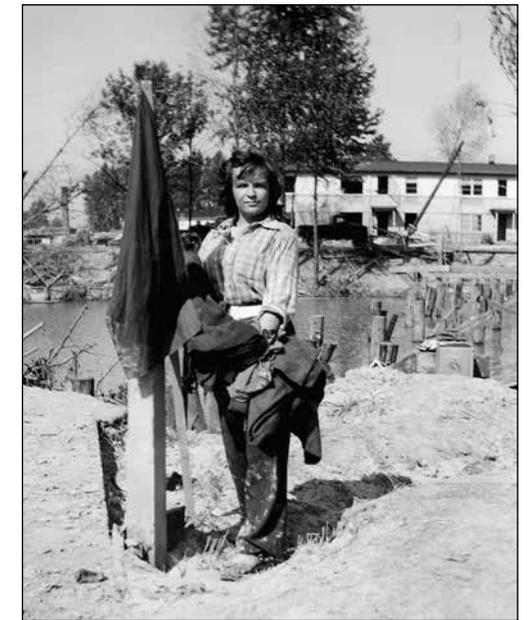
people who had tried to wait out the traffic jam on the exit ramp began to abandon their cars and started climbing up the embankment to the top of the dike and safety.

I heard a call asking for volunteers to get into the water to form a human chain to help those who had become stranded on the other side of the exit ramp road, which was now covered with rushing water and abandoned cars. People were stranded across the street, standing on the bench seat at a bus stop, trying to stay out of the rising water. I volunteered to go. I figured the hunt for Delores and Stan could wait and went down the hill to join the men forming the chain. As I stepped into the water, I grabbed the hand of a young man who had entered the water just before I did and then reached back and extended my hand to the next man waiting to step in. As we moved forward into the water, trying to get close enough to reach the stranded people, I noticed how quickly the wa-

ter was moving and swirling around our legs. An undercurrent made it hard to walk without some assistance, and I could feel the water pulling at my legs as we moved out and stood, holding firmly to each other's hands. We were able to reach the people and provide the security they needed to get to the embankment and safety. As we started back to safety ourselves, we noticed that many of the abandoned cars were now starting to float and move around. Thankfully no one was hit by any of them, and we all exited the water in good form and headed back up the embankment. I never thought anymore about it.

I found out later a newspaper photographer from the *Oregon Journal* took a great picture of us that day to document our little place in the history of Vanport and the flood. I am the young man in the white cowboy hat and light-colored shirt who is standing second from the left, waist deep in the swirling water. (Many

*Mud covered the yard in front of the author's apartment building.*



*The author's mother, left, and sister sort through personal items after the flood, finding very little that was worth salvaging.*

years later, I found out that his name was Stuart W. Miller and that he had written an article for the *Portland State University Magazine* (spring 1996) about his experience as part of that human chain. He is the young man in the white T-shirt.) I don't remember how many people we helped that day with the human chain, but whatever the number was it was worth it.

After I reached the top of the embankment I noticed that the Salvation Army had arrived and was providing free coffee and doughnuts for the people. That was wonderful. I gladly took a couple of doughnuts and a hot cup of coffee. When they saw I was wet, they also offered me a blanket, but I declined their offer and started walking toward Kenton. By now, I figured Delores and Stan were probably at the

Red Cross Rescue Center that had been set up there. My clothes were soaking wet, but the coffee and doughnuts had tasted good and I figured that the hot afternoon would dry out my clothes soon enough. I didn't know what was going to happen next.

When I reached Kenton, I ran into Ted Smith, my boss at the riding academy. He was planning to join a group of men that was going back down to the flood site and see if they could do rescue work. When I told him I didn't know what I was going to do, he took me to his parents' house. They said they would put me up until I could join up with my family and called the Drapeaus' home to leave word for my parents. I found out later that Mom found Delores and Stan at the Rescue Center and they had all gone back to

the Drapeaus' place. By that time, it was about 6:30 in the evening, and Mrs. Smith gave me with some dry, clean clothes and made a nice meal for me. Except for the doughnuts, I don't remember having had anything to eat since breakfast.

LIKE MOST OF THE people who lived in Vanport at that terrible time, we lost most of our personal effects. We saved some of Mom's antique pieces, which we were able to get into the car, but everything else was ruined. After the floodwaters finally subsided and the area had dried out, we were able to sign up to get back into our apartment — if the apartment was still in one piece — to see what we could salvage. The day we went back was beautiful, which made it at least comfortable to do what we had to do.

An escort took us to the site and told us he would come back later in the day to escort us out. I suppose they were doing that to prevent looting, but when we looked out over what was left of Vanport I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to root around in the mold- and mud-covered apartments. Looking about as we drove to our old building, it felt like we were traveling through one of the bombed-out cities I had seen on the newsreel in the theater. Destroyed buildings and rubble were everywhere.

The flooding waters had lifted our apartment building off of its foundation and floated it up against a large growth of trees where I used to play and left it there. The building was in pretty good shape on the outside, but on the inside everything was covered

with mud and mildew rot. My mother had a solid, strongly built five-foot-long box she had used it to ship things from Minnesota to Portland. She had placed it in the dining area in the far corner, covered it with a lovely throw cloth, and used it to set things on. When we got into the apartment that day, we found that the rushing water had picked up the box, spun it around, turned it upside down, and set it back in the same spot where it had been. When we finally got the box open, however, we found there was nothing worth saving. So Mom decided to leave the box behind to be destroyed. We drove out with our escort and never looked back. It was an end to a stage in our lives, and now we had to concentrate on getting a handle on the future.

We stayed at the Drapeaus' house for two weeks, and then Dad located a housing project on the Washington side of the river that had been opened to temporarily house people from Vanport. We stayed there for the rest of the year and returned to Oregon and moved to St. Johns, where Dad had arranged to get us assigned to a small two-bedroom house in St. Johns Woods. I was happy to go back to Roosevelt High School and see my friends.

That is my 1948 Memorial Day flood experience. It has been a long time since I thought about that tragic day and all that happened, but the memories are still very clear in my mind. The flood tragedy is now history, as are many of the people who were involved that day. But for me there are certain memories that will be with me forever.