

# **"The Portland Firefighter's Association and The Vanport Flood of 1948"**

Source: See references at end of passage

Compiled by Don Porth

During the early 1940s, Vanport, Oregon, was the second largest city in the state of Oregon. A national emergency had created the city. World War II turned the Portland/Vancouver area into a major shipbuilding hub and many thousands of workers from across the country began arriving for jobs in the shipyards. The Northwest migration caused a major housing shortage in the Portland area.

By early 1942 nationally known industrialist Henry J. Kaiser was operating three major shipyards in the Portland area. While he was building ships quickly for the war effort, housing for workers in Portland was lagging far behind. Impatient with city officials, Kaiser acquired funds directly from the federal government and proceeded to build the largest single federal wartime housing project in the country. Although built on a flood plain, Vanport, as the city would be named, was surrounded by dikes and levees, Vanport was conveniently close to the shipyards and during its heyday housed about 42,000 workers and their children.

The city was built quickly and was never meant to be permanent. The crowded apartment buildings were prefabricated and lacked cement foundations. A noisy, 24-hour city, it also offered progressive services, including grade schools that operated year round, 24-hour day care for preschool children, and the first black school teachers in Oregon. The housing was segregated: blacks were steered towards certain parts of town, whites to another — but the schools were integrated. Children of all races learned together and played together (1).

As shipbuilding began to wane, so did the population of Vanport. By 1948, the population was still significant, but had dropped to 18,000 residents.

In the spring of 1948, heavy snowfall in the mountains and sudden warm temperatures elevated water levels in the lower Columbia River. The levels at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers, the site of Vanport, had been high for weeks, but city officials told residents on the Sunday morning of May 30, 1948: "Dikes are safe at Vanport. You will be warned if necessary. You will have time to leave. Don't get excited." However, on this fateful day, a railroad berm that served as a dike on the edge of Smith Lake failed and the city of Vanport flooded. The entire city was under water in less than two hours. Refugees fled Vanport, grabbing only what they could with the few minutes of warning. Fifteen people would die in the floods of the Memorial Day weekend event (2).

## **Portland Firefighters Respond To The Crisis**

The Vanport flood of 1948 was a notable event in itself. Many relief efforts were undoubtedly provided. A discovery of a series of archival documents in a dusty box of papers in the basement of the Portland Firefighter's Association (IAFF Local 43) has shed light on a little-known effort that appears to have provided tremendous aid to the citizens adjacent to, and within the ruined city of Vanport.

It is certainly common for firefighters to respond to emergencies and render aid. Portland Firefighters have been doing so since 1853. In this instance, Portland Firefighters also responded, but this time on behalf of the International Association of FireFighters - Local 43 (otherwise known as the Portland Firefighter's Association). Members banded together and initiated a plan to support stranded and displaced citizens and provide food for those in need.

The following is taken from a letter of unknown origin and without a date. It chronicles the efforts put forth by the Portland Firefighters, volunteering their efforts off duty, during this disastrous event (3).

### **The Account**

"Mighty oak trees from little acorns grow," is a phrase often heard and is one which Portland Firefighters might easily apply to their idea of forming an emergency evacuation and rescue Depot in the North or Northeastern part of Portland, Oregon prior to the Vanport flood, for this idea grew to proportions far beyond the initial purpose.

The idea came to the minds of two Portland Firefighters early the morning of Saturday April 29, 1948. After brief consultation with Local 43 Union officials, they then approached the Portland Fire Department and received the go ahead from the fire department administration.

A tentative plan of organization was developed. It provided several means of addressing a potential flood, which included:

- a central dispatching office
- a pool of motor boats, on trailers, for rescue of persons in flooded areas
- a motor pool of trucks to remove furniture, persons, and animals from danger areas
- first aid cars
- a field kitchen
- central dispensing warehouse for distribution of blankets, gasoline, etc.

Each of these efforts were to be manned entirely by fire department volunteers.

By Sunday May 30th, concern was high that the dikes surrounding Vanport as well as the entire south bank of the Columbia River from Vanport to Troutdale were in danger of collapse. Information gathered at the Fire Alarm Dispatch office soon established that there were approximately seventy boats with motors, on trailers, available along with four hundred men willing to volunteer at the Depot should the need arise.

The initial committee composed of Firefighters Wendell Baker, Rodney Davis, and then Union President Jr. Captain Terry Schrunk consulted with Battalion Chief Edward Boatright early Sunday afternoon (May 30th). They drove to Vanport intending to offer their services to the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) in the event of a mass evacuation or disaster. A tour of the dikes in the Vanport area followed, as the men attempted to ascertain where they might place their Depot to render the swiftest aid with maximum efficiency.

The three firefighters then left Vanport and proceeded up Marine Drive (located on top of the dike), which borders the South bank of the Columbia River. Their goal was to determine whether the Depot should be placed in the Kenton area for aid to Vanport, or the Woodlawn area, should the greatest danger lie between Union Avenue and Troutdale.

Upon noticing speeding Sheriff's cars and Coast Guard units going toward Vanport, they checked into the situation from Fire Station #29 at NE 8th and Dekum, in the Woodlawn District. They were horrified to learn that Vanport was flooding and that the MCSO had called for help ten minutes earlier. By order of Mayor Earl Riley and Battalion Chief Boatright, calls for help were broadcast over the air. Off-shift firefighters, with their boats, were among the first to arrive at Vanport where they gave much help.

When the boats were ordered out of Vanport by the Army Corp of Engineers, the Portland Firefighter volunteers realized that there was still a terrible life hazard for the people further east behind the Columbia dikes. They received permission from Portland Fire Department Chief's Delane and Linneville to have the Jay Stevens Emergency Car broadcast, by its massive loud speakers, that all boats and trucks register at Station 29 to further assist with evacuation efforts to the East.

MCSO Deputies and Portland Police Officers assisted by notifying all boats and trucks in the area of Vanport. Firefighters Davis and Baker hurried to Station 29 and put the original plan into operation with the help of firefighters and civilians who had already gathered there.

The entire idea was to centralize and register all mobile boats, trucks, and men, on a volunteer basis, for rescue and evacuation service between N Denver Avenue and Troutdale, and from Columbia Boulevard to the Columbia River. As boats, trucks, and men were registered, they were told either to stand by or leave, but keep on an alert status so they might be called in the event of further trouble.

Contact was established with the Red Cross, the Army Corp of Engineers, the Coast Guard, and the MCSO to apprise them of the forces that were available.

In a very short while, calls for help began to come into the Depot various agencies. People in the lowland areas were requesting evacuation of not only themselves, but of their livestock, poultry, and rabbits from the threatened area.

The more calls for help the volunteer Portland Firefighter's answered, the greater the volume of calls that were coming in. Their efforts also prompted more people to volunteer so more men and trucks arrived to join their effort.

As the volume of volunteers swelled, food was furnished gratis by the owner of the "Tam-O-Shanter Tavern" across the street from Station 29. The Salvation Army took over this duty early Monday, May 31st, and immediately set up a food service operation within the Depot. This remained in operation until Thursday night, June 3rd. During this four day stretch, they supplied blankets, food, drink, cigarettes, and candy to all men waiting to work or returning from the dikes or various details. They prepared over a thousand meals for men working along the dike. No request was too small and none too large for their attention.

As the volume of calls swelled, work of dispatching and assisting was lightened by many civilian volunteers. The Depot operating from Station 29 was apparently the only dispatching and clearinghouse operation from N Denver Avenue to Troutdale.

It is estimated that the first night of operation, 700 men and 125 trucks were dispatched to various needs along the threatened areas. This volume swelled daily so that a fair estimate for the four days that the Depot was operating as a volunteer effort would approach 4,000 men and 700 trucks dispatched to various troubled points. This included calls to assist men on the dikes protecting Deer Island, Sauvies Island, Scappoose, and the Columbia dike from N Denver Avenue East to Troutdale.

The Longshoremen's Union responded with large numbers of men who were put in charge of all crews dispatched to the dikes to ensure efficient handling and placing of sand bags at weak spots. CL Noonan, a representative of the Longshoremen on the Portland Development Committee (which had been recently set up by Mayor Riley) provided direction for all Longshoremen. His able assistants were Messrs B. Mansfield, a top official of the Longshoremen's Union, JD Mitchell, and J Olsen, also from that body.

All types of equipment was dispatched from the Depot. Included were heavy duty trucks, shovels, sand bags, and portable lights for night work on the dike. A wide range of equipment from power shovels to bulldozers to automatic truck loaders were volunteered and managed by the Depot. .

Ham radio operator Russ Brant (W7JIG), with others, set up two way communications. He would be headquartered at Station 29 and communicate with mobile units on the dikes. He was later relieved by Operator W7KRO. By Monday night, loud speakers and public address facilities were installed (by Lloyd Bailargeon of 514 NE Holland Street) to facilitate communication with assembled workers.

On Monday night, the dike at the underpass to Vanport failed. On Tuesday afternoon, concern arose over potential failure of the Columbia dike extending from the 24th Street Peninsula dike on the west, to the Reynolds Aluminum plant dike in Troutdale. A standby pool of 76 trucks was arranged by Mr. Barry and Mr. Knowlton of the Oregon Motor Transport Company. Trucks were volunteered by all major trucking companies in Portland. While most were released that night at 9:30, twenty two remained, ready to serve.

At noon on Tuesday June 1st, a request was made to Colonel Walsh of the Army Corp of Engineers for assistance from his office to help coordinate services between the Depot and various flood relief agencies. Duplicate requests were beginning to come in and this did not lend to efficient service.

Mr. Bob Steward of the Army Corp of Engineers appeared around 1:00 PM Tuesday afternoon and was assisted by Joe Taylor of the same office. These gentlemen arranged authorization for various supplies and gasoline for the volunteer trucks and gradually assumed charge. This transition of control was accomplished with no break in the flow of supplies and by Thursday June 3rd, control would be passed completely to Mr. Stewart and Mr. Taylor and place all men and trucks on a pay basis.

Tuesday night, June 1st, ten large van-type trucks with ten men on each, toured the lowland area from NE 33rd and Columbia Boulevard to Troutdale. By this time, the Army Corp of Engineers had ordered the area to be cleared and evacuated of all people and furniture from the homes of those who wished to leave.

The Depot at Fire Station 29 received all calls for special equipment from the radio of Portland Police Car 364, which had been placed at NE Durham and Madrona Streets by Chief Shoemaker of the Portland Police Bureau.

Early Wednesday morning, at the request of the MCSO, twelve trucks were dispatched to NE 47th and Columbia Boulevard to standby for immediate evacuation and remained the rest of Wednesday night. The remaining trucks remained available at the Depot for the remainder of Wednesday.

The following is a list of the Portland Firefighter's who volunteered at the Depot throughout its operational span.

- Wendell Baker
- Rodney S. Davis
- Terry Schrunk
- Linneville
- Harold Simpson
- Marin Karnath
- Oswald Forbes
- John Wanner
- Richard Kent
- Kenneth Yost
- Ira O'Neil
- Charles Cruse
- Smith
- Gustav Mundt
- Joseph Schiweck
- Pete Leinweber
- Lawrence
- Dante Petruzelli
- Harry Williams
- Ralph Miller
- Jack Peters
- Burnes
- Clark
- Ross
- Howard Westover
- Louis Merchant
- Cecil Norris
- B Brown

Trucking companies who sent trucks for evacuation and later stayed to help:

- Inland Motor Company
- Service Auto
- Interstate Trucks
- Inland Auto Freight
- Manlowes
- Lyons
- Consolidated
- PSA Freight
- West Coast Auto Freight
- Silver Wheel
- Nickel Plate
- Union Pacific Railroad Freight
- Oregon Transfer
- Sell Trucking Company
- Bend Portland Truck Company

Several hundred members of the Longshoremen's Union worked volunteer shifts from Sunday until the Army Corp of Engineers took over.

Upon call by the MCSO and the Army Corp of Engineers, sand bags were procured from Kerr Gifford Mill when the initial calls for bags were made. Many loads of these bags had to be hauled by Army Duck vehicles from the docks to trucks because of high water.

There were a great many more people who helped in miscellaneous positions. However, their names were never recorded.

It is our firm belief that the services of this Depot made holding the dikes from 33rd and Marine Drive to Troutdale possible and that many of the services which were rendered were indispensable and bridged the gaps between agencies operating from 7:00 PM Sunday May 30th to Wednesday June 2nd at midnight. At that time, the Army Corp of Engineers took charge and instituted a system to hire services to continue relief efforts.

The following is a list of the services and resources procured by the Volunteer Portland Fire Department Rescue and Evacuation Depot:

- Headquarters Depot
  - Chief Dispatcher
  - Watchmen to log dispatches of men and material
  - Scout cars
  - First Aid cars
  - Extra trucks to carry crews and equipment and to move furniture to higher ground
  - Boats with motors on trailers
  - Cars manned by volunteers on standby status
  - Field kitchen to feed volunteers at the Depot
  - Central dispensary for extra equipment such as blankets, first aid supplies, gasoline, and oil.
- Communications

- Jay Stevens Disaster car radio and loud speaker
- Telephones, operators, and messengers
- Radio cars (Portland Police and Portland Fire)

## Donations

A significant accounting sheet was found with the chronicle of the volunteer Portland Firefighter's Depot. Local 43 apparently reached out to other IAFF Locals across the country and the response was overwhelming. Over the following 75 days, 223 IAFF Locals sent donations for the Vanport flood relief cause. The total amount raised was \$8,295.15. Forty Three organizations made multiple donations, led by Chicago IAFF Local 2, who made five donations for \$1,167.60, which equals 14% of all donations sent.

To put these donations in context, the 1948 donation of \$8,295.15 would equal \$83,847.45 in 2017 dollars. An amazing feat accomplished by a very grassroots effort of Portland Firefighters volunteering through the Portland Firefighter's Association, IAFF Local 43.

## References

1. "Vanport" by Nadine Jelsing ([www.opb.org/television/programs/oregonexperience/segment/vanport/](http://www.opb.org/television/programs/oregonexperience/segment/vanport/))
2. "Our Town: Vanport" by Dave Blanchard ([OPB.org/nes/series/ourown/our-town-vanport/](http://OPB.org/nes/series/ourown/our-town-vanport/))
3. Documents found in Portland Firefighter's Association Archives - no author or date. (some editing was done for readability)

## DONATIONS FROM IAFF LOCALS ACROSS THE USA

IAFF Local #	Donation Amount	IAFF Local #	Donation Amount
2	\$25.00	510	\$10.00
2	\$25.00	512	\$50.00
2	\$700.00	517	\$5.00
2	\$387.10	521	\$25.00
2	\$30.50	522	\$117.50
8	\$25.00	528	\$18.00
13	\$132.00	530	\$46.00
15	\$10.00	532	\$5.00
15	\$50.00	533	\$10.00
20	\$50.00	540	\$10.00
23	\$25.00	547	\$11.00
27	\$250.00	548	\$25.00
29	\$102.50	554	\$5.00
31	\$25.00	554	\$5.00
34	\$50.00	571	\$50.00
34	\$50.00	579	\$5.00
37	\$25.00	581	\$20.00

53	\$15.00	594	\$10.00
55	\$25.00	603	\$50.00
56	\$10.00	604	\$3.00
61	\$50.00	604	\$3.00
73	\$25.00	606	\$35.00
73	\$25.00	608	\$20.00
82	\$50.00	608	\$20.00
82	\$50.00	616	\$25.00
92	\$100.00	618	\$25.00
92	\$100.00	627	\$10.00
94	\$200.00	632	\$25.00
104	\$10.00	633	\$10.00
104	\$10.00	634	\$15.00
107	\$25.00	644	\$25.00
107	\$25.00	648	\$10.00
124	\$10.00	666	\$10.00
127	\$25.00	672	\$25.00
134	\$503.75	673	\$25.00
136	\$25.00	673	\$25.00
145	\$25.00	675	\$10.00
145	\$25.00	680	\$10.00
152	\$10.00	682	\$25.00
176	\$25.00	695	\$25.00
184	\$10.00	699	\$15.00
204	\$20.00	701	\$10.00
228	\$50.00	702	\$17.00
237	\$5.00	703	\$17.00
249	\$100.00	706	\$25.00
251	\$10.00	713	\$10.00
252	\$5.00	713	\$10.00
279	\$5.00	718	\$362.53
288	\$99.25	724	\$15.00
299	\$5.00	724	\$15.00
299	\$2.00	727	\$28.00
302	\$25.00	734	\$100.00
305	\$10.00	735	\$10.00
305	\$10.00	742	\$25.00
309	\$10.00	743	\$5.00
315	\$25.00	750	\$25.00
320	\$10.00	753	\$154.00
322	\$22.00	754	\$25.00
326	\$25.00	759	\$25.00
327	\$25.00	764	\$10.00
328	\$10.00	769	\$10.00
328	\$10.00	774	\$10.00



329	\$10.00	777	\$100.00
330	\$25.00	777	\$100.00
333	\$25.00	783	\$5.00
338	\$25.00	794	\$10.00
341	\$20.00	794	\$10.00
344	\$25.00	797	\$10.00
345	\$50.00	797	\$10.00
345	\$50.00	809	\$25.00
356	\$38.00	809	\$25.00
357	\$10.00	810	\$50.00
362	\$5.00	817	\$10.00
363	\$10.00	817	\$10.00
366	\$219.00	820	\$25.00
370	\$10.00	823	\$25.00
379	\$5.00	831	\$6.00
381	\$17.00	831	\$6.00
384	\$25.00	835	\$25.00
385	\$10.00	838	\$5.00
386	\$25.00	850	\$10.00
388	\$20.00	854	\$50.00
390	\$15.00	854	\$50.00
390	\$15.00	858	\$100.00
397	\$70.00	867	\$25.00
402	\$41.75	867	\$25.00
410	\$50.00	868	\$27.00
412	\$25.00	868	\$27.00
413	\$10.00	870	\$25.00
414	\$10.00	885	\$10.00
416	\$5.00	885	\$10.00
416	\$5.00	888	\$14.00
428	\$10.00	888	\$14.00
428	\$10.00	889	\$24.00
429	\$10.00	889	\$24.00
436	\$10.00	890	\$50.00
441	\$11.00	890	\$50.00
441	\$11.00	895	\$10.00
445	\$10.00	895	\$10.00
445	\$10.00	925	\$25.00
451	\$10.00	927	\$10.00
451	\$10.00	942	\$25.00
463	\$25.00	942	\$25.00
468	\$25.00	944	\$5.00
468	\$25.00	949	\$10.00
469	\$50.00	949	\$10.00
470	\$5.00	964	\$100.00

476	\$100.00	969	\$20.00
481	\$25.00	969	\$20.00
484	\$5.00	975	\$66.00
496	\$50.00	975	\$66.00
509	\$12.27	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$8,295.15</b>