



## **Vanport Escrow & Title Company, Inc.**

### **Fred Stewart, Real Estate and the Memory of the Vanport Tragedy**

*By Theresa Griffin Kennedy*

Fred Stewart is not someone you forget meeting. His larger than life persona takes center stage when he's meeting new people, taking on new projects, volunteering or working hard to transform the landscape of the city he loves, particularly the north side of town in his beloved Portland. Stewart has served on more important community boards and oversight groups, (including police oversight groups) over the years than most people could ever hope to, and he was always happy to help, provide new ideas, and suggested innovations, all originating from his wide knowledge of real estate, business, finance and military service.



Stewart is personable, affable and genuine. He dominates a room with the outright positivity of his character and his robust approach to engaging with people from all walks of life. As one of the most successful men in the city (where he's lived nearly his entire life) Stewart is also a lively conversationalist, well-educated, a dedicated reader, fun loving and finally memorable to all those who meet him.

Most notable is Stewart's wide expanse of knowledge on any number of diverse topics. This includes the longstanding housing crisis in Portland, the logistics of actually building additional housing, the intricacies of doing ones taxes, to the endless and complex details of the Portland real estate market, which is in a constant state of flux.

### **Looking Back at a History of Racism and a History of Hope:**

Another area that Stewart knows quite a lot about is the general history of the Portland community in general. This includes the Black families who have lived in Portland going back to the turn of the century and their descendants, many of whom don't live in Portland anymore. These are people Stewart can name easily. He knows them all. His work as a real estate broker for almost 35 years gives him that easy expanse of knowledge.

Stewart came to Portland from Mississippi, his family having survived more than a few instances of shocking racism, including at least two horrific lynching murders that occurred around the turn of the century. Fred was personally introduced to the bewildering racism inherent in the world of white Mississippians' after he was accosted by a grown man who threatened to kill him

because a last homerun in kiddy baseball, assisted by Stewart, meant the white man's son's team lost.<sup>4</sup>

[As the target of a racist newspaper article in 2016, Stewart was again the target of the ugliness of racism.](#) The paper in question has become known for peddling their occasional sensationalistic yellow journalism, and Stewart paid the price for their foray into yellow journalism. Stewart has learned harsh lessons about how racism can be expressed by white people who will look you in the eye and lie to you about their motives, pretending to be progressive but ultimately expressing their ugly racism in covert, underhanded and cowardly ways.<sup>6</sup>

Racism is something Stewart talks a lot about now, with his large number of personal friends and with those people on social media he regularly interacts with. It is the stark reality of racism and exclusion that prompted him to create, from the ground up, a real estate title company that will be manned by Black people, to serve Portlanders who may wish to purchase a home. The name of his new business is Vanport Escrow & Title Company, Inc. Choosing the name was easy.

[Stewart wants the tragedy of Vanport, Oregon to never be forgotten.](#) But not for the reasons most people would think. He wants to remind Portlanders of the resilience and hardworking spirit of the Vanport residents, at least forty percent of whom were Black. These were people who worked hard to raise families, surviving in a harsh climate, with the city of Portland only a few miles down the road. Stewart also wants people to remember what is alleged to have happened at Vanport, as reported by his own grandfather, George "Goldie" Golden and numerous other residents from the Black community. Many of these individuals lived at Vanport as children. They were witnesses to what happened, and they remember seeing far more than the officially stated number of 15 bodies floating on the waters of Vanport. They remember the number being closer to 100 drowned bodies of men, women and children floating above the muddy flood waters of Vanport city. The rumors have continued in hushed tones over the decades and have not gone away.<sup>4</sup>

Stewart remembers his grandfather and mother talking about Vanport, and expressing their sadness at the people who just seemed to vanish. "Men just disappeared according to what my grandfather told me. They didn't show up to work, they didn't pick up their checks. That was unheard of—to not pick up your check, or your tools? To just leave them behind and never to be seen or heard from again?"

Fred Stewart does not want people to forget the good folks that made up the city of Vanport, Oregon. More than the tragedy, and the loss of life, he wants people to remember the residents' optimism, their dedication to family, their positive spirit and the racially blended and harmoniously integrated city that was the first of its kind for that very reason alone.

**The Vanport Tragedy - How one of the First Integrated Communities in the Nation was Destroyed:**

“The mere utterance of Vanport was known to send shivers down the spines of "well-bred" Portlanders. Not because of any ghost story, or any calamitous disaster—that would come later—but because of raw, unabashed racism. Built in 110 days in 1942, Vanport was always meant to be a temporary housing project, a superficial solution to Portland’s wartime housing shortage.” 2

Vanport was a city made up of public housing in Multnomah County, and situated between the city of Portland and the Columbia River. The city was originally referred to as Kaiserville after the man who built it, Henry Kaiser, who worked as a ship builder. While struggling to find housing for the new workers Kaiser had coming from the South, he realized it would be most efficient to quickly construct his own housing, and so with 26 million dollars in government approved funds Kaiser began construction on Vanport City in 1942.

[The city was short lived, though, ending with the flood Memorial Day afternoon, 1948.](#) The city got its clever name from combining the first syllables of the two major cities on either side of the Columbia River where it was located—Vancouver and Portland—which then became Vanport. The first tenants began to arrive December 12, 1942 just in time for Christmas in what would become one of the nation’s first integrated low income communities.

The city however, was known to be in a direct flood zone and more than vulnerable as it was built on reclaimed lowlands along the Columbia River, not the best land on which to build a town. The previous winter snowpack had been generous with two major rainstorms occurring May 19th to the 23rd and again on May 26th to the 29th. The rainfall along with the melt water from the snow fed the numerous underground tributaries and the Columbia swelled dangerously in the days before the flood. This created extremely high water levels not seen since the Portland flood of 1894 which covered over 250 square blocks and shut down docks, warehouses and public utilities.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Mysterious Flier - whom was it sent to and whom was it not sent to?**

The night before the Vanport flood, a radio alert was issued and to prepare for what many knew was coming, residents moved their belongings into attics, and upper level bedrooms, hoping to preserve precious possessions like photographs, birth certificates, letters and other family memorabilia and documents. The residents of Vanport were more than half white people, with African Americans at a percentage of 40 percent, but there were also Asians and Native Americans residing in Vanport too. They all worked as unskilled Portland shipyard workers at the nearby Swan Island, with children of all races playing with each other and getting along well.

That Memorial Day, residents had no idea the flood would be as disastrous as it was. Part of that feeling of confusion occurred because residents were given conflicting messages about the

dangers of the rising water levels.

On the night before the morning of Memorial Day, May 30, 1948, or the morning of the flood, (there is opposing testimony) the Housing Authority of Portland issued a long typed statement, with the last paragraph reading: “Remember: Dikes are safe at present. You will be warned if necessary. You will have time to leave. Don’t get excited.” This was distributed to many Vanport residents. The question remains, how many? Who got the message? And who didn’t? It would have taken all night and several dozen people to get the same printed message to the 17,500 residents that were preparing for bed that night in Vanport City.



At 4:17 May 30, p.m. the Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railway berm “melted away” saturated as it was with tons of rising water, and finally busted open in a violent surge.<sup>3</sup> At this point, an emergency siren began to sound, announcing its shrill call high over the city in a lonesome wail. The destroyed berm catapulted a ten foot high, three mile “wall” of rushing water into the area of Vanport, busting through three separate sections of the city. The tons of water tore houses from their flimsy wood foundations, whereupon they began to float, crashing into each other like bumper cars at a carnival. The alarmed residents who were able bodied enough, grabbed what they could and began to head to North Denver Avenue to higher ground, carrying their children and what they could put in bags, strollers or wheelbarrows. But many were left behind and had to be rescued later by rescue workers.

The population of Vanport at that time was around 18,500 people, but due to the Memorial Day



holiday there were many residents who were away visiting family. These figures, according to some sources figured in the low “loss of life” according to official sources with the city of Portland. Public officials stated there were no more than a total of 15-17 deaths that occurred, though that small number has been contested for decades.

Vanport was a complete loss; the city was simply swept away. And there continue to be people who dispute the number of the dead, claiming they saw far more than only 15-17 bodies floating forlornly above the flood waters. The tragedy was so heart wrenching that even President Harry S. Truman flew to Portland to survey the damage and offer a few kind words to victims’ families. The recovery efforts were assisted by employees and staff of Vanport College and the Red Cross and then the Portland police became involved in the recovery mission, along with other law enforcement agencies.

### **The Destructive Specter of Racism in Vanport:**

Some people wonder why the large numbers of black residents didn’t flee sooner, with the underlying message being that it was somehow their fault if they were killed, injured or lost everything. Part of the difficulty of leaving Vanport was that most residents didn’t own vehicles and relied on the city buses for public transportation to work. This was particularly true of the African American residents residing in Vanport. The other reason more residents didn’t flee Vanport was because of misinformation. The residents were told not to panic and were lulled into a false sense of security with that last minute notice that was delivered to a few doors, but most assuredly not all the residents’ doors.

On this topic Stewart has a lot to say as he riffs on one aspect of Vanport which was far more difficult for Black people, than for the white folks living at Vanport. “Part of the difficulty of Black people traveling to another state or even to just move from a place like Vanport to Portland, which isn’t that far away, was because moving companies would not do business with Black people in 1948. They had to arrange moving themselves. When they couldn’t even buy gas at all gas stations or even stay in certain motels, how could they just up and go anywhere? Traveling was a complicated endeavor for Black people back then. It was much easier for a white person to get up and move from state to state. The other reality is that Black people at Vanport were escaping the south. They were leaving places like Alabama, Texas, Missouri, and Mississippi and so when they moved to places like Vanport, they tended to stay put, grateful that they were away from the immediate dangers of the Deep South and its racism.”<sup>4</sup>

[But because those Black people had come north, living near Portland, did that mean they were safely away from the specter of racism?](#) No. Not with mayors like Earl Riley around.

Riley was one of the most corrupt and criminally inclined mayors in Portland’s history. His hatred of black people was well known. Stewart goes on to say: “In 1946 the city hall leaders

were trying to arrange the chartering of a bunch of trains. Business people and city hall was involved. The city intentionally misled the residents of Vanport about the flood. Instead of evacuating the residents of Vanport, they told everybody to stay put.” But why would the mayor of Portland feel so intent on doing this? How deep did Riley’s racism go? A 1942 newspaper article sheds light about Mayor Earl Riley’s concern that too many black people were coming to Portland and that people were comingling—become integrated. In the article, Riley expresses his concerns about this seemingly natural process of integration occurring.<sup>3</sup>

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**Stranger Than Fiction**

**Gotham Heeds Shipyard Call; Special to Leave for Portland**

**New Negro Migrants Worry City**

**Nazis to Buy Hitler Present**

**Japs Plan Isle Drive, Says Knox**

**Out of Work 1200 Enroll For Kaiser First Day**

**Allies Batter Grounded Japs**

**Paper Claims Von Rock Out**

**HOLLYWOOD** Greta Miller told an amazing story Tuesday of how she escaped from death a year of anguish and found she was married to a man she didn't know. The curtain of forgetfulness fell over her following her first husband's death. (AP Wirephoto)

**Air Power Facts**  
 "The Facts About United States Army's Air Power," a thick discussion of the merits and faults of our air force and its equipment, appears Monday in The Oregonian magazine.

On September 29, 1942 the Oregonian ran a front-page headline that read "New Negro Migrants Worry City" and another Oregonian article reported that some Whites complained that the Kaiser Specials were "bringing in an army of Negro workers" that "Portland didn't want."... Shortly thereafter the Oregonian reported Mayor Earl Riley's claim that Portland can absorb only a minimum of Negroes without upsetting the city's regular life." The above referenced article is from 1942, six years before Vanport residents would be deprived of their homes due to the flood. The article was written the year Vanport began to provide housing for the influx of shipyard workers, so it's clear Mayor Earl Riley's views on race and Black people were dated, casually discriminatory and likely quite hostile.<sup>3</sup>

The site of where Vanport existed is now a large green area called Delta Park. Near the Max train and in the parking area, there are several original metal rooftops that have been placed in manicured lawn areas, along with chunks of concrete at the curbs of the parking lot. These fragmented remnants of Vanport act as a way of remembering the town. In an area lower down, beyond where the heart of the city was located, there is what looks like a picnic area, with rounded brick and rock walls that appear to be a kind of possible amphitheater where people

could listen to live music and enjoy picnics. There is also the concrete foundation of what used to be the Vanport Theater, which had room for 750 people. The theater was open seven days a week and 24 hours per day and was a constant source of entertainment, especially for teens and young children.

Probably the one aspect of the city of Vanport that most threatened Mayor Riley was that it was peaceably and harmoniously integrated. Black families and white families lived near each other and their children played with each other. There were also Asian families and Native American families living in Vanport. This reality would have likely been a source of irritation for someone as conservative and bigoted as Mayor Riley. This would also have been a reason Riley might not have felt particularly compelled to warn all the Vanport residents with the printed, typed flier that was distributed to only a fraction of the residents the night before the flood.

### **The Oral History of Vanport Survivor's Cannot be Ignored:**

Stewart remembers the stories he grew up hearing from family and friends about the tragedy at Vanport: “I’ve heard people tell me there were bodies floating all the way down to Linton and Sauvie Island in that area down there. Nobody who was there, black or white that I heard reminisce about Vanport ever gave credibility to the number of victims being only 15. I’ve heard the number go as high as 100 to 300 people who died. The late senator Tom Whalen told me in 2010 and his Dad went down there—his Dad was a fireman and he went down there and they got in a boat and tried to help as many people as they could. And Tom told me himself that it was very unlikely that it was only 15. And when I asked him how many died he told me: “It was a lot!” My grandfather always said that a couple hundred people were killed. He came to that conclusion because of how many of his friends and associates just disappeared. What got to my grandfather was the number of people who never picked up their paychecks or their tools. They just disappeared! Tools are expensive and part of everyone’s livelihood and why would someone leave them behind? My grandfather always felt that the city had burned up the bodies or buried them someplace. He told me that he had heard there was a building over in NE. For some reason he felt that this building, over there by Nabisco, just east of MLK Blvd was used as a “makeshift morgue for Vanport.” He would tell me: “One day I want to get inside that building and look around!”<sup>4</sup>





Stewart has long been troubled by the stories he heard from so many old Black men from his community in North Portland. “There were a lot of people who I would listen to, when I was a kid at the barbershop. There was Mr. Greene, Mr. Robinson, Mr. Young, and my grandfather’s friends Mr. Morris and Mr. Murray. They all talked about it and they all said that there were dozens of people who went missing. It’s what they all said—that there were people who were never seen or heard from every again in any way. My grandfather thought they were just burned up somewhere, the bodies, I mean. Willie Harris would repeat what he had heard from his family and other older folks. He was a barber who owned Sportsman’s Barbershop and he would talk about the people who just never returned. I grew up listening to him talk with my grandfather and they would recite these names of people they never saw again, just dozens of names, mostly men that they never saw or heard from again. I’ve heard every number under the sun, from 100-300 but the one thing is that the number was far higher than only 15. The trouble is nobody knows. There were people who had survived the flood and they were looking for missing friends’ and family members and the city wasn’t very cooperative in helping people find their lost family members. That’s what I remember hearing from all these old guys.”<sup>4</sup>

When asked why naming Stewart's business after the city of Vanport is so important, he responded by saying that he wants Portlanders and all Oregonians to remember more of the positive things about Vanport and not just the negative aspects of the tragedy, clearly a difficult request for any history buff. "Vanport had a strong spirit of community. That's why it hurt so much when it ended. It was an interracial community at a time when American life was very segregated. To have this integrated community develop out of the blue with this strong sense of community was unusual. People were proud to call Vanport their home. They were proud to live there and to educate their children there. The flood washed away an entire community that was thriving. Black and white kids grew up together, they went to school together, they played ball together. Vanport was an integrated community. That's what I want people to remember most."<sup>4</sup>

Then there are the heartbreaking recollections of Mariah Taylor, a Vanport survivor and lifetime Portland resident and beloved activist and benevolent presence in the Portland community. Taylor was a child when the Vanport flood hit and remembers seeing numerous dead bodies floating on the river. Taylor has said the images continue to haunt her. "There are so many memories of bodies floating on the water. Mothers holding their dead babies in their arms. People on housetops. Memories that I will never forget. And so many people have never even heard of it. There is a need for keeping history alive. We don't know where we're going until we know where we've come from. Our history of yesterday is a part of our today. Out of that experience, out of that disaster, out of that tragedy has come new life, new hopes and a new vision and hopefully will help to restore some of what has been considered The Lost City."<sup>5</sup>

### **Fred Stewart's Mission:**

When asked why he wanted to create the title company Vanport Escrow & Title Company Inc., Stewart explained: "I wanted to create an escrow and title company named Vanport because I want to encourage more people to remember the important history of Vanport, and I want more people to get involved in the escrow and title business, and especially more minorities. I want all people to have a trusted source that is based in Oregon and that is run and operated by Black people. Vanport ended poorly, but it was a special time. It was Portland's first integrated community. Other than the flood, everyone that I met who lived there had only fond memories of living there, both Black and White people."<sup>4</sup>

\* Stewart's new business, *Vanport Escrow & Title Company Inc.*, will be up and running in 2021 and Stewart is currently accepting applications for qualified applicants for a number of positions.

Below photograph, provided by the Smithsonian, August 1943, Vanport, Oregon.



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