

Nightshift Arrives Portland Shipbuilding

By Ray Atkeson

During World War II, up to 125,000 people worked in around-the-clock shifts at shipyards in Portland and Vancouver, Washington. This photograph, taken by Ray Atkeson, shows nightshift workers at the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation (OSC), located in Portland's St. Johns neighborhood. Atkeson worked as professional photographer to document Oregon's people and landscapes between 1928 and his death in 1990.

At the OSC yards, as many as 35,000 workers built 435 ships for the U.S. Maritime Commission, including military tankers, aircraft carriers, and Liberty and Victory Ships used to transport goods and people to the war front. The OSC was one of three shipyards in Portland and Vancouver owned by Henry Kaiser's Kaiser Corporation.

Kaiser recruited workers from around the country, transporting them to the Northwest on special "Kaiser Trains." Kaiser also used government funding to build Vanport City on the Columbia Slough, a complex of houses, schools, and community service centers that had a population of 40,000 at its peak. Vanport was destroyed during a 1948 flood.

The growth spurred by war industries changed Portland and Oregon permanently. The census shows that from 1940 to 1950, Oregon's population grew from 1,089,684 to 1,521,341 people. In addition, Oregon's African American population more than tripled to 11,529. In 1950, most of Oregon's Black population lived in Portland.

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