

Deep Roots



NEWSLETTER OF THE TRAVEL INFORMATION COUNCIL HERITAGE PROGRAMS — VOLUME 15, APRIL 2026

Celebrating 30 years of Oregon Heritage Trees

On November 8, 1995, a group of tree lovers gathered for the founding meeting of the Oregon Heritage Tree Committee. They came together to create a program that combined the majesty of Oregon's trees with the history they witnessed over hundreds of years. The group crafted the program from scratch, discussing goals, formalizing criteria, and creating a brochure. In June of 1996 the first program guidelines were drafted, and by Friday, April 11, 1997, the first dedications were held during Arbor Week.

Thirty years later, the committee is lucky enough to still have one of its original members—retired State Parks Forester Al Tocchini. When asked what has kept him engaged, Al responded without hesitation, “The people I’ve gotten to work with over the years. The enthusiasm.”

Committee members have comprised a diverse profile of people including historians and state resource managers, plus tourism representatives from all corners of the state. Al recalls former member Warren Nunn, one of Mark Hatfields’ staffers. Warren was a student at Willamette University in the 1940s and was involved in planting the star trees that decades later he shepherded to become the state’s 27th heritage tree stand.

“I enjoy the mission,” Tocchini continued and laughed. “I used to be called the wood butcher by my cohort at State Parks, but I love trees. I always felt like this



The first state heritage trees were dedicated in 1997. Photos clockwise: Hager Grove Pear in Salem, Courthouse Square Giant Sequoias in Hillsboro, and Sitka Spruce at Klotchy Creek in Clatsop County.

program was a good service to the public. To use trees to interpret history.”

Al became acquainted with Maynard Drawson in late 1995 when he worked at State Parks. Maynard was known as a big tree enthusiast and would drop by the State Park’s office to chat. During this time, Maynard also reached out to the Travel Information Council about assuming a uniquely Oregon heritage program—the Oregon Heritage Tree Program. After pitching his idea to several state agencies, the Travel Information Council agreed to implement it. Maynard asked Al if he wanted to be a part of this committee.

Over the past 30 years the program has grown and established itself, telling stories of state and national significance from the perspective of the trees that have witnessed this history. There are now 86 designated heritage trees in 26 of Oregon’s 36 counties.

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We asked Al if he has a favorite tree or memorable dedication that stands out to him. He recalled the 1999 Ewing Young Oak dedication. Ewing Young was a former fur trapper and trader who settled in the Chehalem Valley in 1834 near present-day Newberg. He is associated with the formation of Oregon’s Provisional Government. The oak was planted on his grave. Former Oregon Governor and US Senator Mark Hatfield attended that dedication.

Al mentioned that the Aspen Arboglyphs in the Steens Mountains was another memorable dedication. The committee and other attendees traveled to the top of Steens Mountain where carvings on the trees were made by Basque shepherders in the early to middle 20th century to communicate with one

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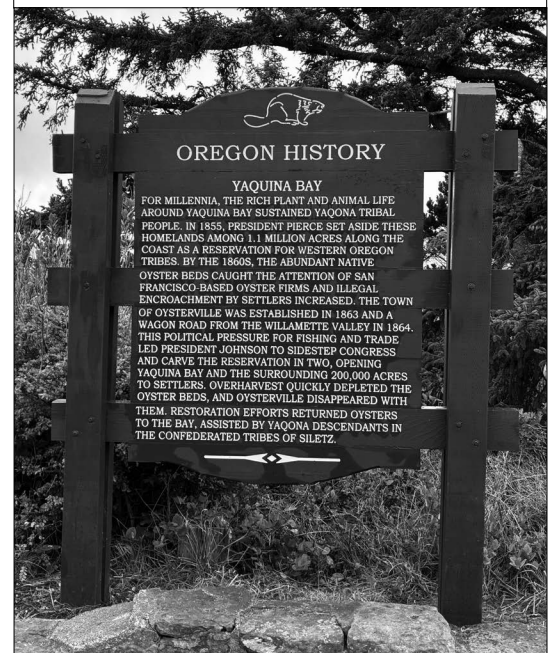
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The Work Behind the Words

The core of the Oregon Historical Marker Program is maintaining the state’s inventory of markers. Because they are constructed of wood, the maintenance cycle is constant.

There is a benefit to a marker’s limited lifespan. When a marker begins physically deteriorating, the Historical Marker Committee revisits the interpretive text, seeks emerging research on the topic, and brings in new perspectives. Cultural humility and accuracy are key values. The committee consults with the Tribes, statewide cultural groups, experts, and local historians to tell a more complete story.



The Yaquina Bay marker stands in Yaquina Bay State Recreation Area, Newport.

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On July 12, 1996, the committee discussed two proposed logos when someone noticed new member Al Tocchini was doodling another logo of a single oak tree design spreading into the design of the state. This became the program’s first logo.

Marking A Road Forward

Each historical marker's dedication is a unique reflection of the community that comes together to tell a story of Oregon's past. Last fall, hundreds of members of the public gathered in Hood River on Veterans Day 2025 to pay tribute to Oregon's Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) veterans and dedicate the state's newest historical marker. It was clear to everyone present on November 11 that the ceremony was something much larger- a community taking steps toward repairing past harms and healing generational trauma by reflecting on the past.

The Oregon Nisei Veterans WWII Memorial Highway marker tells the history of the second-generation Japanese American soldiers who served our country during World War II, even as many of their families were incarcerated on American soil. Around 33,000 Nisei served in the U.S. military. An estimated 437 were Oregonians. These soldiers served their country while Executive Order 9066 created exclusion zones along the West Coast that forcibly removed over 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry (two-thirds American-born citizens) from their homes and incarcerated them on American soil.

Nisei served honorably across military units. Still, anti-Japanese sentiments ran high in the U.S. In November 1944, the names of 16 Nisei soldiers were blotted from Hood River American Legion Post 22's honor roll of 1,600 veterans. The removal of the Nisei names was followed shortly after by a petition signed by more than 1,800 residents saying Japanese Americans were not wanted in Hood River.

According to Linda Tamura, author of *Nisei Veterans Break their Silence: Coming Home to Hood River*, this history was not readily shared with the third and fourth generations. Her research in local newspapers uncovered details of racism and discrimination families may have found too painful to discuss.

Through the efforts of third and fourth generation Japanese Americans, veterans' networks, Japanese American cultural institutions, heritage groups, and city, county and state officials, the history is now very much in the public realm. The Oregon Legislature designated the 41-mile stretch of Highway 35 from Government Camp to Hood River the Oregon Nisei Veteran Memorial Highway in 2022 and the historical marker now stands in a pull out 1 mile south of Hood River.

Attendees at the marker dedication in Hood River not only felt honor and appreciation for the Nisei veterans and their service but also for the people who worked hard to mend past harms and saw value in remembering our complicated past.

American Legion Post 22 Commander Carl Casey said in opening remarks, ***"We hope that we will learn from the past mistakes to ensure they are not repeated."***

Linda Tamura added, "We can rise above our past... We wish our grandparents and parents could be here today with us. They didn't want to worry us- or maybe make us feel less than optimistic about what our futures could hold... Today, we have a gift for them. We're working together with our communities and the state of Oregon to honor our Nisei veterans. We're addressing the adversity they faced. And were ready to tell stories they were reluctant to share."

Eric Ballinger who first proposed the highway signage added, "What my Issei (first generation) and Nisei family endured resulted in a generational trauma that still resonates to this day. The generations in front of me, the Gosei, my daughter's generation, inspire and motivate me to share this history and to change the narrative to one of pride, honor, and healing."

Visit this marker on the west side of Hwy 35, approximately one mile south of Hood River.



Organizers and local officials at marker. L-R: Linda Tamura, Eric Ballinger, Commander Carl Casey, Rep Jeff Helfrich, Commission Chair Jennifer Euwer, Mia Ballinger, Mayor Paul Blackburn, Former Mayor Kate McBride, Museum Director Lisa Commander, Councilor Gladys Rivera.



Nisei soldiers in the Military Intelligence Service translated 20 million pages of captured documents and interrogated 14,000 Japanese prisoners. Major General Charles Willoughby, intelligence chief for General Douglas MacArthur, noted that the Nisei MIS "saved over 1 million lives and shortened the war by two years."



The 442nd "Go For Broke" Regimental Combat Team is the most highly decorated Army unit of its size and length of service in military history.

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Heritage Tree Committee at Waldo Lake Tree at Island Lake, Klamath County. Maynard Dawson (left) and Al Tocchini (standing left of tree).

another about the sheep and who had passed by each place. Al recalled that Basque shepherders came in from all over to attend the dedication and shared some traditions such as baking bread in big iron skillets and passing the boda bag around. The committee stayed at the historic Frenchglen Hotel and fellow committee member Doug Grafe brought his guitar and played in the enclosed porch.

Al says that he and the current Heritage Tree committee members share a clear vision for the future of program- to be more inclusive. In this 30th year, the Oregon Heritage Tree Committee is drafting a value statement to guide the program in continuing to expand the stories told to include less represented voices throughout history.

Thoughtful growth and change are signs of the program's health. Al recalls that Maynard Dawson and the early committee focused on the novelty of a historical figure or event connected to a tree, noting of the founder: "He might squirm a little bit in some of our meetings now, but I'm sure he's smiling down, too."

Vanport Cottonwoods- Rooted in Place

At 4:17pm on Memorial Day 1948, the Columbia River crested 15 feet above the flood plain and breached a railway dike. In a matter of minutes, the flood of water destroyed Vanport, one of the largest wartime housing projects in the United States and Oregon's second-largest city.

Today, there are few remnants of this community on the landscape. Thanks to a collaboration between Nidus Consulting, Outdoor History Consulting, and the Vanport Placemarking Project, stands of cottonwood trees have been identified that likely survived the Vanport Flood. The team utilized aerial photos from the City of Portland's Archives to track images of the same stands of trees in the same locations over decades to provide strong evidence. These trees will be dedicated as Oregon's 86th Heritage Trees.

Built to house a diverse workforce

Vanport operated from 1942 to 1948. Built in one year to house workers and families in World War II industries, primarily at the Vancouver and Portland Shipyards, Vanport contained up to 9,568 units of housing. Over the 650-acre site, as many as 42,000 people lived, worked, played, and went to school. Vanport's community housing was racially segregated, along with its hospitals and most of its recreation centers and shops. African American and Native American families lived

in separate zones from White families, but schools and theaters were integrated.

After the war, many families stayed in Vanport and others moved to the city to take classes at the Vanport Extension Center, a college which eventually became Portland State University. The site holds special significance for Black and Indigenous families, as many Black and Indigenous people first moved to Oregon to work in wartime industries and live in Vanport. Vanport remained one of the only places they could find housing in the Portland area during and after the war.

Trees help connect this landscape to intangible memories

When the Columbia River's floodwaters rose on Memorial Day weekend 1948, the cheaply built homes and structures floated off their post and pier foundations, and in the span of a few years, most physical remnants of the site had vanished. The residents of Vanport were first displaced to makeshift refugee camps. Over time, Black and Indigenous families were pushed into deteriorated public housing and eventually into de facto segregated neighborhoods in North Portland.

Vanport's legacy is complicated. Its residents, who came from all over the continent, brought traditions and cultures with them. Those that have remained in Portland since have helped shape the culture and history of the city. And the stories of expediently built housing, segregated communities, and the significance of the war industry work are all important parts of the collective memory of the region that must not be forgotten.

For over 75 years these cottonwoods have grown at the Vanport site as the landscape transformed into a golf course and a racetrack. Rooted in place amid great tides of change, they likely witnessed construction equipment building a city from farms and wetlands, countless workers leaving for shifts at the shipyards, kids playing in and around the banks of the sloughs, and the violent and sudden destruction of Vanport in the 1948 flood.

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This past year, the program replaced the Yaquina Bay marker. Installed in 1950 and restored in 2003, the original marker centered on the lighthouse, telling the history of British Captain James Cook's landfall on the coast in 1778. Much of this information was duplicated on other signage at the park, which opened the opportunity to identify a new topic of state significance.

In collaboration with Oregon State Parks and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, the marker now tells the story of oysters as an important food source in Yaquina Bay and how political pressure for fishing and trade led to President Johnson illegally breaking the Coast Indian Reservation in two. This new story meets the Siletz Tribe's priority of telling reservation history and State Parks' goal to interpret the bay as a food source throughout history.

A key interpretive change was adjusting the timeline of the marker from centuries to millennia as mud in the sloughs of the bay hold fish weir well over 3,000 years old. Another exciting addition to the new text is that the Siletz tribal language manager consulted old linguistic recordings with Alesia/Yaquina speakers and chose to spell Yaqona with a q because the "k" sound is placed a bit further back in the mouth. That spelling is also closer to the English spelling of Yaquina Bay.

The story ends by circling back to the restoration efforts that have returned oysters to the bay, assisted by Yaqona descendants in the Confederated Tribes of Siletz today.



Photo courtesy of Multnomah County Library PUPic_001345.

1948 Vanport Flood victims being resettled.

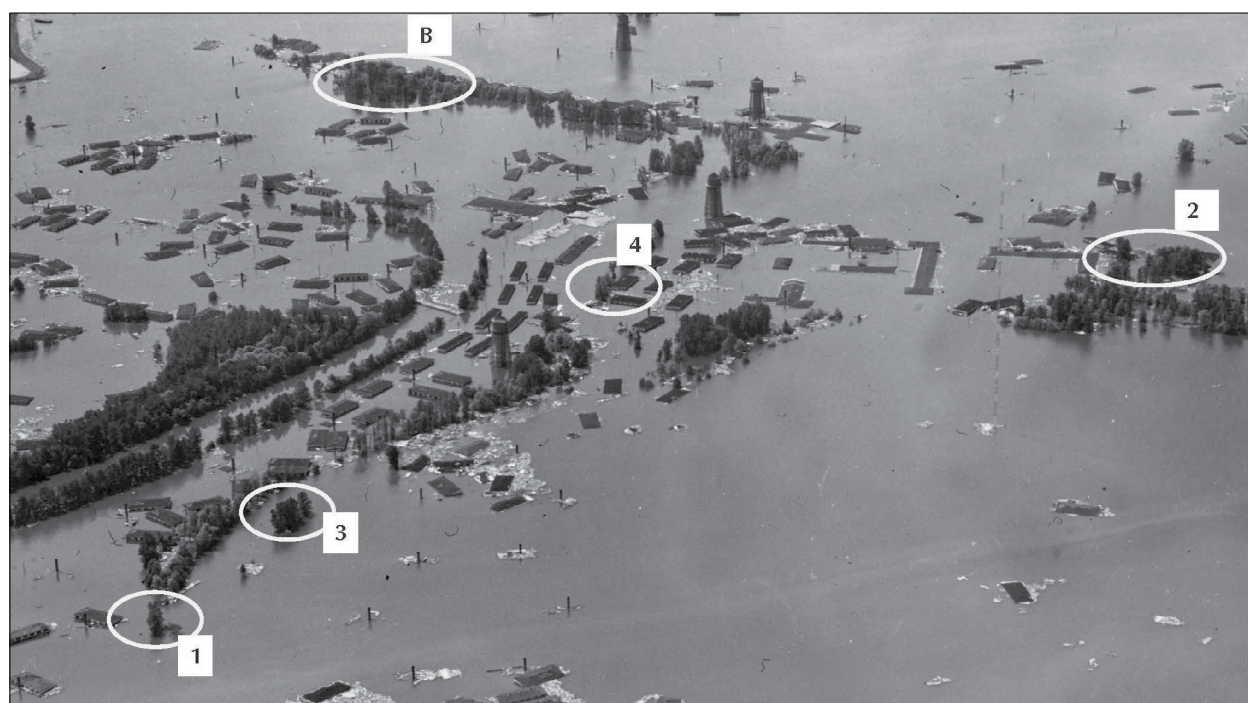


Original Yaquina Bay marker circa 1950



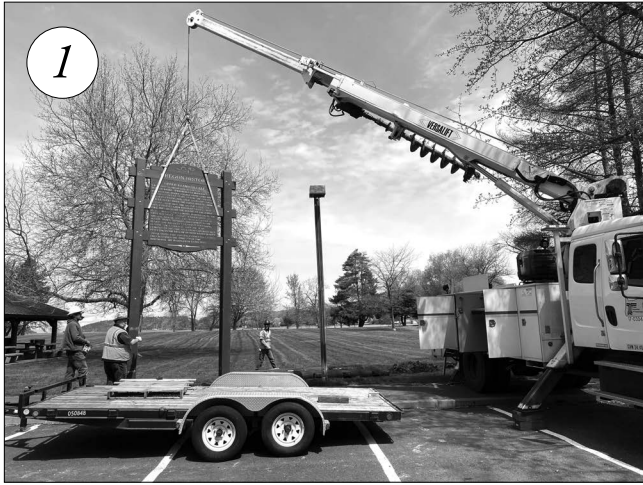
Photo courtesy of Oregon Historical Society OrHI_3623

Vanport Flood clean-up.



The 1948 aerial photo taken two weeks after the flood shows Vanport completely covered by water. Tree stands that likely still exist today are identified by circles.

2025 Heritage Program Yearbook



Heritage Committees

Historical Marker Members:

Katie Bush
 Kelly Cannon-Miller (Chair)
 Nancy DeSouza
 Robert Garcia
 Kimberly Gorman
 David-Paul Hedberg
 Sarah Jalving
 Robert Olguin
 Amy Platt

Heritage Tree Members:

Nancy Appling
 Mike Boero
 David-Paul Hedberg (Chair)
 Mike Hogan
 Jennifer Karps
 Kristine McConnell
 Molly McKnight
 Arne Nyberg
 Brittany Oxford
 Carol Palmer
 Kristin Ramstad
 Al Tocchini
 Samantha Wolf

Salemtowne Volunteers:

(Historical Marker Maintenance)
 James Childers (foreman)
 Richard DuBois
 Stan Gregory
 John Mangini
 Herman Mitzel
 Howard Long

TIC Heritage Program Staff

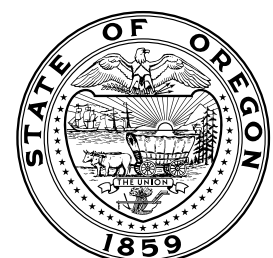
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Deep Roots is published annually. For additional copies, please call 503-378-4508.

The Oregon Historical Marker and Oregon Heritage Tree Programs are administered by the Travel Information Council.

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Visit us on the Web
www.oregontic.com

1. TIC Sign Crew works with ODOT to install updated Upper Klamath Lake marker in Moore Park.
2. Craig Leech (right) accepts Heritage Tree Hero of the Year Award from Heritage Tree Committee Chair Dave Hedberg (left).
3. Heritage Tree Committee gathers to honor former member Craig Leech's work at Grove of the States.
4. TIC staff and families participate in spring cleaning at Grove of the States for Take Your Child to Work Day.
5. Heritage Tree Committee members dedicate the JQA Young House Fruit Trees during Cedar Mill Cider Festival in Beaverton.
6. Travel Information Council and Historical Marker Committee volunteers at dedication of the Oregon Nisei Veterans WWII Historical Marker near Hood River.
7. TIC Sign Crew installs updated Cape Sebastian marker near Gold Beach.