

It was a cold and soggy day to be camping out in Alton Baker Park, and that helped illustrate what life was like in Tent City six decades ago.

It was no campout. It was a shutout - a racist-fueled expulsion from civilization in Eugene's not-so-distant past.

On Saturday, members of the Black Student Union at Lane Community College pitched a surplus Army tent on the park's west end to recall the cluster of black families that lived there in a ramshackle village in the 1940s.

"Most of us had never even heard of Tent City at all," said Michelle Fisher, 20, a dance major at LCC. "I just couldn't believe it. I know that discrimination and segregation existed, but it seems so recent."

Black residents, not welcome to live within city limits, congregated in tents and makeshift houses on county land at the north end of the Ferry Street Bridge.

They survived without sewers and running water. The lack of dams up the Willamette River made the area prone to flooding.

"That's how times were then, but still it's shocking to hear about it," Fisher said.

The re-enactment, which included food and historical exhibits, also commemorates Black History Month. Organizers plan to make it an annual event.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," said Herman Davis, 63, the oldest member of the LCC Black Student Union.

"It enlightens a lot of people that just can't visualize such a thing happening. Sometimes people just need to be made aware that things happened, and it makes them take a look at themselves."

The students, who got the idea from student union adviser Mark Harris, erected the large canvas tent near the actual site of Tent City, which was bulldozed in 1949 to make way for reconstruction

of the Ferry Street Bridge.

Most of the people moved to Glenwood or the western outskirts of Eugene, where they again encountered frequent flooding in the wetlands.

Despite the primitive conditions, Tent City residents did their best to make it habitable.

They turned a tent into a chapel and established a juke joint for entertainment.

"It was a community within itself," Fisher said. "It didn't have any support from Eugene. It had to get its own water to cook and clean and to use bathrooms, the outhouses. They had to build their own shelters."

"I think it's really impressive to have nothing and to be able to turn it into somewhere to live, to raise children and families," she said.

A few former Tent City residents are still around.

**Mattie Reynolds**, 86, lived there with her husband, the late Sam **Reynolds**, and their children.

"When we look back on it, that was one of the most pleasurable times," she said in an interview early last year. "We were oppressed and depressed, but we had one another to raise each other up."

Hart Jenkins, Fisher's father-in-law, remembers hearing stories of Tent City while growing up in Eugene in the '60s and '70s.

But it's not a topic everyone is comfortable discussing, he said.

"A lot of people don't want to talk about it. If they did, they'd be here," Jenkins said. "There was a lot of race conflicts. They had the KKK here."

The community could do more to recall this chapter in its history, said David Sonnichsen, who helps lead a citizen planning committee for the Whilamut Natural Area of Alton Baker Park.

"I really do think that Eugene would benefit from having a permanent recognition of Tent City in whatever form the African American community thinks is appropriate," Sonnichsen said.

Fisher agreed it's important to keep the story of Tent City alive, to teach new generations about it.

"It's our history, Eugene's history," she said. "It takes a long time to change a community. It's definitely a lot better, but I think there's still a long way to go."

**CITATION (MLA STYLE)**

The Register-Guard, Scott Maben. "Tent City stakes its claim in history." *Register-Guard, The (Eugene, OR)*, sec. Minorities, 13 Feb. 2005, p. 1C. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*, infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/108502A9DDD73D18. Accessed 17 Apr. 2022.

Copyright (c) 2005, The Register-Guard, Eugene, Ore.