Oregon's history **pockmarked** with racial injustices

**BYLINE:** JANIE HAR and BILL GRAVES, The Oregonian

**SECTION:** Local News; Pg. A04

**LENGTH:** 750 words

**SUMMARY:** Race | The discussion Barack Obama seeks is tough in a mostly white state, a professor says

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JANIE HAR

and BILL GRAVES

From a flap last year over renaming a Portland street to racist taunts at a state high school basketball tournament, race remains a simmering sore point in a state that's overwhelmingly white.

Oregon history shows that people in power have discriminated against just about every minority group at some time.

In 1857, Oregonians made it illegal for African Americans to live within state borders --and the provision stayed in the state constitution until the 1920s. Interracial marriage was against the law in Oregon until 1951.

During World War II, as part of President Roosevelt's executive order, authorities rounded up Americans of Japanese descent at the North Portland Assembly Center to ship them to internment camps.

Sen. Barack Obama, who will be in Portland on Friday, addressed the "racial stalemate we've been in for years" in his speech Tuesday.

His attempt to kick-start a meaningful conversation on race may pose a bigger challenge in Oregon than most of the country because the state is so "Wonder Bread white," says Chet Orloff, former director of the Oregon Historical Society and a professor at Portland State University.

Oregon's 3.7 million people are 81 percent white, 10 percent Latino, 4 percent Asian American, 2 percent African American, 1 percent Native American and 2 percent multiracial, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

With such a small minority population, Oregonians typically don't have to confront issues of race, Orloff says.

"We like to think we are progressive, open minded and liberal," he says. "But it is easier to be such when you are in Oregon. . . . White people have not had the opportunity to live with others."

Shameful episodes

Still, tensions surface.

The U.S. Army and settlers killed thousands of Native Americans in clashes early in the state's history. Through the next 150
years, the state and federal governments also took Native American lands, stopped recognizing their tribes and dissolved their reservations.

The Oregon Geographic Names Board encounters friction whenever it replaces the name of a place using the word squaw, which is offensive to Native Americans.

Almost any incident --a noose, a swastika, a police shooting --can rub salt in old racial wounds, says James S. Harrison, who teaches African American history at Portland Community College. The stalemate that Obama talks about rings true with students, the majority of whom feel "nothing has changed," he says.

With Latinos making up Oregon's largest and fastest growing minority group, perhaps it's not surprising that the latest battle over race in Oregon has centered on immigration.

Opponents of illegal immigration have protested at the Capitol and at labor centers, telling people to go back to Mexico. Separately, some businesses and residents of North Portland's Interstate Avenue protested when told of a plan to rename the street for labor leader Cesar Chavez.

Immigration debate

Cisco Espericueta, who works with a group in Salem that helps young people register to vote, says the immigration debate has racial undertones in some parts of the state.

"I've heard of situations where people are called names because of how they look," he said. "Some people are afraid of change. They've lived so many years without any people of color in their towns, and they see too many (Latino immigrants) and they get freaked out."

Brenda Sifuentez is 24 years old, a graduate of Ontario High School and the University of Oregon. Her home state, she says, is no better or worse than the rest of the country, with plenty of work left to do on breaking down racial barriers.

"It's more than black and white," she says.

"And with Oregon, it's definitely talked about in terms of migration, and who's coming here and if you look Latino, even if you're born in the United States, you're seen as an outsider."

Byron Wong, a 32-year-old mortgage banker, says race relations in Portland are better than in New York or California.

He points to some progress, at least on the political front: Portland mayoral candidate Sho Dozono and longtime legislator state Rep. John Lim of Gresham are both Asian American.

"I have been racially harassed in New York," Wong says, "but it's never happened here."

Reach Janie Har at 503-221-8213, janiehar@news.oregonian.com;

Bill Graves at 503-221-8549, billgraves@news.oregonian.com

LOAD-DATE: March 21, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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