



MOUNT-TABOR

NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

Serving the only neighborhood on the slopes of an extinct volcano

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Imagining Mt. Tabor 300 years ago

By Ken Ames

Looking west toward downtown from atop Mt. Tabor, it is difficult to imagine how our neighborhood appeared 200 or 300 years ago. The Portland metro area was the home of Chinookan peoples, people related to the modern Chinook at the mouth of the Columbia River (who last year were formally recognized as a tribe by the federal government). What is now Portland and Vancouver had one of the densest populations in western North America. Most people lived in villages and towns down along the rivers, particularly the Columbia. Mt. Tabor was not a place where people lived year-round. It was part of their hinterland where they came to acquire resources in season.

Today we must squint our eyes and use our imaginations to peel away the roads, the bungalows, the shops along Hawthorne, the cars, the fenced yards, and summer gardens. But what was here? Although no archaeology has been done around Mt. Tabor, it is still possible to paint a picture based on research elsewhere and our knowledge of Chinookan lifeways.

Looking out from Mt. Tabor, we would probably see a rolling, grassy, park-like landscape with oak trees standing alone and in groves. We might also see low grass fires flickering through the trees and smoke drifting down toward the rivers. The west hills could be obscured through the smoky haze on some days. The Kalapuya people who lived in the Willamette Valley south of



Mt. Tabor Methodist Episcopal Church. Oregon Historical Society, OrHi CN009009.

Willamette Falls regularly burned the valley's vegetation, producing the lush pastoral environment that so attracted the first Euroamerican settlers. It seems likely the Chinook also set fires to burn their landscape here.

These fires would have made the environment more productive, more useful, for the Chinookans. With fire, oaks produce more and larger acorns. These nuts were a very important food resource. The oaks themselves were larger and healthier. Regular burning also created an environment in which deer and elk flourished. These animals were important for

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