

Voices In My Head: Vernonian or Flatlander?

By P.J. O’Leary

It’s Jamboree time again in Vernonia, and there’s electricity in the air. Enjoy it now because West Oregon Electric is working on a plan to add Jamboree electricity to your next monthly statement.

It really is a great time because we get to enjoy the efforts of hundreds of volunteers who work their hearts out sponsoring events for charities, kids and local organizations. There are warm displays of friendship and hospitality. People come from all over to experience the special feel of a small town festival. Naturally, this means that there will be “city people” here.

We Vernonians tend to loosely define a city person as anyone we don’t recognize by sight which is not always a reliable method of identification. One dead giveaway I’ve noticed is when you see someone walking by himself carrying on an animated conversation. Your first inclination is to think that this guy is a couple logs short of a load, but on closer inspection you realize that he’s talking to someone through this little implement strapped to his ear. It’s called a Bluetooth, or a loose tooth, or something otherwise related to dental neglect. Turns out the guy’s not crazy after all.

I’ve actually borrowed this new urban trend and adapted it as a way to assure people that I’m not crazy. I mean, who doesn’t talk to themselves from time to time? It doesn’t mean that you’re “going postal;” it’s simply an indication that occasionally mental conversations find their way to the audio feed. For me buying one of those phones would be a waste of money. Even if I could figure out how to work it, which is unlikely, I would probably never actually use it. Undeterred, I pulled an old pocketknife that looks vaguely like the phone device out of the drawer. Naturally the knife doesn’t have a headset strap, so I just went ahead and duct taped it to my ear. Now I can rest easy knowing that as I walk down the street, even if I unwittingly give voice to a random thought, nobody will think I’m crazy. Additionally, I always have within reach a handy tool for peeling apples which is a feature I doubt that the Bluetooth offers.

This year, as always, the streets will be teeming with both Vernonians and Jamboree visitors from away. As I mentioned, sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference. So, for this special Jamboree issue, I’m introducing a little game I call “Vernonian or Flatlander?”

I’ll describe a person and you decide whether that person is a Vernonian or someone from away. Simple, right? Let’s begin.

1. You see a middle aged guy in jeans and a plain t-shirt wearing a \$20.00 “Ax-men” hat. Vernonian or Flatlander? Answer: Flatlander. A Vernonian would never pay for a hat.
2. A thirty-something guy wearing a muscle top, unnervingly “fitted” elastic waistband shorts and sandals with striped tube socks. Vernonian or Flatlander? Answer: Vernonian. A Flatlander might wear the same outfit, but the socks would be knitted wool. Let’s celebrate the common ground shared by dorks everywhere.
3. A young lady in camo shorts and simple top leading a Chihuahua on a leash. Vernonian or Flatlander? Answer: Flatlander. Vernonians typically use Chihuahuas as cougar bait, and it would be plain irresponsible to bait cougars on a crowded thoroughfare.
4. An older bearded guy with Romeos, white socks and white legs wearing a Caterpillar t-shirt and sunglasses on top of his head. Vernonian or Flatlander? Answer: Flatlander. This was a tough one. While most of the outfit makes you think local, a Vernonian would no sooner wear sunglasses on his head than he would put lipstick on livestock.
5. A forty-year-old man with a Mohawk, wearing a tight red chiffon top, purple hot pants and calk (“cork”) boots. Vernonian or Flatlander? Answer: I don’t know where he’s from, but the police have been trying to catch him since Jamboree 2005.

You got one or two answers right, you should be mildly concerned. If you got three or more right, I recommend you put the paper down and seek counseling immediately.

You know I was kidding about the Chihuahuas, right?

Report From Rural America: Vernonia, Circa 2043

Work of Fiction By Miles Wickstrom

The transformation of America over the last 35 years has been more dramatic than anyone could have imagined. For my neighbors in Vernonia, the changes have been a mixture of sacrifice and success. On balance, though, we have not done too badly, certainly compared with other areas of the country that are still under martial law. We owe our success to the resiliency of our community and to several initiatives that began way back in 2009.

Some background first. The underlying cause of this great change in America was oil, or perhaps more accurately, the lack thereof. We were undeniably a petroleum-based society. Many people failed to appreciate the extent to which petroleum touched our lives. Industries that were heavily dependent on oil such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture, plastics, cosmetics and transportation have all experienced dramatic losses in capacity as their primary raw material has grown scarce.

For most of us, the immediate impact was first felt at the gas pump. Some of us still remember the millennium celebration when gas sold for less than a dollar a gallon. That was just 43 years ago. Today, the price is \$57 a gallon for unleaded and \$65 a gallon for diesel. This upward spiral of fuel costs was predicted as far back as the 1960’s and two unrelated events in 2008 turned that prediction into reality.

The first event was the arrival of peak oil. Like a dark storm quietly gathering on the horizon, peak oil described that day when world-wide petroleum production began to decline as the once-vast pools of oil beneath the surface began to run dry. Ethanol was briefly promoted as the “fuel of the future”, but the industry quickly disappeared with the discovery that the BTUs created were less than the BTUs expended in production. By the time we stopped betting our future on pipe dreams, the damage was beyond salvation.

The second world-changing event occurred in September of 2008 when the international oil trading centers switched the exchange medium from dollars to euros. Since the value of the dollar was so low at the time, the cost of a barrel of oil jumped to \$172. Asian nations with strong economies and the European Union did well; the US, already trillions of dollars in debt, was forced to shop the world market with money that had little value.

Overnight, fuel availability declined by 30%. The resulting panic was entirely predictable and – tragically – largely avoidable. The government immediately began a rationing program that first assured a steady supply for the military, the government, and certain large corporations. This decision was highly unpopular and widespread disenchantment led to protests, which led to riots, which led to martial law. Instead of fighting terrorists, we fought each other.

Yet as I said, Vernonia hasn’t done too badly. The gasoline price spike of 2008 proved to be the catalyst that roused the town to action. Since many townspeople drove 40 miles or more each day to work, rising gas prices were particularly painful. The first thing we did was organize a city-wide carpool network, which proved in time to be highly effective, not just for commuting, but also for shopping and medical appointments.

In 2009, a local bond measure was successfully passed that provided seed money to demonstrate how biodiesel and methane could be produced locally from brush, logging debris, apples and animal waste. In 2010, another bond measure was passed that provided funds to build a community-owned wood pellet manufacturing plant in town. Concurrently, a group of mechanics and millwrights organized a small company that chopped up old car bodies and converted them into new pellet stoves. This was critically important since the supply of propane and home heating fuel was spotty at best and priced beyond the reach of many citizens.

Food self-sufficiency also required immediate attention. Hundreds of large corporate farms in the mid-West went bankrupt when the availability of tractor fuel did not coincide with harvest time. Vernonians learned to build large cold cellars from recycled materials where carrots, potatoes, squash, apples and other foods could be kept fresh through the winter. The city, which had condemned several dozen abandoned homes in the area, actively recruited farm workers by offering them free housing in return for assistance on the farms. Farming today is much more labor intensive than it once was and the partnership has proven beneficial to all.

In some ways we were just plain lucky. We had clean water, arable land, trees and biomass in abundance. In other ways, we made our own luck. When WOEC announced in 2014 that electricity would only be available for six hours a day, we brought our best minds together to design and build a series of low head hydropower generators that produced electricity without interfering with fish migration. When a local timber company ceded several hundred acres of nearby forest land to the city, we asked our foresters to create a sustainable forest plan that could supply our town with lumber and wood fiber not just for this generation, but for all generations to come.

Yes, life in Vernonia has changed. Our economy is largely based on the barter system. The mail only comes once a week. The newspaper is delivered exclusively over the Internet. Folks walk and ride bicycles more. We lost a third of our population in the first two decades of this century. Some were flooded out. Some felt that safety could be found living closer to the big city, when in truth safety is found nearest to where your food is grown. We began as a small town with small town values and that sense of community cohesiveness has held us together through some pretty rough times.

Some say that our once-great nation is sliding inexorably toward Third World status. I disagree. I think America is returning to the virtues of our founders. Living lives of simplicity rather than succumbing to the lure of consumerism. Sharing and cooperating to achieve community goals instead of striving for individual advantage. From where I sit, I see an endlessly hopeful and optimistic future for all of rural America in general and for Vernonia in particular, circa 2043.

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