

## Living In Alaska: Summer Visitors

By Kate Conley

"Life comes at you fast" is the Nationwide Insurance slogan. I agree. Here in Bristol Bay life has sped up. The town is bustling with fishermen and cannery workers. Lodges and restaurants have opened for the tourist season.

From June 20th to July 20th each year our little community explodes. Our usual population of 500 rockets to 5000 as the planes disgorge jet-lagged, backpack-laden recruits from across the globe. Meanwhile, the rivers begin to bubble and spill over with their own population explosion. Like the fish, the human visitors are here only to achieve their goals and then leave.

Cabins that sat empty for three seasons suddenly show the traces of habitation: cars in the driveway, wash on the line, boots by the door. Large three story boxes of dormitories that for the winter were locked up and cavernous are now filled with calls and shouts in many languages.

And the sleepy little village nestled in the corner of Bristol Bay has a very distinct odor. Everywhere you go is the pungent odor of fish. I believe the fishermen and cannery workers do not even smell it anymore. I advise offering rides to hitchhikers only if you have a pickup.

With the fish come other visitors – the four legged, hairy kind. I have to admit my attitude to bears has evolved. I was so excited to see bears and to snap pictures and get as close as possible. When you get close you see how big these animals are, how long their claws are. It is humbling and frightening. Our latest brush with the bears happened in our own backyard.

Three little bears tumbled into our yard. They followed the trail up from the river and they stopped in shock when they realized they were so close to a house. They paused and looked around. About then momma ambled up. The threesome was emboldened by the presence of mom and began to wrestle and tussle. To get a better photo, my own family spilled onto our raised deck. Momma bear gathered her busy bunch and scooted into the brush while we went back inside. As soon as we were in, the bears were back out and completely without inhibitions. The little guys dared one another to see who could get the closest to the house. Eventually they were pounding on our basement windows despite our yelling at them to leave. Life definitely sped up with the possibility of a bear cub falling into our basement!

Sometimes life comes at you slowly, too. Weekends in Bristol Bay pass very slowly this time of year if you do not fish. The rest of the population is out on the water gathering the "red gold" while non-fishermen sit home. There are no theatres or malls to visit. All meetings are cancelled until August. Even the restaurants are not an option, as they are glutted with customers and the wait can be up to two hours for a pizza.

So I sit at my window and watch the rain drizzle up a misty white fog from the river. The sun casts a sidelong glance at the world and illuminates the clouds with purple and gold like a Thomas Kinkade painting. I think it is most accurate to say life comes at you in bursts. Sometimes it crawls and sometimes it sprints, but it continues, and it changes, and for the most part – it is good.

## Vernonia Pioneer Museum: Preserving Our Heritage

By Tobie Finzel

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum Association (VPMA) is dedicated to recording and preserving the history of the City of Vernonia and the Upper Nehalem River Valley. Its mission is to educate, display, research, and preserve the history of this area.

The museum houses artifacts from the Upper Nehalem River basin as well as the rest of Columbia County. There are tools, clothing and household items donated by the founding families of Vernonia; an extensive photographic and document collection of local pioneer life and early logging operations; and many blueprints and paper records of the Oregon-American Mill that was built in 1923 and demolished in the late 1950's.

The museum is located at East 511 Bridge Street in the former Oregon-American Lumber Company administrative headquarters building, a Vernonia landmark. The building was placed on the National Historic Register in 2002 in part because it is only one of three remaining mill office structures still standing in the State of Oregon. In the early days of Oregon forestry, lumber mills were the heart of a large percentage of towns across the state. Vernonia is one of the few mill towns that is still a vibrant community.

When the OA mill closed in 1957, the property was given to the City of Vernonia. In 1963, Vernonia leased the mill office to Columbia County. The Vernonia Pioneer Museum opened in 1963 and is the largest of the Columbia County museums. The building is maintained by Columbia County and for many years had a resident curator. The Vernonia Pioneer Museum Association (VPMA) was established in 2002 to administer the museum, maintain the artifacts and hold the museum open to the public. VPMA is staffed entirely by local volunteers. Current officers are Carol Davis, President; Ralph Keasey, Vice President; Barbara Larsen, Secretary; and Tobie Finzel, Treasurer. Donna Webb is VPMA's liaison to the new county museums association and serves as its secretary. Additional volunteers help with displays, preservation and holding the museum open; new volunteers are always welcome.

Museum membership is \$15 per year for an individual, \$20 for a couple and \$25 for a family. VPMA publishes a bi-monthly newsletter to members that includes current events and articles of local historical interest. There is no fee to visit the museum, but - of course - donations are always welcome. VPMA is organized as a program of Vernonia Hands-on Art Center, a 501(c)(3) arts and heritage non-profit corporation; therefore, gifts to VPMA are deductible as a charitable donation.

In 2006, VPMA was awarded two small grants from the Oregon Heritage Foundation and the Columbia County Cultural Trust, the local extension of the Oregon Cultural Trust. The grant funds were used to restore a mid-20s panorama photo of the mill and to purchase supplies for photo and textile preservation. Copies of this panorama and selected other photographs are for sale at the museum. The County received notification this spring of a State Historic Preservation grant that will be used to fix the foundation of the building under the annex and upgrade the roof; the County is providing the required matching funds.

From time to time "Museum Talks" are presented by individuals who have special knowledge of local history. These talks have been recorded on DVD as part of our oral history collection. Over the past several years, interviews with long-time residents have also been captured and preserved for this archive. Museum patrons may view the DVDs during open hours.

The museum is open from 1-4 pm on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the year, and 1-4 pm on Fridays from June through mid-September. Each year the museum hosts over one thousand visitors and logs nearly an equal number of volunteer hours. About half of the visitors are from outside Vernonia; while many are casual tourists, occasionally they are descendants of the early settlers and O-A mill workers who moved away from the area and often provide additional information about our local heritage.



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