

Senior Stars: Ken Smejkal

By Karen Miller

From time to time, before my family and I moved to Vernonia, we used to drive way over here from Scappoose (it seemed like such a long way!). On those trips my husband Frank and I would drop in and visit with a friendly couple—the men would talk business and trucks and the wife was a gracious hostess, entertaining me as we listened and chatted. When we decided to relocate here in 1993 I already had a warm and fuzzy feeling about this rural wilderness land as a result of knowing this special couple, Ken and Penny Smejkal. So I am honored to interview Ken, along with wife Penny, as the Senior Star for *Vernonia's Voice*.



Ken Smejkal

Ken Smejkal was born of Czech decent; his grandfather Joseph came over to this country via a ship called the *SS Frankfurt*, a one funnel, two masts with a speed of 13 knots. The ship was launched in March of 1900 for service from Bremen, Germany to Baltimore and she made her first voyage from Bremen to Galveston, Texas in December of 1901. It was on one of her Galveston voyages in 1904 that Ken's grandpa Joseph arrived on U.S. soil. According to Ken, many immigrants, especially Germans and Eastern Europeans entered the U.S. through the Port of Galveston.

One year later Joseph sent for his wife, Ken's grandmother, Teresa, who packed up her four children, including

Ken's father Tony, aged 2 and set sail on the *SS Koln*. The *Koln* was later seized by the United States and served as a troop transport ship during WWI.

The family arrived by train to Vernonia and made their home around the Buxton area. Ken fondly remembers that his grandma spoke five languages, but didn't know English, so the story goes, she would trustingly hold out her

hand and let shopkeepers take the right amount of change.

Transportation in 1905 around Vernonia consisted of mainly horse and buggy, wagon or carriage, depending on your standard of living. For Ken's grandpa it was quite a switch, from being a tailor in Pressburg, Czechoslovakia to working in and around the woods of the great northwest.

Ken's mother Louise was born on a homestead near what is now Leonard Schmidlin's place. Louise's father, Gustav Schmidlin, arrived from Switzerland; Louise's mother, Emma Wunsch set sail for America at the age of 19 from Germany.

Ken's father Tony worked as

a timber faller and began working for himself in 1948, gypo logging they call it. According to Ken, Tony had his share of near misses: In 1926 a log rolled and pinned him down, he lost an eye in his teens when a tree limb hit him in the woods and lost a kidney in the 50s. He was shot by his brother one time, who thought he was a cougar.

Tony met and fell in love with Louise Schmidlin and they were married in the Catholic Church in 1930. Louise went to school in Monmouth and became a teacher in the Braun school off Highway 47. Ken remembers that his older brother Jim, now a Timber buyer in Banks, OR, was paid \$8 a month to go to the school every day to build fires, sweep floors and clean blackboards. Ken also has a younger sister, Lucille, who lives in the original family home.

Ken was born in April of 1937, a home birth at his Uncle Crue and Aunt Mary Ohler's house, (formerly the Chick Jensen place) on Timber Road just outside Vernonia, delivered by the well-known Dr. Eby.

Ken remembers Matilda Bergersen as his first and second grade teacher at the school in Kist, named after the gentleman who homesteaded the property where Ken and Penny reside today. His name was Stephan Kist and he had fought in and survived the Civil War, only to meet an untimely death, found frozen in a snow storm when a fallen tree blocked his way on Peterson Road off Timber Road, then

called Grindstone Road.

Ken and Wayne Golden were the only two kids in first grade. In 1943 Kist School consolidated with Vernonia. Ken says back then every six miles or so there was a school building. Seems the rule of thumb then was not allowing kids to walk much more than three miles to school.

Ken had his fair share of fun times riding the bus—he describes himself as a bit of a hell raiser—once getting kicked off the bus and walking straight home and writing on his mailbox in letters big enough to be seen, “H-E-L-L.”

Ken played basketball in high



Penny Smejkal

school, as a center he stood, “5 feet, 14 inches.” He remembers spending lots of time warming the bench with Dick Gwin.

Ken must have learned his perseverance and entrepreneurial skills from his father—he shares how he used to sit and wait for hubcaps to fall off of passing cars on the rough gravel roads

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