

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Eightieth Anniversary of the First Tillamook Burn

The summer of 1933 was exceptionally hot and dry throughout the state. In August, Governor Julius Meier ordered the state forests in southern and eastern Oregon closed. He pleaded with the loggers on private lands in the northwest corner of the state to cease operations. The humidity dropped to 22% in the Coast Range foothills, and the main logging camps sent runners with orders for the local operators to shut down until moister and cooler conditions returned. According to what may be fact or local legend, shortly after one p.m., the messenger reached a gyppo operator working in Gales Creek Canyon on lands owned by Crossett and Western. Wanting to bring in one more log, the operator's donkey engine pulled the huge Douglas fir over a rotted windfall. A spark ignited the forest floor and the first conflagration began. A second fire of unknown origin had ignited about the same time.

With the next day bringing a temperature of 104 degrees and a gusty east wind, the fires grew and suddenly reached the tops of the tallest trees, a condition called crowning. The winds blew hot sparks and burning limbs into the air and ignited other blazes in the forested lands beyond the immediate fire. Hundreds of loggers and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) youth were brought in to battle the multiple fires. By August 18th, the inferno had spread to more than twenty-five square miles.

The fires increased and merged and on August 24th literally exploded, sending a 40,000 foot high column of smoke across a fifteen mile front. By the end of August, over three hundred thousand acres of dense, virgin timber were damaged by fire. Nearly twelve billion board feet of timber went up in smoke. Subsequent fires in 1939, 1945 and 1951 destroyed an additional billion and a half board feet; in all, the four fires consumed enough timber to build over one million five-room houses.

The 1933 Fire and its Effect on Vernonia's Oregon-American Operations

Camp McGregor, Oregon-American Lumber Company's headquarters on Rock Creek near the town of Keasey was bigger than most towns in this part of the state in 1933. It had been built in the heart of O-A forest lands while the Vernonia lumber mill was under construction to provide a ready supply of timber when the mill became operational in 1924. There were bunkhouses for two hundred men, thirty cabins for families, a company store, dining halls, workshops, and offices. When the fire threatened, 275 residents and CCC men were in the camp along with five families. The women and children were loaded on railroad flat cars to get them out safely. The men remained behind to try to save the camp and equipment. The men fought the fire in vain because within an hour of its arrival, all of the buildings and equipment were destroyed.

Another fire broke out on the

East Side Logging Company lands in Clatsop County and within a few hours destroyed bridges and trestles of the Oregon-American logging railroad. Closer to Vernonia, the Wolf Creek fire burned sixty thousand acres. The Vernonia fire erupted in O-A holdings seven miles west of town along the road to Timber. This fire merged with the Wolf Creek fire and later merged again with the Gales Creek inferno. Twelve thousand acres of O-A timber were affected by the fire, approximately fifty percent of its total holdings. Twenty trestles burned of which twelve would be replaced; another thirty trestles on abandoned spurs were destroyed and did not need to be rebuilt.

Timber salvage operations following the Tillamook Burn recovered much of the timber that was scarred by the fire but not burned through. Camp McGregor was rebuilt. The new cabins were assembled at the mill and loaded on railcars for the trip up Rock Creek. A photograph of one of these cabin-trains is currently on display in the shop window across the street from the Shay locomotive. The information for this article came in part from two books in the museum's collection, Epitaph for the Giants by J. Larry Kemp and Tillamook Burn Country by Ellis Lucia, and articles in the Vernonia Eagle newspaper. For additional information on the Tillamook Burn area prior to the fire, the conflagration itself and the reforestation effort that created today's Tillamook Forest, visit the Tillamook Forest Center on State Highway 6 a few miles east of Tillamook.

From Virgil Powell's Diary

Virgil Powell was a long-time resident who had a farm in the Upper Nehalem Valley between Natal and

Pittsburg. Each year from 1906 until 1955, he kept a regular diary of his activities. He was among the hundreds of local loggers, farmers and CCC camp youth who helped fight the terrible fire that began on August 14:

Tuesday, August 15: Went to Crossett Western Co. fire on Gales Creek. Awful hot all day.

Wednesday, August 16: On big fire all day. Crowned a lot and very hot all day.

Thursday, August 17 through 28: Each day's entry started with "On big fire all day" followed by the weather which remained hot and dry. By the end of August, damp and cooler weather finally stopped the fire from spreading further. Powell's diary entries for September were primarily clean-up and recovery work in the burned areas and additional firefighting west of Yamhill on the Trask River.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is located at E. 511 Bridge Street and is open from 1 to 4 pm on Saturdays and Sundays (excluding holidays) all year. From June through mid-September, the museum is also open on Fridays from 1:00 - 4:00 PM. There is no charge for admission but donations are always welcome. Become a member of the museum for an annual \$5 fee to receive the periodic newsletter, and if you are a Facebook user, check out the new Vernonia Pioneer Museum page created by Bill Langmaid. The museum volunteers are always pleased to enlist additional volunteers to help hold the museum open and assist in other ways. Please stop by and let one of the volunteers know of your interest in helping out.

The Sounding Board: Reality

By Jack Phillips

In what is left of our democracy, personal, physical presence at a public meeting is essential. Being present works in two ways: (1) you show by the singular act of "being there" you are concerned, want to be acknowledged, want something done and (2) are a powerful "witness" to persons you elected to act in your name, that you are watching and will act if necessary. That's how it works.

If you do not show, democracy collapses.

Democracy involves a lot of

people interacting, talking, debating, arguing, showing emotion, passion, making reasoned statements, making wild statements, coming to a decision, where each person, in whatever degree, participates, for or against an idea whose time has come. All at the same time, it is fun, sad, exciting, upsetting, a relief or stressful. It is life with meaning. It is "being alive".

What democracy is not, is when you are "not there," where a few decide for you; where you simply become "an observer" and are told what is right and what is wrong; and woe to you if you object.

If you want to say something, like "My electric rates are too high," how can you do it? How can you possibly do anything meaningful? Life is busy. Who has time, or money, to go talk to the wind? Make time. Make an appointment with yourself. With a simple step, you can attend a meeting. You can "make a difference," just by being there.

West Oregon is a large territory. Directors must live in their district, but any member can vote for anyone or anything. So doing something is important! Going to a meeting really makes a difference. When is the next

WOEC meeting? It is the general membership meeting two days from now, on Saturday August 17th. Call WOEC at 503 429-3021 and tell them you are coming. Eat some good food. Meet and talk with a bunch of other folks. Listen, get up and say something. Put some passion into it. Don't fret if someone disagrees with you. Plenty of others will be for you. Power of One will be there. We have a write in candidate for District 5, Heather Johansen. She is running against Bob Paleck. Bob VanNatta, so far, is running unopposed for District 2. But you can write in someone else in his

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Home for Sale

276 E North St, Vernonia \$84,000
MFH-Built in 1994. 3bdrm, 2bath
1751 sqft. 10,000 sqft lot. Large steel
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Information is from sources deemed
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