

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Vernonia's Japanese Community and World War II

From the early 1920s, several people of Japanese ancestry lived in Vernonia. The Inouye family owned and operated the Vernonia Laundry. Mary Kato ran a "chop suey" restaurant. The Soejima and Kuge families came to the area in the 1920s as railroad workers. Their children attended Vernonia schools and were good students who participated in school activities. They lived for at least part of that time at Clark and Wilson Camp Eight, one of the Japanese timber and railroad worker camps.

From the time the Oregon-American mill was built until after WWII, company housing was racially segregated. The O-A "Japanese Colony" was located where Anderson Park is today. Following the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, wartime paranoia led the US government to taking 120,000 Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast to internment camps inland.

On May 20, 1942, nineteen Vernonia residents of Japanese ancestry were taken by bus - escorted by two truckloads of soldiers - to the Portland Livestock Pavilion where they awaited relocation along with others similarly removed from their Oregon homes. They had to abandon or sell at low prices most of their possessions. The May 21st Vernonia Eagle article that reported the removal added "Vernonia citizens who saw them leave felt relieved to think that this possible source of danger was

leaving, but with that feeling of relief was mingling regret that some well-known and liked, worthwhile Japanese populace were required to abandon their homes."

Among those moved away that May included the Soejima and Kuge families. Several VHS students went to the stockyard - renamed the Portland Assembly Center - the next day to talk with their classmates through the fence until a guard forced them to leave. Toshi Kuge had been 1934 VHS Student Body President and was in medical school when the relocation commenced. Roy Soejima, Class of 1941, was an honor student, sophomore class president and active in sports. Ben, VHS 1942, was on VHS winning teams in football and basketball, and his sister Kerry, also VHS 1942, was in the glee club. They were all Nisei, American-born children of Japanese parents.

The final relocation of the 2,400 Oregon Japanese-Americans detained in Portland to the hastily constructed relocation center in Idaho didn't occur until September. Nisei of fighting age were wanted by the military but were only allowed to join the Army and serve in all-Nisei units. Ben and two of his brothers enlisted in the US Army even while his parents and sister were interned at the Minidoka camp in Idaho. Toshi Kuge served as an assistant to the head doctor at the Portland Assembly Center and later helped treat people in relocation centers. After the war he went on to have a successful medical practice in Portland. Toshi's brother Tommy enlisted in the Army and was killed in

the war.

Although the Nisei units fought valiantly and earned numerous medals and citations, it has only been in recent years that their part in the victory has been fully recognized. Two years ago, Ben Soejima learned that he would be awarded a Congressional Gold Medal for his service during the war. A recent reception at the Oregon Historical Society marked the opening of a new exhibit on the Japanese-American soldiers of World War II. Ben, now 90 years young, was one of the honorees and wore his medal with pride.

Although his family did not return to Vernonia after the war and his siblings are deceased, Ben returns to Vernonia annually for the Old Grads Picnic and enjoys visiting with his long-ago schoolmates. The Soejima family made a generous donation to the new school's athletic facilities. The boys' locker room coach's office is named in Ben's honor.

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, but he rarely - if ever - commented on national events. His diary was silent about the Pearl Harbor attack of 1941, the Japanese relocation or the progress of the war. He was far past the age for military service by the 1940s and was hired by the Oregon-American Lumber Mill, presumably to fill positions vacated by younger men who were drafted or enlisted in the armed services.

Monday, February 2, 1942: Over to O.A. and got the job as Fire Chief. On over to town and signed

for insurance. Rained some but pretty fair day.

Tuesday, February 3: Cleaned drain pipe and around home all day. Brought buck rabbit down. Rained pretty hard all day.

Wednesday, February 4: Started working at O.A. Mill as Fire Chief. Rained awful hard most all day and river up high.

The US government launched a big campaign in 1942 to raise funds for the war effort through the sale of war bonds. Powell's diary may have a tie to that campaign:

Tuesday, May 26: Went over town got haircut and purchased \$1325 in bonds. Hauled scrap lumber from mill afternoon. Fair forenoon but rained very hard at times during afternoon.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is located at E. 511 Bridge Street and is open from 1:00 to 4:00 PM on Saturdays and Sundays (excluding holidays) all year. From June through mid-September, the museum is also open on Fridays from 1:00 to 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: Why Power of One?

By Sally Harrison

I've been asked by my friends with Power of One to talk to you, our fellow members of West Oregon Electric Cooperative.

First I should let you know why we settled on that particular name for our efforts. Think about who we are and how helpless we feel for a second. Alone, we are only one and powerless to exact change, but if our "ones" band together the "ones" gain the power needed to get answers, find solutions and hopefully fix the problems we have before us. And so "Power of One" was born.

The past year we have spent educating ourselves, learning about co-ops in general and our co-op in particular. The final analysis is that no entity-federal, state, county, or city has any jurisdiction over co-ops. Period. We the members have the power and duty to see that our co-op is run efficiently. Yes, we elect a board

to represent us, but without some oversight, do we really know that our best interests are being served? I know the board members are all honest and mean well, but it's these and others like them that have gotten the co-op into such debt. When more than 60% of the total worth of the co-op is debt...well, you decide.

Yes, we can blame past administrations. We can blame "All our Trees." We can blame storms like we've had since I was a child and believe me, WOEC does. Never have I heard, "We did this or that to hold the line on spending." They live and spend as they always have. For example, \$54,000 annually for meetings. But when the fiscal shoe starts to pinch, they just raise the rates.

I know the meeting WOEC planned for "discussion" of a rate increase has come and gone. I'm hoping you were there just so they know you care about how deep they put their hands in your pocket. They've promised they won't ask for more increases for two

years. The message: In two years we can expect another rate increase.

The \$1.3 million that was invested in 2001 in a fiber optics system that has not borne fruit in 12 years may be a good start in getting back on an even keel. Maybe an in-depth analysis of expenditures could find extra savings. Maybe just cutting back on Mr. Farmers "7 year renovation plan" could reap some monetary reward. When you remember that we pay 2 ½ times more than any co-op in Oregon it puts a little tarnish on living in paradise.

Vernonia's Voice is published on the 1st and 3rd Thursday. Our next issue will be October 3rd.

291
a
street
CALL KIM

Happy
Grooming
Dog Salon
429-0576

LOVABLE SERVICE AT
a reasonable PRICE

- BATHING
- HAIRCUTS
- NAIL CLIPPING
- NAIL POLISHING
- SPECIALTY SHAMPOOS

VERNONIA
SERVICE & REPAIR

Walk-ins welcome
Lube/oil/filter
\$29.95
up to 5 qts. conventional oil

\$75 Four-wheel computer alignment
\$55 Front End computer alignment

Call or come by today for free tire quote
Most major brands and custom aftermarket wheels

One low price includes:
Installation • Balancing
Valve Stems • Lifetime Rotation
Lifetime Repairs • Alignment Check
Enhanced Warranty

• ASE Certified
• Fully Insured
• Warranty on all parts and labor

ASE **NAPA** **AUTOCARE CENTER**

INTERSTATE BATTERIES Interstate batteries with free install on most vehicles

503/429/7972
58605 NEHALEM HWY. South, Next to Storage, Too

Vernonia Veterinary Clinic
Small and Large Animals



Now Open
Mon, Wed & Saturday
9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Call for Appointments
(503) 429-1612
Or 24 hr. Emergency Number (503) 397-6470
700 Weed Ave. Vernonia, OR