

# The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

## Homesteader Days

Along with the photographic and physical artifacts on display at the Vernonia Pioneer Museum are fascinating documents written by the early settlers in the Nehalem Valley. One such memoir was written in 1938 by a Mist - Birkenfeld area pioneer, Anna Katherine Jepsen Berg, about her life as a homesteader's wife. Homesteaders were the earliest non-native settlers in this inland part of Columbia County. In exchange for a government land grant, the settler had five years to "prove up" his claim by building a dwelling and clearing the land for farming.

One of these men, Eric Jepsen, had taken a homestead claim in 1877 on Fishhawk Creek. In 1884 he decided to travel back to his birthplace on the Jutland Peninsula (now divided into Denmark and a part of Germany) to see his parents and siblings. He financed the trip by selling his cattle and rented his place to N.L. Berg for three years. While at home he met and married Anna. Two weeks after their June 1885 wedding, they left for America. They crossed the northern United States, presumably by train, and arrived in Portland.

After enjoying a few days there, Eric and Anna took a steamboat to Westport. Steamboats were the primary means of travel up and down the Columbia at that time. At Westport they hired a man with a canoe to paddle them to Woods Landing (now Woodson). Anna wrote "My thoughts on that ride were: Have we crossed the Atlantic just to drown in this mud puddle? The water reached up to the edge of that small skiff loaded with our three large trunks, besides ourselves." Anna spent the night in Woodson while her husband walked over the mountain to get a team and wagon along with two riding horses to take them to the Fishhawk settlement.

The Bergs had built a new home on their own homestead a couple of miles from the Jepsen land. Eric and Anna bought some cows, two horses, a mowing machine, a wagon, and the other things necessary to establish a proper farm. They pulled the stumps left by Eric's earlier clearing efforts, cut down more trees and brush, burned the slash, weeded out the grass, and planted potatoes, wheat, oats, strawberries, vegetables, and eighty fruit trees. At

first, Anna only spoke Danish and a little German, but she spent the evenings reading and having her husband and their hired man read to her until she learned English. She also found reading the weekly *Oregonian* newspaper a big help in her language studies.

They earned cash from selling the butter Anna churned from the rich cream their cows provided. The butter was formed into two pound rolls that were sold to Conyers' store in Clatskanie. When they had more cows, they put the butter in sixty pound kegs that Eric took on horseback to McFarlane's Logging Camp near Woodson. Eric left early in the morning and walked the ten miles alongside the butter-laden horse. He walked back home the same day with the horse bearing the empty kegs. Anna wrote that "We were all young and strong, worked hard, lived the simple life and were happy."

During this period, oxen were still used to haul logs from the logging camps to the Columbia where they were tied into rafts for hauling to mills up and down the river. Eric and Anna were paid to winter eight to ten of these oxen. Anna recalled, "They brought them over the mountain from their camps, and took them back in the spring. When they came, they were poor, stiff and full of rheumatism, and it was up to my husband to straighten them out before spring. Am very glad there are no oxen anymore; they were a pitiful sight. My husband told me about how they had to pull the logs from the hills to the landing on hot summer days, the driver hollering, lashing them, and on their climb back on the hills, their tongues hanging out from sheer exhaustion."

What couldn't be grown or caught by the homesteaders had to be purchased from grocers in towns like Clatskanie and Astoria. Each year, the Jepsens bought a supply of groceries that included five or six sacks of sugar, several kegs of syrup, green coffee, four barrels of flour, beans, and salt. They made their own yeast from grated potatoes, baked their own bread, roasted and ground the coffee beans, picked and canned fruit and berries, raised vegetables, beef, pork, chickens, and fish so they and their children could grow up strong and healthy. For eight dollars a month, they boarded the teacher who held school for four months each year. Anna stated that she enjoyed having her

for company for herself and the children.

In 1893, Eric was killed by a falling snag while clearing land. "Never will I forget that first night when I took the three children (then six, four and two) to bed with me, and all night I heard my husband's watch ticking away in his overalls," Anna wrote. There was no cemetery in the vicinity then, so they buried Eric in their orchard where "I went every day to cry my heart out." Anna wrote her father about Eric's death, and her neighbors helped her out to the extent they could.

A few months later, her twenty-two year old brother came from their family home in Germany to provide the ongoing help she needed to manage the farm. He had just finished his compulsory three year military service, and she was grateful for his company and assistance. Seven months later, the historic flood of 1894 that inundated downtown Portland was echoed in the Nehalem Valley. Anna's barn was flooded and all the hay had to be moved after the water receded. She lost their bridge over the Fishhawk, but, she reflected, "...whatever happens, we just have to make the best of it, but it was hard sledding."

Three years later Anna married Antoni Berg "which I have never regretted." Her brother married their neighbor's daughter and took up a claim further down the valley. Anna had three more children, and she went on to have a good life despite the challenges presented to those who live off the land.

## 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. Christmases were dancing days for Virgil in his youth.

*Tuesday, December 25, 1906: Went up to Vernonia the first thing in the morning after the musicians. Started from Vernonia for Natal at 12:30 P.M. Arrived at the Grange Hall at 4:30. Rained quite hard all day. Sent postal to Alice and also got one from her. Had a pretty good time.*

*Wednesday, December 26, 1906: Left the Hall at 3 A.M. and got home at 6 A.M. Slept until 9. Went up to the Post Office and got the mail. Very bright all day.*

*Mailed a postal to Alice. This makes 29 that I have sent her.*

*Friday, December 25, 1908: Did not do much of anything. Rained hard all day. Started for the doings at Natal at 4 P.M. Had a pretty good time. Had a little dance. Got home about 3:30 A.M.*

*Saturday, December 25, 1909: Did not get up till pretty late. Fooled around town all day. Went down to Wood's at 6:15 and spent the evening, also stayed all night. There was a doings over in the school house also a big fight. Pretty good day.*

*Sunday, December 25, 1910: Got home from the Vernonia doings at 2:45 A.M. Lost my key and had to crawl in through the upstairs window. Went to bed and slept till 9 A.M. Mart Ray, Elmore Lavender, Harve Christensen, Jack Ray and a lot came about 2 P.M. and stayed till 4 P.M. Rained a little in the morning but pretty fine all afternoon.*

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 - 4 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.

Vernonia's Voice is published twice each month on the 1st and 3rd Thursday. Look for our next issue on January 2nd.

Tension may be high, but there is NO excuse for abuse.

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