

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Summer Work and Summer Fun

In the Finnish language, the month we call July translates to "Hay Month," and indeed July still is the month when most hay is harvested to feed livestock during the winter months. It's also the start of fairly reliable warm weather in the Upper Nehalem Valley, so along with the summer work comes summer fun.

Before farmers had motorized mowers, balers and tractors, haymaking depended on horses, the specialized implements they pulled and lots of human hands at work. This writer fondly recalls haying time on her Finnish grandparents' farm near Astoria before mechanized balers were common. Those too young to wield a rake or a pitchfork rode on top of the load of loose hay to hold it in place as it was transported to the barn's hayloft.

As soon as the hay was mature but not yet too dry, it was cut with a horse-drawn sickle bar mower, an invention of the mid-1800s that replaced the arduous task of mowing with a hand-held scythe. After the hay dried for a day or two, workers raked it into piles called hay shocks that were next loaded into wagons for transport to the barn. If it rained or the cut hay was otherwise too damp, a horse-drawn tedder might be used to fluff and turn the hay before raking and shocking. Usually the whole family was involved in getting the hay in, and neighbors often helped each other with the process.

Summer then as now was the season for Fourth of July celebrations and picnics of all sorts. In *Vernonia: A Pocket in the Woods*, author Ann Fulton wrote of the memorable Fourth during the Spanish-American War. "Patriotic feelings ran high as the United States fought over Cuba. Vernonia celebrated the 1898 Fourth of July with an anvil chorus at dawn and a morning program at the campground on the banks of Rock Creek. The program featured a noon basket dinner, Reverend A.E. Myers' oration and Mrs. Nellie Keasey's recitation." Like most community gatherings, it closed with a dance for all ages. An even earlier Fourth was cited in a 1926 *Vernonia Eagle* article where Mrs. J. H. Aldridge of Clatskanie recalled the 1882 event in Mist. Families who lived miles

apart rode their horses over trails in the woods and gathered for a community picnic, speeches, and games for the children. Over fifty people enjoyed the day.

The Fourth fell on a Sunday in 1928 making a three-day weekend with July 5th the official day of celebration. The *Vernonia Eagle* reported that hundreds of tourists, campers and sightseeing motorists passed through Vernonia that Monday. "It makes a splendid drive coming from St. Helens and going out through Forest Grove. (NOTE: Construction on the Sunset Highway, first known as the Wolf Creek Highway, didn't begin until 1933 and finally opened in 1949.) Many of the cars stopped to admire our city and leave a few dollars for refreshments. Adjacent to town, the creek and river banks were thickly dotted with picnic parties, many choosing that method of celebrating the Fourth."

Group picnics were a very popular form of summer entertainment, and there were many annual basket feasts for the individual lodges, Granges and churches in Columbia County. During the heyday of lodges and other organizations in Vernonia in the 1920s, the newspaper announced picnics for the Masons and Eastern Star, Oddfellows and Rebekahs, Knights of Pythias, American Legion, Women's Christian Temperance Union, Columbia County Granges, Women's Relief Corps, Woodsmen of the World, Nehalem Valley Pioneers, and various church and Sunday school groups. Other than the Rock Creek campground, there were no established city parks so willing citizens with sufficient space hosted them on their own property. Albert Parker's Grove, Weed's Grove and Sheeley Grove were three frequently mentioned picnic sites.

Several of the gatherings, especially those of the county-wide lodge events, were reported to have hundreds of picnickers attend. Games and races, swimming contests, horseshoe pitching, and speeches by dignitaries were all part of the day's fun. In those days before ice chests and portable grills, picnic fare often consisted of home-prepared sandwiches, non-perishable salads, pickles, olives, fruit pies, cakes, and cookies. There might be a fire pit for roasting wieners and toasting marshmallows. Those who owned Thermos bottles could enjoy a cup of hot coffee or cool lemonade. Prohibition was the law of the land

so any "home brew" would likely have been consumed on the sly.

From the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, Oregonians who had moved to the state from the East and Midwest gathered annually in various locations in the Portland and upper Willamette Valley with others from their state of origin. In the 1920s, picnics for groups as large as 1,500 reunited people from Nebraska, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Maine were announced in Vernonia's newspaper. The formula was nearly the same with all of the big picnics: bring a picnic dinner and coffee will be provided.

Summer work and summer fun combine to make good memories.

From Virgil Powell's Diary

Virgil Powell (1887-1963) was a long-time resident whose family 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. Each July, he worked long days cutting, raking, shocking, and hauling hay but still managed to dance until the wee hours on Saturday nights.

Wednesday, July 14, 1909: Finished cutting the balance of my hay at 8 AM Then went up and cut for Chas. Peterson the balance of the day. Done a big day's cutting. Very hot day.

Friday, July 16: Went up and raked hay for Peterson in the morning and cut hay in the afternoon.

Saturday, July 17: Cut hay for Peterson till about 2 PM Then it got to raining so hard that I had to stop. Went up to Vernonia about 5, took in the dance and had a big time. Danced till about 4 then I started for Bacona.

Sunday, July 18: Left Vernonia at 5 AM and went up to Bacona. Got up there for breakfast. Met Will on the road and we looked at the land in Sec. 36. Got through about 1 then came down to Hotchkiss, fed my horse and got dinner. Left there at 3:45 and got home at 6:20 PM Pretty hot day.

Monday, July 19: Went up and finished cutting and raking Peterson's hay. Also shocked some in the evening. Pretty warm day.

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 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.

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