

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Roads and Rails

The isolation of Vernonia in its early days appealed to many of its first settlers. The Upper Nehalem Valley, known at first as a "hole in the timber," was accessible only on foot with perhaps a mule or horse packing supplies. Over time resident volunteers widened the footpaths into primitive dirt roads to allow travel by horse and wagon to market centers and transportation links in St. Helens and the western Tualatin Valley.

The first rough trail improved for wagon travel followed a route along Dairy Creek to Mountindale, over Green Mountain past the eponymous spring that provided good water for travelers, back and forth across Pebble Creek to the center of the handful of homesteads that was Vernonia. In 1880, just six years after the first settlers came into the valley, the biggest windstorm in the history of the Upper Nehalem obliterated the Green Mountain Spring Road. The settlers went to work constructing a new road - this time to Buxton.

The first market road to St. Helens - Pittsburg Road - was another early settler effort. Motivation for this road building came from multiple sources: the need to get products to and from markets, access to the scheduled water transportation to Portland and other towns along the Columbia, and a way to avoid the \$2.00 per \$2,000 tax or jail time. In 1860 Oregon passed a law that every able-bodied man between 21 and 50 was expected to put in time building roads equivalent to his assessment or face the aforementioned penalties. The Scappoose-Vernonia market road wasn't completed until the late 1920s.

The Salem-Astoria Military Road was first surveyed in 1855; construction began in 1856. The route of this road bypassed the rarely visited and uninhabited Upper Nehalem Valley. The northern part of the route was to go from what is now Gales Creek through the Coast Range to Astoria. A wagon road from Astoria to Elsie comprised the northwest section, and the road from Salem to Timber the southeast, but the middle portion was never built. Federal funding ended with the outbreak of the Civil War in the early 1860s with maintenance left to the counties.

Some sections of that road and the older market roads were incorporated into our present day county and state road system. The State Highway Division was established in 1917 as more and more automobiles required better, interconnecting roads. Construction methods gradually incorporated more permanent surfaces such as macadam and concrete, but even by 1948 only 16% of Oregon's roads were paved. Roads in and out of Vernonia were among the last to be hard-surfaced. Keasey Road, formerly known as Rock Creek Road, remained gravel until the 1960s.

The promise of a railroad through the Upper Nehalem was a long hoped for but elusive goal. The homestead lands in the valley were partially held for future railroad development. By the late 1880s the Astoria and South Coast Railway's survey of a right-of-way through Vernonia led to a small land rush. All of the platted city lots were acquired, stores and offices opened, the Nehalem Valley Journal newspaper established a weekly publication, and the population soared to almost 150. Vernonia officially obtained its city charter in 1891. Just two years later, news that the railroad would not be built coupled with the national depression known as the Panic of 1893 caused a mass exodus. Homesteads were abandoned, businesses closed and the newspaper ceased. The population dropped to less than forty.

It was only when the Oregon-American mill construction began in 1922 that a railroad line finally reached Vernonia. Passenger service to and from Portland and the Tualatin Valley commenced, and the line from the lumber camps and rail yard at Keasey brought the timber to the mill. Finished lumber from the O-A mill headed south and east to markets across the country. Passenger service to Keasey began in 1923 but ended during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The rail line from Vernonia to Keasey was abandoned with the closure of the mill in 1958, and passenger service to Vernonia from the south and west ended soon thereafter. After a few years of steam excursion train operations in the late 1960s, the line between Banks and Vernonia was abandoned and eventually became the Linear Trail we know today.

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.

In May 1915, Virgil mentions traveling on the "new road" that was presumably to or through Vernonia, but we have not yet been able to establish its history. We presume it was still the hard-packed dirt, possibly oiled, road typical in rural Oregon until the 1940s and even later.

Saturday, June 12, 1915: Inez and I went up to Vernonia 7:15 and returned 1:15 P.M. Cloudy all day but only sprinkled a little. Mrs. Nelson raffled off her fish basket.

Sunday, June 13, 1915: Went up to Pittsburg 10 A.M. and fished from there down here and caught 11 fine ones with fly and spinner. Cloudy most all day but very good.

Monday, June 14, 1915: Cultivated the late potatoes first thing in forenoon. Went fishing in afternoon and caught 12 nice ones. Pretty hot most all day.

Sunday, June 20, 1915: Inez and I went up over part of the (new) Highway in afternoon. Bright and fine all day. Ball game at Vernonia, Mist vs

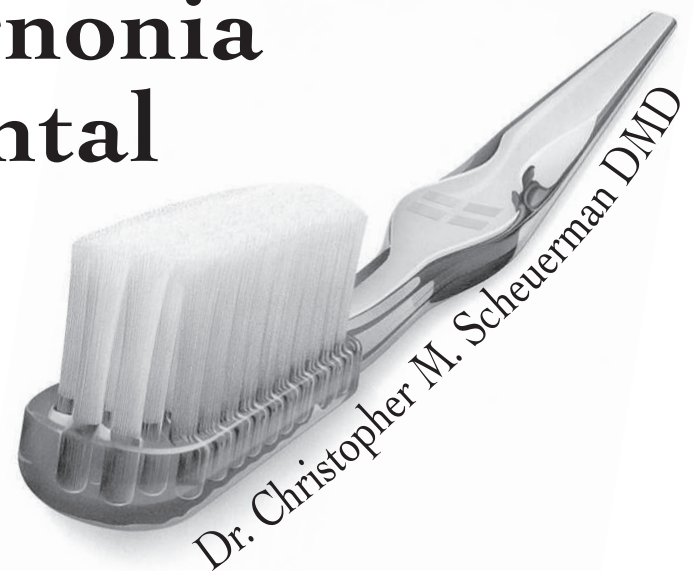
Vernonia.

Tuesday, June 22, 1915: Roy and I went up on the new Highway in forenoon. Cut hay all afternoon. Cloudy in forenoon but awful hot all afternoon. They took the big steam roller up this A.M.

Saturday, June 26, 1915: Roy and I left 8:30 and went up to Claudi's on Pebble Creek. Came back via Vernonia and the new Highway. Got home 2:30. Rained a little in morning but fair in 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. We now have a page on the Vernonia Hands on Art website, www.vernoniahansonart.org If you are a Facebook user, check out the Vernonia Pioneer Museum page. 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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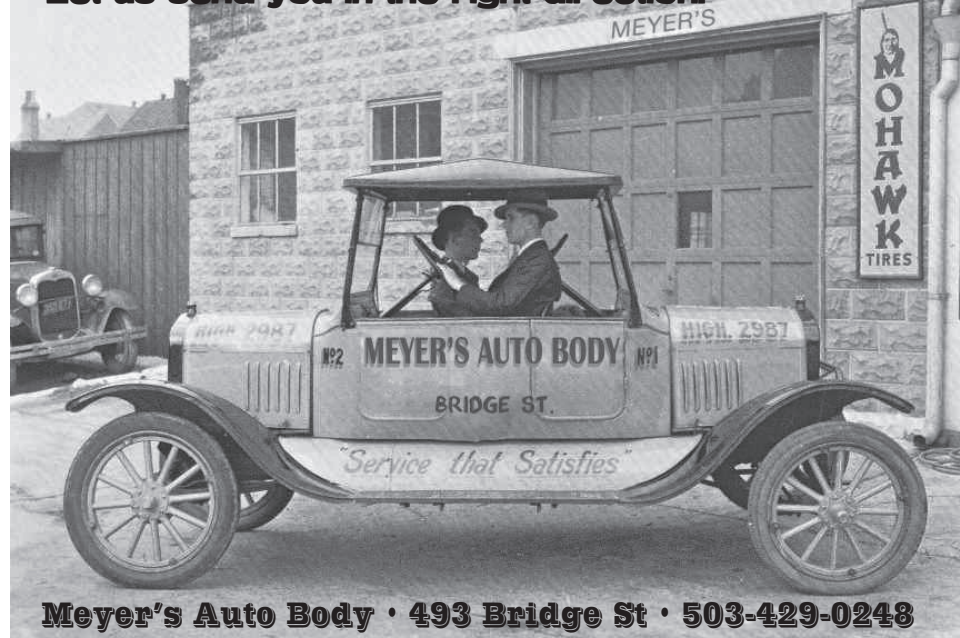


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