

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Last month we once again mourned the passing of another beloved Vernonia elder, Jim Johns. Born here 88 years ago, Jim was part of the community for all but his college and World War II service years. A Vernonia High Class of 1945 graduate, Jim returned to his home town for his entire teaching career and subsequent retirement. We will miss him!

Naming of Places, Part Two

As noted in our column last month, there were no apparent Native American settlements in the Vernonia area when the settlers arrived, and therefore names were given to places based on the whims of the pioneers. Geographic features, local fauna, and early settlers were the most frequent source of place names. Rock, Coon and Coal Creeks abound throughout the Pacific Northwest and indeed we have those three here. Creeks that ran through homesteads were frequently named for the original owner. Virgil Powell's parents, Alva and Martha, settled north of Pittsburg in 1877 and thus the small tributary of the Nehalem River that crossed their property was named Powell Creek. More distant from his homestead but near his mining claim, Judson Weed gave his name to a stream there.

Roads, streets and hills were also given names of the original settlers who lived nearby; thus we have Rose, Weed, Spencer, Noakes, Biggs, Melinger, Corey and Nickerson. Sheeley Creek – both stream and road – is yet another example. The road that connected Vernonia to what was once the town of Keasey was originally known as Rock Creek Road and appears as such on older section maps. The Keasey post office was established in 1890 in pioneer Eden Keasey's home, but during the logging boom of the early 1920s, Tony Lausmann petitioned the U.S. Post Office to move it to the logging camp and rail switch so that it could serve the many nearby logging camps. In the 1980s when the Post Office began assigning five digit numbers to homes instead of the former practice of rural box and route names, the road name was changed officially to Keasey Road. Because a petition is required to

change a road's name, Eden Keasey's great-grandson, Ralph, had the awkward assignment to ask everyone along the road to sign that petition.

Settlements and towns took their names from various sources. Pittsburg was named by Peter Brous, a Pennsylvanian who settled there in 1879 and built a sawmill and gristmill using water power from the East Fork of the Nehalem. Brous was the first postmaster for the office established in that same year. In 1892, the Post Office dropped the "h" from the original "Pittsburgh;" at the end of 1908, the office discontinued and mail went to Vernonia. Anton Birkenfeld, a native of Germany, came to the Nehalem Valley in 1886 and founded the community named for him in 1910.

A post office called Riverside was established near the present site of Mist in 1874. Because there was another town by that name in Oregon, the name was changed in 1888 to Mist from the frequent foggy conditions in the low plains along the river. Interestingly, the town was surveyed and platted with the name of Esto, but that name was never used. Natal, halfway between Pittsburg and Mist, had a post office of that name from 1889 to 1891. The first and only postmaster, Roderick Cole, gave the name to honor N. C. Dale who owned land there in the early 1870s and used to bring his neighbors' mail from the Mist post office for retrieval at his home. Mr. Dale's first name was Nathaniel, and according to a 1949 report by Omar Spencer - son of Vernonia pioneer, Israel Spencer – Cole arbitrarily contracted the name to Natal. A current resident who lives between Pittsburg and Natal waggishly refers to that collection of homes as "Pre-Natal."

One of this writer's first encounters with local pronunciation after moving here full time in 1999 was with the name of the road (and former town) between Big Eddy Park and Rainier: Apiary. Knowing that term is used for a collection of beehives or colonies, I called it "Ap-i-a-ry." A post office employee observed, "You're not from around here, are you?" and was told that the locals call it "Ap-ry." Nevertheless, the settlement and the road were named for an apiary kept by a pioneer named Dorcie, one of the earliest settlers. Similarly, the former logging camp,

Treharne, located in the flats where Timber Road branches off of Highway 47 is usually pronounced "Tree-horn" by long-time Vernonians.

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. Shearing sheep to get them ready to send to market was a mid-September chore. We assume the trip from Portland to St. Helens was by steamer and that he walked home, but how he got the sheep from his farm to St. Helens is a question – from the time it took, it appears to have been on foot.

Monday, September 20, 1915: Got the sheep up first thing. Roy came down and sheared a few in the afternoon.

Wednesday, September 22: Was fooling around at helping shear sheep all day. Very good day.

Thursday, September 23: Roy and I left for Portland via Timber 7 A.M. Rode from Vernonia to Timber in Teck's automobile. Got to Timber 11:30. Rained pretty hard all afternoon. Got to Portland 6 P.M.

Friday, September 24: Went up and saw Fir Tree Lumber Co. first thing in morning then went and saw Carl D. Shoemaker, State Game Warden. Came down to St. Helens 2 P.M. Stayed over night in Houlton. Cloudy most all day.

Saturday, September 25: Left Houlton 7 A.M. and got home 2 P.M. Awful hot all day. Dance at Vernonia. Sunday, September 26: Rained pretty hard all day. Sheep buyer here about noon.

Wednesday, September 29: Went up to Pittsburg and got the sheep up in forenoon. Sorted out 13 wethers for sheep man in afternoon. Got \$3.50 per head. Bright

nice day. Caught two salmon in evening.

Thursday, September 30: Left 7:30 A.M. with a bunch of 60 sheep for St. Helens. Got out there 8:45 P.M. Cloudy all day and rained some late in evening. Friday, October 1: Left St. Helens 8 A.M. and got home 4:15. Got dinner at Trenholm. Rained quite a bit all 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. 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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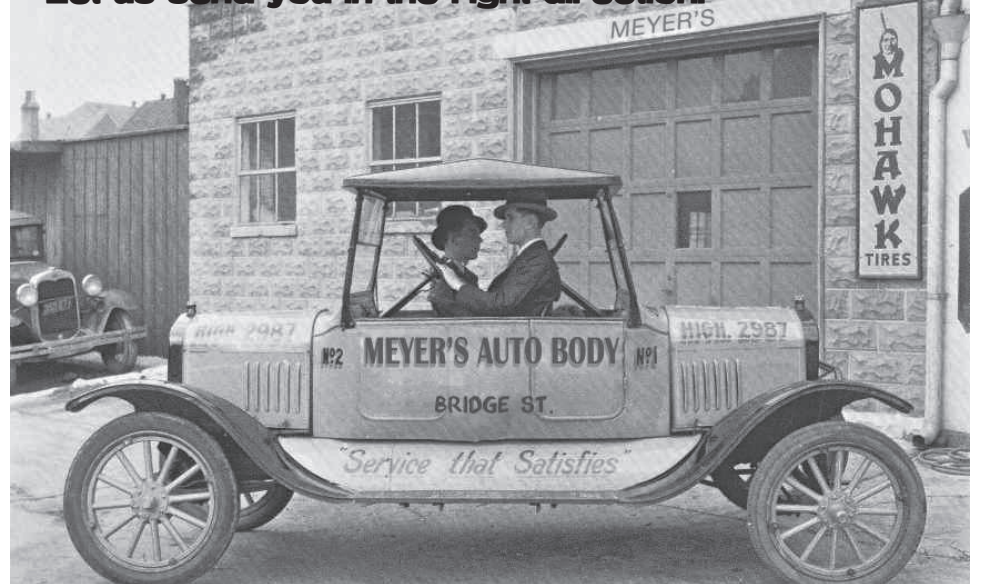
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