

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Going Outside

This month's topic echoes the title of Omar Spencer's memoir. Omar, son of early pioneer Israel Spencer, rarely left the Upper Nehalem Valley as a boy. "Going outside" was the term the first settlers used for travel away from this isolated locale. In the absence of hard-surfaced roads, a railroad or a navigable river, the trip to the Tualatin Valley, Astoria or Portland required one or two days of challenging travel.

As we've noted in earlier columns, passenger rail didn't reach Vernonia until 1922. Before then, various conveyances were used, often multiple methods per trip: on foot or by horse or the infrequent stage coach to a railway station in the Tualatin Valley or eastward to St. Helens to catch one of the many steam boats up the Columbia River to Portland or down river to Astoria. References to steamboat travel in the Malmsten family archives and an entry in Virgil Powell's 1909 diary about catching a train in Clatskanie prompted more research into the rail and steamboat lines along the Columbia.

The first steamboat on the Columbia River was the Beaver which started service in 1836, but it wasn't until the 1850s that many steamboats, side- and stern-wheelers operated regularly along the Lower Columbia from Portland to Astoria with St. Helens the major port in Columbia County. The side-wheeler Columbia was the first regularly scheduled passenger and freight steamer. Launched in June, 1850, at Astoria, her first run from Astoria to Portland and Oregon City began on July 3rd. The first captain was Jim Frost, a former Mississippi river pilot.

The trip took two days due to the caution the captain took with the unfamiliar river channel. Following the maiden voyage, Columbia made the Oregon City to Astoria run twice a month traveling at four miles per hour. Even with the \$25 per passenger fare (over \$500 in today's dollars), there was no passenger cabin or a galley on the ship. Freight charges were \$25 per ton. Later that year, Columbia had a far more comfortable competitor, the side-wheeler Lot Whitcomb, captained by John Ainsworth. For the same fares and freight charges, the larger ship could

make the trip upriver in ten hours.

Sternwheelers, superior in performance and less vulnerable to damage, began to replace the other craft by 1855, and the competition from the many riverboat companies decreased fares to more affordable passenger rates. The abundant forests of the counties along the river supplied the steamboats that burned wood at an average rate of four cords an hour. Riverboats continued to provide passenger and freight service along the Lower Columbia until the early 1900s when they were replaced by railways.

The Astoria & Columbia River (A&CR) Railroad was incorporated in 1895 to construct a connection between Astoria and the Northern Pacific Railroad. NP went as far as Goble (between St. Helens and Rainier) where a train ferry to Kalama carried rail cars to the rails north to Seattle. The train ferry operated from 1884 to 1908. The first train from Portland to Astoria carried 700 people on May 16, 1898, in celebration of the completion of that link. Although Astoria was expecting freight traffic to support the rail line to Portland, coastal tourist trade proved to be the mainstay of the A&CR. Its link to Seaside caused that town's growth to triple within the first six years of rail operations.

The timber industry benefited the most from the A&CR with Astoria being the coastal hub of lumber operations thanks to the difficult to access but bountiful forests in the northwest counties of Oregon. In 1907, Northern Pacific offered the most - \$5 million - for the profitable railway. By 1911, the Astoria line was converted to operation under the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway name. Passenger service declined over the decades with the improvements on the Lower Columbia Highway (Highway 30), and passenger service discontinued in 1952. There have been occasional excursion trains along the route with a brief seasonal surge from 2003 to 2005 with the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Explorer.

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. After two years since

the first planning meetings, it looked as if telephone service to the Natal area was at last a sure thing.

Tuesday, November 16, 1909: Got up early and went up and got a ton of hay from Bert Hosford and took down to Vernonia. Did not get home till 6:15. Frozen very hard in the morning and pretty cold all day.

Wednesday, November 17, 1909: Butchered a pig the first thing in the morning to take up to Vernonia, weighed 104 pounds. Packed phonograph and other things to take up to Vernonia tomorrow. Rained pretty hard all day.

Thursday, November 18, 1909: Took a load of things up to Vernonia for our doings this winter. Got up there at about 1. Stayed over night. Rained pretty hard all day.

Sunday, November 21, 1909: Went down home and done up my work. Started down at 11:30 and got back about 3. Met somebody on the road and had a long talk. Pretty good in morning but rained quite a bit in the evening.

Monday, November 22, 1909: Went out to Clatskanie horseback. Started out at 8 and got to Clatskanie at 2 P.M. Stayed in Clatskanie over night. Rained and blowed awful hard all day.

Tuesday, November 23, 1909: Went up on the morning train from Clatskanie to Portland. Got my overcoat in the afternoon. Went to the Orpheum in the evening. Rained very hard all day.

Wednesday, November 24, 1909: Came down from Portland to Clatskanie on the morning train. Left Clatskanie at 11 A.M. and got to Vernonia at 5 P.M. Pretty good day.

Friday, November 26, 1909: Did not get up till pretty late. Went up the little creek by Vernonia after salmon and caught several. Went over to Spencers for supper in the evening. Pretty good day.

Saturday, November 27,

1909: Started down to the telephone meeting at Natal at 7:30 A.M. Stopped at home for about 1 hour. The telephone is a sure go. Got back to Vernonia at 6:30. Rained pretty hard 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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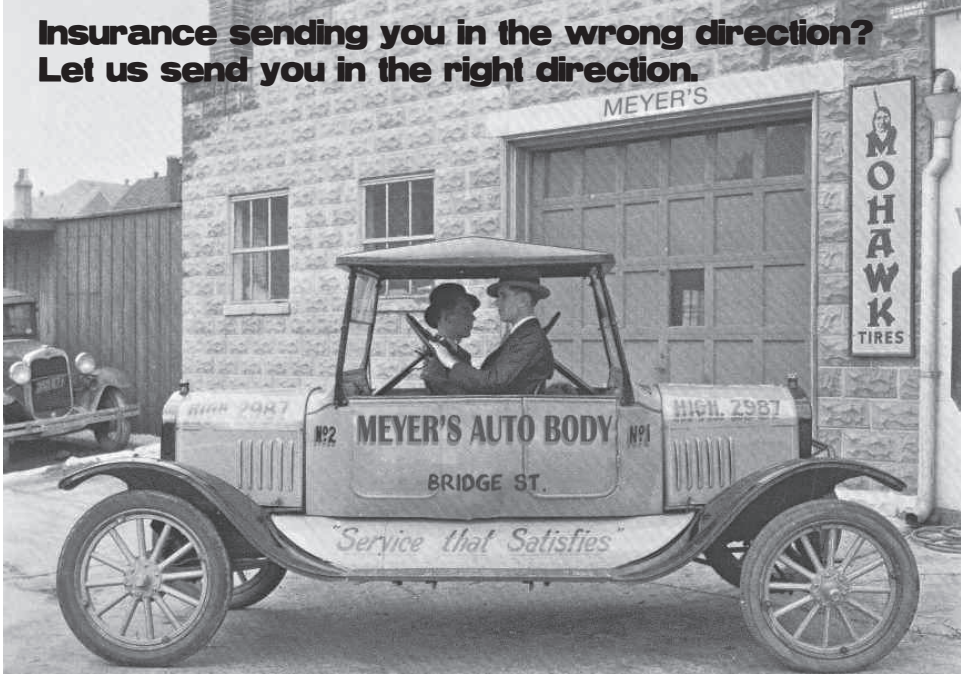


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