

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Christmas in the 1920s and 1930s

The contrast of the booming Vernonia economy of the 1920s to the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s is revealed in the content of the articles and advertisements in the *Vernonia Eagle*, the town's weekly newspaper from 1922 to the mid-1970s. The rapid growth and prosperity brought on by the new lumber mill as well as the booming national economy meant jobs, new housing and schools.

In the Twenties, beneath the *Eagle's* masthead and date, the paper subtitled itself the "Mouthpiece of the Nehalem Valley" and the "Advertising Medium for a Big Pay Roll Community." Other pages' title lines promoted the city with mini-ads such as "Largest Mill in the West," "Best Ball Park in Oregon," "Biggest Little City in Oregon," "On Inland Highway," "7 New Homes a Day," and "Municipal Water System."

Between 1922 and 1925, three new schools (Lincoln and the first Washington Grade School) replaced the former one room, log cabin or simple wood frame schools that were the norm for the first four decades of Vernonia's existence. In a December 1923 edition of the paper, articles discussed the installation of the city's water system, the hundred new dwellings being constructed and included a picture of one of the grander homes. Another picture showed the new Hoffman Hardware Building, one of the earliest "up-to-date, fireproof" brick buildings in the business district.

Advertisements for Christmas shopping abounded. The Vernonia Drug Company and Miller's Mercantile ran full page ads with suggested gift lists for each part of the family: jewelry, watches, toys, candies, clothing, and silk underwear including hosiery, vests and bloomers. Some stores promised gifts to children who brought in their parents. Everyone who wanted to work had a job that provided spending money for the holidays.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing bank failures and economic collapse of the early 1930s changed life in Vernonia drastically. The lack of demand for lumber resulted in the closure of the former "big payroll mill" from 1933 to 1936, and the businesses that depended on the now laid off workers also closed or reduced their op-

erations. The Christmas ads were smaller and most suggested practical gifts and bargain pricing. Hopeful wishes for prosperity in the New Year appeared in several advertisements from local surviving businesses.

Many of the articles about church and fraternal associations mentioned charitable giving and fund-raising bazaars to help families in need. The school newspaper, the *Timberline*, was published inside the *Eagle* for many years. A December 1933 editorial suggested that gift giving at school be suspended due to the hard times. A 1935 *Timberline* mentioned a petition by students to reinstate Christmas presents as it was felt that there was no reason to have Santa Claus and a Christmas tree at school without them.

The *Eagle* published articles about the various federal government programs designed to improve banking safety, create large-scale work projects and otherwise provide support for the vast number of unemployed. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" to give employment to young men 16-18. CCC crews built roads, fought forest fires and provided labor for a number of other public works.

Although the paper felt that things were beginning to improve in 1935 and the re-opening of the mill was rumored and hoped for, it wasn't until 1936 that the wish finally came true. While Vernonia never regained

the momentum of the Roaring Twenties, the mill reclaimed its position as the key "big payroll" operation for the next twenty years.

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. Below are a few entries from Christmas time in the mid-Twenties and mid-Thirties. We assume the play he attended in Vernonia in 1925 was the high school's annual Christmas play that was noted in the *Eagle*.

The camp and camp crew referred to in the 1930s is presumed to be the CCC camp at Mist where Virgil supervised the young work crews.

Sunday, December 24, 1922: Helped Ike move over part of day. Had the bunch here evening. Rained. River high.

Monday, December 25, 1922: Fooled around all day. To Garfields for dinner. Fair day.

Wednesday, December 23, 1925: Around home most all day. To play Vernonia evening. Very good day.

Thursday, December 24, 1925: Worked around home A.M. Went down to L. Nelsons P.M. Fine day.

Friday, December 22, 1933: Around Camp till 3 P.M. then Thompson and I drove around via St. Helens home. River up at its highest. Rained some all day.

Sunday, December 24, 1933: At home all day. Ben and crowd here for dinner. Rained a little but fair day.


Tuesday, December 26, 1933: Went to Jewell to look about telephone line. Returned to Mist Camp 8 P.M. Pretty fair day.

Wednesday, December 27, 1933: Got wood and shakes out on Clatskanie Mt. road. Fair day. Took the crew to the Clatskanie dance 8 P.M.


Sunday, December 31, 1933: At home part of day. To Mrs. Wright's funeral afternoon. Came to Mist Camp 4 P.M then took a big bunch out to Arcadia to dance and doings. Returned 3 A.M.

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.vernoniahanson-art.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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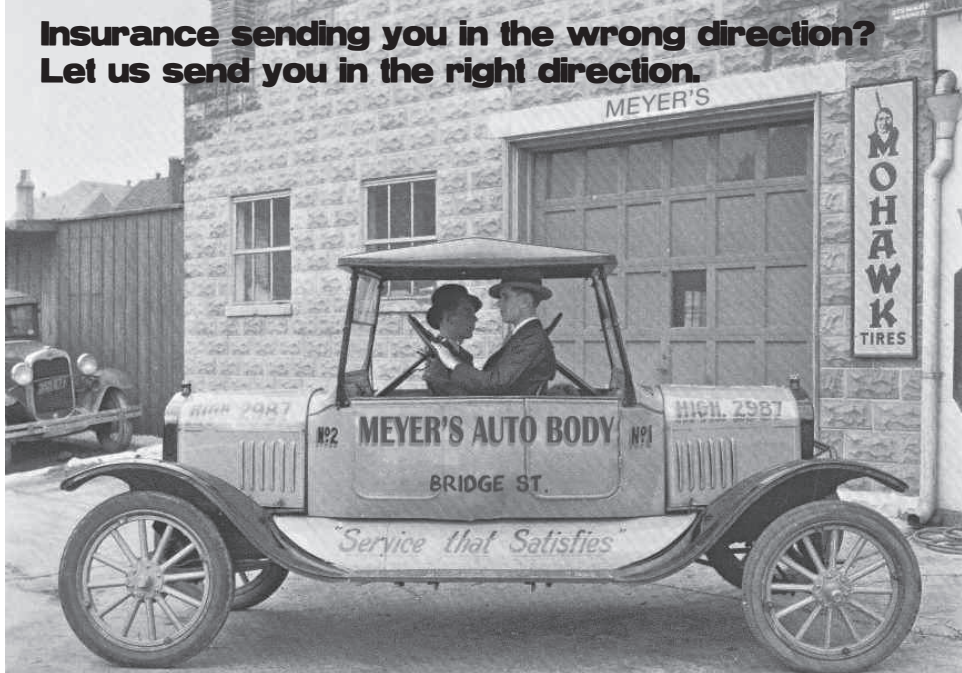
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