

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Winter Storms

With the heavy rains, flood, landslides, wind storm and snow of the past month, we were reminded of the variety of winters residents have endured over the past hundred and forty years of Upper Nehalem settlement. Just as in current times, some winters are mild while others are memorable.

The biggest windstorm on record in the Upper Nehalem occurred on January 9, 1880, just six years after Vernonia was first settled. The "Great Gale" that lasted for several hours and affected most of western Oregon was also dubbed "The Storm King." A big snowfall accompanied the wild winds. The Green Mountain Spring Road, the first route in from the Tualatin Valley, was completely obliterated by fallen timber and was abandoned.

Because wind gauges and record-keeping weren't as sophisticated in those times, it is presumed The Great Gale rivaled or exceeded the Columbus Day Storm on 1962 which many Vernonians remember vividly. For several hours, Category 3 hurricane winds – remnants of tropical Typhoon Freda - battered the coast and gusts over 110 miles per hour took down power lines and trees throughout western Oregon. All of West Oregon Electric's customers lost power for days while the lines were restored.

The "Great Coastal Gale of 2007" centered itself over the Coast Range, taking out hundreds of acres of standing timber and dumping up to sixteen inches of rain in a twenty four hour period. The result of those heavy rains was Vernonia's record flood when the Nehalem River crested at 19 feet on December 3 and cut off all access in or out of town. The February 1996 flood had been considered a 500 year event, but the 2007 flood resulted in the extensive changes we see in our landscape: elevated homes, removal of several buildings including our former schools, and areas that cannot be built upon. This past December's flood mercifully crested four feet lower and affected far fewer structures.

Due to the geography of the Upper Nehalem, flooding is certain when heavy rains fall for days on end or when a "Pineapple Express" suddenly melts a heavy snowpack in the Coast Range. We

have heard that at least one of the earliest settlers who farmed the flood plains of the Nehalem kept a rowboat tied to his front porch.

The winters of 1949 and 1950 brought extremely cold temperatures and heavy snow throughout the Pacific Northwest. In the Vernonia area, logging operations in the surrounding hills were suspended due to snow as deep as twelve feet. Some of our older residents recall that open trenches had to be dug to get through downtown Vernonia to get to school or businesses. We have no local newspaper records for 1919, but that winter brought the most snow in Oregon history with over forty inches falling in a twenty-four hour period. The January 1969 snowstorm brought half of that, but the cold temperatures kept it on the ground for weeks. Our most recent record snow fell in December 2008 with resulting multiple day power outages due to the extensive line damage.

We are fortunate to have Virgil Powell's diaries as a historic record of the weather in our area. His daily notes may not be specific as to temperature, rainfall and snow depth, but they give a good idea of the fluctuations day to day and year to year. One thing we all know – if you want predictable, monotonous weather, don't move here!

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.

Wednesday, January 18, 1911: Stayed in and cleaned house just about all day. Received my new white Leghorn chickens. Rained terrible hard all day.

Monday, January 23: Elmar and I started out in the woods with the dogs about 10:45. Went up by Damairs in Sec. 18, 5-3. His dogs put one in at Cooks and my dog put one here in the field. Newell and Jim killed them both. Was fooling around on a cougar track when we first went out. We came back out by Wolfe on the St. Helens road. Found the section corner of 17-18-

19-20. Got back home at 3:45. Pretty good day for hunting. About 6 inches of snow up in Sec. 18.

Tuesday, January 24: Went over to the Elliott place and hauled over a load of cabbage and roots for the cow. Also hauled up a load of bark and one of wood. Rained terrible hard all afternoon.

Wednesday, January 25: Done a little washing and worked around the house in the forenoon. Went up to the forks of the Rock Cread roads about 1 p.m. horseback and met Fritz Faltinat. Got back home about 3:45. About 3 inches of snow on. Had all kinds of music over the phone (NOTE: we presume a gramophone) in the evening.

Thursday, January 26: Fool around the house all day. Lamack came up in the afternoon and stayed overnight. Had all kinds of music all day. Snowed quite a bit in morning.

Saturday, January 28: Was cleaning and pressing my clothes and getting ready for the dance about all day.

Fritz, Elmar and I started for the dance at Vernonia about 3 p.m. Walked and got there about 4:30. Pretty large crowd there and had a good time. Very fine most all day. The dance broke up about 5

a.m. Wednesday, February 1: Went up to the funeral of John Pringle, Sr. Went up horseback. Started up at 8:15 and got up to Vernonia at 9:30 a.m. Pretty fair in the forenoon but snowed quite a little in the afternoon. Got home from Vernonia at 2:30 p.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.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.

Vernonia's Voice is published twice each month on the 1st and 3rd Thursday. Our next issue will be out February 4th.

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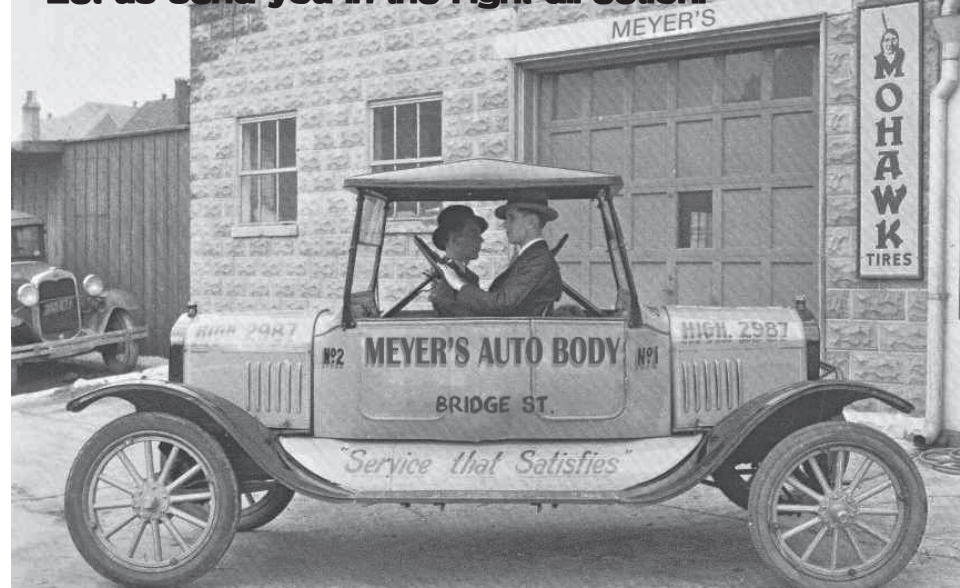
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