

## Like Salmon, We Return *continued from front page*

surface. I would watch them by the river, religiously keeping to the bank, for fear of crushing their eggs, as much as I would have loved to go out and walk among the great fish in the boot-deep water.

One day, I came up from the river to find my mom's father and a few other extended family members sitting in our little house. Grandpa, to my surprise, was in town from Portland visiting relatives. Other relatives. Dead relatives.

What?

And to my surprise, I learned that my family's story in Vernonia was much older than that day in '96 that I visited town for the first time.

In 1877, Alva Hamilton Powell came over the Pebble Creek trail to the Nehalem Valley, settling on a farm in Pittsburg. He was a rebel veteran of the Civil War, who'd met a Yankee sweetheart while campaigning in Illinois, returning after the war to marry her. They came west. Alva felled trees, split shakes and boards, and built a five room house. He ditched and drained fertile land near the Nehalem using ingenious wooden troughs. A surveyor, he built the first road to St. Helens with others in the community, for no pay besides the rewards of a better way over the hill. He built the first schoolhouse in Pittsburg. His three children who had come West with him and their mother, Martha Jane, were joined by seven more, though four of the little ones died. Ora, my great-grandfather, survived, moved to Portland, became a police detective in a city and time straight from an old film

noir. His son, James (my grandfather and a namesake), spent summers with his Uncle Virgil in Vernonia—the Virgil who kept a diary of every day of his life, they tell me, diaries now held by the Pioneer Museum, a meticulous catalogue of the irreplaceable everyday life of a lost time.

With Grandpa, we went to the family grave plot in the pioneer cemetery out Keasey. It was just up the hill, barely out of sight of the home I lived in. We read Virgil's careful hand in his diaries at the museum. And then we piled in the car to visit the old homestead plot in Pittsburg, the family land once drained and farmed. Now forgotten for many years.

It was overgrown, woods, to all appearances. But young though I was, I *felt* something there. Something real. Something whose logic or purpose eluded me, but whose meaning was clear, like the silver flash of a fish under silty water.

In those dark and ancient woods, that had taken back my ancestor's farm and homestead, covered his footprints, gently buried the work of his hands, in those thick and perfect woods *I felt something*.

For all its fierce and overgrown strangeness, I felt home.

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Wherever time meets place, you will find miracles.

The first peoples of our land were largely migratory, like deer, or salmon. They moved as food moved,

or weather moved, or custom dictated. Their kind of movement was wisdom, not wandering. They returned in season to the same lodges, the same camps.



Paul at 16 on the old Powell Homestead near Pittsburg.

Home was just drawn more like a wide, wobbly circle than a dot.

What is "home"? It is sometimes a place, but not always. It is sometimes a family but not always. It is sometimes the flavor of a food, a particular changing of the light, a smell that is more a sweet memory than anything else.

Sometimes it is just a magnetic pull, calling us upstream.

How do we make sense of the rhythms of life around us? My ancestor Alva came from Illinois to the valley along the Nehalem. His son left the valley, came to Portland. My grandfather James splashed as a boy in the same rivers I did, ran through the same summer woods.

Decades passing, I am born in Portland, move to Vernonia like rain moves over the hills, then skip out of those woods like a deer, back to Portland, then out to Illinois for work, the reverse of Alva's quest. I found it, then trailed back across the West again, returning to the Oregon woods. I see symmetry there, some fishlike pattern of going and returning, playing out in the life of a family, in my own short years. But what does it mean?

What is home for you? What patterns do you see, what paths lead behind or ahead? How do they weave with the people and places around you?

These rhythms are where the stories of a life happen. And perhaps we begin to find out what home is. For me, it is a long wobbly circle, drawn like the curve of a humpback whale on an old map.

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Wherever roots meet soil, you will find miracles.

Margaret Berndt, a mother to many in Vernonia (including me), wears a button sometimes. It's a 70s-style flower pin with a simple saying: *Bloom Where You're Planted*.

It took me two decades to know the wisdom of that.

Salmon bloom where they were once planted, as eggs in a chilly stream. But what a journey. People do the same thing.

Home for most of us becomes

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