

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Movie Houses

In the years before motion pictures and television, entertainment in Vernonia consisted primarily of dances with live bands, musical performances, lectures, and the occasional stage play. The radio and phonograph expanded the types of music available for home entertainment and small dances in the years following World War I. When the population soared in the 1920s with the opening of the big lumber mill, however, moving pictures were added to the list of leisure activities.

Ethel Blackburn was the granddaughter of early pioneers Hans and Anna Van Blaricom Christensen. In 1991, the year of Vernonia's centennial, she self-published her first volume of memoirs entitled "Nehalem Valley Bits o' History." This is her recollection of the first movie houses in Vernonia:

"During the 1920s when rumors were circling around the country that a big sawmill was going to be built in Vernonia, people came from far and near to observe for themselves where the town was and the location of the mill. A young couple came with the thought in mind of opening a theater. Their names were Jack and Zelma Bush and they came from a small town called Ione, near Heppner, Oregon. They lived at first in a walled tent until their home was built on State Street. They first opened a theater where Millers Store (NOTE: J.C. Penney Building, northeast corner of Bridge and Madison) was later built. The theater burned down one night. Jack and Zelma then decided to open a theater in a building next to the Rock Creek Bridge (NOTE: this is where Shay Park is today on Bridge and Adams; we believe this was the Rose Theater which also burned down). It was an old building but they decided it would do as they had plans to build a new theater. They purchased some lots and had the theater built. Then there was the question of what to name it. They finally decided to call it the Joy Theater after their daughter who was named Joy. They lived next door to my parents, so Joy and I became friends and I was asked quite often to go to the show. The most exciting shows in those days were Tom Mix, Richard Dix, Hoot Gibson, Charlie Chaplin, Rin Tin Tin, and a little later the Lassie pictures and

many others. Those were silent pictures, some of them, but it wasn't long until talking pictures came into the theater business and people really crowded in to see them. Then came television and this made quite a change in people's lifestyle and theater business as people began to stay home to watch the television."

A search of the *Vernonia Eagle* corrects and enhances a few points in the Blackburn memoir. The Rose Theater was known as Vernonia's first movie theater but its opening date is unknown. Jack Bush bought the Rose from the Keasey family in 1924. The Majestic opened June 1, 1923, with "Skyscraper" as the featured film. The theater boasted a \$5,000 organ for the music that accompanied silent films and 400 theater chairs. In 1924, the original organ was replaced with one valued at \$12,500. The theater hosted organ concerts, school plays, vaudeville performances and public meetings. An overheated wood stove triggered a devastating fire in 1927. The organ was lost but the movie equipment was in the fireproof projection room and thus able to be salvaged for use at the Rose Theater until Bush's newest theater was built. The date of the Rose fire is also unknown, but it appears that no pictures were shown – or at least none were advertised – after mid-1927.

The Joy Theater opened May 4, 1928, with "The Third Alarm." It was Vernonia's movie house until the early 1980s. The David Janssen movie, Ring of Fire, which was filmed in Vernonia and Shelton, Washington, had its world premiere at the Joy in 1959. Lulu Lamping recently donated to the Vernonia Pioneer Museum several handbills from the 1950s advertising the upcoming films at the Joy. Films played only a day or two each with the choicest selections and matinee serials shown on the weekends. In a recent Facebook post, Lulu remarked that she "rode the Trailways bus during WWII from Buxton to the matinees and always had a problem sleeping that night wondering how the cowboy was going to keep from going over the cliff on his horse...next week found out he wasn't even close...."

By the 1970s, movies only ran on weekends, and by the 1980s some weekends had no shows. Everyone who lived in Vernonia before the closing of the Joy has his or her favorite story about

that beautiful theater and hopes to see it restored to its former glory one day.

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. The March 4, 1916, entry mentions attending a moving picture; perhaps it was at the Rose.

Sunday, February 20, 1916: Vic and I went up East Fork about one mile to set some traps. Caught one mink in trap and shot one. Got back home about 3 P.M. Bright and dandy all day.

Monday, February 21: Went up on mountain to cut some trees out of road. Only got up about one mile. Bright and fine all day. Went up in the wagon.

Tuesday, February 22: Went up and finished taking the trees out of St. Helens road. Went up as far as Wolfe Burn. Pretty fair day. Got mail from cream man at covered bridge. Also some smelt. Elmer Lavender married today.

Saturday, February 26: Went over and brought the sheep over also one load of turnips. Filed the saw in afternoon. Vic went to Vernonia after mail in afternoon. Bright and fine all day.

Sunday, February 27: Vic and I went up East Fork to look after some traps in forenoon. Very cold early in morning but fine balance of day. John Eden was here to look at the stove.

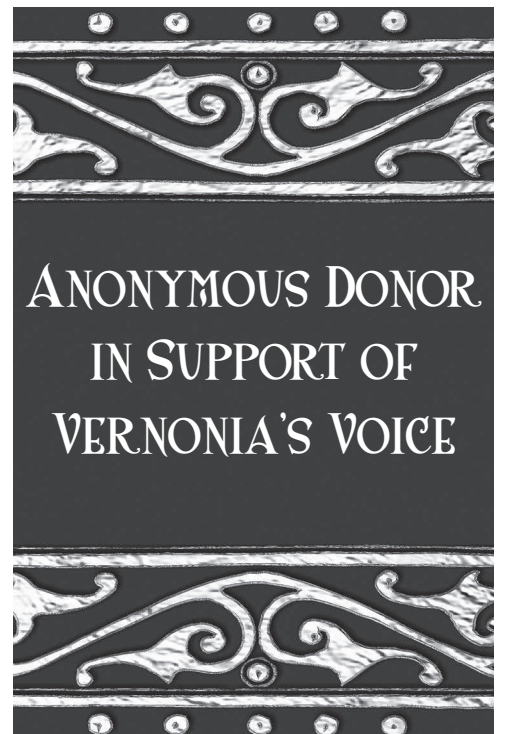
Monday, February 28: Hauled manure in forenoon and finished, making a total of 41 loads. Rained and snowed considerable all day. Went over and got a load of turnips in afternoon and certainly got good and wet.

Tuesday, February 29: Vic and I went up and built a raft and then on up and fell a cedar tree in the river for a foot log. Got home 1 P.M.

Snowed, rained and was pretty bad all day.

Saturday, March 4: Went over and got a load of straw for the cattle. Looked for a lost calf in afternoon. Vic and I went up to Vernonia to the moving picture show 5 P.M. and returned 1:15 A.M. Fair most of the day, rained some. About 4 inches of snow on.

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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Terry's Gym

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