

# The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

## Early Life and Commerce

After a recent museum board meeting, Ralph Keasey was poring over the late 1800s ledgers of his Detrick relatives who operated lumber and grist mills in the community of Pittsburg. The East Fork of the Nehalem had a small dam that provided waterpower to the equipment. Cash was scarce so goods were often purchased with farm products or labor.

Hours of labor, raw timber, sacks of oats and potatoes, chicken and dozens of eggs seem to have been the more popular ways for customers to settle their bills for lumber, flour and other goods produced at the mills. As we reviewed the entries, we couldn't help but wonder what the mill owners did with all those eggs. Finished lumber and more durable products could be hauled over Pittsburg Road to St. Helens, but there must have been some local outlet for the eggs and other perishables - perhaps one of the hotels or stores.

The Detrick ledgers also contain notes about incoming and outgoing shipments and other information about the business. Like the Virgil Powell and other pioneer diaries, the glimpses into life in those times are frustratingly spare. This is further evidenced by another record transcribed by former Vernonia museum curator John Stofiel, the diary of Mrs.

Elmer Everett (Marrinda "Minnie" Rollo) Nickerson. She and her husband married in Kansas in 1888 and moved to Vernonia in 1889 after an eight month stay in Cornelius, Oregon. The move from Cornelius took two days with an overnight stop at the "half way house." It took ten hours from there to their new home in Vernonia. Her daily entries are brief notes about the work she accomplished, attendance at church and Sunday school, and who had visited or come to work with her. We have photographs of her in later years when she was a cook at Camp Benson near Clatskanie.

Leisure days were few and far between. On Christmas Day 1889, there was a dance, presumably at Zillgitt Hall, that was attended by most of the town's residents and a Fourth of July picnic in 1890 complete with a speaker and a dance later in the evening. Mrs. Nickerson was a participant in a Christmas entertainment at Zillgitt Hall in 1890. Summer Sundays often included boating on the Nehalem, sometimes to visit people along the way. In her early twenties when these diaries were written, Minnie noted frequent "sick headaches" and being ill fairly often.

The most amusing notes were about a bear cub that her husband brought home in February 1891. Over the next several weeks, scores of people came daily to see the young bear that they named Cubs. She noted

that so many people were coming to see the bear that she had no time to do anything. By mid-April, the bear "raised the Devil" and on April 27, her husband took the bear back to Mr. Rose. There seems to be a sense of relief in that entry. This was good timing, too, as the diarist gave birth to her first child on May 5, 1891, with Dr. Newth delivering and a Mrs. Ward staying with her for the night.

Because diaries are written as personal notes, the absence of detail on last names, relationships and other facts are often lost to the ages, but reading them provides an intriguing snapshot of life in "the good old days" of early Vernonia.

## 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 rains were heavy and mixed with snow in the early spring of 1916, but the changeable March weather also produced some fine weather, too. Because the family homestead spanned both sides of the Nehalem River, he frequently mentions building fords and repairing and replacing bridges in his diary entries over the years.

*Wednesday, March 22, 1916: Went over and got the mail first thing in morning. Worked a building a road up to the little house over the canyon part of the day.*

*Rained quite a little all day and river is up yellow. Thursday, March 23: Built fence along the river in forenoon. Also fixed a new fording place below gravel bar. Finished making road up to little house in afternoon. Snowed considerable in forenoon but pretty fair in afternoon. Friday, March 24: Plowed most all forenoon. Snowed and rained pretty hard all day. Went up to Pittsburg 7 P.M. to see Lovell the Automobile man. Sunday, March 26: Worked at fixing bridge from washing out. The river is the highest today that it has been this winter. Washing out lots of fence. Rained considerable all day. Monday, March 27: Went up and put some cattle over on East Fork first thing in morning. Built fence balance of the day. Put up the rail fence that the river washed down. Pretty fair day. Wednesday, March 29: Went up on St. Helens road about 5 miles and cut the trees out of the road. Got back about 3:45 P.M. Bright and fine 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](http://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.

## Where Do You Read the Voice?



Andrea Grant just returned from visiting her friend Ronda Hill Pratsch in Austria. Andrea and Rhonda grew up together, catching crawdads in the creek and having a good old time here in Vernonia, and graduated in 1993. Ronda went on to work for HP where she met her Austrian husband and has been living there for almost 10 years now. Andrea finally got the chance to go visit. This photo is from their day in the Inner District of Vienna.



Tracy Morrison took a copy of the Voice to the Vernonia Loggers boys basketball team's win at the 2A State Championship on March 5 in Pendleton. Pictured with Tracy are (clockwise) Torey Tolonen, Susan and Lauren Ely, husband Jim Morrison, and Derek and Angie Handegard.

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