

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Early Schools, Part One

Education was important to Vernonia's earliest settlers. In 1875, just a year after the first families arrived, Clark Parker donated a piece of land for a school near present day Mist Drive, north of the green bridge. Built in late 1876, the one room hewn log cabin measured eighteen by twenty-four feet with four windows. Fern Hill School opened with Ozias Cherrington as the teacher followed by Judson Weed the next term. Due to the expense of hiring a teacher and the need for children's labor on the family farms, school was in session just three months per year. The little log school also was used for community functions. By 1881, the growing population with its large families meant a second school was needed.

The first to serve the families living west of the Parker land was built in 1881 near the Nehalem west side road and the start of the Rock Creek road, less than a mile southwest of the Spencer homestead on what became known as "O-A Hill." According to Sarah Spencer, wife of pioneer Israel Spencer, in a 1928 Vernonia Eagle article, "the cracks between the logs were filled in with moss, and the large chimney which was built from sticks and clay was perched on one end of the building. At Christmas in the year 1881, the community Christmas tree was inside of the school house where presents were distributed to all, and following a potluck supper was served to the many who attended the program."

Sarah also recalled that "On Sunday, services and Sunday school was held in the old school house, where settlers from miles around attended to worship. Judson Weed taught the first school term, which in the year of 1881 existed three months of the year for learning and teaching. School was next taught in a building fashioned after a wood shed, and later the school was held in a building which had been originally intended to be a dance hall. A short time later a school was built near where the high school is now located, and was later sold and a laundry started operations in the old building." The high school to which Sarah refers was the Vernonia Union

High School, built in 1922 at State and A Streets.

Locations of the various Vernonia schools are challenging to pinpoint, but our research from multiple sources states that the first wood-frame school near the business district was sited near the intersection of today's Stoney Point Road and Keasey (then called Rock Creek) Road. Land for that school was donated by the Mellinger family from its homestead land. Built in 1893, it had four windows, four rows of seats, a double front door, and separate out-houses for boys and girls. The desks and blackboard came from the old school. By then the town had its only church on Jefferson Street north of Bridge.

The first Washington Grade School was built in 1913 primarily as an elementary school but in 1916 some ninth grade classes for older children were offered. Prior to 1922, a high school diploma could only be obtained by students who traveled away to boarding schools. Sometimes, the whole family moved to get their children a high school education. The first WGS was erected on land donated by the Malmsten family near the site of the second high school which was erected in the early 1950s. The second Washington Grade School was approved by the voters in 1930, opened in 1932 and operated until 2012 with the opening of the new K-12 school on what was part of the Israel Spencer homestead. Lincoln Elementary School, built in 1923, served the booming population around the Rose Avenue addition and Corey Hill areas of town. In its four rooms, students from kindergarten through fifth grade attended classes through 2004.

Columbia County provided central administration of the schools under Oregon School Law in the early days of the county before regional school districts were established. Teachers submitted monthly reports which had to be reviewed and approved by the county before the \$20 to \$35 monthly salary order was written to the chairman of the local school board. These orders were vouchers that would be presented for payment at the annual school meeting. Teachers were required to submit school term summary reports to the County School Superintendent in St. Helens.

Throughout the decades, former

students of our local schools went on to become teachers here themselves. Dedicated teachers and students have benefited from the foresight of those first settlers who knew that education was a key to a full and happy life. Next month we will explore the many one room schools that appeared in the remote settlements beyond 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. We hope someone can tell us if the last sentence in the July 27 entry is an old time expression or if he was really into sartorial splendor.

Saturday, July 21, 1906: Went down to Mist in morning also went up to Vernonia in evening to basket social which was pretty good. Total amount cleared \$24.65. Seen Edna and had a little talk. The people danced a little after the basket social but it did not amount to anything. There were a dance at Natal Grange Hall tonight. All report having a good time.

Sunday, July 22: Got home from Vernonia at 5:30 A.M. Slept until 9, then went down to Natal and played ball a little. Seen Alice, Minnie and Hilda, got home at 5:15 P.M.

Monday, July 23: Went up to Albers and N.J. Parkers in morning. Went up to Pittsburg in evening and was sworn in to carry the U.S. Mail. Today is my birthday. There wasn't any mail came over today on account of a train wreck. Emil Messing was up this evening on his bicycle.

Tuesday, July 24: Carried the mail to Mist. Seen 2 deer down by Dave Kaye's when was coming back. Sent postal card to Rob. Pretty hot all day.

Wednesday, July 25: Sawed a little wood and went

down to Crooked Creek hunting, went up toward the Wilkinson School House in afternoon.

Thursday, July 26: Carried the mail to Mist. Not very warm during the day. Got back at 12 N. Wrote to L.L. Detrick.

Friday, July 27: Went up to Pittsburg in morning. Came back and fixed barn to hold more oat hay. Very hot all day. Got my hair curled in evening.

Saturday, July 28: Hauled a little wood in morning. Not very warm during the day. Started for Vernonia at 5:30 took in Grange meeting and went over and stayed overnight with Rob. Got to their place at 1:30.

Sunday, July 29: Went over to Vernonia with Rob and took buggy ride up the river about 3 miles. Played a little ball in the street in afternoon. Edna and several more girls were there. Heard about Gust Peterson being dead.

Monday, July 30: Albert Parker came down and cut the oats for hay. Cool and cloudy most all day. Went up to Mellingers in evening and brought Edna down. Got home at 9:15.

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.

Terry's Gym



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