

The Day They Burned the Mill Down

Don Webb remembers when Hollywood burned down the O-A Mill

By Scott Laird

On April 19, 1958 the last load of lumber left the Oregon-American (O-A) Mill in Vernonia headed for Portland. It was the end of an era. After three decades of operation the mill was shutting down.

But the old mill still had one more big day to come, two years in the future.

The O-A Mill began operations in 1924, and was powered by, what at the time was considered, state-of-the-art electric power. The mill caused a population boom in Vernonia and for the next thirty-four years was the major employer for the community.

By 1957 all the old growth forest had been logged in the region and the mill, no longer necessary, began the slow process of shutting down.

In September of 1960 Hollywood came to Vernonia for the filming of the MGM motion picture Ring of Fire, which starred famous television star David Janssen as a small town sheriff trying to rein-in two teenage delinquents, played by starlet Joyce Taylor, and Frank Gorshin, who later became famous for playing The Riddler on television's Batman series.

Local citizens played extras in several scenes in the film. Local church ladies made lunch for the crew every day and local landmarks were used for scenes in the movie.

The dramatic ending to the film called for a climactic race against a spreading forest fire that included a Hollywood version of the town burning down.

The film had its premiere showing at Vernonia's Joy



The planer shed at the Oregon-American Mill was burned as part of the filming of the movie Ring of Fire. Photo courtesy of the Vernonia Pioneer Museum.

to be loaded with barrels of napalm that would cause large explosions and a hot fire to create extra drama for the filming. Because it was the end of the summer and still very dry in the region, Webb made arrangements for several local logging outfits to be standing by with earth moving cats on low boy trucks in case the fire got away in any of the nearby timber forests.

"I told the film crew they had to have it started by 10:00 am on the day of the filming while it was still damp from the overnight dew," explains Webb. "It wasn't real hot but things were pretty dry and there was a threat that we could end up with a real forest fire."

The evening before the scheduled burning, the film crew loaded up the building with the napalm and prepared for the big show.

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Don Webb was the Vernonia Volunteer Fire Chief in 1960 when Ring of Fire was filmed.

Theater on May 14, 1961 and then quickly disappeared into obscurity, although it is still fondly remembered by local residents who enjoyed their brief brush with fame more than a half century earlier. Today you can rent a copy of the difficult-to-find film at the R&S Market or borrow it from the Vernonia Library.

Producers Andrew and Virginia Stone made arrangements to burn the planer shed on the old O-A Mill site as part of the filming of the movie's thrilling final scene. Local resident Don Webb, now in his late eighties, was the volunteer Fire Chief at the time and remembers the day they burned part of the mill down almost sixty years ago.

Don remembers that the State Forestry Service initially said they would write the permits and take responsibility for overseeing the burning of the planer shed. But a week later they backed out, telling Webb the structural fire in his fire district would be his responsibility.

Plans called for the planer shed

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