

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

The Wreck of the 104

This month's article is condensed from a 2013 entry in The Forest Hiker, an internet publication (www.foresthiker.com). There is more information available in the book written about the Vernonia timber company, *The Oregon-American Lumber Company - Ain't No More*, by Ed and Greg Kamholz and Jim Blain. The Kamholz brothers' dad, Marvin, published the Vernonia Eagle for many years. The article got some information wrong, but the gist of the story remains as tragic.

For twenty-five years Oregon-American (O-A) managed to haul two billion board feet of timber out of the Coast Range without a serious accident. That all changed on June 3, 1948. At 8:30 am the 104 steam-powered locomotive was bringing an empty oil car and thirteen big carloads of logs down the winding rails along the rim of Windy Gap, headed for Camp Olsen. It inched its way down the steep grade of Line Spur 26 but had to stop on a slope about a mile short of camp due to repairs being made on the line. In the cab were Jeff McGregor, engineer, Jerry Manning, fireman, and Frank Wills, timekeeper. Three brakemen were riding further back among the log cars. Everything seemed to be in order.

After a short wait, the section foreman completed his repair work and waved the train ahead. It soon became clear to all who witnessed the event that the train was gathering speed far too quickly. The train continued on, alarmingly increasing speed. As it tried to round the bend of the 26-8 junction, it jumped the track on the curve and overturned immediately.

George Lee, a key man in construction for O-A, reported the grisly scene: "The engineer wasn't alive when I got there. He got half-way out the cab window and that's as far as he made it. He was cooked. You don't get two hundred pounds of live steam goin' on you and survive. The timekeeper, 'ol Frank Wills, he was just squashed

right between the boiler and the tank. The other guys, they weren't squashed, they were just cooked." According to the official company report, however, the engineer died in the ambulance about a half-hour after the accident, but the fireman and timekeeper were killed instantly. The brakemen had all successfully jumped from the runaway train before it rolled over.

The company lost three men, each with twenty or more years of experience; engineer McGregor had forty years work on trains. The reason for the accident was not fully proven although a later writer suspected that the brakes were all released too quickly. The surviving brakemen said the train started too fast, but the engineer said, before he died, that the brakemen hadn't set up enough brakes. Whatever the cause, the company was shaken by the loss of three long-time employees and friends. The track was repaired quickly, and Engine 104 was repaired and back in service two months later.

Due to periodic renumbering of locomotives, we are not sure if engine 104 in downtown Vernonia's Shay Park is the same engine, but it is certainly a representative of those hard-working Shays.

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. March 1907 was wet with rain and snow but work went on as usual. Road repairs were done by those who depended on them. We can only imagine how much it took to amend a slide during wet weather.

Saturday, March 16, 1907: Trimmed fruit trees in the morning and did not do much of anything in the afternoon. Started up for the dance at Vernonia at 6:30 P.M. Got home next morning at 7 A.M. Had a dandy time. Will D. and Emil came up from

below. Pretty good day. Sent postal to Alice.

Sunday, March 17: Got home from Vernonia dance at 7 A.M. Went to bed and slept till 12. Commenced raining about 1 and rained all afternoon. Wrote a letter to 55131 (we don't know what this was, certainly was over fifty years before ZIP codes!)

Monday, March 18: Trimmed fruit trees again all day. Pretty fair in morning but rained considerable in evening.

Tuesday, March 19: Went down by Cooks and worked on the big slide in the road. Rained quite a lot during the day. Got 5 postal cards, one from Alice. Sent for leather postal card. Send letter to 55131.

Wednesday, March 20: Worked on the slide in the road down below and got it so a wagon could get past so quit at noon. Worked on fruit trees and fixed some fence in afternoon. Bright most all day.

Thursday, March 21: Went down to F. J. Petersons in the wagon the first thing in the morning after potatoes. Hauled wood in the afternoon. Pretty bad stormy day and snowed a little in evening. Albert spoke to me to carry the mail for a while. Sent leather post card to Alice.

Friday, March 22: Snowed all day and was about as bad a day as we have had any time this winter. The wind blew and was pretty cold. Wrote to Lameck and Bob. Went up to Post Office and mailed some letters, also sent a letter to Vernonia.

Saturday, March 23: Carried the mail to Mist. First trip I have went since they have got sacks. Rained and snowed terrible till noon. Gust Peterson's (recently deceased) things were sold today. Got back there at 1:30 and stopped till 3:35 and got home at 4:30. Got 2 postal cards. Grange day at Vernonia.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is located at 511 E. 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.vernonia-handsonart.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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PANCAKE FEED!!!

April 8TH 2017 April 8TH



Where: Mist-Birkenfeld Main Station
12525 Hwy 202 Mist, Oregon 97016

Time: 8am to 11am

How Much: \$6/plate
Seniors : \$5/plate
Children under 12: \$3/plate

The Volunteer Association would like to invite everyone (large, small, big, and tall) to come join us for the best **All You Can Eat** Pancake Feed in the county! Association members will be whipping up fluffy pancakes, hearty ham, scrumptious scrambled eggs and you can chase it all down with some coffee and juice. All proceeds will be used by the Volunteer Association to provide additional training to better serve our community.

Vernonia's Voice is published twice each month on the 1st and 3rd Thursday.
Look for our next issue out April 6.