

# The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

## Museum Notes

An astute reader of last month's column, none other than Vernonia Pioneer Museum President and railroad buff, Jay Anderson, noted that last month's column about the wreck of train #104 was definitely not a Shay but rather a tank engine. To top that off, the engine number on the train in Shay Park is 102. We always appreciate feedback and corrections, even the embarrassing kind!

There are three news items of interest to Vernonia history fans to share. First, thanks to a training program for inmates of the Oklahoma State Prison, we were able to have nearly all of the Vernonia High School yearbooks from 1924 to 2016 scanned into digital format and written to DVDs at no cost to the museum. Watch for the press release in the next issue of *Vernonia's Voice* and a request to borrow the few we, the school, and a museum patron didn't have so those can also be scanned and saved.

We will soon announce the availability of the second edition of the Vernonia Walking Tour, first created by Vernonia Pride in 2004. If you're not familiar with the tour, you may have noticed the numbered plaques on many downtown buildings. The accompanying guide has been out of print for a few years, and two wonderful young women have completely updated it with a fresh, new look. It will be available for sale at a nominal fee in multiple locations around town.

The Oregon Folk Life Network visited here several months ago and interviewed us about our local artisans and long-time residents. The result of this project is a Community Conversation that will be held Tuesday, May 2, 6:30 pm at the Vernonia Library. They will present a program featuring Don Webb and Fred Heller. Be sure to mark your calendars!

## Fires in Downtown Vernonia

As we updated our research for the Walking Tour book, we noted the number of buildings that had been destroyed by fire. The combination of wooden buildings, wood-burning stoves, kerosene lamps, and combustible interior finishes was an early cause of many home and commercial fires in Vernonia's

early years. There were so many commercial building fires before the mid-1920s that the city required new structures to be built with brick or other non-combustible materials. As noted in the Vernonia Walking Tour, the entire Stuart Block where Subway and the Post Office now stand went up in flames in the early 1920s. All of the fairly new wooden structures on the block were destroyed.

The first motion picture theater, the Majestic, located on Bridge between what is now Madison and Jefferson Streets, had a devastating fire in December 1927. Started by an overheated stove near the stage, the fire went undetected for some time. When the fire truck was eventually called and responded, the heat had burst the windows, letting in fresh air that further fanned the flames. The fire was made far worse by the large supply of firewood that had been stored under the stage. Water had to be pumped from the fire truck as there were no fire hydrants in those days. It took over 2,000 gallons of water just to douse the woodpile blaze.

The greatest loss was the Majestic's magnificent theater organ, used to provide the music for the silent films of that era. Projection equipment and the current films being shown had been safely stored in the fireproof projection room, and the next night the feature film was shown at the Rose Theater on Adams. The building was declared a total loss, however, and a commercial building was planned for the space. The American Legion later held a special luncheon at City Hall for all the firefighters who responded.

That same week, a fire broke out in the Reynolds Shoe Shop, located near the Mile Bridge - now more commonly known as the Green Bridge at the east end of town. The cause was presumed to be arson as earlier that week, the shop was broken into and a fire started. That first fire was quickly spotted and extinguished, but the second destroyed the building.

In September 1938, the former Commodore Hotel structure was consumed by flames. Located on Rose Avenue, it was somewhat notorious during the mid-1920s for federal raids. Prohibition was the law of the land, and federal marshals broke into the building on numerous occasions to seize al-

cohol and arrest those providing it. For a short time, the Commodore was under new management as the Rose Hotel and boasted hot and cold running water in all rooms. Apparently vacant by 1938, the structure was still known as the Commodore. This was one of several fires in vacant buildings during the lean years of the Depression. Insurance fires, perhaps?

The 1948 Hotel MacDonald fire started in an upper floor of the combination residential and standard hotel. Thanks to quick response by the Vernonia Fire Department with help from the nearby Crown Zellerbach operations, the fire was suppressed before igniting a nearby home. Between fire and water damage, however, the half-block long building was declared a total loss and left Vernonia with a shortage of overnight and residential rooms.

Structure fires, of course, still persist, but given all the fires in the "Good Old Days," we are properly grateful for modern building and fire codes that have significantly reduced the number.

## 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. April 1907 alternated between rain and heat. It was time to prepare the fields, sow wheat and oats and get a garden patch ready.

*Wednesday, April 17, 1907: Rained pretty hard most all day. Did not do very much work for it was too wet. Filed the saw in morning. Ploughed a little corner for garden in the afternoon. Went up to Pittsburg in evening and mailed a postal to Alice. Had a big gabber with the old lady C.*

*Friday, April 19: Harrowed all day on wheat with drag harrow. Very warm all day. Mr. Spencer and Carl (Carroll?) Keasey were here for dinner.*

*Saturday, April 20: Finished*

*harrowing wheat ground with drag harrow about 3 P.M. Grand day at Natal. Very hot all day. Got two postal cards. Sent a leather postal to Alice. Here's to my girl.*

*Sunday, April 21: Went down as far as the Pringle School house in the morning horse back for a little ride. Awful hot all day. Wrote to 55131.*

*Saturday, April 27: Sawed some wood in morning and hauled wood and oats out in field in the afternoon. Fixed the road in front of house and had dandy bicycle ride in evening. Also rode wheel up to Pittsburg after the mail. Very hot all day. Sent postal to Alice.*

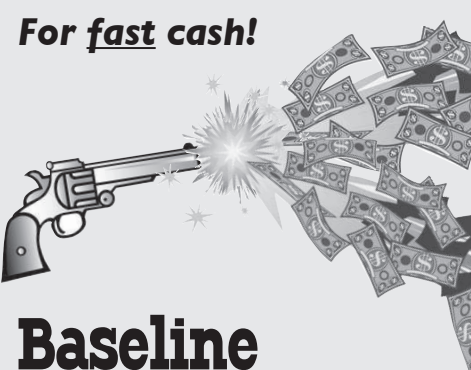
*Sunday, April 28: Took a bicycle ride in morning up the river about two miles. Sowed oats in the afternoon and got almost through. Awful hot all day.*

*Monday, April 29: Run the disc harrow all day. Done a terrible big day's work. Got about ¾ over all that ground. Received a postal from Lemeck. Will carry the mail tomorrow. Very hot all day.*

*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.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.*

Vernonia's Voice is published twice each month on the 1st and 3rd Thursday. Look for our next issue out May 4.

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