

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Local Poets

A few years ago, Robb Wilson held a "Logger Poetry" event at the Grange during Jamboree featuring Gary Everett and other logger-poets from around the Pacific Northwest. He is still hoping to make it an annual event similar to the cowboy poetry festivals held in other parts of the country. Poetry that reflects everyday life of a particular town or region is approachable and popular. The Upper Nehalem has enjoyed such works by its poets over the years.

Walter Mathews was born in 1911 in the area known as "The Burn," a few miles north of Mist. Giving up on farming on that poor soil, in 1920 his father started a sawmill; Walter and his four brothers all worked there for many years. Walter sold his share in 1948, and he and his wife, Grace, bought the Mist Store which he ran for five years. Grace was a teacher whose first job was at the one room school in Natal. She was recruited away from that job by the Vernonia principal and taught in Vernonia for eighteen years and at Mist School for seventeen. After they sold the store, Walter took a job with J and H Lumber where he sharpened saws, chipper knives and trim saws for the next eighteen years until retirement. His hobby, however, was composing narrative poems. He could recite from memory many poems and especially his own.

Over the years, he wrote poems about his childhood, farming, logging, and people he knew. He was often asked to write poems to commemorate events, birthdays and golden and silver anniversaries in the Natal, Mist and Birkenfeld communities where he lived and worked. Among these was one he recited for the dedication of the new Mist-Birkenfeld Fire Hall in 1981.

In 1988, Walter self-published a paperback book of his poetry, "Collected Poems of Walter C. Mathews," that can still be found in online bookstores such as AbeBooks. Quite recently, one of his daughters was cleaning out her attic and found the single hard bound copy which they had made as a gift for him. They decided that it should reside at the Vernonia Pioneer Museum for which we are grateful. His poetry also appeared in "Logger's World," "American Timber-

man and Trucker" and various Nehalem Valley newspapers.

John Brown grew up on a farm eight miles out Keasey Road in the 1930s and attended Vernonia High School from which he graduated in 1950 and where he met his wife, Bobbie. Inspired by the cowboy poets, in his later years he composed poems about his boyhood, farm life, the Oregon-American Mill and other places where he worked, his Vernonia schooldays, dances, and downtown businesses like the Pal Shop, a diner popular as a teenage hangout complete with jukebox, burgers, and Cokes. He and fellow classmates of his era met for many years for the "John Brown Lunches" that continued after his death in 2004.

John's poems, like Walter's, were self-published in spiral binding. The museum has one of the copies, but a few years ago, his grandson, Eric Kotila, republished them in a paperback form entitled "Vernonia Memoirs" complete with photographs of the people and places his poems reflected. Eric collaborated with some fellow musicians to form the John Brown Band that set several of the poems to music. They produced a number of copies of the book and the accompanying CD which are both out of print. The band performed at Jamboree and other local venues for a couple of years. Unfortunately, to our knowledge the band is no longer together, and we have been unable to contact Eric for more copies of the book and CD. We do have museum copies of both.

Our most recent unofficial "Poet Laureate of Vernonia" is Kala Cota. She has a special gift for poems inspired by events of the day: a birthday, anniversary, the seasonal changes, wildlife, her grandchildren, and most recently, the long illness and passing of her beloved mother, Faye Millis Sword. Her mother's slow decline from Alzheimer's Disease inspired many touching poems, one of which was published in "Chicken Soup for the Alzheimer's Soul," one of the titles in the "Chicken Soup" series. Her poems have also appeared in other Alzheimer-related publications. Local Facebook users enjoy her works on a regular basis, and many Vernonians are delighted to receive poems commissioned for special occasions. As she has stated, "...the poems seem to just come together and flow from my keyboard."

We hope to see the "Collected Works of Kala Cota" in print one day soon.

From Virgil Powell's Diary

Virgil Powell (1887-1963) was a longtime 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.

Sunday, November 10, 1907: Started down to the shooting match at 10 A.M. and got there about 12. Stayed until the shooting was over about 4:30. Got home dark about 5:30. Also church day at Natal Grange Hall. Saw Alice & Minnie and had a little talk. Very frosty the morning but bright all day.

Monday, November 11: Went up and put my wood for the school down along the road in the forenoon. Dave K. came up and I helped him pick some apples in the afternoon. Also fixed barn some. Bright and fine all day.

Thursday, November 14: Finished hauling the wood for the school in the morning. Went pheasant hunting in the afternoon. Pretty fair day. Emil Messing came up and stayed over night. Received a postal from Minnie.

Friday, November 15: Emil and I went up to Pittsburg in the morning and took several pictures of the school. Cold but good day. (Note: surely wish we had those photos at the museum!)

Saturday, November 16: Started down for Grange at 8:30. Went down on horseback. Pretty good crowd. Grange was not out till 4:30. Had a big showing. Got home about 6 P.M. Heard that there will be a basket social at Grange Hall Thanksgiving Nov. 28. Cloudy all day. Sent a postal to Allie.


Sunday, November 17: Started down to Petersons at 11:30 and got down there about 1 P.M. The girls were over to

Burriss when I got there; they got home about 5 and then we certainly had a dandy time. Talked stale candy (Note: presume this is slang for idle chat) till about 9:30 P.M. Got home about 10:15. Rained quite hard in the afternoon.

Monday, November 18: Fixed a place up at Pittsburg to catch in the afternoon. Worked around home balance of the day. Pretty fair day. Mailed some postals at Pittsburg in the evening to Alice & Minnie.

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 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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