

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Logging Tunnels

Columbia County's rich, but not easily accessible, timber resulted in three historic tunnels, the only three in Northwest Oregon. One familiar with railroad buffs, hikers and loggers is the Nehalem Divide Railroad Tunnel that lies in the hills along the Scappoose-Vernonia Highway near Scaponia Park. In 1906 Fred and Simcoe Chapman began building a railroad, the Portland & Southwestern, from their Columbia River log dump at Chapman Landing through the forest past Clark & Wilson's Camp 8 towards Pittsburg. The grade between the communities of Chapman and Pittsburg was too steep, and in 1910 construction of the 1,712 foot long tunnel began. Completed in fits and starts by 1920, over one million board feet of timber shored up the sandstone and fossil-filled soil. The original plan was to continue the rail line all the way through Vernonia and ultimately to the coastal town of Nehalem, but the furthest point reached was near present day Big Eddy Park. Although it occasionally carried passengers to the community of Chapman, it was primarily a logging line that hauled at its peak one million board feet of timber per day.

In 1943 the Crown Zellerbach Corporation acquired the abandoned rail line and converted parts of it to a logging road, connecting it with new grades to avoid using old trestles and other topographical features. Because the tunnel couldn't be converted for trucks, the road used a different pass through the range. In the 1970s, the BLM owned a square mile of land that included the tunnel and listed it on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981. At the time, restoration plans were being considered, but it was never improved for public access. Columbia County purchased the former Crown Zellerbach Logging Road in 2004 from its owner, Hancock Timber Company, with grants from Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon State Parks to be developed as "The CZ Trail." The tunnel is not part of the trail and is not flagged on BLM maps, but people familiar with the terrain have hiked to it. While it is in extremely poor condition and many sections have partly collapsed, the tunnel is open from end to end.

The Kerry Timber Company owned a vast tract of timber from the Columbia River inland to Tillamook County. The timber in Tillamook County had been damaged by a big forest fire, and the old growth Douglas fir in the inland holdings was ready for harvest. Despite the difficult terrain, a rail line had to be built. The Columbia and Nehalem River Railroad began in 1914 near the Kerry log dump at Westport in Clatsop County, snaked its way up over the headwall of Nicolai Mountain and tunneled under the summit to the rail shops dubbed "Neverstill" because of the round the clock activity with all the log trains. Known as the "Kerry Line," it eventually comprised 31 miles in

length with 35 trestles, ending at Buster Camp in the Coast Range a few miles north of Keasey.

The tunnel was 1,875 feet long, one of the longest of the few logging railroad tunnels in the western United States and Canada. Not originally in the plan for the line, it was dug to avoid a spring and quicksand on the route. Unfortunately, when they got two hundred feet into the tunnel, there was the same spring and a complex system of pipes and drains had to be installed to deal with the water. To prevent destruction of the tunnel's timbers in case of a forest fire, steel doors at each end of the tunnel were installed. The doors hung from softer steel chains designed to melt and drop the doors to cut off oxygen to the fire.

The line was a vital thoroughfare into the remote valley and used by numerous active logging operations, the isolated communities of Birkenfeld and Neverstill, and several large logging camps. Wagon roads were nearly impassable most of the year with deep dust in summer and mud and snow in winter. The solution was the flanged wheel motor cars known as jitneys that carried freight and passengers to and from the SP&S line along the Columbia with two runs a day, seven days per week. There was a spur line to Kerry's Nehalem Logging Camp near Mist.

Between 1914 and 1938, the Kerry Line hauled over three billion board feet of timber averaging one million board feet per day. The steel rails were pulled up and the remains of the line fell into disrepair. Without the constant maintenance performed when the line was active, the tunnel eventually collapsed. At some point after the line was abandoned, the entrances to the tunnel were blown shut to keep people safely out.

The oldest logging tunnel in the area was not originally built for railroads but for ox teams. Old Highway 30, now shown on maps as Westport Tunnel Road, went right past the entrance just south of the town of Westport. There are at least two stories about its construction. One, written by a descendant of Thomas Holstine, states that in 1888, when Tom was sixteen years old, his stepfather put him in charge of building a tunnel to provide access through a high ridge of sandstone. The ridge stood between the timber stand that was to be logged by the stepfather's company and the log dump on the Columbia. Tom had a small crew of his younger stepbrothers, and together they hewed a ten foot wide, man-height tunnel through twenty feet of sandstone using hand tools, one horse, a scoop shovel, and a homemade hand cart. The resulting passage saved the oxen over an hour on each hauling trip.

The alternate account in the webpage entitled "Abandoned Railroads" states that it was built in the early 1880s by John West for whom the town of Westport is named. In 1907, ox teams were replaced by steam locomotives which required the widening and deepening of the tunnel. The timber was depleted by 1915 and the rails pulled up and tunnel abandoned. The entrance to the tunnel is still visible but fenced.

More information on all three tunnels and their

associated railroads can be found in several websites and publications. One of the best is <http://www.brian894x4.com/AbandonedRRmainpage.html>

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. Following the major slowdown of the early 1930s, the timber industry was once again picking up, and there were logging camps all across the Upper Nehalem area. There continued to be many men like Virgil who were still unemployed as the Depression slowly neared its end.

Wednesday, February 16, 1938: Up where they were logging on N.E. corner of place. Was up there about all day. Cold in morning but bright and fine all day. J.J. Russell here eve.

Friday, February 18: At home forenoon. Went over town afternoon and got some hay. Jepson brought a load of wood logs. Cloudy and cold all day.

Monday, February 21: Worked some around the yard. Over town for a little while afternoon. Pretty nice all day but a little cold. Jepson finished hauling all logs Sec. 33-5-4.

Wednesday, February 23: Around home A.M. Up to Sec. 33-5-4 P.M. where they were moving the (steam logging) donkey. Cloudy but very good day.

Friday, February 25: Took Chuck down to Van Vleet Camp on lower Nehalem River. Left 8:45 and returned 12:15 P.M. Frozen just a little A.M. Bright and fine all day.

Saturday, February 26: Tuned up drag saw for running in garage. Cold early A.M. but bright and fine all day. Around home all day.

Monday, February 28: Over town got haircut, registered for unemployment insurance. Took drag saw into the woods late in evening. Bright and fine all day.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is located at 511 E. Bridge Street and is open from 1-4 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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