

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Puncheon Roads, the Crowder Shingle Mill, and a Jitney Wreck

With our modern abundance of paved roads, it's hard to imagine the challenge of getting around the often soggy Upper Nehalem Valley in decades past. Plank roads, also known as corduroy or puncheon roads, date back thousands of years as a means to make muddy roads passable. Puncheons, logs flattened on one side and laid crosswise on the roadway, provided a stable base in the oozing mud for wagons and horses. Throughout the Pacific Northwest roads built of spaced logs similar to widely spaced "army tracks"¹ were a mainstay of local logging practices and were called skid roads. On the outskirts of the larger mill towns like Seattle and Portland were concentrations of bars and loggers' slums where the skid roads ended. This was the origin of the more widespread meaning of "skid road" and its derivative term "skid row."

In our January column we discussed the cedar mills in the area. Cedar logs were a by-product of fir logging operations, but they still held good value as a source for cedar shingles for siding and roofs. The percentage of cedar trees in a Douglas fir stand was stated as four percent, a figure that was quoted in *Oregon-American Lumber - Ain't No More*. A few local timber men have since told us that the figure is probably closer to ten percent. This was also the percentage stated in the article mentioned below.

According to Norman Crowder's 1997 article on the history of Crowder Shingle Co., sometime in the 1920s August Birkenfeld built a lumber mill and a shingle mill about a half mile northeast of the small town of Birkenfeld. The lumber mill burned once, was rebuilt and then burned down again in 1932 or 1933 and abandoned. The shingle mill apparently never burned but stood idle until 1935 when it was bought by the Crowder brothers who operated it until its sale in 1941 to a new owner. Most of its cedar came from the Oregon-American Lumber Company in Vernonia and brought to the shingle mill by the "swamper" who drove the truck carrying the pond-soaked logs.

The mill was about a quarter mile from what is now Highway 202. A plank road ran down to the mill pass-

ing a few houses and shacks. It continued around past the shingle mill and the shingle shed a quarter mile further and then turned back up to rejoin the main road. There was also a railroad known as the Crowder Short Line. It consisted of one Model T Ford touring car with railroad wheels, a flat car and a quarter of a mile of track that went from the mill to the shingle shed. The Model T had been a doctor's car in the days when many of the logging camps could be reached only by rail and had hauled many an injured logger out of the woods in its day. As Norman Crowder stated in the article, "Like all Model Ts it was cranky about starting and indeed, in cold weather, the only person who could start it was Henry. He would get into such a temper that that crank handle would just be a blur. Sometimes I manned the spark and throttle levers at these ceremonies, and rarely did it to Henry's satisfaction."

In our February article we mentioned the jitney, the regularly scheduled flanged wheeled motor cars on the Kerry Line that carried freight and passengers between Birkenfeld, Neverstill and the SP&S Railroad along the Columbia River. In a memoir written in the early 1990s by Marion Morris to John Labbe, author of *Railroads in the Woods*, Morris recalls moving to Neverstill in 1928 in their Model T over the road from St. Helens to Pittsburg and ultimately Birkenfeld. The oiled gravel road ended at Yankton, then it was rocky going to Pittsburg where it connected to a narrow gravel road to Birkenfeld. From Birkenfeld to Neverstill was a rough plank road. The family learned that the train or jitney route was far superior.

Marion Morris became a fireman on the Kerry Line, spending most of his time on Engine #119. The incident he said he'd never forget was a day they left Buster Camp (the far end of the Kerry Line) with sixteen loads and were to meet the jitney at the siding three miles below Buster. They waited and waited but no jitney appeared. They finally got an order to leave their load on the siding and go see where the jitney was stuck. The locomotive moved slowly ahead, blowing its whistle and ringing its bell. They got to the last known sighting with no jitney on the track but spotted a few people standing along the track near the trestle at the foot of the grade.

The people were passengers

who had climbed from the wreckage of the jitney that had tumbled into the gulch. When Morris saw the wreckage at last, he was horrified to see splotches of red on everything. Fortunately no one was killed and only one man had a bad cut on his foot. The jitney driver said he had seen blue sky come up under his feet on the way down. All the red splattered about was a demolished load of watermelons that had been riding in the jitney's trailer. The #119 engineer rushed the now-tourniqueted injured man to Kerry where an ambulance was waiting. The wreckage was never lifted out of the gulch and soon the trestles all had guard rails.

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. In 1908, some of his March and April entries disclose that he helped shingle the first Grange Hall at Natal, learned to roller skate and helped build a puncheon road along the bluff near Pittsburg.

Friday, March 6, 1908: Went up and worked on the Grange Hall. Done a big days work. Shingled all the one side of the hall in the afternoon. That finished the roof. Eight of us shingled in the afternoon. Pretty good day. Received a postal from Minnie.

Sunday, March 8: Went up to Pittsburg for a while in the morning and bummed around a while. Lemeck was up this way. Came home and went down to church at Natal. Pretty good crowd there. Saw most everybody. Fine bright day and the roads dried up lots.

Saturday, March 14: Rained hard all day. Started for the doings at Natal at 3 P.M. Got to Hall at 4:30. Had a pretty good time. They took in \$109 for baskets. They danced after the doings. Started home about 6 A.M. and got home at 7:30. Rained the hardest through the night that it has for a long time.

Thursday, March 19: Went down to Mist with W.D. Started down about 9 and got to Mist at 11:30. Stopped and had a long talk with Alice when I was

coming up. Stopped at Rays and skated a little. Today is the first time I ever had roller skates on. Bright fine day.

Friday, March 20: Went up to Chars. Mellingers in the morning and did not get back till 1 P.M. Terrible rainy day. Skated a little in the afternoon. Started for the doings at Vernonia at 5:30. Got to V about 7. Had a pretty good time. Doings broke up at 2:30.

Thursday, March 26: Fixed the brake blocks on the wagon in the morning. Went up and swept out the Wedrick Hall and skated some in the afternoon. Rained hard all day and was certainly a dreadful day. Received a postal from Dee.

Monday, March 30: Worked on the road in the morning moving the punching (Note: the word he uses for puncheon) over along the bluff. Went up to Armstrongs in the afternoon and put my load to take out to Clatskanie in the morning. Rained awful hard all day.

Friday, April 3: Fell a cedar tree for punching in the morning. Sawed punching all afternoon. Rained awful hard in the forenoon and quite a bit in the afternoon.

Saturday, April 4: Sawed punching till noon. Split punching all afternoon. Fair day but looks like rain.

Tuesday, April 7: Put all of the punching down, finished about 3 P.M. Had 6 1/2 rods at \$1.25. Very bright and warm 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.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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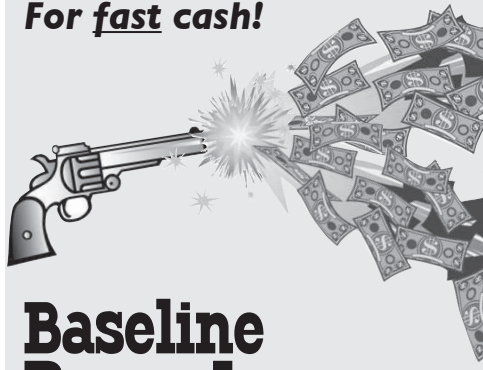


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