The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Editor's note: The author is on vacation this month; this is a reprint of an article with a few additions, originally published in May 2014

Israel Spencer: Early Vernonia Pioneer

Israel Spencer, one of the earliest settlers in the Upper Nehalem Valley, came to Oregon in 1876. A native of Madison County, New York, Israel enlisted in the 136th New York Regiment in 1862 at the age of eighteen and served until the end of the Civil War in 1865. He returned to southwestern New York for three years before heading to Michigan to work as a lumberjack. He married in 1872, but a year later his wife died in childbirth. The baby girl, Emily, survived and was raised by his late wife's parents.

Israel left Michigan in early 1876 and traveled by the only cross-country railroad to California and via the side-wheeled steamship, AJAX, from San Francisco to Portland, Oregon. He hoped to find a homestead in the Willamette Valley, but all the good land had already been claimed. At the regional land office in Oregon City, he met two other men from the Upper Nehalem Valley who were there to perfect their claims. They convinced him that there were some good parcels still available near theirs, and he joined them on their return journey. He acquired a quarter section for $60 from a homesteader who was eager to move on. This homestead was located on what became known as Spencer's Addition and later, O-A Hill. The Vernonia K-12 school, completed in 2012, is sited on part of the Spencer homestead. Because the new school displaced the former Spencer Park and its baseball diamond, the name was transferred to the land formerly occupied by the now-demolished schools.

In 1879, Israel began a courtship by correspondence with Sarah Gillihan, a homesteader's widow, in Chelatchie Prairie, Washington. She had a young daughter, Bertha, by her first marriage, one of many things she had in common with Israel. They were married in Portland in June 1880. Because the road to the Upper Nehalem wasn't yet completed, Sarah stayed in Forest Grove with Bertha until July when that work was done. There were ten other families settled along the Nehalem River and Rock Creek, each homestead separated by tall stands of old growth timber and dense underbrush. There were no stores or other businesses at that time, just a post office, Vernonia, named for the daughter that another widower and homesteader, Ozias Cherrington, had left with eastern relatives.

Six weeks before their first anniversary, Israel and Sarah celebrated the arrival of Omar, their first son, aided by the local midwife, Mrs. Pringle. By then, Israel had built a sixteen by twenty foot cabin of split cedar boards. A fireplace constructed of dried mud and wooden slats provided the cooking space and heat. The chimney caught fire a few times before the wood became charred sufficiently to become fire-resistant. They soon added a lean-to kitchen with dining space to the south side of the cabin. Old newspapers provided the wall covering and added a bit of insulation. Young Omar learned to read from that multi-functioned wallpaper. A woodshed, dairy barn, hog house, chicken coop, well house, and the small but all-important structure known then as the backhouse, constituted the remaining buildings on the property. Later constructions included a much bigger barn and improved or additional farm structures.

With no general store in town and such long distances to travel to "the outside," homesteaders like the Spencers grew, hunted, or fished most of what they ate. Potatoes and other root crops such as rutabagas and turnips did well enough in the valley's cool night temperatures. The garden near the house provided sweet corn, popcorn, beans, peas, squash, onions, beets, radishes, and parsnips. Along with the wild blackberries found abundantly near the river, fruit trees brought in from the Tualatin Valley produced the apples, plums, pears, and cherries to sweeten the diet. Chickens, turkeys, and at least one hog per person greatly enhanced the wild game and fish of the homesteaders' earliest fare. Wheat and oats grown on the property could be ground into flour and oatmeal at the Dietrich's water-powered saw and grist mill five miles away in Pittsburg.

Two or three times per year, the three-day round trip by horse-drawn wagon to "the outside" was needed. The Spencers raised extra turkeys which they'd transport live in a big crate to a Forest Grove merchant who would exchange them for the sugar, salt, coffee, fabrics, and other staples they could not produce themselves. With no refrigeration, poultry went from barnyard to kitchen immediately. Meat stayed on the hoof until slaughtered and then quickly brined or dried for later consumption. Hog butchering, a major production, was usually done in the fall. A boiling cauldron of water and lye helped remove the hair more easily. The cleaned hogs were cut up and salted down in barrels of brine for two weeks. Shoulders, hams and sides of pork then went into the smokehouse for the final curing.

In early 1891, Israel sold the westernmost quarter of his quarter section for $600. With the cash from this sale he was able to acquire sawn lumber from the Detrick Mill in Pittsburg. With the materials purchased, he began construction of a new home for his growing family. He used cedar bolts from his own property to rive shakes for the roof. He built a picket fence around the chicken yard and discreetly placed the new backhouse inside that enclosure. Indoor plumbing was still a future luxury.

From Virgil Powell's Diary

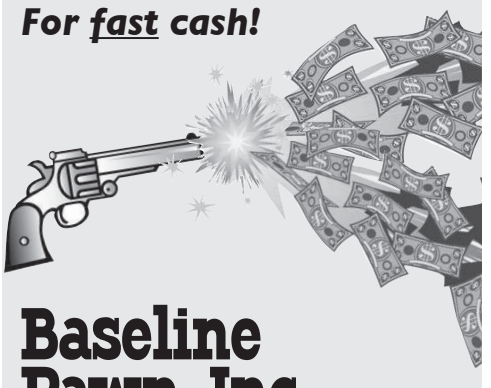
Virgil was an enumerator for the 1910 census but covered the St. Helens area. His diary entries show how much the population of the Auburn Precinct (Vernonia and the surrounding area) had grown since the Spencers' early days.

Monday, April 25, 1910
Finished the enumeration of St. Helens about 9 P.M. Enumerated the hotels in the afternoon and had a lot of fun. Done a terrible big day's work. This is the end of my enumerating Dist. 45. Will go home tomorrow. Very warm all day. The population of St. Helens was 774 and Houlton 348.
Tuesday, April 26, 1910
Started from St. Helens for Nehalem at 8 A.M. Walked over and got here at 2:45 P.M. George also came over on horseback. Pretty warm in the morning but rained a little in the afternoon. Mailed my enumerating report for Dist. 45 in the morning before I left St. Helens.
Thursday, May 5, 1910
Did not do much of anything in the forenoon. Bert Mills came down in the morning and enumerated me. This is his last day's work. It took him 18 days to enumerate the Auburn Precinct. The population of the precinct was about 415 and 93 farms. Cloudy all day.
Saturday, May 7
Sowed the ash field with timothy seed the first thing in the morning. Then went over it with clod masher. Finished at 4 P.M. Awful hot all day. Jack Ray and I went up to the dance at Swords in the evening in the buggy. Started up at 9:15 and got to Vernonia at 11. Lizzie McPherson was there so certainly had a great time. Dance broke up at 4 A.M. and I got home at 5:30.
Sunday, May 8
Got home from Sword dance at 5:30. Done up the things and did not get any sleep. Started up to Woods at 11:30. Walked up got there about 1 P.M. Came down to old school house for a walk. Certainly had a fine time. Something very important to remember about today so guess I won't forget. *(Editor's Note: Don't we wish we knew what it was?)* *Awful hot all day. Got back home at 5 P.M.*

Vernonia Veterinary Clinic
Small and Large Animals

Open
Mon, Wed & Saturday
9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Call for Appointments
(503) 429-1612
Or 24 hr. Emergency Number (503) 397-6470
700 Weed Ave. Vernonia, OR

BEHIND EVERY PROJECT IS A
True Value®
Get Your Garden Ready
Lawn Care Supplies • Insect Control
Trimmer Line • Hoses • Seeds
Potting Soil • Garden Tools
Family owned & operated for over 45 years
834 Bridge St., Vernonia (503) 429-6364

Don't Sell it! Pawn it!
For fast cash!

Baseline Pawn, Inc.
2245 Baseline St., Cornelius
(Across from Fred Meyer)
503-530-8119
State Licensed PB-0388
Open everyday at 10 a.m.