

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

The Life of Virgil Powell

For over five years we've been sharing entries from Virgil Powell's diary, but the specific details of the life of this farmer and Jack-of-all-trades remains elusive apart from public records. He was one of twelve children of Alva and Martha Hinds Powell. His father was born in Maryland in 1832 and his mother in Illinois in 1852. Alva and Martha married in 1868 and settled in Kansas. Their first three children were born there: William (Will), Harvey and Laura.

In 1877 the Powells moved to Oregon and claimed 160 acres just north of Pittsburg. Vilena was born in 1879, and one set of triplets and two sets of twins were among the twelve children. Many of the babies died in infancy and were buried on the farm. Virgil Leslie Powell, the second to the youngest, was born July 22, 1887, and his sister Grace came along three years later. By 1900, the two youngest were the only ones still at home with their parents.

Alva Powell died in 1905, and Virgil took on the running of the farm. In 1906, Virgil started the first of his annual journals that included crops planted, work done, and the weather. He used pocket calendars and other small booklets over the years. Each handwritten entry was made in small script to fit the space available. Fortunately, sometime after 1982 a shoebox full of his journals was given by an unknown man to the Vernonia Pioneer Museum. The resident curator at the time laboriously typed up the journals and filed them in order, in acid-free sheet protectors. The collection is comprised of three three-ring binders. In the early 2000s, a volunteer donated a fireproof safe to store the originals. The museum board plans to scan and digitize the collection to preserve this slice of Vernonia area life.

On December 21, 1913, Virgil married a neighbor, Inez O. Smith, the daughter of Swedish homesteaders, John and Hanna. She had three brothers, Edwin, Garfield, and Ben, and a sister, Gladys. Inez was 18 and Virgil 25 when they married. The Powells first child was a son, DeLoss, who was born July 20, 1915. A second son, Melvin, was born March 29, 1922.

Virgil's mother died in 1925,

and her obituary listed as survivors her daughters, Grace and Myrtle, and her sons, Will, Ora and Virgil. She had 13 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Virgil was a census taker in 1920, and by then they were renting a place close to a logging camp along the Nehalem. He listed his occupation as "farmer" and his wife's as "helper." The neighboring farms included several members of the Parker family, the Clines, Nickersons, Spencers, Smith, Mills, and Malmstens. According to the 1930 census, Virgil's family was living on River Road, Vernonia, and his occupation was fire warden. He worked at the Oregon American Lumber Mill as a fireman and shingle mill operator in the 1940s and 1950s. When his sons were teenagers, he was active in the Masons with the boys in the Masonic youth organization, DeMolay.

Virgil died June 4, 1963, in a Portland nursing home following a long illness. The diaries ended in 1955. He is buried at Lincoln Memorial Park, and his stone includes Inez's name but with no death year so we presume she is buried elsewhere. He was survived by his wife, sons, four grandchildren and his sisters Myrtle and Grace. Inez died March 23, 1983, in a Portland nursing home.

Other than the data available from public records and the occasional Vernonia Eagle article, there is much we don't know about Virgil Powell, but the diaries provide wonderful snippets of the life of a farmer, hunter, fisherman, mill employee, and very active man.

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. As we've commented before, the condition of the roads was quite primitive and impassable for a buggy in the rainy part of the year.

Saturday, June 6, 1908: Harrowed with smoothing harrow all day. Pretty hot most of the day. Got my tennis shoes from Portland.

Sunday, June 7: Went down to Natal to play ball. Started down at 9. Went down in the buggy. This is the first time I

have drove the buggy this year. Practiced till about 2 then went down and played the Mist second team. Natal 19, Mist 27. Got home at 7:30. Terrible hot day.

Tuesday, June 9: harrowed the potatoes in the morning. In the afternoon went up to East Fork and took Daisy and fixed a place for horses to get water. Wrote a letter to Minnie and mailed it. Very warm all day.

Wednesday, June 10: Mr. Armstrong came down and sowed grass seed for me. I went over some of it with the clod masher in the afternoon. Pretty warm all day.

Sunday, June 14: Went down the river in the buggy as far as Banzers. Jim went down with me. Started at 8:30. Came back and played the Vernonia 2nd team in the afternoon. This was the first game in our new suits. The score Natal 34, Vernonia 20. Pretty warm all day. Got home at 6 P.M.

Tuesday, June 16: Sowed and harrowed in some rape and rutabagas down along the river in the morning. Angus Burt was here for dinner. Did not do much of anything in the afternoon. W.B. Dillard was here.

Tuesday, June 23: Went out

to Clatskanie in the buggy. Started out at 4:25 and got to Clatskanie at 8. Started back at 12:15 and got home at 6 P.M. Pretty warm day. Received a dandy postal from Francis.

Wednesday, June 24: Washed the buggy. Went up on East Fork and got Daisy. Took the team down in the afternoon and graded road for Emery Mills. Pretty warm day. Got home at 6:45. Received a postal from Francis.

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.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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