

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

With part of Highway 47 currently closed due to a bridge replacement, we thought it would be interesting to revisit some of our earlier columns on the challenging roads of the early days.

The First Roads

The isolation of Vernonia in its early days appealed to many of its first settlers. The Upper Nehalem Valley, known at first as a "hole in the timber," was accessible only on foot with perhaps a mule or horse packing supplies. Over time resident volunteers widened the footpaths into primitive dirt roads to allow travel by horse and wagon to market centers and transportation links in St. Helens and the western Tualatin Valley.

The first rough trail improved for wagon travel followed a route along Dairy Creek to Mountindale, over Green Mountain past the eponymous spring that provided good water for travelers, back and forth across Pebble Creek to the center of the handful of homesteads that was Vernonia. In 1880, just six years after the first settlers came into the valley, the biggest windstorm in the history of the Upper Nehalem obliterated the Green Mountain Spring Road. The settlers went to work constructing a new road - this time to Buxton.

The first market road to St. Helens - Pittsburg Road - was another early settler effort. Motivation for this road building came from multiple sources: the need to get products to and from markets, access to the scheduled water transportation to Portland and other towns along the Columbia, and a way to avoid the \$2.00 per \$2,000 tax or jail time. In 1860 Oregon passed a law that every able-bodied man between 21 and 50 was expected to put in time building roads equivalent to his assessment or face the aforementioned penalties. The Scappoose-Vernonia market road wasn't completed until the late 1920s.

Although there had been a dirt road between Pittsburg and Vernonia since the 1870s, in 1910 a county road was built to improve it. In early June work commenced on the project. It required the felling of a number of large trees, pulling and blasting out the stumps, hauling gravel, and finally grading the surface with horse-drawn equipment.

This new section of road went

from the intersection of Stoney Point Road past farms owned by Albert and Lizzie Parker and other residents. Automobiles were still relatively few and far between. During the construction, an automobile sank into the still-loose gravel and had to be pulled out by horses, an all too frequent occurrence in the days before hard-surfaced roads.

With a gravel base purchased and hauled from the Peter Bergerson quarry in Buxton, a Buffalo Pitts steamroller was used to compact the surface of the new road. Because steamrollers were often used for tarred gravel (macadam) and asphalt paving, it may have been the first paved road in the Upper Nehalem.

The older military and market roads were eventually incorporated into our present day county and state road system. The State Highway Division was established in 1917 as more and more automobiles required better, inter-connecting roads. Construction methods gradually incorporated more permanent surfaces such as macadam and concrete, but even by 1948 only 16% of Oregon's roads were paved. Roads in and out of Vernonia were among the last to be hard-surfaced. Keasey Road, formerly known as Rock Creek Road, remained gravel until the 1960s.

Bob New, a former resident and 1947 graduate of VHS, recalls that few roads were paved in the 1930s and 1940s. Bridge Street was paved about 1924 thanks to the new mill, but he recalls that the road from Treharne (the Highway 47 and Timber Road junction west of town) to Timber remained gravel for many years after the paving of 47 in the early 1930s. The roads to Scappoose, St. Helens, and Rainier were gravel until the late 1940s or early 1950s.

Bob's reminiscence continues: "Those unpaved roads of the day? Lots of washboard ruts. It was a trick to decide what speed to find to cause the least damage to the car. Some would just say to heck with it and drive as fast as they could over the extensive washboard spots, thereby giving yourself and the car a good shake. And in winter, lots of mud puddles. You could not tell how deep was the rut if it was filled with water. You went a bit carefully and explored the depth of water. Also, spark plugs were not capped and protected as they are in today's cars, and you could

easily short out the car's motor by zipping through big puddles. And in summer cars using those gravel roads would send up huge clouds of dust. A few slowed down when meeting another car. Cars did not have air conditioning then so it was the custom to have windows rolled down in summer. If you met a car on a dusty road you would hastily roll up all the windows to cut down on the dust and then roll them back down when the car and its dust cloud had been passed."

So with our history of challenging travel over dirt and gravel roads, perhaps the temporary closure of our main route out of town can be put into perspective!

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. The roads in his early years were dust in the summer and mud in the winter and were walked or ridden on horseback or with a horse-drawn buggy.

Sunday, August 16, 1908: Was in Clatskanie all day. Started to play the Alder Grove team but Lincoln got hurt and we had to stop. Saw the game in the afternoon between Clatskanie and Mist, score 21 to 10 in favor of Mist. Started home about 5:15 and got home about 8:30. Pretty warm day.

Tuesday, August 18: Carried the mail to Mist. Went down in the buggy. Got there about 9. Got back home at 12:30. Went up to camp meeting in the buggy in the evening. Mart Ray took a crowd up. Started up at 5:30. Very hot day.

Wednesday, August 19: Hunted some cattle for a while in the morning. The waving girls went up. Cut a little grain. Started up to Vernonia about 12:45 and did not come back till after camp meeting. Went up the river where the waving girls were camped in the evening. Went up in the buggy.

Thursday, August 20: Cut some grain but did not work very much. Went up to the school house and was elected school

director in the afternoon. Awful hot day.

Sunday, August 23: Went up and took charge of the Post Office in the morning. Was up at the Office most all day. Pretty warm day.

Monday, August 24: Cut grain after I got through with the mail. Mart Ray and Lloyd Burris is helping me. Rained about noon so went up to Pittsburg and skated a while.


Saturday, August 29: Looked after the Post Office. Rained quite a bit. Started for the dance at Vernonia at 6:15. Sold 15 numbers at 50c. I sold numbers. Had a dandy time. Party upstairs in Hall. Quite a crowd up from Mist. Dance broke up at 1 a.m. Got home about 2:30.

(NOTE: The Grange Hall at one time was in a two story building on Bridge Street. Although this was shortly after the Grange Hall on North Street was built, we have no information about the one on Bridge except that it shows on the Fire Marshal maps of the 1920s.)

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.

Vernonia's Voice is published twice each month on the 1st and 3rd Thursday. Look for our next issue on September 6.

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