

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

An Event with Many Names

We at the Museum received a few comments about the name of the annual picnic held the third Sunday in August each year where those who grew up or worked in Vernonia in the "old days" gather and reminisce. We refer to it as the Old Grads Picnic for simplicity, but the postcards we send out to those living out of town refer to the event by its combined names: Vernonia Society, VHS "Old Grads," and Oregon-American Alumni. The one NOT on the postcard the past few years is "Old Timers Picnic," the name by which several stated that is has "always" been known. In order to clarify, we thought we'd give a little history of this event.

The Vernonia Society was established in 1957, during the year when the lumber mill (Oregon-American for most of its life) closed, as a way for former O-A employees and Vernonia residents past and present to stay in touch. Because many moved away for other jobs, both this picnic and the Vernonia Friendship Jamboree were created to encourage former residents to return each year. The Society was formally organized at a picnic on August 14, 1958, at Portland's Creston Park. Officers were elected with E.S. (Happy) Thompson president, L.H. Dewey (for whom the summer pool is named) vice president, A.C. Knauss secretary/treasurer, and Lester Sheeley membership and publicity chairman. They decided to hold an annual picnic, and in 1959 a second potluck picnic (with coffee and ice cream furnished) was held at Creston Park; about two hundred persons were present. Awards were made to the oldest person attending, earliest settler in Vernonia, the person who lived in Vernonia the longest, the person coming the furthest to the picnic, and the person with the largest family group attending the picnic. Although the attendance was good, not many Vernonians came as there seemed to be some that thought current residents weren't invited.

In 1960, the Vernonia Chamber of Commerce issued an invitation to the Society to hold the picnic in Vernonia, and that proposal was accepted. It returned to Creston Park in 1961, but a vote taken at the picnic determined that it return to Anderson Park permanently.

Lester Sheeley, retaining his membership and publicity duties, put a request in the *Vernonia Eagle* for addresses of former residents so that notices could be sent. Current Vernonians would see the information in the paper. The first Sunday in August was established as the annual date, several years before the Vernonia Friendship Jamboree was moved from July to that first August weekend. Due to other scheduling conflicts at the time, the date changed to the third Sunday beginning in 1964.

By 1968, several Vernonia High School class reunions were included as part of the Vernonia Society Picnic which now also had "Old Grads" in the title. Each year, the invitation was for "all Vernonia residents, members of pioneer families, 'old grads' and teachers". The Eagle's announcement that year added that "new residents in the area who wish to get acquainted with the 'old timers' and learn more about the history of the area are also urged to attend." In other years, the headlines for the paper's annual announcements sometimes called it the "Old Timers Picnic" but referenced the Vernonia Society and Old Grads in the article itself.

Bob Spencer became president of the Society in 1971, and Ruth Steers was Secretary/Treasurer. 1972's picnic had record attendance of 400, a number not known to be surpassed. The 1973 picnic had a special invitation to the Clark and Wilson Camp 8 Caboose and Cookhouse Schools. Eight of the twelve Caboose students attended and six from the Cookhouse School. One of the latter group was Ben Soejima who has attended most of the picnics since then. Now 95 years old, his health prevented him from attending the 2018 picnic, and he was very much missed.

Ruth Steers and her daughter, Mary Steers Cota, ably managed the picnic registration and mailings from the 1970s forward. Bill Sword was president of the Society for most of that time as well. The picnics saw rain in 1986 and 1987 and had to be moved to the old Washington Grade School cafeteria, but the sun returned in 1988 with 217 in attendance. The 1989 event was said to be the biggest in a long time with 260 registering.

Mary Cota managed "the list" until 2011 when she decided that it was time to retire from that duty and decided

the appropriate party should be the Vernonia Pioneer Museum Board. We have hosted the event since then. Although attendance has diminished over the years as the "Old Timers" from the mill days pass away, each year many still return for that chance to reminisce with those classmates and colleagues from "the good old days." Prizes are still awarded to the oldest man and woman graduate and the man and woman who traveled the furthest to attend. No longer a potluck, for the past two decades various civic and student groups have instead sold hot dog meals for those who chose not to bring their own lunches. The coffee is still provided on a donation basis which helps provide the funding for the next year's mailing and other expenses.

The Vernonia Society's formal organization ceased, but the name remains as one of the several used for this annual event. All people interested in the people and stories of old times in Vernonia are welcome, but next year we will make sure to add "Old Timers" back to the invitations!

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. We certainly wish we had some of the pictures he took that he references on September 20!

Tuesday, September 8, 1908: Went up and looked after the mail. Went up with Walter in the afternoon to Vernonia and got up a dance for next Friday night Sept. 11th. Stopped at Parkers coming back and had a dandy talk with the girls. Got home about 6:30.

Thursday, September 10: Went up and looked after the mail. Started up to Souls about 10 after some cruisers. Left S about 4:30 and got down here and had supper. Then hitched up and drove them on down to Mist. Got back home at 1 A.M. Pretty warm day.

Sunday, September 13: Went up to Al. Parkers and took her for a buggy ride. Went a long ways up the river. Stopped in Vernonia quite a while in the

evening. Had a dandy time all day. Got home about 11.

Monday, September 14: Started up the road and met the threshers so went on around by Vernonia and came back home. Commenced threshing about 1:30 and finished at 3. Had 100 bushels of oats. Went on down to Pringles and threshed till 8:30. Then Ray and I went up and saw the slashing burn at P.

Sunday, September 20: Went over to Elliotts in the morning. In the afternoon Jim and I drove up to Vernonia in the buggy. Had quite a time down there at the camp ground. Took several pictures. Got home about 7:30. Pretty warm day.

Monday, September 21: Looked after the mail in the morning. Was down where they were hauling gravel a while. Did not do much of anything. Got my picture postals from Portland. Pretty good day.

Wednesday, September 23: Hitched up and hauled down some old lumber from Pittsburg for wood. Rained quite a bit in the afternoon. Did not do much of anything in the afternoon.

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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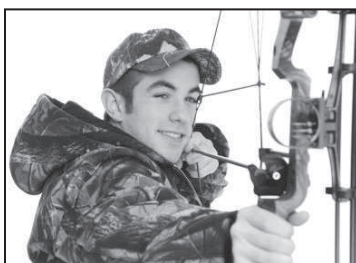
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