

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Community Beautification

In a small community such as Vernonia with limited city staff and funding, community volunteers often fill the gap and take on projects such as downtown cleanup and beautification. In 1925, the Vernonia Study Club was founded by a group of women who wanted to improve themselves and the town they lived in. The club was officially organized for the purpose of "self-improvement and civic betterment."

Self-improvement programs included book reports and studies of topics such as drama, music, government, geography, world travel, and the arts. The "civic betterment" portion of the club's mission began with offering cash prizes to local students for birdhouse building (for the boys) or window box displays (for the girls.) In another project, the PTA and the Study Club asked the City Council to form a city park and cooperated with the council to raise the necessary funds. Other accomplishments of the Study Club during the 1920s included raising funds for the City Library, book drives and sponsoring a Garden Club.

In the late 1920s, the club asked the Vernonia City Council to clean up vacant lots and wash windows in vacant downtown buildings. The council refused, so the ladies went to the Chamber of Commerce, a men's organization in those days, to ask for help that the Chamber gave gladly. The club also raised money for the first Scout Cabin and donated a framed picture and three flowering trees for the new Washington School in 1930. Study Club sponsored clean-up and fix-up days and asked the council in 1940 to establish garbage service in the city. By 1991, the membership had declined and such projects were taken over by other non-profit groups; the club disbanded in 2011 after nearly a century of commitment to improving Vernonia.

Genny Schwab Fisher had grown up in Vernonia, then married and moved away. When she and her husband returned to Vernonia in the early 1990s, she was saddened to see the decline in the condition of the core downtown area. She gathered other concerned citizens and established Vernonia Pride. Other early members included Enid Parrow, Shirlee Daughtry, Carolyn Keasey, and

Joann Beamish, but there were many more. The group tackled a large number of beautification and improvement projects.

One of Vernonia Pride's first projects was to acquire trash receptacles suitable for placement in downtown areas. The city's budget couldn't cover the \$400 cost for each of the ten needed, so Pride spearheaded a joint effort with the city to refurbish ten second-hand trash receptacles acquired for \$10 apiece. Another early project was the placement of decorated Christmas trees in planter barrels on Bridge Street. A committee formed under the auspices of Vernonia Pride established a service memorial dedicated to all who have served the United States in wartime.

The mid-1990s were a very active time for Vernonia Pride. The group raised funds to sponsor the annual Fourth of July Fireworks, place street lights in Bolmeier Park, erect at "Welcome to Vernonia" sign near Vernonia Lake, and sponsor an annual Vernonia cleanup day in mid-April. The event grew into a joint project with SOLV (Stop Oregon Litter and Vandalism) and became officially named "Make Vernonia Shine" in 2000. For several years on that one Saturday in April, community volunteers numbering up to 200 showed up to clean up city parks and downtown areas.

In 1996, Vernonia Pride received a \$5,793 grant from the Oregon Community Foundation to produce a history of the community. Professor Ann Fulton, PhD, of Portland State University, was engaged to write the book. Entitled "Vernonia: A Pocket in the Woods", proceeds from the first two hundred copies were given to Vernonia Pride to further their community improvement projects. The group also raised funds through community garage sales, sale of bricks for the Shay Locomotive setting in Shay Park, and other fundraisers. Obtaining National Landmark status for the Vernonia Pioneer Museum building, the former Oregon-American Lumber headquarters, was a side benefit of the history project.

In the early 2000s, Vernonia Pride wrote the first edition of the "Vernonia Walking Tour" guide and purchased the plaques which still adorn the buildings on the tour. Other projects during that time included the water foun-

tain at Madison and Bridge, the hanging floral baskets on the Rock Creek bridge, benches along Bridge Street, and replacement of the downtown trash receptacles with wood-framed ones, and downtown Christmas decorating. Donna Gerhke Webb and DeDe Webb were among those who joined the leadership ranks of Vernonia Pride as the early founders aged. As stated in a 1996 article in the *Independent*, "Vernonia Pride is not a club or an organization but rather a community spirit— people of all ages working together to make a more livable community for everyone."

The group disbanded a few years ago due to a decline in new members, but quite recently others such as the Vernonia "Green Team" (Rick and Linda Hobart and J.R. Allen) completed targeted clean-up weeding at the post office and Vernonia Schools. Rachael Organ and Cici Bell are among the volunteers of the Vernonia Improvement Projects who are beautifying the library and post office grounds with new plantings. They are planning to reactivate some of the work Vernonia Pride did for so many years in targeted, short projects. We applaud these new efforts to keep our town attractive to residents and visitors.

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. With our ongoing issues about the Highway 47 temporary closure, we found a road trip in his 1916 diary that puts it in perspective.

Wednesday, October 11, 1916: Roy and I worked most of the day at putting logs in river for a foot bridge. Went up to Vernonia 3 P.M. to make arrangements to go to California. Very good day.

Thursday, October 12: Left 8 A.M. by auto for Portland. Got there 2 P.M. On way to California. Very good all day.

Friday, October 13: Left Portland 8:30 A.M. by auto for California. Got to Salem for dinner and over night at Cottage Grove. Very good day.

Saturday, October 14: Left Cottage Grove about 7:30 and

got to Grants Pass 8 P.M. Had all kinds of break downs. Bright and nice all day.

Sunday, October 15: Left Grants Pass 8 A.M. and got to Montague 7 P.M. Very good all day and no trouble.

Monday, October 16: Drove out about 50 miles from Montague, Cal, to look over some land. Got back to Montague 5 P.M. Awful warm most of day.

Tuesday, October 17: Left Montague, California, 8:30 and arrived at Grants Pass about 7 P.M. Bright fine day.

Wednesday, October 18: Left Grants Pass 9 A.M. and got to Cottage Grove 7 P.M. Had a good day of it but several blow outs. Bright fine day. Stopped at Roseburg and saw T.A. Raffety and Mr. Bell.

Thursday, October 19: Left Cottage Grove 6 A.M. Drove to Eugene for breakfast. Came through Corvallis, McMinnville. Got to Portland 3:30. Bright and nice all day.

Friday, October 20: Left Portland 11:30 A.M. and got home 4:15 P.M. Drove just 1000 miles on the trip. Bright and fine all day.

(Note: Per Google Maps, the same trip today, barring bad traffic, breakdowns and taking no stops along the way, would take about six hours each way).

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 1:00 - 4:00 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.vernoniahansonart.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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