

# The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

We've delayed the start of our businesses of Vernonia series to give ourselves a bit more time for research. This winter being a mild one so far, we thought you might enjoy hearing about a few famous bad winters in our area.

The winters of 1949 through 1951 were record setting for their cold and snow. The longest cold spell in local memory began in December 1948. In January 1949, there wasn't a night when the temperatures rose above freezing and several single digit and below zero readings were taken at the former weather station on Corey Hill. In early February 1949, in one week over two feet of snow fell on top of an accumulation that started in the previous December. As is often the case here in western Oregon, heavy warm rains came in mid-February that melted most of the snow in town but also in the Coast Range. The Nehalem River and Rock Creek both rose over nine feet, flooding what is now Hawkins Park and homes in what was known as O-A Flats, the area behind the former schools south of Bridge Street.

The mill pond froze that year so hard and deep that mill operations were suspended for several days until logs could be freed for movement to the mill. Oregon-American took note of these unprecedented winter challenges and prepared log decks during the summer months along the berm of the pond. The investment in a specialized skidder that could manipulate the big logs proved worthy as the next winter was even more severe. The winter of 1949-50 saw the heaviest snowfalls ever recorded in the Pacific Northwest. Logging operations ceased due to snowdrifts of twenty feet and more. The snow accumulated faster than the truck roads and rail lines could be cleared, and equipment was buried in white.

By the first of February 1950, Vernonia had accumulated over eleven feet of snow with one storm dropping over forty inches. Old timers recall the open channels dug on the sidewalks to permit people to move about town with walls of snow towering on each side. The mill pond was frozen to a greater depth, but the log deck plan kept the mill going full strength. Up in the Coast Range, Oregon-American's Camp Olson

was snowed in with a small crew trying to keep the railroad open. The locomotives were so deep in snow that only the stacks were visible. The rail switches were frozen so the crew finally gave up. George Lee, the construction foreman, went to the carpenter's shack and built homemade skis out of plywood and wire, melted candles and swabbed the wax into the skis, and skied off the cook-house roof.

Twenty years later in late December 1968, a huge snowstorm moved in from the east and buried Portland and most of northwestern Oregon in three to four feet of snow. Cold temperatures lingered making for extremely icy roads. The heavy snows took out trees and power lines, leaving many without electricity for several days. All Columbia County roads were closed to truck traffic in February due to snow and ice. Logging crews took bales of hay up into the hills to feed the elk who couldn't get to forage due to the deep snow.

A similar snowstorm on Christmas Eve 2008 left Vernonia without power for days. Holiday travel plans were canceled as many were snow-bound in their homes until roads could be plowed. The Bill James family tradition of serving a Christmas dinner at the former Senior Center on Bridge and Washington went on, however. Over two hundred people enjoyed a meal by lantern light cooked in and on the gas range in the kitchen there.

Big snow events are rare enough in the Pacific Northwest that they make lasting memories for those who experienced them. If you have a favorite snow story to share, the Vernonia Pioneer Museum would love to hear it!

## 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. It was a rainy January in 1909 with a high river and slides on the roads.

*Friday, January 15, 1909: Bill Elliott and I started out hunting about 9:30 and did not strike any tracts till about 12. Killed one about 1 P.M. Had a long chase after*

*him. Was just about tired out when we got in which was 3:30. Rained quite a bit.*

*Saturday, January 16: Hauled hay for Ericksons about all day. Rained about all day. Snow going pretty fast.*

*Monday, January 18: Went up on the mountain as far as the spring to cut a tree out of the road. Rained about all day. Got a lot of mail also clock.*

*Tuesday, January 19: Started up after my mail and found Gustavson had gone over the bluff back of school house so helped him fix things up. The river is the highest today since 1895. Rained about all day.*

*Friday, January 22: Worked on the slide in the road up along the Bluff all day. Pretty bad day. Snowed a little.*

*Sunday, January 24: Did not get up till pretty late, then went up on the mountain and cut a tree out of the road. Got back about 12. Fair day. Will work on the road again tomorrow.*

*Wednesday, January 27: Finished all the slides this side of Parkers. Very fine day.*

*Thursday, January 28: Commenced work on the slide along the big Bluff above*

*Parkers. Pretty good day.*

*Saturday, January 30: Finished the road. Came home and went up to basket social at Nickerson School House. Emil was here and went up with me. Bad day, snowed a little. Got home at 1:30.*

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](http://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 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday. Look for our next issue on February 7.

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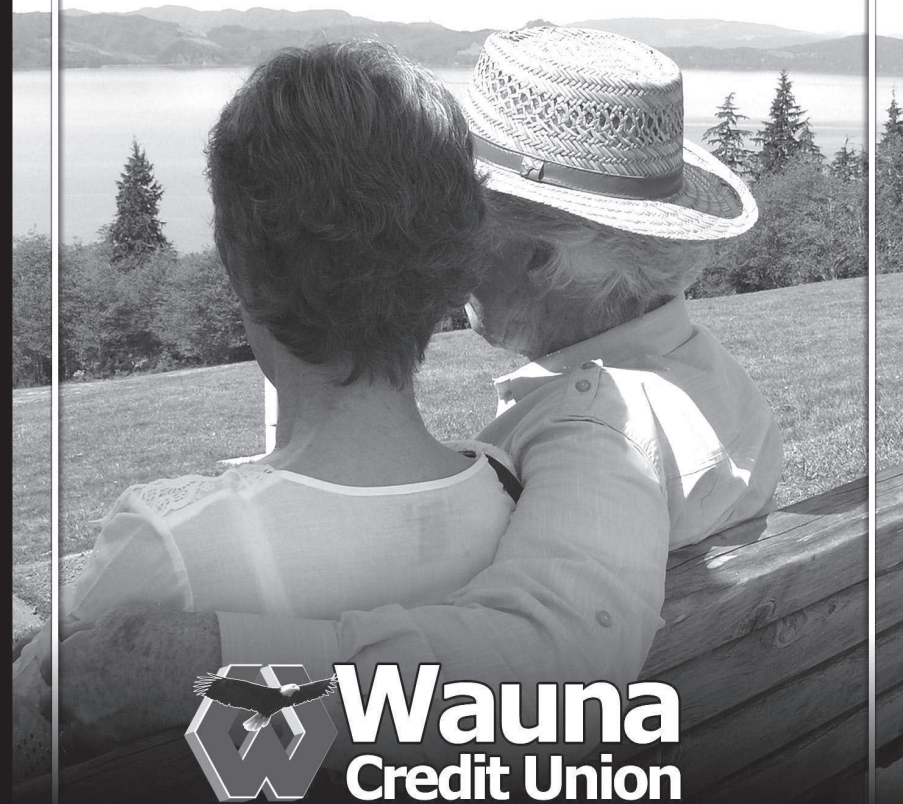
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