

# The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel with Robb Wilson  
Vernonia Businesses, Part One

Grocery stores are an important element of town life, especially when that town is thirty miles or more from the next. In its earliest days, settlers had to plan a three day trip to Astoria from Mist and Birkenfeld or Cornelius from Vernonia to buy the provisions they couldn't grow or make themselves. This was an annual or semi-annual event for most families as transportation was limited to rough wagon roads.

The first known store, McNutt's, appears in the earliest known photograph of Vernonia. Robert McNutt was one of the early settlers. His store, a rough wooden structure, was built in 1887 on the northwest side of Rock Creek amid a scattering of cabins, the first "hotel" and a printing office in a tent. We assume that it was a typical general mercantile of the time selling staples such as flour, beans, a selection of canned goods, coffee, spices, and other non-perishable items since refrigeration and electricity were still decades away.

Across Rock Creek on the south side of Bridge Street, just west of Gary Meyer's Auto Body, was Zillgitt's Store; it was also built in the 1880s. German-born Zillgitt was one of Vernonia's first mayors. Zillgitt's also housed the city hall and a post office. A large open room upstairs was used for community meetings and dances. Zillgitt sold the store in 1899 and, like most of the downtown buildings, there was a succession of owners and businesses located there until the building was demolished in 1939.

A few long-time residents of Vernonia were chatting on Facebook recently about the multiple grocery stores that flourished in Vernonia back from the 1920s through the 1960s. Once the mill opened and the population soared, markets opened in various parts of town. On the east side of the Nehalem, Harry and Emily King established a market in the early 1930s. Their first location was on the river side of what is now Pebble Creek Road, but a 1935 flood caused them to move across the road and built a new store with residence in the rear in 1936. As was true with other stores in those days, home delivery of groceries was part of the service. King's motto "You Ring, We Bring" appeared in their newspaper ads. They delivered locally and also put grocery orders up for the remote logging camps such as Wilkerson. Harry died in 1950, but his son, Earl, and other family members managed the store until 1972. Emily continued to live in the back until her death in 1981. It still stands just to the left of the turn north off the Green Bridge onto Mist Drive.

Just across from the Oregon-American mill was the Mill Market. Its ads stated that "You are as close to the Mill Market as your telephone." Like King's Grocery and other stores of the day, the store carried a full line of meats, produce, canned goods, dairy products, and household products. The

Mill Market also boasted freezer lockers. Before the widespread use of home freezers, people rented locker space to store home-butchered meats and freshly caught fish and game. According to Bob New, VHS Class of 1947, the Mill Market was known as "The Locker" because of that. Patrons would rent or purchase a box in the freezer and put their own padlocks on. The boxes had open slats to let the cold air in, and occasionally some people would break a board and steal the frozen food. There was no insurance or payment if that occurred; Bob said it happened to him once. The Mill Market was acquired by Cliff's Supermarket in 1969; by 1971, the building was rented for other use until it either burned or was torn down.

Mrs. Reeher's store was located at the bottom of O-A Hill on Bridge Street directly across from Washington Grade School. Many long-time Vernonians remember going across the street to buy candy and soft drinks there. We presume it was an even smaller store than the other markets, a neighborhood "corner store" type of operation during the days of penny candy. Licorice sticks, jawbreakers, and such were available in open boxes from which to select one's favorite. Wrapped candy bars sold for a nickel, and a Popsicle or a bottle of Coke was a nickel or a dime.

Down in the heart of town there were many grocery stores over the years. The building west of the current day laundromat and barber shop, all now part of the Black Iron Grill complex, was the site of a flower shop followed by a series of grocery stores: Nehalem Market, Heber's with Mr. Adams butcher shop, Bob Curl's, Culver's, and Child's Grocery. In the next block, the current Blue House Café was built in 1924 to serve Skagg's United Store. It later became a Piggly Wiggly grocery until 1935 when it became a Safeway store; Safeway closed this location in the 1950s, presumably after the Vernonia population dropped precipitously with the closure of the mill.

The Bergerson Building, erected in 1900 and rebuilt from the ground up in 1999 to become the Grey Dawn Gallery, housed a variety of businesses over the years including the Red & White Grocery. When it was still Bergerson's Hardware, a sign boasted that "Good Things to Eat, Cigars, Tobacco and Fishing Tackle" were also available inside. On the corner opposite, the 1924 Peterson Bakery housed a succession of bakeries and later a café. When George Saber owned the bakery, his special was "two loaves for 25 cents." The center of that same building west of the bakery corner was vacant for some years before becoming Fairway Foods. Sam Hearing, Sr., came to Vernonia in 1935 and worked at Safeway. In 1938 he purchased Fairway and renamed it Sam's Food Store. His son, Sam "Buck" Hearing, Jr., also worked for Safeway at other locations but came to work for his father in the new enterprise. When Sam Sr.

sold the store in 1945, Buck stayed on with the new owner and then bought it in 1947. He operated Sam's for 42 more years until he retired and closed the store in 1989.

There were many other neighborhood groceries and a food co-op that came and went over Vernonia's history. One of these stores, Sunnyside Market near Timber Junction, remained in business until Highway 47 no longer passed that way in the early 1990s. Vernonia's only supermarket began in the mid-1960s when the trend toward larger stores began. The former 1930 Crawford Motors building became the home of Dean's Market in 1964 but before 1967 it became Cliff's Supermarket. In later years, it became a Sentry Market, owned by Gordon Smith, Chuck Hendryx, and later Randy Parrow. Randy and Sharon Parrow became the sole owners in the early 2000s; they renamed it R&S Market. R&S and the Chevron gas station and Mini-Mart on Bridge Street remain the town's only sources of groceries.

## 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. February of 1909 was cold and wet, but that never seemed to slow him down – even walking from Pittsburg to Clatskanie in a downpour.

*Saturday, February 6, 1909: Went down to Dave Kayes and got 5 pigs. Will Elliott went down with me. Got home at 1:30 just about froze. Rained all day. Went up to Vernonia and skated. Started up at 6 and got home at 12:30.*

*Sunday, February 7: Did not get up till 9:30. Done chores and then done a washing. Jack Ray came about 12 and stayed till 4. Pretty good day.*

*Tuesday, February 9: A little snow on in the morning so worked around barn measuring grain, also cleaned out hen-house.*

*Thursday, February 11: Did not do much of anything. Went up to Petersons with Bill in the morning. Fine in*

*morning but awful cold in evening. Going up to Portland next Tuesday.*

*Friday, February 12: Packed phonograph and got ready to go to Vernonia to basket social. Started at 1 P.M. Took wagon and took phonograph up and played. Bill E. went up with me. Danced a while then skated till morning. Had a dandy time. Rained all day.*

*Saturday, February 13: Got home from basket social at 8 A.M. Got breakfast and went to bed. Did not get up till 2:30 P. M. Pretty fair day. Played "Rainbow" for Miss Black in the evening.*

*Sunday, February 14: Did not get up till pretty late, done up the work then Bill E. and I went up to Wedrick Hall and skated for about 2 hours. Rained pretty hard all day. Go to Portland tomorrow via Clatskanie.*

*Monday, February 15: Left for Portland via Clatskanie. Bill Elliott and I walked out together. Left here at 7 and got to Clatskanie at 1. Rained most all day.*

*Tuesday, February 16: Got up to Portland about 12:15. Went down to Effie's in afternoon. Rained awful hard all day.*

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](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.

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