

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

End of an Era

On Wednesday, September 11, 1957, at 11:30 am, the last log was cut by the giant saw at the former Oregon-American mill, just little more than thirty-three years after the first. Over the next three months, this log and the rest of the remaining cut timber were transformed into finished lumber in the dry kilns and planing department. The last shipments of finished lumber left Vernonia for International Paper's (IP) Longview operations in April 1958. By May, only three office staff, three watchmen, three caretakers, and three workers in the timberlands remained on the payroll that once had over 700 workers. During its thirty years of operations over two and one half billion board feet of timber were processed into finished lumber; the mill was closed for three years during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

IP, Long-Bell Division, had acquired all of Oregon-American's holdings in 1953, well aware that the supply of logs near the Vernonia mill would run out in a few years. IP was focused on the 20,000 acres of timber-growing land that would be improved and replanted for future harvests. During the last months of mill operations, plans for disposition of company-owned assets including the sixty-six homes on O-A Hill were also underway. By the end of 1957, over a fourth of the homes were vacant but the remainder were being rented by former O-A/Long-Bell employees. In November 1958, IP decided the homes plus a building lot in the business district and other acreages to the City of Vernonia. The homes were sold over the next several years to individual homebuyers.

In its donation of former mill lands to the City of Vernonia, there was

a stipulation that the mill headquarters building be used for "the common good." In 1963, the Columbia County Historical Society, which had no home at that time, approached the City to use it for a museum. Columbia County signed a lease with the City, and it's been a museum since that time. For many years, there were resident caretakers, but in the past two decades the artifact management and holding the museum open to the public has been performed by volunteers. Fortunately, the County pays the utilities and major maintenance which has allowed the museum to be open to the public continuously since then, albeit on a limited hours basis.

Shay Engine 102 was steamed up in June 1958 by former O-A rail engineer Chet Alexander and brought along the tracks to the end of Second Street (now Jefferson Avenue.) This section of tracks eventually became part of the Banks-Vernonia Linear Trail. Heavy equipment and lots of helpers moved the engine to its final resting place at Bridge and First Street (Adams Avenue) where it was ultimately refurbished, fenced, and covered by community volunteers and many donors who bought bricks to pave the perimeter almost fifty years later.

The closing of the lumber operations also meant the silencing of the mill whistle. R. A. Simmons first heard it as a boy in Texarkana, Texas, and later in a mill in Conroe, Texas, where he worked. When the Conroe mill burned, Simmons salvaged the whistle and brought it here in 1923. It became part of the community's life as it signaled the start and end of work days and the noon lunch break. A double-blast sounded at quarter to eight to let employees know they had fifteen minutes to get to work. It also blasted to augment the call for firemen and welcomed in each New Year. It went silent

in late December 1957 when the planing department closed for good. This writer was told that the whistle then went to the mill in Gardiner, Oregon, and would appreciate confirmation or correction of that notion. The final stanza of Vernonian John Brown's poem so poignantly states:

*I don't know where whistles go
When mills have to shut down,
But Vernonia lost its heartbeat
When it lost that familiar sound.*

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. Having purchased his first car in the spring of 1916, many entries now referred to that auto – the trips and the troubles. The Columbia River Highway, the first planned scenic roadway in the United States, was begun in 1913. By 1914, the road was completed as far as Horsetail Falls. Then as now, the road drew sightseers from Portland and elsewhere who could motor on that engineering marvel.

*Saturday, September 9, 1916:
Left 7 A.M. and got to Portland
3:15 P.M. Stopped at Hillsboro
to hear the Thompson murder
case. Rained considerable
all day and the roads were
terrible.*

*Sunday, September 10, 1916:
Was in Portland till 3 P.M.
then went up Columbia River
Highway as far as Multnomah
Falls with Chas. Heinen and*

*others. Got back 8 P.M. Pretty
fair day.*

*Monday, September 11, 1916:
Went up Columbia River
Highway 10 A.M. as far as
Multnomah Falls with Ora &
Eva. Got back 4 P.M. Pretty
warm most all day.*

*Tuesday, September 12, 1916:
Left Portland 9 A.M. and got
home 8 P.M. Broke a spring on
Gales Creek and had several
blow outs. Pretty warm day.*

*Friday, September 15, 1916:
Walked up to Vernonia 8 A.M.
and returned 12. Sold 3 steers
to Orwig for \$92.50. Very warm
all day.*

*(Reprinted from our September 2014
column)*

*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, and if you are a Facebook
user, check out the Vernonia Pioneer
Museum page created by Bill Langmaid.
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.*



The Cascadia MegaQuake is coming. How will you prepare?

Please join this community event at Jewell School to view an hour-long documentary focusing on Oregon's earthquake preparedness, participate in a panel discussion, and get information about how to be ready for the Big One! Local Red Cross volunteers will be in attendance to participate in their Pillowcase Project with younger audience members.

83874 Highway 103, Seaside, OR 97138

SCHEDULE:

Informational Fair	2:00 p.m.
Film/Kids Activities	2:30 p.m.
Q&A Expert Panel	3:30 p.m.
Door Prizes	4:15 p.m.

Q&A PANEL MEMBERS:

Mike Wammack	Elsie-Vinemaple Fire Chief
Don Rose	WEOC Operations Manager
Tiffany Brown	County Emergency Manager
Allison Pyrch	ASCE Engineer

Special thanks to the following sponsors & participants for making this event possible



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