

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Diaries, Part 1

For seven years we have shared excerpt from the diary of Virgil Powell who started his when he was 19, just a year after his father died and he became the "head farmer" of the Powell homestead. His nearly fifty years of diaries are a wonderful look into life in the Upper Nehalem Valley in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Other residents from long ago also kept diaries, and the Vernonia Pioneer Museum is delighted to have a few of them.

One of the earliest is that of Marinda (Minnie) Rollo Nickerson who came to Oregon to marry Everett Nickerson, one of the earlier settlers, in the mid-1880s. They started the first hotel in Vernonia among other accomplishments. Her diary entries from 1891 were typed by former museum curator, John Stofiel. As with the Powell diary, her entries listed the work accomplished in a given day (washing, cleaning, canning, and the like) and added comments on other activities such as afternoons and dinners with friends. The late August entries note the week-long "camp meeting" that year. Camp meetings were annual, outdoor Protestant Christian revival gatherings held in primarily unchurched regions of the American frontier. Traveling preachers led the daily worship and preaching; a communion service was also part of the week's agenda. Minnie's diary indicates that she and Everett attended the meetings and took their turn hosting the ministers and their families for the evening meal. She also mentions taking their dinner (presumably lunch) to the meetings some of the days and sharing it with friends. By the time this diary was written, she only occasionally went to work at the hotel as they had a farm of their own to manage.

Mary Ross Nicolaisen, a descendant of Vernonians Charles and Alice Soules Malmsten, recently sent us digitally scanned pages of some of Charles Malmsten's, his wife Alice's, and his daughter Lois's diaries. The Malmsten clan figured prominently in Vernonia of the 1890s and early 1900s. Olof, a blacksmith, and his wife, Maria Louisa, were Swedish immigrants who met and married in Minnesota where they had a series of farms in Vasa and Welch. They had five sons and two daughters, all born in Minnesota. Most of the family began moving to Vernonia starting in 1889 and acquiring various homesteads abandoned or sold by the original homesteaders. We wrote a three part series of columns on the Malmsten family in 2014.

Charles was born in Vasa, Minnesota, in 1876. He met Alice Soules in Vernonia, and they married in 1903. The museum has their framed wedding certificate. Charles's 1911 diary reveals that he and Alice were living on a small farm in Gaston, Oregon, at the time, but he frequently went to Vernonia to visit his brothers and mother. Father Olof had died the year before, and one February entry shows that the brothers gathered in Olof's blacksmith shop to divide his many tools. His diary notes that this trip from Gaston to Vernonia took from 8 in the morning until 5 pm that day. There

were visits back and forth throughout the year, and his mother came to stay with him for a few weeks.

Like Virgil Powell, he often commented on the weather as well as noting the work accomplished daily. Most of the April and early May entries referred to "grubbing" all day for a Mr. Newell. The term refers to removing trees, shrubs, stumps and the like from land in preparation for cultivating farm crops. Towards the end of April, a large pile of stumps had been accumulated and burned. He noted one day that he had cleared an acre so we assume it was a large parcel to take so many weeks to clear. He also worked on his own farm and planted potatoes, kale, and other crops.

Threshing and baling hay for the Newells comprised several summer weeks, and in the fall he helped with harvesting and drying prunes. He noted that his wife, Alice, packed grapes for the Newells many days in October while he tended their four year old twin daughters, Lois and Louise. He also notes harvesting his potatoes that month. In mid-November, the entire Malmsten clan gathered for a dinner at their mother's home, and the next day he returned home with a cow he purchased from brother Oscar. The cow obviously slowed his pace as he only made it to Banks after an eleven hour trek. He spent the night there and arrived home at 2:30 the next day. With all the hard work throughout the weeks of the year, every Sunday was reserved for church and Sunday school although some Sundays Charles stayed home with the twins so his wife and son, Paul, could attend.

Next month's column will continue our peek into the museum diary collection.

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. In 1910 he was a census taker (enumerator). Last month's column included his entries before he began the process. We include the rest of his April enumeration this month.

Thursday, April 14, 1910: Went up on the morning train from Clatskanie to Houlton (Note: now upper St. Helens). Did not do much of anything in the afternoon. Went out and took in the skating at rink in the evening. Very warm most of day. Will commence taking the census tomorrow.

Friday, April 15. Commenced taking the United States Census in Houlton. Enumerated 85 population. Very hot all day. Was fooling around town in the evening.

Saturday, April 16. Worked on the enumeration of Houlton again and done pretty good. Very hot all day. Took in the shows in the evening. Saw Will and Effie in the evening.

Sunday, April 17. Did not do much of anything in the morning. Took in the ball game in the afternoon between the Moyer Blues of Portland and St. Helens, St. Helens winning. Awful hot all day.

Monday, April 18. Finished the enumeration of Houlton in the evening. Very hot all day.

Tuesday, April 19. Commenced the enumeration of St. Helens and got quite a list. Took in the skating at rink in the evening. Rained quite a little in the morning, but fine in the afternoon.

Thursday, April 21. Worked all day on St. Helens. Was working in the North part of town. Got quite a lot done. Very hot day.

Sunday, April 24. Went out and worked till noon enumerating Greeks. Took in the ball game between St. Helens and a Portland team in the afternoon. St. Helens won the game. Awful hot all day.

Monday, April 25. Finished the enumeration of St. Helens about 9 P.M. Enumerated

the hotels in the afternoon and had a lot of fun. Done a terrible big day's work. This is the end of my enumerating Dist. 45. Will go home tomorrow. Very warm all day. The population of St. Helens was 774 and Houlton 348.

Tuesday, April 26. Started from St. Helens for Nehalem at 8 A.M. Walked over and got here at 2.45 P.M. George also came over horseback. Pretty warm in the morning but rained a little in the afternoon. Mailed my enumerating report for Dist. 45 in the morning before I left St. Helens.

Thursday, May 5, 1910. Did not do much of anything in the forenoon. Bert Mills came down in the morning and enumerated me. This is his last days work. It took him 18 days to enumerate Auburn Precinct (Note: The Vernonia area including Pittsburg was called the Auburn Precinct - now Precincts 41 through 45 - named by Judson Weed for his former home in Auburn, New York, before the town name of Vernonia was chosen in 1876). The population of this precinct was about 415 and 93 farms. Cloudy all day.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is currently closed in compliance with State of Oregon COVID-19 restrictions. The museum located at 511 E. Bridge Street and is normally open all year from 1 to 4 pm on Saturdays and Sundays (excluding national holidays, Easter and Mothers' Day.) 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 and our page on Vernonia Hands on Art website, www.vernoniahandsandsonart.org. 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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