

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Minorities in Vernonia

Our second part of the "Diaries" series is postponed until next month in order to discuss a topic that we've evaded long enough. The "good ol' days" weren't always so good for many of our past residents in terms of the racial and religious prejudices that existed so overtly then. This part of our history, as hard as it is to read with our current sensibilities, is not completely without bright spots along the way.

The first fifty years of Vernonia's history is that of white, Protestant and mostly northern people who moved here between 1874 and 1920. When the big Oregon-American (O-A) Lumber Mill was established in the early 1920s, it transformed the sleepy, backwoods town into a more modern and certainly more diverse one. The owners of the O-A mill, Central Coal and Coke Company (CC&CC), unable to hire enough local labor, brought in Japanese, Filipino, Hindu (as those from the Indian subcontinent were known) and African-American workers and their families from the Midwest and South to do the most physically demanding jobs. The black workers received the roughest treatment by their white bosses.

Paying a base rate equal to their white counterparts, these workers were assigned to the "green chain" in the mill and to railroad building in the woods for logging operations. The company provided housing in several areas near the mill. On the hill above the mill's flatlands, a planned residential community was constructed. Although the intended name was "Millview," it became known as O-A Hill. Consisting of two to three bedroom bungalows for the married white workers and more elaborate homes for the managers, the homes were painted chestnut brown with cream-colored trim and were equipped with electricity from the mill's generating plant, running water and a sewer system.

In the boggy flatlands west of the mill, behind present day Greenman Stadium along Rock Creek, much less elaborate two bedroom homes housed the African-American, Filipino and Hindu workers and their families. Japanese workers resided in what is now Anderson Park or in railroad camps separate from the white loggers. The minority houses all had electricity for lighting, outhouses and community bath houses. The Filipino homes, however, each had a room with a round tub for bathing. Single white men lived in nearby bunkhouses, and there was a bunkhouse for unmarried Filipino men.

Because many of the mill managers and other workers came from the American South, there was an expectation that African-Americans would "behave" as they did in their home states. At one time, an Oregon newspaper declared

Vernonia the most southern city above the Mason-Dixon Line. The Evangelical Church and the Joy Theater let black patrons attend, but they were expected to sit in the balconies of these edifices. Minorities employed as housemaids to the managers were expected to enter by the back door.

Initially, there were only five black children of school age, and the Vernonia schools would not admit them. The school district tried to set up a segregated school in a shack near the worker housing. The families organized a chapter of the NAACP and in 1925 invited Beatrice Morrow Cannady, the first African-American woman to be admitted to the Oregon Bar and Secretary of the Portland chapter of the NAACP, to intercede for the children. A year-long battle ensued, but in 1926 the children were admitted to the public schools. One local resident, who taught in the first Washington School in 1927, recalled that a real attempt was made to insure that the black students received fair treatment.

In response to the growth of the Catholic Church in the burgeoning population in the 1920s, a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) chapter was organized in 1922. At its first meeting in October, the Klan organizer told the large audience that the KKK "defended the Christian religion, the Protestant Bible, the supremacy of the white race, public (not parochial) schools, the purity of American womanhood, the enforcement of laws, Prohibition and the Constitution." The local chapter had over 200 members, and its social activities were included in the Eagle newspaper in a way similar to its stories about other clubs and fraternal lodges. The editor of the Eagle at the time seemed in sympathy to some, but not all, of its beliefs particularly the anti-Papist views. We have found no historical records of any horrific deeds against local Catholics or racial minorities like those of the Klan in the south. National power struggles and scandals caused membership to wane, and by 1925 the Vernonia Klan faded.

Several of the Japanese families had businesses in Vernonia such as a big laundry behind the Cherry Tree Apartments that serviced the town and the logging camps with six trucks. There was also a "Chop Suey" restaurant run by a Japanese woman. When all of the Japanese were rounded up in 1942 during the early years of World War II and sent to internment camps, they had to leave their homes and businesses behind. One of that number was Toshi Kuge who had been VHS Student Body President in 1934. He was in medical school at the time of the relocation and served as a camp doctor. After the war, he completed medical school and went on to have a successful practice. Many of the other minority groups left Vernonia during the war years to work in the better-paying shipyards of North Portland or to join

the armed forces.

Several Japanese men were able to leave the internment camps to join the military in all-Nisei units, and one, Ben Soejima, received a much-belated Congressional Medal of Honor for that service in 2011. Some of the Filipino families stayed on in Vernonia and remained in the timber field. In the early 1950s, Sam Ceballos, Sr. convinced Judd Greenman, O-A Mill President, to install complete electrical service to the homes in the Filipino housing beyond just the overhead lighting. His son, the late Sam, Jr., also worked in the timber industry. In 1969, Dado Briones, son of mill worker Pete Briones, was the VHS Student Body President.

By the early 1950s, a few African-Americans remained employed at the mill. There were at least six of their children who were students at Vernonia High School, and all were involved in school activities including athletics and student government. Sylvester Williams, nicknamed "Ted" for the famous baseball player, was a popular student in the late 1940s and graduated in 1950. He was an outstanding, all-around athlete and played varsity football, basketball and especially baseball. The VHS Student Body President in 1953 was Charles "Bob" Powell, another popular African-American student. He also was in the Letterman's Club for basketball, baseball and football. His sister, Margaret, was an officer in the Loggerettes and the Girls Athletic Association and was the assistant director of her junior class play.

Older VHS graduates with whom we've spoken admit that Vernonia was a "red neck" town throughout a lot of its history, but they recall good relationships with their classmates of all races. Although most of us believe we've advanced in the past 100 years beyond the ugly, overt racism in our past, we know we still have work to do.

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.

*Saturday, June 18, 1910.
Worked on the road all day.*

Cloudy most all day and rained a little. Big rose carnival at Clatskanie today but I could not very well go.

Sunday, June 19. Rained pretty hard till about noon. Hitched up about 12.30 and went up and took Gaynell for a ride. Went up the river as far as the second covered bridge. Certainly had a dandy time. Got home about 7 P.M.

Tuesday, June 21. Went down to Mist at 11.30 to the funeral of P. Linn. Rained just about all day. Got back home at 5.30. Received my check for census enumerating \$44.07.

Wednesday, June 22. Worked on the road. Blew stumps all day and got quite a lot out. Pretty good day for working, not very warm.

Saturday, June 25. Pulled stumps off of the road all day. Mart Ray was up and stayed for dinner. Went up to Vernonia after supper and got my new buggy team. Paid \$125.00. Did not get back home till about 12. Very good day.

Sunday, June 26. Hitched up my little team about 11 A.M. and drove down to Mist to see the ball game between Mist and Vesper. Score 22 to 0 in favor of Mist. Got back home at 6.15. Very warm most of the day.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is 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.vernoniahansonart.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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