

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

At the time this is being written, the "Atmospheric River" is promising to bring heavy rains and the threat of flooding to our valley once again. Predictions of the depth of the Nehalem and Rock Creek flows are tricky, but the following memoir, reprinted from our December 19, 2013 column, mentions the widespread flood of 1894 that left its mark in downtown Portland as well as out in this corner of the state. We also reprint this article in anticipation of receiving permission to share a memoir from the next generation of Birkenfeld settlers which we hope to include in next month's column.

Memoirs of a Birkenfeld Homesteader

Along with the photographic and physical artifacts on display at the Vernonia Pioneer Museum are fascinating documents written by the early settlers in the Nehalem Valley. One such memoir was written in 1938 by a Mist-Birkenfeld area pioneer, Anna Katherine Jepsen Berg, about her life as a homesteader's wife. Homesteaders were the earliest non-native settlers in this inland part of Columbia County. In exchange for a government land grant, the settler had five years to "prove up" his claim by building a dwelling and clearing the land for farming.

One of these men, Eric Jepsen, had taken a homestead claim in 1877 on Fishhawk Creek. In 1884 he decided to travel back to his birthplace on the Jutland Peninsula (now divided into Denmark and a part of Germany) to see his parents and siblings. He financed the trip by selling his cattle and rented his place to N.L. Berg for three years. While at home he met and married Anna. Two weeks after their June 1885 wedding, they left for America. They crossed the northern United States, presumably by train, and arrived in Portland.

After enjoying a few days there, Eric and Anna took a steamboat to Westport. Steamboats were the primary means of travel up and down the Columbia at that time. At Westport they hired a man with a canoe to paddle them to Woods Landing (now Woodson). Anna wrote "My thoughts on that ride were: Have we crossed the Atlantic just to drown in this mud puddle? The water reached up to the edge of that small skiff loaded with our three large trunks, besides ourselves." Anna spent the night in Woodson while her husband walked over the mountain to get a team and wagon along with two riding horses to take them to the Fishhawk settlement.

The Bergs had built a new home on their own homestead a couple of miles from the Jepsen land. Eric and Anna bought some cows, two horses, a mowing machine, a wagon, and the other things necessary to establish a proper farm. They pulled the stumps left by Eric's earlier clearing efforts, cut down more trees and brush, burned the slash, weeded out the grass, and planted potatoes, wheat, oats, strawberries, vegetables, and eighty fruit trees. At first, Anna only spoke Danish and a little German, but she spent the evenings reading

and having her husband and their hired man read to her until she learned English. She also found reading the weekly Oregonian newspaper a big help in her language studies.

They earned cash from selling the butter Anna churned from the rich cream their cows provided. The butter was formed into two-pound rolls that were sold to Conyers' store in Clatskanie. When they had more cows, they put the butter in sixty-pound kegs that Eric took on horseback to McFarlane's Logging Camp near Woodson. Eric left early in the morning and walked the ten miles alongside the butter-laden horse. He walked back home the same day with the horse bearing the empty kegs. Anna wrote that "We were all young and strong, worked hard, lived the simple life and were happy."

During this period, oxen were still used to haul logs from the logging camps to the Columbia where they were tied into rafts for hauling to mills up and down the river. Eric and Anna were paid to winter eight to ten of these oxen. Anna recalled, "They brought them over the mountain from their camps, and took them back in the spring. When they came, they were poor, stiff and full of rheumatism, and it was up to my husband to straighten them out before spring. Am very glad there are no oxen anymore; they were a pitiful sight. My husband told me about how they had to pull the logs from the hills to the landing on hot summer days, the driver hollering, lashing them, and on their climb back on the hills, their tongues hanging out from sheer exhaustion."

What couldn't be grown or caught by the homesteaders had to be purchased from grocers in towns like Clatskanie and Astoria. Each year, the Jepsens bought a supply of groceries that included five or six sacks of sugar, several kegs of syrup, green coffee beans, four barrels of flour, beans, and salt. They made their own yeast from grated potatoes, baked their own bread, roasted and ground the coffee beans, picked and canned fruit and berries, raised vegetables, beef, pork, chickens, and fish so they and their children could grow up strong and healthy. For eight dollars a month, they boarded the teacher who held school for four months each year. Anna stated that she enjoyed having her for company for herself and the children.

In 1893, Eric was killed by a falling snag while clearing land. "Never will I forget that first night when I took the three children (then six, four and two) to bed with me, and all night I heard my husband's watch ticking away in his overalls," Anna wrote. There was no cemetery in the vicinity then, so they buried Eric in their orchard where "I went every day to cry my heart out." Anna wrote her father about Eric's death, and her neighbors helped her out to the extent they could.

A few months later, her twenty-two-year-old brother came from their family home in Germany to provide the ongoing help she needed to manage the farm. He had just finished his compulsory three-year military service, and she

was grateful for his company and assistance. Seven months later, the historic flood of 1894 that inundated downtown Portland was echoed in the Nehalem Valley. Anna's barn was flooded and all the hay had to be moved after the water receded. She lost their bridge over Fishhawk Creek, but, she reflected, "whatever happens, we just have to make the best of it, but it was hard sledding."

Three years later Anna married Antoni Berg "which I have never regretted." Her brother married their neighbor's daughter and took up a claim further down the valley. Anna had three more children, and she went on to have a good life despite the challenges presented to those who live off the land.

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. January 1911 was snowy and cold with heavy rains off and on, but apparently the illegal hunting was excellent.

Thursday, Jan. 12, 1911. The crowd all stayed in all day because we were afraid of the Game Warden. Just fooled around the house all day. There was not very much snow fell during the day. Very bright and nice most of the day.

Friday, Jan. 13. We all started out hunting about 9 A.M. We went up by the Detrick cabin. Ed. Webster and Perry Mellinger took to the right and Tom McDonald, Harold Throop and I took to the left and on over to the Archibald Burn. We killed 3 in the burn about 12.15. Killed 2 of them in their beds. Got back home good and tired at 4.30. Very good day. Ed. Webster and Perry Mellinger got lost and did not get in. We stayed up till about 11 waiting for them.

Saturday, Jan. 14. Did not do much of anything in the forenoon. A crowd of us consisting of Elmar Lavender, Jack and Mart Ray, Tom McDaniels and I left at 12 to hunt for Ed. Webster and Perry Mellinger. Had a big chase after them all East of here. Tracked them to the Wolfe burn and was getting late so we did not go any further and came out to St. Helens road at Henderson cabin. Got home at 5.15 and heard that the boys had come out

at Carico. A big bunch here for supper. Niagara and Ethel got supper. Very good day for traveling.

Sunday, Jan. 15. Got up at 4 A.M. and got Daisy and Tom started out over the mountain after the other boys at 6.30 A.M. They went out in a sled. Elmar and I went down the road about 10 A.M. about 2 miles to look where some deer came in the river but we could not find any so came back home. Did not do anything but sit around the house all afternoon. Very cold all day and snowed a little in the afternoon.

Monday, Jan. 16. Worked around the house all day. The wind blew pretty hard all day. Ed. Webster and the balance of the bunch got in from Carico at about 5 P.M. Had a big oyster supper. Also had another big oyster supper about 11. Did not get to bed till about 12.

Tuesday, Jan. 17. Tom McDaniels and I went up in the woods and carried those 2 deer out the first thing in the morning. The bunch went on up to Vernonia about 11 A.M. Bert Wood and Elmer were here about all day. Rained pretty hard all day.

Wednesday, Jan. 18. Stayed in and cleaned house just about all day. Received my new white Leghorn chickens. Rained terrible hard all 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. Due to the current state pandemic restrictions, the museum is closed until further notice. We will change our telephone message (503-429-3713) when we reopen, and will keep our Facebook page (Vernonia Pioneer Museum) and webpage on www.vernoniahansonart.org current with our status.

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