

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

While it's hard in current times to appreciate what railroads meant to the development of the West, we've mentioned several times about the importance of the railroad to this remote location. From the false hope of a railroad going through Vernonia to the coast from Portland, it took the timberland acquisition and construction of the Oregon-American Lumber Mill to finally make it a reality the summer of 1922.

In the early spring of 1922, getting to Vernonia was quite a different story. An article in a 1960s rail publication told of Weaver Clark, the man who in later years saved Engines 104 and 105 from the scrap heap, and his first journey to Vernonia. At the time he was operating a small sawmill in Albany, Oregon, but prices were low. He sought "greener pastures." His brother-in-law and he "put bows on the wagon one rainy day in February and hitched up Dick and Coaly, two handsome geldings, and set off for Vernonia, a four days' drive."

It was so cold that the men carried lighted lanterns under a blanket to keep from freezing. Rain froze on the lines so solidly that they could push the lines ahead to urge the horses onward. Their route went through the town of Jefferson and cross country on the west side of the Willamette Valley via Yamhill where they stopped for the night with a hospitable family. Their hands were so cold they could hardly unhitch the team.

After an early breakfast they drove all day and stayed the night north of Gales Creek near Glenwood. The route followed Gales Creek to Timber and at last down into the Nehalem Valley. Much of the road was barely passable in winter. The road that today is Highway 47 was not built for another four years. "Our first view of Vernonia was from the old plank road along about four o'clock in the afternoon, and a welcome sight it was... We put the horses in an old red barn near the Grange Hall, a building built many years earlier. Then began a new life for Weaver Clark."

Clark's first job was for the man who was supplying timbers for some of the trestles being built for the Portland,

Astoria & Pacific (PA&P) Railway. A construction company was grading the rail line by mule teams and scrapers along with men working grabbing hoes and axes. Clark hauled the sawed timbers that measured 8x16x32 from 4 am until 9 pm and earned \$14 per day. Clark felt like he was getting rich with that good pay.

The steel rails for the PA&P were laid the summer of 1922, and the first train of mixed freight and passenger cars rolled across them on August 3. The PA&P/United/Seattle, Portland & Spokane (SP&S) rail line from the Columbia/Clatsop County line through Vernonia to Wilkesboro (near Banks) and to the Willamette River at Burlington was part of the rail boom that peaked in the mid-1920s. The Pacific Northwest's timber belt boasted 460 railroads and 1,230 locomotives that traversed 6,700 miles of privately owned trackage. By the 1940s, log trucks began to replace the railroads, and the rail line to Vernonia ceased commercial operations shortly after the closure of the Oregon-American Mill in 1958.

In the 1960s an excursion train – the Vernonia, South Park & Sunset line – ran twice on Sundays from Banks to Vernonia and back, a 42 mile round trip with a one hour stop in Vernonia for passengers to have lunch or an early supper and see the town. The big Baldwin locomotive #105 that had hauled logs daily to the O-A Mill was named "Old Chet" in honor of Chet Alexander who had been its engineer for nearly four decades. A round trip ticket cost \$3.50 with half fare for children. The cost of maintaining the locomotive and the line ended the VSP&S line, and eventually the tracks were taken up and the Banks to Vernonia Linear Trail was established over the former line.

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. His spring and summer entries mention working on the road, but we are unsure if this was paid work, a community project, or done just to keep the rough roads passable.

Saturday, June 10, 1911: Worked on the road all day up above. Awful hot all day. The first automobile of the season passed at 5 A.M. Willie and I went up to Vernonia horseback after supper. Started up at 7 and got back at 11.30.

Sunday, June 11: Did not get up very early. A bunch of us got in the boat about 10.30 and went up to Pittsburg and fooled around a long time. Got back about 4.30. Washed the buggy off in the evening. Very warm day.

Monday, June 12: Mr. Durbeary came down in the morning so I did not get to work on the road till after dinner. Pretty warm day. Willie took the dog over across the river after supper and I went down to Crooked Creek. Willie ran one (deer) in the river here by the house and killed it.

Wednesday, June 14: Worked on the road till noon. In the afternoon we went up Rock Creek after the scrapers and back by Vernonia. Got back home about 6 P.M. Cloudy and pretty cool all day.

Saturday, June 17: Got up at 3.30 A.M. Started for Clatskanie at 5 A.M. Got out there at 9 A.M. Had a pretty good time during the day and an extra fine one at night. Very good day. The rose show did not amount to much.

Sunday, June 18: Was in Clatskanie almost all day. Got the automobile about 1.30 and brought the girls over to Nehalem for a ride. Had a dandy trip. Got back to Clatskanie about 6.30. Started

back over in the rig about 7 P.M. Got over this side of Mist and broke the coupling of the tongue and had a runaway. Walked on home and got here at 12. Will and Effie came over in an automobile. Very fine day.

Tuesday, June 20: Worked on the road all day. Will and Effie started back to Portland at 1 P.M. Pretty warm day.

Thursday, June 22: Did not work on the road today. Harrowed the potatoes in the forenoon and hauled some wood in the afternoon. Cloudy and looks very much like rain. Took Pringle's hack and took a load up to Vernonia to the show in the evening. Started up at 7 and got back at 1 A.M.

Friday, June 23. Worked on the road all day. Pretty cool day. Took a load up to the show at Vernonia in the evening. Started up at 7.30 and got home at 4 A.M. Certainly had a dandy time.

Saturday, June 24: Did not get home from the Vernonia doings till 4 A.M. Went to bed and slept till 7 A.M. Worked on the road till noon. Went to bed about 2 P.M. and slept till about 6. Very good day.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum has resumed its normal schedule. The museum located at 511 E. Bridge Street and is open all year from 1 to 4 pm on Saturdays and Sundays excluding holidays, Easter and Mothers' Day. We will change our telephone message (503-429-3713) should that change, and we will keep our Facebook page (Vernonia Pioneer Museum) and webpage on www.vernoniahansonart.org current with our schedule.

Miller Named Administrator of the Year *continued from front page*

Miller was recognized for his work improving the finances of the District, expanding campus facilities, improving student achievement, implementing Trauma Informed Care strategies, collaborating with other adminis-

trators across Columbia County and the state, and successfully navigating the COVID pandemic.

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