

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel

Rocks, Minerals and Fossils of the Upper Nehalem

Although timber proved to be the most lucrative and enduring of the natural resources in this area, there were early mining activities that occurred in the late 1800s. Judson Weed, who came to Vernonia in the first wave of homesteaders in the mid-1870s, filed the first gold mining claim in the area. In our July 2015 article, we quoted the following information from a website titled *OregonGold.net*:

On May 25th, 1885, Judson Weed filed the first claim for a placer mine on Rock Creek called the "Gertrude" in eastern Clatsop County. Subsequent claims were located not only along Rock Creek in Clatsop County, but even extended all the way to its mouth at the Nehalem River, near the town of Vernonia in Columbia County. Weed Creek, a small tributary of the North Fork of Rock Creek, is named for Judson Weed and was probably the location of his claim.

By July of 1889, so much gold mining was going on in this area that the Rock Creek Mining District was formed. Bill H. Braden was elected not only the Secretary but also the President of the district. Some of the claims filed in the district during the early years included the "Protector", "Defender", "Elkhorn", "Bonanza", "Mountain", "Last Chance" and the "Rolling".

By 1894, the whole thing suddenly petered out. Nothing more was heard about the area and in fact, the reality that gold was ever discovered in that area was removed entirely from the old history books. Incidentally, most of Rock Creek is now located on private timber lands, while the majority is under management of the State of Oregon as the Tillamook State Forest and is therefore, not open to filing claims.

Gold can still be found in Rock Creek and the Nehalem, and a recent panning expedition during the late summer low water in the Nehalem produced some color from the flour gold in the fine river sand. Without the now-illegal use of a mercury-based process to separate the gold, however, it is not a viable source of income.

In an article in the 1891 Nehalem Journal, the writer describes a 7,000 acre area east of Pebble Creek that encompassed six coal seams that lay under the big timber growing there. There had already been some coal mining before then, but with the overly optimistic speculation about a railroad soon coming to the area, the newspaper touted the coal and timber riches that could be extracted and sent by rail to nearby Portland.

Although the coal was said to be of the finest quality by the newspaper, it apparently wasn't of sufficient quality or quantity to warrant extraction on a larger scale. Coal Creek, named for the local resource, flows into Pebble Creek near where McDonald Road joins Pebble Creek Road, and the Coal Creek Mainline logging road crosses the area. The museum has a DVD containing photos of the exterior of the coal mine which no longer stands, and the access road is on private timberland and gated.

In August 1957, Smithwick Concrete Products moved its shale processing plant to their Haydite quarry nine miles south of Vernonia. Haydite was a trade name for a lightweight aggregate used in concrete in place of sand and gravel to reduce the weight of structures and to increase insulation. Vernonia city leaders and the Chamber of Commerce held ceremonies at the plant followed by a dinner at the American Legion Hall to commemorate what everyone hoped would be the first of many industrial employers to replace jobs lost by the impending closure of the Oregon-American Lumber Mill. Oregon's governor, Portland's mayor, and other dignitaries in commerce and government also attended. We have been unable to

find information on when the plant closed, so if any of our readers know, please contact the Vernonia Pioneer Museum at (503) 429-3713 and leave a message. We'd like to update our scanty records on this plant. There was a similar plant near the Sunset Tunnel, originally owned by Northwest Aggregate Company and later purchased by Empire Building Materials.

The shale quarried at Haydite and Empire Lite-Rock was comprised of Keasey Shale, part of the Keasey Formation that lies beneath much of the Upper Nehalem Valley. The Keasey Formation is a well-known 700-meter deep fossil bed exposed in many cliffs and road cuts in the Nehalem Basin. It is especially noticeable at Pittsburg Bluff and in places on Keasey Road. Fossils found here date back 33-37 million years ago when this land was ocean floor, later uplifted by tectonic movement. See Scott Laird's November 19, 2020, article on the whale vertebrae found on the Keasey homestead many years ago and more recently identified as an extinct whale species, *basilosaurid archaeocete*. The museum has a fossilized whale vertebra of unknown source in its fossil collection along with many other fossils of ancient sea creatures found here.

Just recently my husband accompanied one of the geologists who studied the Keasey homestead, PSU Department of Geology's Dave Taylor, in his search for microfossils, microscopic animals or "foraminifera" that are found in the bedrock on our stretch of Rock Creek. He is researching whether these can determine when the ancient Columbia River flowed into a bay of the former ocean here and deposited the silicate-rich sand. He was successful in collecting samples, and we look forward to additional field visits.

The fossils tell the ancient history of our valley, and the local minerals once produced some income for the area, but timber remains our most valuable and renewable natural resource.

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.

Tuesday, Oct. 10, 1911. Worked around the barn just about all day. Was down to Pringles for a little while in the afternoon. Some of us fellows went out after salmon in the evening. Very good all day.

Friday, Oct. 13. Was too wet to haul gravel. Went down below in the morning to try and catch some hunters from Hillsboro. Was fooling around in the afternoon. Rained terrible hard all day.

Monday, Oct. 16. Went down and helped the boys haul gravel all day. Very bright fine day. Jim Ray commenced sawing wood for me.

Wednesday, Oct. 18. Went up to Wm.

Placke and got the wagon. Started up about 9 and got back about 4. Very fine and bright all day.

Friday, Oct. 20. Hauled manure all day. Awful cold in the morning but bright and fine all day. Received a letter from the Fish Commissioner about the Pittsburg dam. (Note: this was the former dam on the East Fork of the Nehalem that provided water power for the Detrick lumber and grist mills and other 1880s enterprises.)

Tuesday, Oct. 24. Mart came up in the forenoon and we made a little cider. Dug potatoes in the afternoon and got about 6 rows dug. Rained quite a little in the morning but fair in the afternoon.

Wednesday, Oct. 25. Dug potatoes most all day and finished about 4 P.M. Rita came up to the Armstrong place and we were talking for a while. Rained quite a bit in the morning but fine and dandy all afternoon.

Thursday, Oct. 26. Hauled the potatoes the first thing in the morning. Then went over to the Elliott place and got some boxes. Hauled the rails away from the potato patch in the afternoon. Very bright and fine all day.

Friday, Oct. 27. Hitched up about 10 A.M. and drove up to the Steel Bridge this side of Kist. Saw Inez at school house. Got up to bridge about 1.30 and back home about 5 P.M. Very cold in the morning but bright and fine all day.

Saturday, Oct. 28. Did not do much but fool around all day. Hitched up and started for the big masquerade at Vernonia at 5. Got up there about 7.30. Had a dandy time with I.O.S. Dance broke up at 5 and I got home at 7.

Sunday, Oct. 29. Got home from the Vernonia dance at 7 A.M. Went to bed and slept till 10 A.M. Rita stopped here as we came down. Did not do anything but bum around all day. Very fine and bright all day.

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is located at 511 E. Bridge Street and is open from 1 to 4 pm on Saturdays and Sundays (excluding holidays) all year. 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. We now have a page on the Vernonia Hands on Art website, www.vernoniahansonart.org. If you are a Facebook user, check out the Vernonia Pioneer Museum page. 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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