

The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel and Bob New

Cecil Johnson and Miller's Mercantile

In prior columns we have written of the businesses of downtown Vernonia and their owners or managers. Bob New, VHS Class of 1949, recently shared a memory of his father-in-law, Cecil Johnson, whom he greatly liked and admired, and of the Miller Mercantile 16-store chain for which he worked 31 years. We share some of those memories below, but first a bit about the Vernonia store's history.

On the northeast corner of Bridge and Madison once stood the Majestic Theater, built in 1924, that housed a magnificent theater organ. A fire destroyed it completely in 1927. The building code was soon revised to require new buildings be made of brick; the theater was not the only structure destroyed by fires from wood stoves and other causes. In 1930 a J.C. Penney store opened in a new brick building on that site. The Penney name is still present in the mosaic tiles at the entrance, but the chain closed the Vernonia location in 1934 during the depths of the Great Depression. We presume that Miller Mercantile was doing business locally before the mid-1930s as they advertised in the *Vernonia Eagle* in the 1920s; however, the ads at that time gave no addresses. The Vernonia store took over the site and remained there until 1963. Several other businesses have come and gone since then, but it was recently – and beautifully – refurbished inside by the new owners, Joe and Nina Shaffer, for their Penny Lane Antiques store.

Les Dewey, who led the 1936 drive to create the summer swimming hole on Rock Creek known as Dewey Pool in his honor, was the general manager of Miller's from the mid-1930s until 1941 when Cecil Johnson took the helm. Cecil had worked at other Miller stores in Hillsboro and Portland's Hollywood District. He, his wife Melba, and their daughter Dolores, moved to 294 B Street. Several years later the daughter was to become Mrs. Robert (Bob) New.

The department store stocked men's and women's clothing, shoes, hats, housewares, linens, fabric and patterns. Many Vernonians recall the large, ornate cash register in the center of the store that operated with a crank handle, but a stronger collective memory is of the cash handling process. The customer brought their selected items to the sales counter; a clerk took the money, placed it and the hand-written sales slip in a metal container the size of a water glass. The clerk screwed container into a fitting attached to a wire that stretched from the sales counter to the manager's office on the mezzanine. He or she pulled a lever that released a spring, and the money and sales slip shot up the wire to the office. The manager took the money, made the change, wrote out

a receipt and sent it all back down in that receptacle via the wire, and the customer received the change and receipt.

Bob recalls that there was a big (for Vernonia) safe between the sales counter and the stairway to the mezzanine. Cecil Johnson, the store manager, didn't even know the combination of the safe as it was never locked. It was simply used to put record books inside in case of a fire. One night some safecrackers broke in and blew that safe. All they would have had to do was turn the handle to open it to find nothing inside by ledgers.

In another part of the mezzanine were racks of women's dresses and fitting rooms. A section of that floor was also rented out for a women's beauty salon that was run independently, Essie Nance being the most remembered hairdresser. The drinking fountain on the corner in front of the store was sort of a gathering place for people to meet and stop and talk.

The store had steam heat. In winter, Cecil would get up early, walk to the store, build a fire in the woodburning heater, walk back home, have his breakfast, dress in his better clothes, walk back to the store and open it for the day. At lunch time he walked back home for lunch, back to the store for the afternoon and closed the store at 6 pm. After that he swept the floors, counted the money, did the books, and walked back home.

Cecil decorated the show windows in the front with clothing, shoes, and other goods. The store was open six days a week from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm. It was not at all unusual for a logger to come to his house after hours or on a Sunday and ask Cecil to open the store for him so he could purchase a pair of "cork" boots, clothing, or gloves. He graciously accommodated those requests. In summer, on a Sunday (his one day off from work), Cecil would watch the weather. If it were a bright day he would walk back to the store and put down the awning so the sun would not fade the merchandise in the show windows.

According to Bob, Cecil was a real "company man." If someone even hinted at anything disparaging against his employer, he would come back with "I had to go to hospital for an appendix operation, and Miller's did not dock my pay for the time I was in hospital." He worked for Miller's for 31 years and closed the store for them when they shut it down. During the years that Vernonia did not have a bank and Cecil did not have a car, he would take the bus from Vernonia to Hillsboro once a week to deposit the store's money. In 1948 he bought a new Chevrolet at Vernonia Auto and could drive to Hillsboro to do his banking. He could have made more money by working for Oregon-American

Lumber Mill, but he was loyal to Miller's despite low wages, no pension plan, and no severance pay when they eliminated that store from their chain. The last two weeks he was there, as they closed the store and had sales, he received no pay at all.

We thank Bob for his glimpse into the life of a store and the man who managed it for so many years.

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. Again we have some tantalizing tidbits about the "kid" – his future wife, Inez Smith – and an apparent lovers' quarrel along with a shopping trip to Portland.

Monday, April 15, 1912. Garfield and I left Smiths about 7 A.M. for Portland. Got to Timber 10.30 and Portland 2.45 P.M. Saw several Nehalem people in the evening. Went to the Baker in the evening. Pretty cold in the morning but good during the day.

Tuesday, April 16. In Portland. Purchased the big ring for my own in the morning. Also got a suit of clothes. We were just fooling around most of the afternoon. Went to the Lyric in the afternoon and it was just dandy. Fair in the forenoon but rained a little in the afternoon.

Wednesday, April 17. We left Portland for Nehalem via Timber at 8.45 A.M. Presented somebody's ring to them about 10.15 P.M. Rained a little all day. Stayed up above overnight.

Thursday, April 18. Stayed up above till about 2 P.M. Had a dandy time all day. Got home at 5.30 P.M. Rained and stormed pretty bad all day.

Sunday, April 21. Got up to Smiths 2.15 P.M. All us kids went fishing down by the covered bridge in the afternoon. Had a big fight over the

letter we tore up. Bright and dandy in forenoon but cloudy most all afternoon. Left up there 12.35 and got home 2.20.

Wednesday, April 24. Plowed all day on big piece in center of field and certainly turned over a lot of it. Showery all day. Certainly remember a month ago today.

Friday, April 26. Plowed till about 1.30 P.M. and finished. Another dandy colt arrived today so the kid will have a job looking up a name for it. Hauled up some wood in afternoon. Also went up to Pittsburg and got Kit and colt and took them over to Elliott place. Cloudy all day but did not rain any.

Monday, April 29. Did not get up extra early. Did not do much any of the day because it rained terrible hard all day. Was up to Pittsburg to look after the colts. Wrote some items for Clatskanie Chief in the afternoon.

Tuesday, April 30. Went up to Pittsburg and fixed a little fence then on over to the Elliott place. Built a raft while over there and came across. Rode Trixie up to Vernonia after the mail in afternoon. Got home about 6.15. Mailed a letter and card to Inez. Did not rain very much any of the 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.vernoniahands-onart.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.

Buckshot Betty's continued from front page

some restroom updates are likely in the future. And of course there's the new handle on the front door. The menu will be an ongoing work in progress. Occasionally bringing in some live music or some other activities like Karaoke, trivia nights, or an occasional DJ are other possibilities. And look for some food and drink specials that incorporate the catchy name. The big news is the return of the popular Sunday Breakfast, which Melissa says she hopes to start sometime in June. When asked if they will host the Beer Garden at Jamboree this year, Melissa responded with an enthusiastic

"You better believe it!"

"We want to keep the same general feel of the place," says Melissa. "I'm not looking to change it. We want it to stay the awesome, local watering hole that it already is. We've really been listening to community feedback on the types of things people are looking for. We're just going to try things and go with the flow."

"I want this to be a place people can kind of call home, whether they're up or down, it doesn't matter, just a place with a sense of community," says Melissa.

This Old Building continued from page 8

Vernonia Grange held an apple pressing event (they have their own 100 year old cider press!) where people brought apples and made cider. Now there's a tradition we can all be excited about!


Like many organizations these days, the Vernonia Grange is always looking for new members. The building is also available for rent – for exercise classes, educational events, family gatherings and parties, plays or music concerts, community activities, meetings, and more – which helps pay for the heat and insurance and keeps the building functioning. The rates are very reasonable – just \$15/hour, \$75 for

a half day, or \$150 for a full day. There is a full, spacious kitchen, tables and chairs, the stage has some lighting, and the main room has really good acoustics.

"This old place just has a nostalgic feel," says Peyton. "The Grange has always been pretty politically active. You can learn how to get a bill passed in the legislature. You can learn how to be a good citizen. There's a lot of integrity in the Grange."

To learn more about the Vernonia Grange or to rent the building contact Maggie Peyton at 503-396-2046 or email Vernonia-Grange305@gmail.com.

STORAGE. TOP

Need more room? 

See us for the lowest prices GUARANTEED!
Debit/Credit accepted

5x10 \$59	10x10 \$89	10x20 \$119	RV Storage \$169
-----------	------------	-------------	------------------

Outside storage available \$70
Totally fenced and gated
Padlocks available

58605 Nehalem Hwy South • P.O. Box 292
Vernonia, Oregon 97064
(503) 429-7867

10-6 Tue-Sat
12-4 Sun