

Homesteading in Aims: 'We did as others did'

When L. C. Van Ausdell sits down and props his feet near his fireplace, he enjoys a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean.

It wouldn't be out of the ordinary except 84-year-old Van Ausdell lives in Aims—about ten miles north of Sandy. The scene he sees in the west is a full length wall mural which typifies what he loves about life in the Oregon county.

Van Ausdell, who homesteaded in the Aims area in the early 1920s, also has a spectacular natural view from the windows of his living room. He sees the lights of Portland at night and weather permitting, he catches a glimpse of the Coast Range mountains. Sunsets provide another breath-taking view—"a painters dream."

"I've never regretted it," Van Ausdell says of his move from Wichita, Kan., shortly after World War I. "The only other place I would have liked was Denver—but it didn't happen to be far enough west."

He appreciates Oregon's climate, beauty and proximity to both the mountains and ocean.

"You know, I can leave here anytime and it's just a short turn to Mt. Hood," he reflects.

"You can take friends to eat huckleberry pie in Government Camp at noon and still have time for an evening meal of seafood at the coast."

"You try that on anyone else's piano and see if you can do that," he adds. "All of this is so handy to reach—yet I homesteaded just 30 miles from the center of Portland."

Van Ausdell and his wife, Alta, started west on May 25, 1919, with friends Charles and "Tinkle" Phillips and their son. Mrs. Van Ausdell died in 1971.

The mode of transportation was a Model T Ford truck which came "in any color you wanted just as long as it was black."

"The horse carriage was on its way out," he recalls.

Averaging 60 miles per day, the two families took 35 days to reach Oregon. There were only two shifts on their vehicle—"low or high," Van Ausdell reminisces.

At several points during the trip the truck became too hot to pull its 4180 pound load over the top of the mountain.

"In Dixie, Idaho, we unloaded maybe 300 feet from the top," Van Ausdell says. The pioneers had to pack their belongings to the summit.

The two families followed the route of the Oregon Trail and Van Ausdell remembers that the trip wasn't always an easy one.

He recalls killing a rabbit for dinner in weather so cold that the animal froze "stiff as a board."

And some, like a woman who visited their camp one evening, warned them of dangers ahead.

"I fear for your lives—that's treacherous road," she told the group.

"She meant what she said," Van Ausdell recalls. "But we couldn't let anyone stop us so we went on our way."

Van Ausdell recalls seeing the graves

of those who hadn't finished the journey in earlier days and viewing rugged country where a few years before a pioneer would have risked ambush by Indians.

"Of course, we didn't have any of that trouble."

They travelled often narrow highways, sometimes overlooking steep cliffs.

"In many places we had to stop and let someone go one way or another," he says. He remembers one point in the trip when the passengers were too scared to ride in the truck because the road was so narrow. "I'll tell you it was scary."

After arriving in Portland, the families first stayed in a tourist camp on what is now Montgomery Ward land in northwest Portland.

The Van Ausdells landed jobs in the city and settled down in an apartment on 24th and Glisan.

Then in 1920 the government opened 360,999 acres in Oregon and Washington to homesteaders.

The offer caught the couple's attention. Van Ausdell remembers having more enthusiasm for the project than his wife, who was working as a bookkeeper for Meier & Frank in Portland.

"She wasn't sure what we were getting into."

For the first 60 days the government allowed veterans to have a preference in filing claim over the land.

"Well, I got to looking around," remembers the Aims resident, who served in the Army during World War I. "We didn't know which way to do it and how to get to it."

He ended up picking a 40 acre tract in Aims. "It was a dot on the map."

But when he went to file the claim, he learned that someone else had also filed for the land—a non-veteran. Van Ausdell protested and was given the property.

The Van Ausdells cleared some trees and pitched a tent which served as their home for the first half-year on the homestead. Some neighbors pitched in and helped them build a wood floor.

"It was ours and that's what we were interested in."

It wasn't long before Van Ausdell's rival—the man who originally filed a claim on the land—began making trouble. He left word with neighbors that he was going to dynamite the Van Ausdells out of their tent.

"Of course it had my wife pretty upset," Van Ausdell says of the threat. But Van Ausdell refused to back off.

"Gordon," Van Ausdell said to his neighbor, "you tell them we'll be in the cabin when he lights the fuse to set off the dynamite. That's all I have to say."

It was hardly a warm welcome to the West.

"I wouldn't get off the place," he recalls. "Then daylight came, the sun rose and nothing ever happened."

Van Ausdell built the first home for the family—a small cabin—and took a job at a logging mill. "It was the first one I had ever seen."

As fate would have it, Van Ausdell

was given the job held by the man who threatened to dynamite his family out of the tent.

"By golly, they canned him and let me have his job," Van Ausdell says. "That kindled the fires again."

After the Van Ausdells made improvements to their 40 acres, they took an 11 month vacation to visit family and friends as far east as Louisiana.

People thought they'd never return to Aims.

"We fooled them."

In 1941, Van Ausdell bought 120 acres of land across the road and sold his original 40 acre homestead along with another 40 acres of land he had acquired.

"We've lived here ever since," he says of the bright yellow house moved from down the road and reconstructed on the property near Camp Howard.

Van Ausdell worked in the shipyards and Portland General Electric before buying a radiator repair shop in Gresham in 1951.

His son John now owns that radiator repair shop and another in Oregon City. The younger Van Ausdell attended the now closed Aims School, Bull Run Grade School and Sandy Union High School. He is the couple's only child.

There was no electricity in the Aims area until 1947, and the homesteader remembers the days when what is now paved road was just a plank road.

Homesteaders fended for themselves. "We had our cows—one or two, enough to keep the milk."

About \$40 worth of staples would last the family all winter, he says. Mrs. Van Ausdell canned meat for the family and stored butter and cream in the north window of the home to keep it cold. Other perishables were stored in the root house still on the property.

"We did as others did," Van Ausdell says. "We learned from the people who homesteaded here years ago."

Homesteaders first came to the Aims area in the 1880s, according to Van Ausdell.

It was the natural place to settle because Aims is not far from where the last leg of the Oregon Trail—the Barlow Road—cuts through Mt. Hood into the Marmot area.

Times weren't easy, "but it wasn't all bad," he adds.

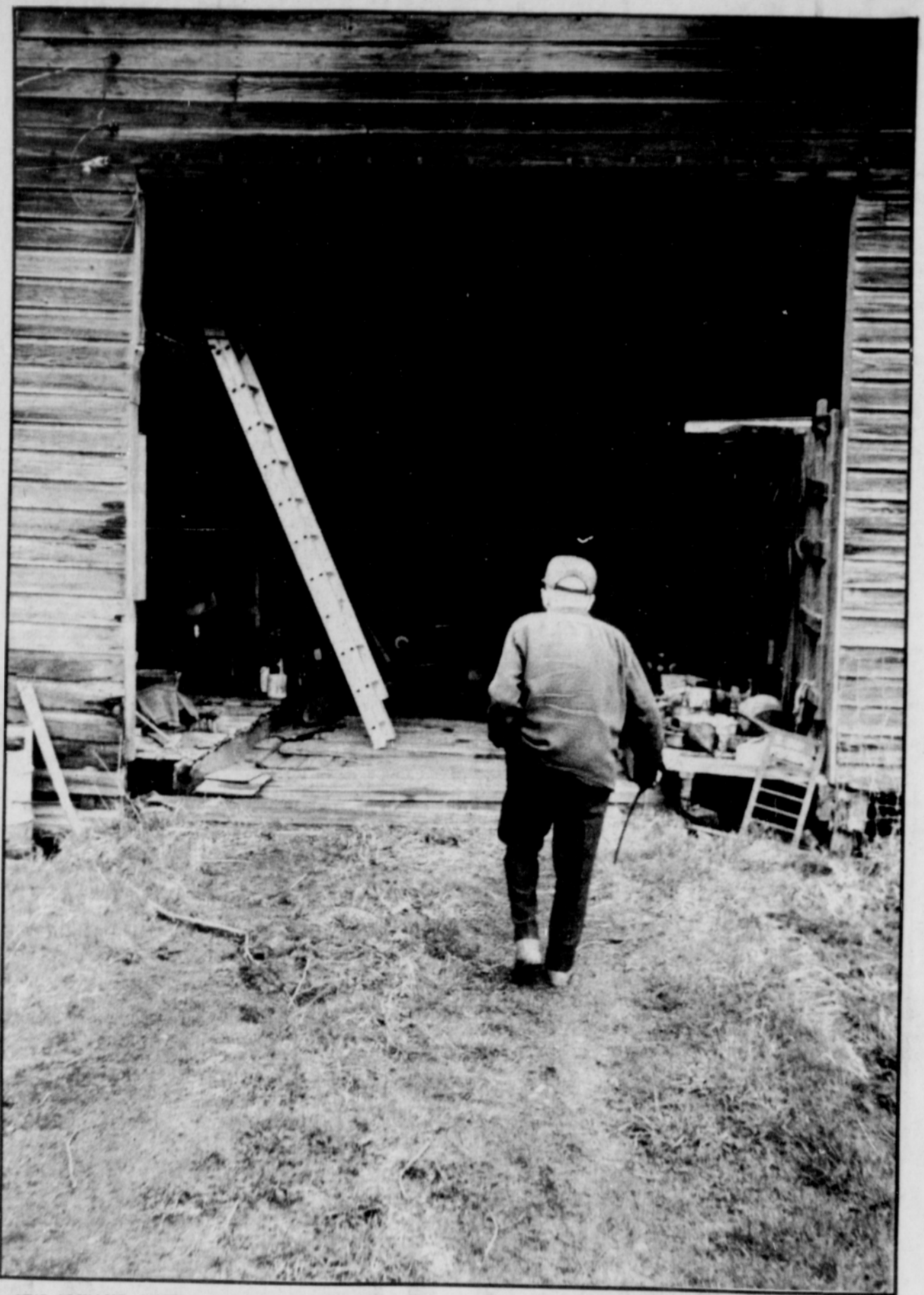
"Oh, we enjoyed it. It was nice and quiet—it is yet. But there are a lot of changes."

In earlier days he could hear, on a quiet morning, steamboat whistles on the Willamette River or the sharp blast of the railroad engine on the Washington side of the Columbia River. Modern transportation has stifled many of those sounds.

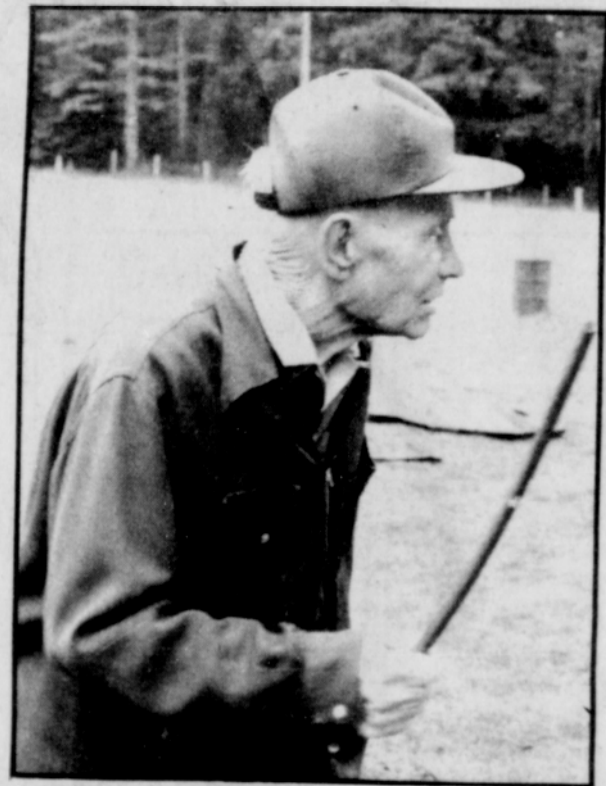
One of the centers of activity through the years was the Aims Community Church to which Van Ausdell belongs.

"It had 25-30 to begin with and now attendance is over 100 people every Sunday."

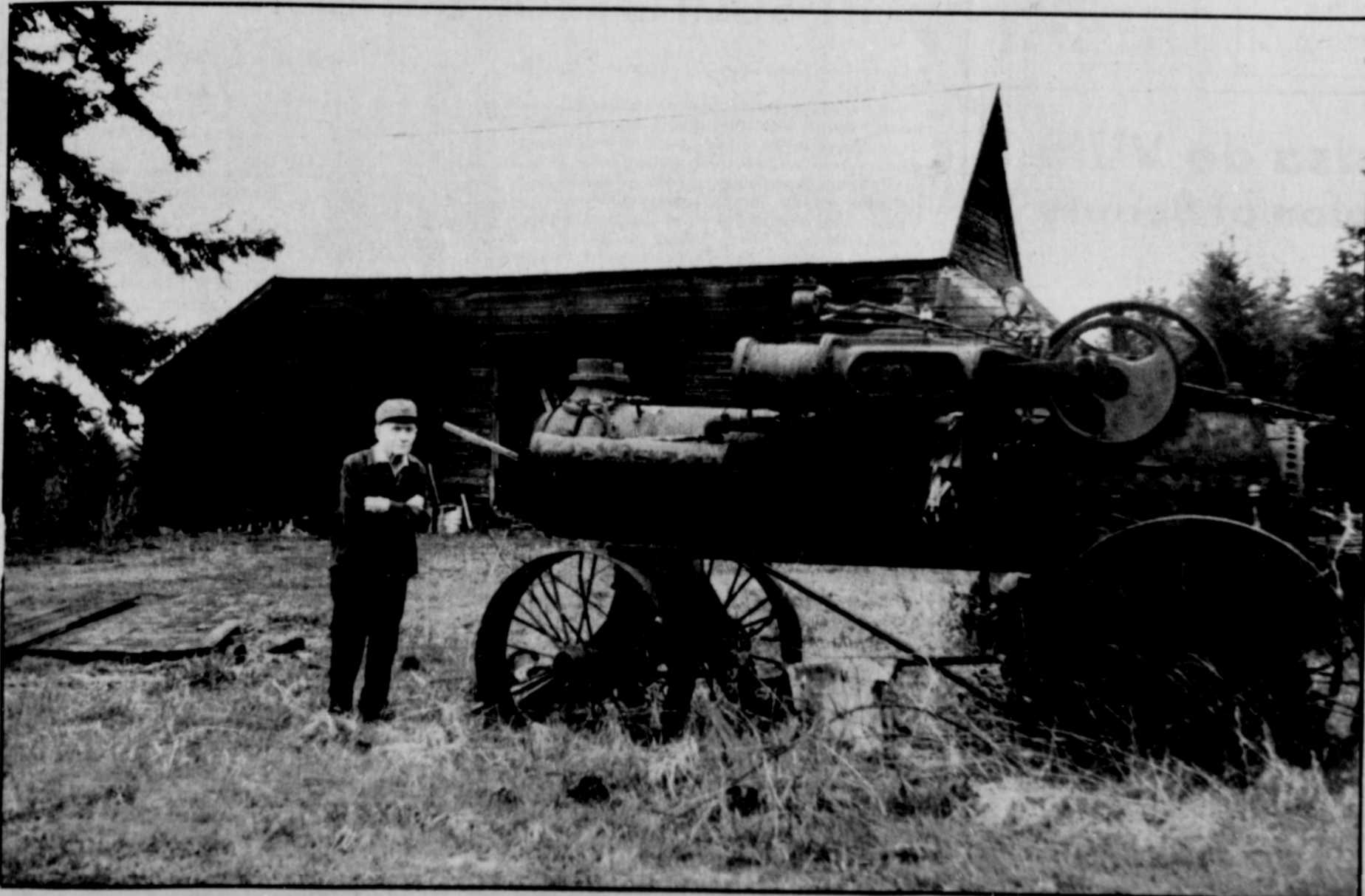
Van Ausdell has been a long time member of Corbett Post 108 of the American Legion which meets in the Corbett Fire Hall. His wife was active



"IT'S ALWAYS NICE to come back here when I'm gone," Says L.C. Van Ausdell of his Aims property.



A HOMESTEADER: L.C. Van Ausdell.



A 1908 CASE ENGINE sits in front of Van Ausdell's barn in Aims.



AN OCEAN scene graces the living room.

Story/photos
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