

The Flood of 1996

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"Voice of the Upper Nehalem River Valley"

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Flood waters hadn't yet peaked when this photo of Vernonia Country Kitchen, was taken.

Vernonia hit hard by "500 year" flood

By Noni Andersen

Heavy rainfall, more than eight inches in four days, and a snow pack ranging from one to three feet on the hills around the upper Nehalem Valley combined to create the Flood of 1996, which easily reached the FEMA 500-year flood boundaries.

Sixty-percent of the homes in Vernonia were evacuated before dark on Feb. 12, with residents staying at other homes or at shelters set up at Washington Grade School and Lincoln Grade School. Shelters had to be set up on both sides of town because Rock Creek became a raging river, cutting the town in half. The green bridge crossing

the Nehalem River at the east side of town, was closed because of concerns about the structural integrity of the bridge, leaving residents of the Riverview area cut off in all directions.

The county-wide 9-1-1 system, located in the basement of the courthouse in St. Helens, was flooded and out of service, forcing Vernonia to fall back on an emergency operations plan that had been worked out locally, but never thoroughly tested.

A command center was set up in the fire hall. From this center, members of city government and the fire district dispatched emergency response and directed volun-

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Volunteer organization played major role during flood crisis

By Dale Webb

Having grown up with a father who has been part of the local volunteer fire department for many years, I have been exposed to the inside workings of this dedicated group of men and women. Following are my experiences working with this group of people during the recent crisis.

The afternoon of February 6, I hurried home from my job at James River's Wauna mill keeping a careful eye on the road for slides or high water. The rain had been falling heavily and I knew our community was in for some high water if it kept up. The road on Clatskanie Mountain had many small slumps of dirt and when I reached the bottom of the mountain at Mist, the road was covered with water from the formerly small stream that flows alongside town. I had been warned about the slide at Scappoose junction and took the bridge at Big Eddy Park onto Cavenham's Crooked Creek mainline. After getting home and eating, Dad and I decided it was time to go to the fire station.

When we arrived, many other volunteers

were already there. They had placed the river markers and were beginning to monitor the river's rise. It had quite a way to rise before it would become a problem, so we decided to get some sleep, just in case Wednesday was a big day. A small crew of volunteer firefighters monitored the streams throughout the night.

Wednesday the rains were fickle; the river had risen to the top of its banks, then seemed to stall. The rain picked up in the afternoon and evening, but the river slowly fell, making watchers say "It can't be going down, look at it rain!" Fire Chief Steve Weller and his officers decided to have a skeleton crew continue monitoring the river overnight while the rest of the firefighters and medics went home and got some sleep, knowing that if the water started rising again they would need rested people for the work ahead, for many of them it would turn into a nightmare.

About 3:00 a.m. Thursday, I heard Dad's pager. He dressed and left in a rush, as he

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The driver of this pickup underestimated the depth of the water on Bridge Street. In the background are Vernonia Country Kitchen and the Senior Center.

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