

Community

After 40 years, Vernonia's movie role still remembered by many

By Robb Wilson

Forty years ago this month, Vernonia was transformed into a Hollywood fantasy. A burning inferno of destruction, where the town folk went crazy, panicking to escape the blaze that was to envelop them, destroy our beloved town and turn it into a certain, fiery grave.

"Ring of Fire" was the name of the Andrew and Virginia Stone Productions movie that featured the semi-known actor David Janssen. Joyce Taylor was the beautiful teenage girl in the film and the later-to-become-famous Frank Gorshen, was a bad guy. A number of other character actors from Hollywood and a few from the Portland actors union also had parts in the film. Many of the town folks here got bit parts and walk-ons, too. I was paid \$10 for a walk-through part and my brother and many of his classmates got out of school to be in the picture. My father was the only local to have a speaking part; he also had a scene with David Janssen, trying to wrestle him off the train's engine! In the movie you can see many Vernonia old timers running for the train - Ma Vike, Albert Schalock, Loren Stiff and many more. Oscar Enstrom's beautiful 1957 Chevy and Mike Schafer's custom '47 Chevy are seen in parts, too, as well as our beloved old firetrucks.

A great misconception among many people in Vernonia today is that the old mill closed because it burned down. The fact is, the mill closed its main operations in 1957 and the shipping department in 1958, for other reasons.

The mill was being torn down, piece-by-piece, by different operators after its closure and, somehow, word got to the movie producers and a deal was made for the planing shed to be used in their movie. The shed was a quarter-mile-long wooden building that would burn very well, indeed.

So, on a hot, dry and windless day, September 10, 1960, a fire was set, a movie filmed (a section of it) and history, for Vernonia, was made. The black smoke (with help from napalm) rose in a column to thousands of feet, as there was not a breath of wind to disturb it. Many folks in the area still have a vivid recollection of the events during the time the movie company was here filming. Ladies from the Christian Church catered meals for the crew and such. Ask around and

you might be surprised who still remembers the week when Hollywood came to Vernonia.

The filming lasted nearly a week, with other scenes also being filmed in town and the surrounding area. It's fun to watch the movie and see how little the downtown has changed in forty years. The West Oregon Electric Co-op building was used as the Sheriff's Department. The old Erik-

changed and moved up toward the old tracks and RR crossing, the town really looked ablaze with this added special-effects-fire. Some of these scenes occasionally pop up elsewhere, too. In the movie, "Day of the Locust," there is a scene where part of Hollywood is supposedly burning up. Sharp eyes that know, can tell that it's Vernonia, NOT Hollywood, burning up. One time on Satur-

the Turner Broadcasting Network, three years ago, on their "classic movie" program. I wonder who determined that this suspenseful drama was a classic?

For those of you who don't know the story line, I'll give you a two-minute version:

Three teenage juvenile delinquents (Taylor, Gorshen and J. Johnson) are in a fictional town eating lunch at the café. The sheriff and a deputy enter and talk to the tough-acting kids, wondering where they got a car. The car matches the description of a stolen vehicle and the two boys meet the description of robbery suspects. The sheriff and deputy load the kids into their squad car and are taking them to headquarters when one of the boys pulls a pistol and makes the sheriff drive across the state line. The quick-thinking sheriff turns on the siren, pulls a car over, and they all switch, so they won't be so obvious. He then turns off the pavement onto a logging road, to the protest of the kidnappers, stating that they can drive the back roads to cross the line, again not to be obvious.

They come to a dead-end and roll the car over a cliff. Now, they have to walk through the forest to cross the state line. The deputy is handcuffed to a tree and the other four take off through the woods. The sheriff asks that they not smoke because of the extreme dryness of the forest. One of the boys smokes anyway and tosses his cigarette butt in the grass. Later, as the movie progresses, the town folks rally to set out and catch the teens.

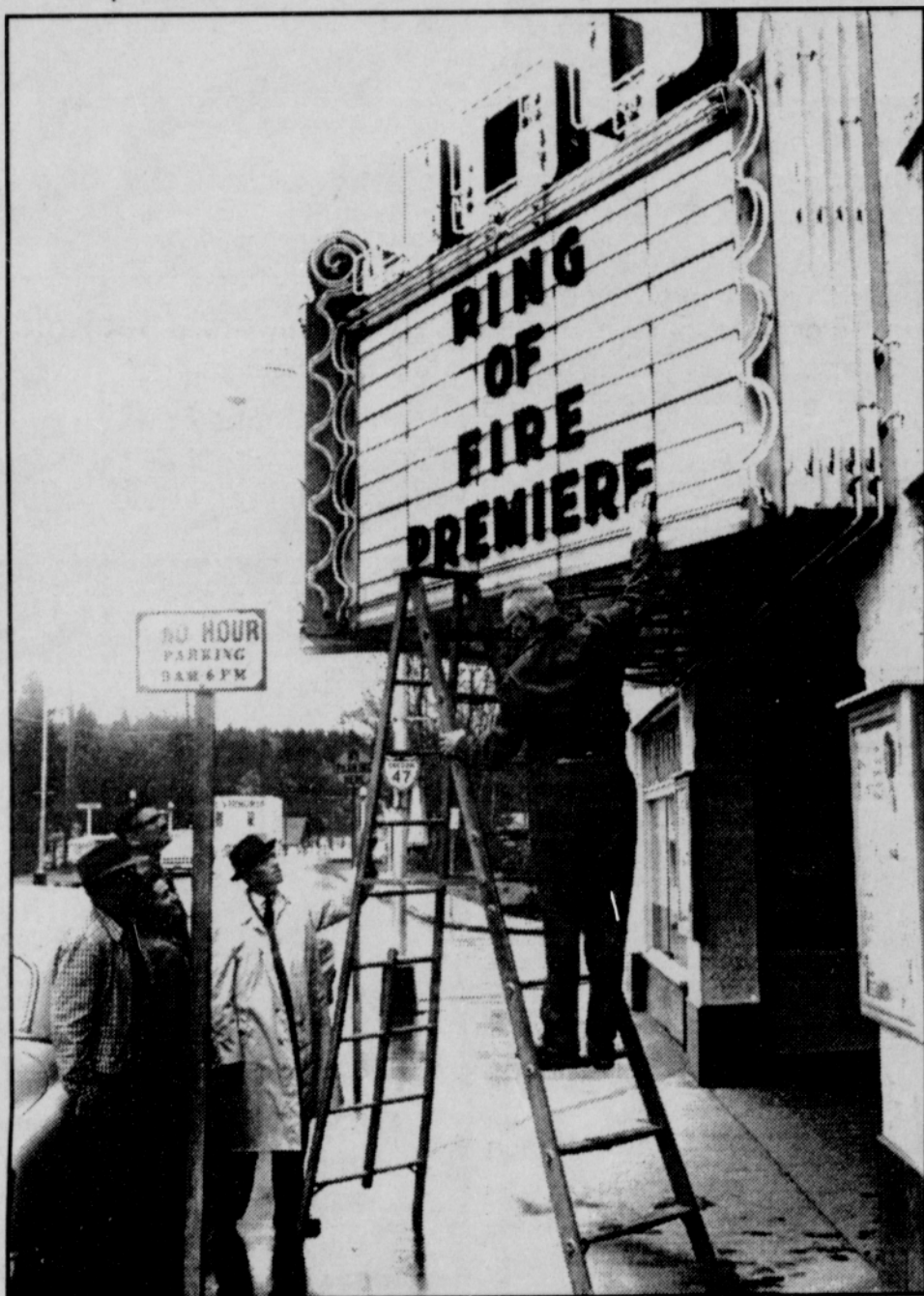
They see smoke billowing up from the trail miles behind them. Worried, they head back to town. Meanwhile, the wind has picked up and the flames are moving toward town. By the time they arrive, the mill is on fire. Janssen gets on an old locomotive and heads into downtown to pick up people so they can escape the blazing inferno of this fictitious mill town.

Through many subplots and scenes of action and suspense, Janssen's goal is met, as he takes the townfolk to safety. There it is, a B movie at its best.

The burning trestle scene was originally scheduled to be shot near here using the old trestle by Scaponia Park. The one actually used in the movie was near Shelton, Washington, where it was easier for the movie's artistic director to get shots and angles. The country gas station and forestry building scenes were also filmed near Shelton.

When I mentioned to someone the other day that it has been 40 years since the movie was shot, they couldn't believe it had been that long. Time flies when you're having fun!

Check your TV schedules to see if it comes on sometime-somewhere-someplace. If it does, let everyone know about it. It is not available on video, that I'm aware of. I've checked many places and sources. Turner fixed the color and made the audio clearer. It is the best copy I have on file. Sorry, it's not for loan! Besides, I'm gonna load it and watch it right now...it's been at least eight months since I last viewed it.



The Joy Theater marquee was nearly ready for the 1961 premiere of Ring of Fire. This photo was loaned by Joe Corsiglia of St. Helens, whose aunt, Rose Valpiani, lived in Vernonia.

son farm house at Pittsburg was torched for the movie. Downtown was turned into a smoky mess as smudgepots were lit by the National Guard. This is where my scene was, downtown during this smokey affair, as the townfolk were running around in a panic, fire trucks were moving about and general chaos was taking place. When you watch the movie, it appears that the town was on fire, but the flames were added in the editing room. The smoke, however, was for real!

When the camera angle

day Night Live, there was a skit with the same view of our burning town. I suppose those fire scenes were used in other films, too.

The town came alive again in May of 1961, when David Janssen and Joyce Taylor came back for the World Premier of the film at the Joy Theatre. A parade was held and more fun was had by all. The movie was shown at the theatre every Jamboree for many years. It was also played on Channel 12 many times over the years. The last time I was aware of its showing was on

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