

Remembering . . .

By Robb Wilson

In my last column, I wrote about the telephone service that was established here in Vernonia at the turn of the century. One of my readers, Charles Comstock, who loves to share historical stuff, wrote to me soon after that article appeared, with the following.

Comstock lived with his family at Keasey, where his father managed the power house, and he remembers that his family had the convenience of a telephone in their house from 1931 to 1941. Many homes in and around Vernonia did not have telephones. Most of the phones were at business locations and their use was for commercial purposes, not social or talking to friends. The phone line for the power plant was shared with phones at Camp McGregor, the railroad depot at Keasey and, of course, was connected to "Central" at the office in Vernonia. This line was established originally as a telegraph line and was used to secure track clearance for the log trains and speeders using the railroad. According to Comstock, the phone service was the ultimate party line, reaching one's party by turning the crank on the side of the phone. Their signal was a long and a short ring; camp McGregor was two long rings; the Depot, three rings; the operator in Vernonia, -who could connect them to the outside world-was reached with one long ring. How times have changed.

Comstock also wonders if the old Vernonia phone prefix "Hazel 9" might have been instituted for Hazel Malmsted, the daughter of Franklin and Bessie Malmsten. Franklin was the gentleman who brought the first telephone service (Swede line) to Vernonia.

Another topic I want to touch on is a few members of the community who have recently passed away. The first I'd like to mention is one of Vernonia's "Oldtimers," Tom Graves. He first came to Vernonia as a lad riding on a bicycle. His family was living in Monmouth, where his mother was attending Normal School. His father came to Vernonia in 1922 and secured a job at the new mill. It was a summer day when Tom and his brother decided to visit their "Pop," so they left early in the morning and made their way north from Monmouth on mostly dirt roads. There was no pavement then. Some roads were gravel, but most threw up clouds of dust. By night fall, they had reached the settlement of Glenwood, on the Wilson River south of the railroad town of Timber, where the weary bike riders bought some eats at the store and slept soundly. They continued the next morning and arrived in Vernonia to the whistles and hustle and bustle of this busy and exciting new place. The only road to Vernonia then, from the south, was the road

from Forest Grove to Timber and on to Vernonia town.

Tom's mother, Mable, soon came to Vernonia to join the family and teach school. Many folks in the area remember her as their teacher. Tom lived and grew up here and spent time during the summers doing various odd jobs at the mill. He graduated from Vernonia High School in 1929, then went to work, full time, at the mill, operating one of the monorail cars that moved lumber from site to site in the mill yard. He left Vernonia during World War II to work in Portland at the Kaiser shipyards. After that, he worked on the Columbia River for Willamette Tug & Barge as a captain on a dredge barge for 35 years.

Graves came back to Vernonia to live in the late 1990s, as he was always fond of his childhood town.

I got to know Tom and gleaned much historical information from him about life in Vernonia during the 1920s and 30s. He had a good memory of the "old days." He used to tell me on every visit that, when he was growing up, Vernonia only had one cop and only needed one cop! One person at City Hall was all that was needed to do the paper work, send out the water bills and record the minutes at the courts and City Council meetings.

Tom loved old time equipment. He was partial to steam powered machinery and boats and was involved in establishing the park where the Shay engine rests. He and many other old timers created that park in the early 1960s as a memorial for Vernonia and its past. He was not comfortable with the way the city had recently removed the small engines, tractors, mill stones, wood wagon, Indian canoe and other items on display that he and other Vernonians had placed there for future generations to see, learn from and enjoy.

Another fellow I had the pleasure of knowing was John Ricker, who was a historian in his own right. John was an avid collector and had a museum of his own, with a collection of chainsaws that is unsurpassed. He was an importer and dealer of Swedish chain saws and really knew their history and how they developed.

Dick Huntman was a collector of early radios and electronics, as well as clocks and anything else he could get his hands on. I got to know him in the 1970s when CB radios were the craze. His knowledge of early electronics and love of things old was really something. He was very interesting to visit with and his home was like a museum with many different things to learn about.

Last, but not least, is my father, who recently passed on to a better place. Wilbur, known to most as "Bill" came to Vernonia after serving in World War II. He was raised in small rural communities in Texas and was one of the last from the horse and wagon and steam train days. He thought Vernonia was a very modern place with electricity, indoor plumbing and such.

He told many stories about growing up in rural Texas, where horses and wagons outnumbered Model T's and the railroad was the lifeblood...and only link to the outside world. But the most notable thing he talked about was how hot Texas was. During the summer in Vernonia he would sit outside every evening and, when he got cool, would heave a big sigh and say, "This is wonderful. I need to go in now. It's getting cool. This sure isn't like Texas, where if it's 99 degrees during the day, it's still 99 degrees at night." How he loved Vernonia and its mild climate. He never had a desire to go back to Texas at all, but was still a Texan, through and through.

Dad was involved in many civic activities and was one of

the founders of the annual Friendship Jamboree. He announced many of the parades, identifying participants to the crowd and judges through the 1960s.

He came to Vernonia in 1947 as assistant bank manager for the newly established bank. Vernonia had been without a bank since the depression! Bill then went to work for West Oregon Electric Co-op as office manager in 1953 and worked there until his retirement in 1986. Most people remember him as Mr. Information, as that is where the Visitors Information Center for our town was for many years. He was also projectionist for the Joy Theatre from 1965 to 1986, something he had done as a teenager in Texas.

All these fellows had much to contribute to history and keeping memories of the past alive. They all will surely be missed.

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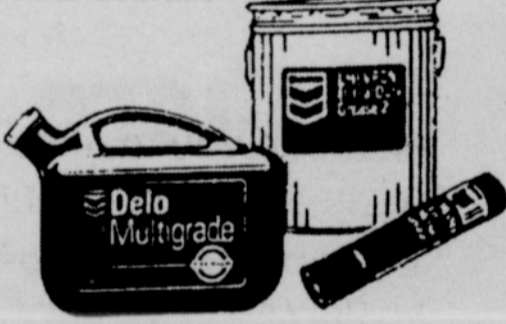
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