

Vernonia: Rising Over Adversity wins in state writing competition

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logged, the accessible supply of old growth trees was greatly diminished. All mill operations ceased in 1957 and it seemed that Vernonia was about to become a ghost town.

The population declined drastically, but many residents decided to stay and do something to help keep the community spirit alive. They decided on a celebration, the Vernonia Friendship Jamboree, which was held annually to invite former residents and others to visit this beautiful, peaceful and friendly community. People came to Vernonia for the first Jamboree in 1957, and to subsequent Jamboree celebrations. While many visitors love the area, no new industry has ever produced the jobs and income that the mill created. Though still the economic mainstay, jobs in the timber industry were gradually declining, partly because of mechanization and partly because of changing markets.

By the mid-1980s the population had dwindled to around 1600. Then, in the next few years, a fairly steady increase was realized as the electronic industry in nearby Washington County brought new residents. Logging companies were still providing employment for truckers and loggers, and a considerable number of retired citizens continued to make Vernonia their home. Local businesses came and went, with those remaining continuing to

provide regular employment for some residents. The schools were again seeing increases in enrollment, while the newly opened Banks-Vernonia Linear Trail and the city's newly improved parks were drawing "outsiders" to this lovely "pocket in the woods".

Just as it appeared that the blessing of her beautiful site on the banks of Rock Creek and the Nehalem River might signify a new beginning for Vernonia, she was cursed by that same location and weather conditions beyond anyone's control. February, 1996, had brought deeply cold weather causing the ground to freeze. This was coupled with several feet of snow that could not be absorbed into the earth when warm rains came, causing extensive flooding in Vernonia and the surrounding Nehalem River Valley. In the early morning of February 8th, police were warning residents to evacuate from low-lying areas, but many long-time residents had seen flooding over the years and considered it unnecessary; others thought they were high enough or far enough away to be safe. They were wrong.

Massive flooding from Rock Creek and the Nehalem River split Vernonia into three areas. The high school and senior center, many downtown businesses including the post office and electric cooperative, as well as many, many homes were flooded. Stranded people were rescued by helicopter, pri-

vately owned boats, and large trucks. Washington Grade School was an evacuation center, fire and medical personnel were ready to handle emergencies, a public works employee worked around the clock in the water plant to prevent pollution and maintain clean water, volunteers worked to keep phone communications open and, when that failed, ham radio operators maintained communications around the clock.

No lives were lost and, on the morning of February 9, most of the water was back in the rivers and streams, and the sun was shining. With mud slides closing roads and stranding people throughout Vernonia and the Nehalem Valley, volunteers organized emergency centers providing food, clothing and other necessities such as cleaning supplies and rubber boots. (Rubber boots were the fashion statement for weeks.) Volunteers helped at the local grocery store (which also was flooded) with some cleaning and others filling lists of needs such as diapers and baby formula. With mud and debris everywhere, citizens began to clean up the mess and get on with their lives. During the first days following the flood, residents were busy sorting through possessions to determine what could be saved and what was damaged beyond repair. Unsalvageable items such as mattresses, rugs, and furniture were soon piled in yards. A dump site was established for these items, as well as for appliances and other household items. Although the site was humorously nicknamed "Mt. Trashmore", it was sad beyond description to see

pile after pile of once prized possessions now reduced to rubble and hauled away. At the same time, it was overwhelming to watch the community come together to get through this catastrophe.

With the exception of a few homes that were elevated, few changes took place. After all, this was supposed to be a 500-year flood and residents did not anticipate a repeat of such devastation in their lifetimes.

Vernonia recovered and used the devastation as a stimulus for many improvements, making the town still more attractive. Citizens continued to enjoy the blessings of the beautiful, tranquil area and gave little thought to being cursed again for living in this "pocket of the woods".

Nearly twelve years later, on the evening of December 1, 2007, light rain fell as Vernonia residents enjoyed the annual lighted truck parade and lighting of the community Christmas tree, as they prepared for the upcoming holiday season. On Sunday, December 2, rain began in earnest. More than 10 inches fell on Vernonia and the surrounding area in the next twenty-four hours. This brought even more devastation than the 1996 catastrophe, with the high school damaged beyond repair, the middle school and Head Start buildings both inundated with muddy water, and questions being raised about the safety of Washington Grade School. Again, homes and businesses were flooded with muddy water. Both Vernonia substations were flooded so there was no electricity and, without power, the public works crew could not produce water, which was becoming alarmingly low as residents were trying to wash the mud from their homes. When the electricity was restored, the water, which comes from Rock Creek, was

so turbid that it took several days before clean water was unconditionally flowing into people's homes. Again, a dump site was established and, again, residents were forced to discard precious belongings. In March, this same site became the home of twenty-one families residing in trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Until mid-February, elementary students attended classes in the Grange hall and local churches; middle and high school students rode buses thirty miles to Scappoose, where they attended classes half days. Head Start students attended class in the public library through the end of the school year.

With this second catastrophic flood came the realization that Vernonia was at risk for future flooding. The community now knew that, if Vernonia was going to survive, drastic measures would be needed for schools, homes and businesses to remain operable and safe from the very real threat of future flooding. Many homes have been elevated above the flood level; some businesses are exploring ways to ensure they will be resistant to flooding; and a site high above the flood plain has been chosen with the hope that a new school campus will soon be built there. Options for controlling Rock Creek and the Nehalem River are being explored. River levels are now being monitored and an automated telephone system is in place to warn residents of potential dangers from flooding. The city and county have worked diligently to improve emergency plans for the area.

It is hard to imagine that these bodies of water, in which youngsters and adults swim,
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