

Vernonia: Rising Over Adversity

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Vernonia is both blessed and cursed to be located in a “Pocket in the Woods”.

When Portland State University Professor Ann Fulton chose this title for her book, published in 1997, she was referring to Vernonia’s location at the confluence of the Nehalem River and Rock Creek, and to the surrounding trees that make it truly a “pocket in the woods”.

The early settlers to this area were mostly farmers whose first order of business was clearing land for crops and livestock. While they marveled at the majesty of the old growth timber, they sometimes cursed the trees as they struggled to prepare tillable land needed to provide the necessities of life for their families. At the same time, these early farmers felt blessed by the mild climate, fertile soil and endless streams of clear water.

To utilize the plentiful supply of trees, small mills were built to supply lumber for the developing community. Then, in the early 1920s, the value of this seemingly endless supply of trees (mostly Douglas Fir) was recognized by the “outside” world and exciting news came to the valley: The largest all-electric sawmill in the world would be built in Vernonia! As the news spread, a huge influx of people arrived, bringing with them businesses, hotels, churches, schools and civic organizations, and Vernonia was promoted as “the fastest growing city in the northwest.” Population soared from 150 to 2500 residents when the mill, at the peak of its operation, employed 750 workers. Railroads were built to haul logs from the forest and take milled lumber to markets. The city prospered. Vernonia was blessed by being in the midst of these remarkable trees...until the 1929 crash of the stock market and the Great Depression. With no market for lumber and the resulting curtailment of production in the timber industry, the mill closed and the jobs were gone. Although the mill resumed operations with full employment, devastating fires in the nearby Tillamook forest in 1933, 1939, 1945 and 1951, combined with the vast amount of timber that had already been 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, privately 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, fish, raft, kayak, and catch crawdads, can become so destructive. It is also hard to imagine moving from this community where residents and visitors camp and picnic along the Nehalem River and Rock Creek during summer months; where bikers, horse back riders, and walkers enjoy the serenity of the path around the mill pond and along the linear trail; where Washington Grade School gymnasium is packed with family and friends as youngsters present their annual holiday program; where basketball and football games are major community events; where volunteers raise money and present a fabulous display of fireworks each July 4th following a parade of mostly youngsters and animals; where loaded log trucks are a major part of every parade; where a salmon festival, celebrating the return of salmon to their spawning grounds, is held annually; where a week-long Art in the Park holds lessons for children; where the residents have shown, time and again, their ability to work together to overcome enormous obstacles; and where there is a group called “Vernonia Pride” which works, year-around, to make Vernonia truly a place where residents can take “Pride”.

Some residents have left Vernonia, with the population hovering around 2300 at present (2009). Most have remained and are working on ways to continue enjoying the blessings of living in this little “pocket in the woods” while exploring options to ensure that the proximity to lovely Rock Creek and the meandering Nehalem River will no longer be a curse to the community.

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