The Good Ol' Days

By Tobie Finzel and Bob New

Bob New, 1949 graduate of Vernonia High School, has written many stories of life in Vernonia while growing up and then working at the Oregon-American Mill for a few years. When we sent him a photo of the new sawblade sign at the Vernonia Pioneer Museum (see the November 5th edition of the Voice for the story), he shared his detailed memory of the mill and the much larger sawblade used there. He gave us permission to share this recollection in our column this month.

The main cutoff saw for logs in the O-A sawmill was on the log deck, where the logs first came up into the sawmill. Three people worked on that log deck and when I was there I was one of those three. The circular saw in the overhead could handle logs up to three feet across. Anything above that in size had to be cut with the steam drag saw, which I operated as part of my job. The largest log I cut with the steam drag saw was 11.6 inches on the small end. That is, I think, mentioned in the Kamholz Bros. book.

The circular saw was larger than the one now mounted in front of the Museum. Our circular saw was mounted on a long boom and operated by a large belt when a lever was pulled. It ran continuously and was only shut off at the end of the day.

As the logs came into the mill, some of them up to 80-footers, the people on the log deck cut the logs into shorter lengths for handling by the two sawyers, Mr. Forrest Blount operated the south or short side (up to 24-footers). The North side head rig, operated by Mr. Ernest East, could handle logs up to 40 feet in length.

Logs, as they came into the mill up a chain, went through an apparatus of high pressure water nozzles designed to wash mud and rocks from the logs. A log would come up into the mill and the people on the log deck would size up the log, and determine what lengths would be best suited to cut that log into, if needed.

A separate control operated the big chain that moved the logs from the pond up onto the log deck. Each log had a small, round, numbered tag affixed to one end. Scaling was done out in the woods and the number was removed and recorded on the log deck as a means of checking the product.

Also on the log deck were three levers, all bunched together and all shaped exactly the same. A log came into the mill, was spotted for cutting to a given length. If the log was to be cut into lengths the log was put into position for the proper length of the log and the lever would be pulled to cause that big circular saw to come down and cut the log into the desired length. Once that overhead saw lever was pulled, there was no reversing the decision. That saw came down all the way to cut the log and then went back up to its "ready" position.

Another of the three levers caused a series of "kickers" to push the log left or right, depending on whether it was intended for the short side or the long side. Another of the three levers, depending on whether it was pushed or pulled, caused a log to be moved down a slight slope on the chains the log was resting on to one of the head rigs, a push for the short side and a pull for the long side.

Another of my jobs was to use a hook to move slabs up into position so the "kickers" could push a log or a slab off the chain down to one of the head rigs. One day, in positioning a large slab so it could be pushed off the chain, the log deck operator pushed the kicker instead of pulling it and he kicked a slab up into my face, hence my fat lip, chin scar and upper denture of today.

The third lever (remember, all together and all shaped the same) pulled that big circular saw down to cut those logs (some as long as 80 footers) into manageable lengths for the head rig carriages. Once that lever was pulled to move that circular saw it could not be reversed and had to come all the way down before it could go back up as that was the way it was designed. Most times, the end of a log would have a lot of rocks in it resulting from its being dragged to the landing out in the woods. That circular saw would be used to cut a slice off the end of the log to get rid of those rocks and that slice would be broken up and dropped down through an opening to a conveyor chain that would take it to the wigwam burner.

Sometimes, those end pieces would not break up when cut and they would hang up in the opening to the conveyor below and not fall through as it was designed to do. Another of my jobs was to stand over the opening and manipulate those slices of log down to the conveyor chain. One day I was doing this and I felt more than the normal amount of wind being generated by that large circular saw above me. I looked up and that big circular saw blade was coming right down on top of me. I jumped out of the way before the saw got me and I looked at the operator and he was pulling the lever for that saw (just me and no log below the saw) and looking over at the deck full of logs and (I suppose) wondering why those logs on the deck were not moving as he was pulling a lever designed for that purpose (or so he thought).

My position, for safety, was to stand between two pieces of railroad rail some three or four feet apart and welded to the framework, the apparatus designed to prevent the accidental pushing of a long log intended for the long side from being pushed to the short side — which would be an error on the part of the man operating those identical levers. It only happened once in my time there but one time the man operating the levers made a mistake and kicked a long log onto where I was standing. The two pieces of railroad iron stopped that log and saved my life.

Another job of the log deck people: The large bandsaws used to cut the logs were sharpened by Mr. DeHart and Mr. Dubendorf in their saw shop above the actual sawmill. Both sides changed their dull bandsaw for a sharpened one, normally four times a day at 10 am, noon, 3 pm and 5 pm. If rocks were encountered and a saw was dulled or damaged there would be an unscheduled change of bandsaw at the time that occurred.

A large hemlock log would have an unusual feature in that the center was often rotted out and a long length of the log would have a big hollow center. In dragging such a log to the landing, out in the woods, rocks of fist size and larger would sometimes be forced into the hole in the center of the log as it was dragged to the landing out in the woods. These rocks could not be seen and when the bandsaw encountered such large rocks the sparks would fly! Oops, an unscheduled change of the bandsaw. Also, when the hemlock log would become level on the log deck — after coming up the chain from the pond — frogs and fish from the pond would sometimes come out with the water trapped inside the log.

Two times I cut my foot with the axe with which it was my job to cut rocks out of the logs and had to have stitches (the axe glanced off the log as I was using it). Once, the fellow operating the aforementioned levers made a mistake and a slab was thrown into my face and I had stitches and my teeth were all loosened and upper had to be removed. I quit my job and went for a safer job out in the woods, setting chokers. In the woods, after the donkey puncher (operator) dropped the butt rigging on my head, causing top of head scar and clamps, I left that woods job and came back to the Planer Department of Oregon-American. I stayed there until 1952 when O-A had no orders and cut back to a shortened week operation. It was then I moved to North Bend, Oregon, to work in a plywood mill that was operating seven days a week, with overtime pay.

Later still, I got a job in the Oregonian newspaper and after working for various newspapers retired in 1993 from the Vancouver Columbian newspaper after 25 years there.

Due to the length of this month's article, we are omitting Virgil Powell's diary entries for this issue only. We know many readers will miss that feature, but Virgil will be back next month. Have a happy Thanksgiving, all!

The Vernonia Pioneer Museum is located at 511 E. Bridge Street and is normally open all year from 1 to 4 pm on Saturdays and Sundays (excluding national holidays, Easter and Mothers' Day.) There is no charge for admission, but donations are always welcome. Become a member of the museum for an annual $5 fee to receive the periodic newsletter, and if you are a Facebook user, check out the Vernonia Pioneer Museum page and our page on Vernonia Hands on Art website, www.vernoniahandsonart.org. The museum volunteers are always pleased to enlist additional volunteers to help hold the museum open and assist in other ways. Please stop by and let one of the volunteers know of your interest in helping out.