

From Camps to Lodges to Per Diem - Part One

Compiled from individual interviews, Winter 2008

While sharing Federal Lands memories, several of WFLHD's retirees recalled their experiences while on survey crews or construction crews when they stayed in tent camps or leased quarters. Some of their recollections are best shared in individual stories, but the memories below provide a good insight into life in the camps.

In the 1950's much of the Federal Lands work was on timber access roads. "You folks don't have (that work) any more," **Willis Grafe** pointed out, adding that "the remoteness isn't there." He joined FHWA in 1948 and came to what is now Western Federal Lands Highway Division on the Junior Engineer training program.

The remoteness of the projects made camps a necessity, but FHWA did not necessarily have to build them: sometimes they used camps that had been set up by other agencies or by the contractors.

In Santiam, "Camp Mongol...was built for the Corps of Engineers," Willis said. "It's where the boat landing is now. They built a bunch of bunkhouses. We lived in there and used that as our office...."

"A lot of your guys probably use mobile homes for the project," he observed, and they sometimes did then, as well. He recalled his job at Twin Sisters as an example. "We had several trailers on that one because at least we were on the road." The contract for that 22-mile project was over a million dollars, and was "all timber country."

When there were no roads, however, the barriers were compounded. **Vern Ford**, who was hired by the Vancouver office in 1954, remembered one tent camp where "you had to cross the river on a concrete slab...The water just ran over it, so you had to drive through the river to go across."

Vern ticked off a number of the locations he remembered: the Clackamas River highway; Steamboat Creek and Tokatee Falls on the North Umpqua Highway; Tiller on the Tiller Trail Highway; Camp Alma, west of Eugene. "They had them all over"

The camps served for many seasons and Willis remembered they were used by both construction and survey crews, sometimes concurrently.

"It used to be you'd build a piece like the White Pass, but meanwhile you'd do a location survey on the next couple of miles." He said "we had an engineering crew worked out of there for several years."



*Construction on the White Pass
Highway, Washington, circa 1952.
Photo courtesy Ray Westby.*

Willis recalled how he got assigned to the White Pass his second year on the job. It was 1949, and he got a call from Wendell Struble who was “head of this division, and he said, ‘Bill Hutz just fired his transit-man up at Packwood. Go up there, he’ll need help.’ About 3 weeks later I was...project engineer on a two-mile job, breaking through the White Pass, Route 12 in Washington....I never saw anyone else the rest of the summer. That was my Junior year.”

He added “we had a camp at Courtright Creek, east of Packwood about ten miles. We ate at the contractor’s camp when I was there, up the road about two miles. Up at the top, the contractor had some big tents. We bunked in there with them and used their cookhouse.”

Willis remembered being on a crew with four other men. “We went up and laid the road out. I had to redesign some of it because the grade had been laid too low and it was in the swamp.”

Ray Westby came to work for FHWA in 1950 and was assigned to the White Pass Highway around 1952. “It had to have been started before World War II, because this piece of road was built up to Courtright Creek,” he said. “It’s a big arch bridge and it’s a real neat summit.” He also noted “there’s a ski lodge at the top of it. Federal Highway built the west side and the state of Washington built the east side up to the White Pass ski resort.”

The photos on these pages were some Ray brought of a bridge he worked on with Bill Hutz, whom, he noted, “was an old man then.” There was no water under the bridge. “We called it the rock creek bridge.”

“We had just a lodging camp there,” he said. “Bill stayed there and I think his office man stayed there. I lived down in Packwood with my wife.” The contractors had a camp up on top....It was a pretty rough go.”

Vern remembered it was Sam Cook who had the White Pass project “about the time I went to work here.”



The crew on the White Pass Highway called this “rock creek bridge” because there was no water beneath it. Photo courtesy Ray Westby.

John Bucholtz, who was hired straight from Clark College in 1958, was on the last survey tent camp out of this office. “If you wanted a bath you went to the creek,” he said. “We had a camp cook who was a housepainter by trade, so you can tell how the food was. But when you worked all day and were out in the woods, you were hungry, so you ate it.”

Vern described the somewhat standard design for the camps: “Usually it would be a...compilation of bunk trailers and tents. They usually put up some kind of cook shack, because they always hired cooks to feed the crew.”

As Willis pointed out, however, a camp cook wasn't an absolute necessity. “At Alma, I didn't (have one). I had to go hire a local lady to feed my survey crew. We had about 5-6 trailers in camp, and then we had 6-7 single guys in the bunk house...I didn't want to have to get involved in starting a cookhouse – that runs into a lot of trouble.”

He also noted that Alma was one of the camps they had to build from scratch: “There was nothing there; there was an old mill site. We built four bunkhouses which would sleep four guys each, then a big storage room and office building.”

Ray noted that there is more to being Project Engineer than just managing the road work. You also had to manage the camps, and that sometimes meant monitoring domestic affairs. Willis made a similar observation: “A certain level of conflict can develop unless you program it pretty well,” he said. “I had...only one washing machine in the wash house. So you had to be a diplomat and make sure you kept the dust settled on it.” As Vern pointed out, most of the guys in the camps were single, so they did their own laundry.

In spite of possible conflicts, the camaraderie was strong. “There was a high level of relationship among all the guys out there,” said Willis, “a bonding that takes place. It isn't like you get just the guys. We lived out in the camps with each other and our families were out there. That adds a dimension to it. You get a bonding that you wouldn't otherwise get.” In fact, he said, “My wife likes to come to those (reunions).

“I had no quarrel with the camp life,” Willis said. “By the time we came back from the woods, we had three kids and were still in our 32-foot trailer.”

“I don't even remember the last camp that they had,” Vern said. **Fred Rogers**, who arrived in Vancouver after completing the training program, thought they were already a thing of the past when he got here in September 1961.

“Of course by then,” Vern said, “they had built a lot of the roads and you had more access, so if you had to go back in there to do something, you at least had roads you could go in and out on if you needed to get back to town.”

It was a different era, Vern reflected. “There was some interesting stuff going on back then. It seems so unusual to think back to what it was like then versus what it is like now. I question seriously if you could even get people (to work) like that any more. I don't think so. It was strictly just roughing it. But we didn't know any differently.”

*If you have comments about this story or the camps, please email me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.
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