

From Camps to Lodges to Per Diem - Part Two

Compiled from interviews, Winter 2008

The tents and trailers described in Part One were one kind of camp experience, but there were often other options. On many projects, vacation inns and hunting lodges became the crew's home away from home -- until the convenience of Motel 6 and per diem allowances came along.

“I started out in 1950 for Bureau of Public Roads,” said **Ray Westby**. “The next summer, we had about a six mile job just west of Leavenworth on 2. It started at the Merritt Inn, (and was a part of) the State Primary System,” he said. “At that time we did quite a few jobs on the State Primary System.”

“When I first started in '50, they never paid per diem. You went to the job and the project engineer had to get a contract for a place to stay, and also for a restaurant....” His first job was on the Loup Loup Highway near Okanogan. “I worked for a fellow by the name of **Curly Gowan** (who) was the project engineer.... We stayed in a hotel up in Okanogan, and we ate in a restaurant.”

Unlike those working today who could receive a set amount of per diem no matter how little or how much they pay for their meals, in those days, if you didn't eat the meal, you couldn't just pocket the change. Most of the time that worked all right, but the arrangement was less than perfect if there were no suitable restaurants nearby, such as Ray's project near Merritt. “(There) was nothing but an old lodge there, (and) it wasn't operating.” An elderly lady owned and lived in the lodge, and the project manager contracted for the cabins on the property for eight to ten men.

It was too far to travel to Leavenworth for meals, and the only place to eat was a roadside restaurant next to the Merritt Inn. The couple who owned the diner, however, were barely making enough living to raise their four children. “They didn't have anything,” Ray said. “They signed a contract to take care of us for meals, but they never had any money; never had any groceries. You'd go in and order something, and they'd say, ‘We don't have that.’”

LeRoy Borstad was his Office Man: “He'd get so mad!” Ray said. “The Region would send her a check for the meals, and then she'd go out and spend it on her kids or whatever. We had an awful time with her....they never had any groceries.

“Finally they got rid of that (system) and started paying per diem.”



Roadside lodges like the Summit Inn on Washington's Sunset Highway at Snoqualmie Pass could sometimes serve as crew quarters during their off-season. Postcard from WFLHD Archives.

Vern Ford recalled an arrangement that was more remote, but was more convenient because they could hire their own cook. It was 1957, and he'd been with the BPR about three years when he was sent to work with a survey crew in the Wallowa Mountains in 1957. The project was Gumboot Road, and it ran "from Sheep Creek, over the top, and then down to the Innaha River." On one side of the mountains, they used a Forest Service camp at Lick Creek, but at the other end, they leased a ranch that had once been owned by the actor, Eugene Palette.



Eugene Palette as Friar Tuck in "The Adventures of Robin Hood"

Palette, a rotund, froggy-voiced character actor, had been in many 1940's movies, including roles as Friar Tuck and as one of the Three Musketeers. "Palette was kind of an eccentric," Vern remembered. After World War II, "he was sure that we were going to be invaded...so he had bought this ranch down on the Innaha River...The Innaha River is about as remote as you can get in Oregon."

Palette Ranch had once hosted movie stars for hunting and fishing trips. "It had a house and a bunkhouse and a cookhouse. There was a slaughterhouse and a garage and a great big storage (building that) looked like a barn....He'd bought out a bankrupt hardware store some place and took all the hardware and moved it over there....He had a huge propane tank," Vern said, and "that run the power source for the ranch. And he had a big underground gasoline tank that he put in there. So he was pretty much self-sufficient. As long as his supplies of propane and gasoline held out, he was OK. He had his own cows there and everything. Anyway, we leased that because it had the bunkhouse, and cookhouse."

Willis Grafe also got a taste of the "resort" life. He had left BPR after the training program, but had been enticed to return and was working in the office in Portland. "I'd just got married in '52. I had come back to work from the Corps of Engineers," he said, when he received a call on the weekend from the Region Office. "He says, 'I want you to go up to Glacier Park. Pick up a vehicle from **Carl Chamberlain** in Missoula.'...My bride and I loaded up and away we went.

"In the 1930's when they built...Going to the Sun Road, they had, at McDonald Lake...quite a good sized camp. (We) got into one of those buildings. (There were) beds in it and a little stove like the look-outs have....We had a light bulb. No refrigeration, of course – she had trouble keeping milk from going sour during the thunder storms.

"It was a good life; we look back on it with a lot of good reminiscences. It was practically a whole summer long honeymoon."



Willis Grafe's living quarters during his assignment at Glacier National Park were not quite as comfortable as the St Mary's Lodge on this 1950's postcard. WFLHD Archives

Fred Rogers came to this office in 1961, and spent several years on surveys. One summer he was working on Galice Creek, which was “an old road that goes up from the Rogue River to the south (toward) Gold Beach.

“I worked for Jack Rickard and we stayed at what’s called Morrison’s Fishing Lodge,” Fred said. “People pay to go (there) during the season.” The Lodge was still a good distance from the project. They’d leave at six in the morning, drive up the road as far as they could, then hike downhill for a half hour to reach the work. At the end of the day, he said, “it would take us an hour and a half to come back to the top.”

It was on this project that Fred discovered that the new guys sometimes had to face a certain rite of passage. They had stopped at the Galice Creek Store one day, which was a convenient stop to gas up the government trucks. “Being green,” Fred said, he was sent off to let the proprietor know they wanted to buy some gas. “This old guy’s sitting in a rocker, there on the porch, and here’s the gas pump down this gravel road. I thought, ‘Why are they doing that?’ Well I found out – I walked out and this police dog sitting by him leaps up and rushes out....Grabbed my leg, tore my pants...He was playing, he wasn’t rough. He wasn’t trying to kill me or anything,” Fred said, but the dog did draw blood. “So that was my introduction to the survey.”

Vern Ford also remembered there were often shenanigans on the projects. “There’s a lot of things that we did...I don’t even remember half of it any more. Crews back then were pretty much a wild bunch. Most of the guys were single – I know I was – so if you got into a town, that was a real luxury. Out in the camps, you didn’t have much comfort.”

If you have comments about people or projects in this story, or other stories about the camps, please email me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.

-- Marili Green Reilly

