

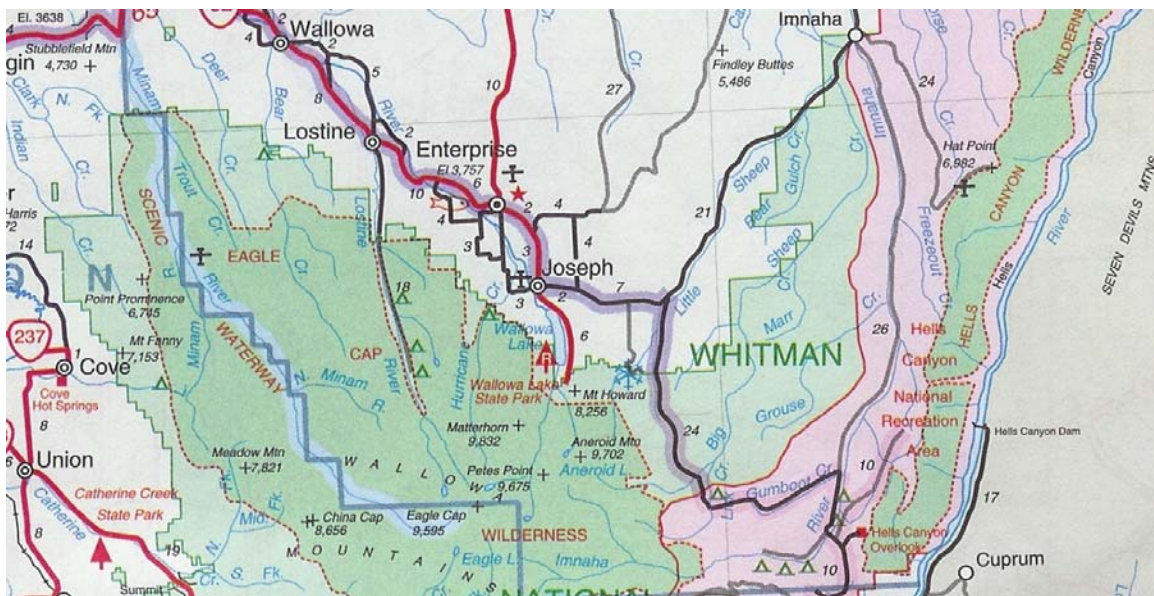
Life in the Camps: Gumboot Road, 1957

From an Interview with Vern Ford, March 25, 2008

A number of retiree memories of construction and survey tent camps have been combined in other stories. Vern Ford shared the following experience during a winter on the Gumboot Road in Eastern Oregon near what is now the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area.

While working on projects in mountainous areas, survey crews sometimes found that winter weather could come earlier than expected. Sometimes they had to push until the last possible moment to finish the job, or winter snows would stop their progress.

Vern Ford was running the transit on the Gumboot Road project in the Wallowa Mountains of eastern Oregon in 1957 (near bottom of map). The project, he said, “ran across from Sheep Creek, over the top, and down to the Imnaha River... We worked out of the camp at Lick Creek until we got over the top and down into the canyon quite a ways. And then it was really steep, and it would get to be a real burden, because you had to walk into the canyon every day and then you were climbing out every night.”



It was on this project that they “moved the crew around onto the Imnaha River and leased (the)...[Palette Ranch](#).” Another crew was working out of a camp on Sheep Creek, and we “worked the job...to tie the two together.

“We worked it the winter of 1957 until we got snowed out and...temperatures were getting down to 15, 20 below zero.” As winter approached, they had pushed the line into the end of a canyon, and had to hike five miles into the canyon to get to the work. In such remote territory, it made sense to leave their equipment at the job site and avoid carrying it in and out of the canyon each day.

By the last day of work, there had already been a lot of snow. **Lyle Hewitt** was the Project Engineer, and “he sent the whole crew up there one morning to bring out all the equipment.”

The topog crew had been working at the downstream end of the project, and a level crew was all the way up the canyon to the farthest extent of the work. “I remember that,” Vern said, “because we had to pick up the transit and go in and get the level and level rod and stuff and bring it back out...”

“**Dave Webster** was the level man on the job at the time. I got the main crew in as far as where most of the equipment was at, and we started loading it up. Dave had to go on up the canyon to get the level... probably another mile up the creek.” After they collected most of the equipment, Vern sent part of the crew back down the trail. “We waited there for quite awhile, and Dave didn’t ...come out.” It was winter and the days were getting shorter. Finally, he said, “(I) started the rest of the crew back out. I told them, ‘You guys go ahead and get out of here and I’m going to go on up find out where Dave’s at.’”



During the winter of 1957, the Wallowa Mountains may have seen as much snow as this BPR Field office near “Mongold,” Oregon did in 1948. Photo from WFLHD Archives.

“I started up the trail to find Dave, and I didn’t get very far up there, and I could see him coming. He had a rod man with him, and the rod man got to where I was at first. He said, ‘Dave’s not doing too well...he’s having trouble walking.’” Vern sent him back down the trail, saying, “I’ll take care of Dave.”

“He finally got down to where I was at, and I grabbed the level from him....Well, he was about wore out from bucking the snow getting in there and getting back out.

“I said, ‘You get ahead of me on the trail and I’ll follow you to make sure you get out.’ They started down the trail, but had gotten no more than two miles before it became too dark to see the trail.

“There was a great big pine snag that had fell across the trail and this log was probably four feet (around), so I planted the equipment next to it,” and told Dave we’d hold up here.... I stopped and took a stake bag, which is like a pack sack, and I got Dave sitting down on that next to this log.

“I had an axe with me, a two-bladed cruiser’s axe,” Vern said. “I had stopped at one place and cut some pitch off this one big snag – you know pitch will start a fire, so I’d shoved that in my vest.... I cut some bark off of one big pine tree that was there, and I started a fire, and I told him, ‘Hey, we’re here for the night. (We) can’t go anyplace; we can’t see; so we’re just going to have to stay here.’

“So we hunkered down behind the log and, with a fire out front, we kept pretty warm. It was probably pretty close to zero or below at that time. But, we were dressed pretty warm, so we were ready to spend the night.”

They had spent a few hours next to that log, Vern said, when “all of a sudden there was a gunshot!” Lyle Hewitt had come back up the canyon with four other members of the survey crew to look for them, and Vern shook his head as he recalled one member of the rescue party. “**Clint Drummond** – you’ll probably hear more about him. He was a practical joker. He had a .38 (and) he’d brought that with him....He set off that shot gun and we’d have liked to have jumped out of our shoes.”

Now equipped with flashlights, they were able to pack the rest of the equipment back down the trail. In time, they learned that after “the rest of the crew had made it back out to the mouth of the creek, (they) got in the trucks and went down to camp and told Lyle that we hadn’t got out yet.” Lyle got the rest of the crew fed, then picked out four guys and “came looking for us.

“It was the middle of the morning before we got out, and Dave and I were just totally wore out.”

When they got back to camp, they were greeted with a hot meal. The cook, Vern said, “was an old guy named **Ed Disney**, and he was a great cook. He’d stayed up, and when we got there, he had dinner for Dave and I all set up....We were just about too tired to even worry about eating, but we went in, had some dinner, and then went back to the bunkhouse and cleaned up and then went to bed.”

Reflecting back on the experience, Vern said “I was not looking forward to spending the whole night out there.” Luckily, they didn’t have to, but they had been prepared to do so if necessary. At least, he said, “we were set up for it.

“That job now is a main route,” Vern said. But that night in the snow, “It was just another one of the adventures.”

Vern Ford worked surveys for the last half of the 1950’s, then later worked in construction, returning as project engineer to some of the same projects. He retired in 1991. If you have comments about this story or would like to share your memories of the camps, please email them to me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov

-- Marili Green Reilly