

# A TRAINEE'S PERSPECTIVE, 1965-1968

## *From an Email from Walt Langlitz, July 2009*

*The Bureau of Public Roads' instituted the Highway Engineer Training Program which was an important training and recruiting tool that has continued to benefit the Federal Highway Administration and the hundreds of training program graduates. As one retiree remembers, the experience gained during those three years provides a good road map for one's future career.*

“Love them or hate them, Highway Engineer Trainees were a fact of life on many Direct Federal construction projects,” wrote Walt Langlitz. The HET program recruited graduates straight from the colleges and universities and gave them assignments on Direct Federal projects and in Federal-aid offices. Most Direct Federal projects were assigned at least one trainee to be mentored and trained, although some project engineers would have preferred to have a full crew of seasoned employees. Those preferences gave rise to some “favorite expressions for trainees,” Walt says, “but I won't go into that here.” For his own part, he says he “was as 'green' as any person could possibly be...(and) helped to perpetuate the expression 'green trainee.’”

Walt said he was “raised on a small cattle ranch in Eastern Oregon,” and that had been the only kind of work he had done by the time he went away to college. As he was getting ready to graduate from Oregon State University in 1965, he had the opportunity to talk to many companies and government agencies that came to the campus to recruit. “I only had one interview,” Walt said, “and that was with the Bureau of Public Roads. The prospect of three years of on-the-job training and a chance to see some of the U.S. in the process was very appealing to me, as was the promise of government job security and retirement benefits.”

The agency, which was a part of the Department of Commerce at the time, had instituted the Highway Engineer Training Program in 1946. It “produced the first graduate in 1948,” Walt said. “At its height in the 1960's and 1970's, there were about 60 graduates per year.”

Walt considered himself fortunate that his construction assignments were both in Vancouver at what was then called the Western Direct Federal Division (WDFD). “My first assignment was to a reconstruction project on the Beartooth Highway in Montana. “Since I didn't have a car, I boarded a Greyhound bus two weeks after graduation.” He filled out the paper work at the Division Office, then “(they) sent me to deliver an orange pickup from the GSA motor pool to the project office

*When Walt began the program in 1965, the three-year program consisted of the following assignments:*

- *Federal Highway Projects (Direct Federal Construction) – two 6-month sessions*
- *Federal-Aid (BPR Division Office) – two 6-month assignments*
- *Highway Engineering and Administration Course (Washington DC) – 4 months*
- *Construction Inspections (State or Region) – 4 months*
- *Selected Assignment – 4 months*

in Red Lodge. Thank goodness for the project staff who took me under their wings and helped me along. As Kermit would say: 'It's not easy being green!'

“Things were good,” Walt said. “I was hired as a GS-7 with an annual salary of \$7,050. Per Diem on the project was \$7 per day.” He noted that in those days, “there were no 'general purpose' credit cards” such as those that now make our government travel easier. “VISA was born in 1966.”

Walt arrived in Helena with “two suitcases and four boxes of college textbooks. I don’t think I ever looked at 99% of those books again, but they accompanied me for the next three years and I was well compensated for moving them!”



*By the time Walt Langlitz went to work on the Beartooth Highway in Montana, BPR contractors had long since retired this ¾ cubic yard Northwest shovel and 2 1/3 cubic yard International truck. The photo is from a 1930's reconstruction project in Glacier National Park. WFLHD Archives.*

His assignment was on a six-mile, major reconstruction on “the portion of the Beartooth Highway from the bridge over Rock Creek to the lower switch back.” The project included “significant realignment, grading, and paving; a new cast-in-place three-span bridge over Rock Creek; and three concrete box culverts.” The Project Engineer was Dave Cossell; Joe Armijo, a 1964 graduate of the training program, was Assistant PE. He recalled other members of the crew were John Hallin (a second year trainee), Jerry Anderson, Craig Sparks, Jay Worthington, Fred Shane, and Roy Leighton.

They were running an emulsified asphalt base course, which was “a hot new construction material,” and he spent about a quarter of his time on that operation and “another quarter in the materials laboratory.”

The project was “completed before I left at the end of October,” he said, which was not quite in time to avoid the snows. “I remember waking up to 18 inches of snow in the middle of the paving operation in early October.” After the snow melted, they finished the project, then “I purchased a new GTO...(me and GMAC)...and set out on my tour of America!”

Walt's second construction assignment was the next summer, and he “was sent to the Quartzville Area Timber Access Roads project near Sweet Home, Oregon. The project was for minor grading and surfacing along several miles of BLM timber access roads, (and again) featured an emulsified asphalt surface course.” He worked under Project Engineer Slim Gordon on that project and recalled that Chuck Borstad was the Office Assistant. Gordy Clark and Vince Hibbard also worked on the project. Although he still spent about a third of his time in the materials lab, Walt said he was able to “spend more time on construction inspection and surveying and was given more responsibility overall.

“I was even sent to a Century Drive project for a couple of days to help Project Engineer Vern Ford with prime coat application and inspection. I was introduced to blackberries on this project,” he said. “They were great!”

Walt's Regional Office assignment was in Atlanta for Construction Inspections-In-Depth, and his two Federal-Aid Division assignments were in Ames, Iowa, and Helena, Montana, “both during the winter!....After spending the winter in the Iowa Division office,” he said, “I was pretty

certain that Federal-Aid was NOT going to be my preference for assignment after the training program. This was further verified after my Selected Assignment in Location and Design in the Denver Office.” After that assignment, he knew for certain that he “wanted to work in Direct Federal in a location and design role.” Participants in the training program were rarely given first assignments close to home, so Walt was passed over for a position at WDFD. Instead, he ended up in the Central Direct Federal Division in Denver.

Walt graduated from the training program in 1968, a member of the same class as Gary Klindedinst. He listed a few of the training program graduates who would be well known to his former co-workers and retirees of Western Federal Lands Highway Division: John Mors, 1955; Vern Buchele, 1959; Jerry Budwig, 1960; Tom Edick, 1964; and James Hall, 1965.

As Walt noted, the “training program was modified and reorganized as the Professional Development Program in 1998 and continues to the present time.” It has played “a significant role in the Direct Federal organization.” During budgeting and down-sizing operations, headquarters often takes a close look at agency operations, but, he notes, “every time Direct Federal had to justify its existence, training was always held up as one of the significant purposes for the organization.”

Walt's experience in the Direct Federal program was quite positive, he said. “My thanks to the WDFD project personnel for a positive learning experience and helping me become a little less 'green' in that first year and a half of my career.”

*Walt Langlitz spent 13 years in the Federal Highway Projects Division in Denver, then transferred to Western Direct Federal Division in Vancouver to finish out his career. He retired in 1998, and is now working part-time at Parsons Brinckerhoff Consulting Engineers in Portland, doing quality assurance/quality control reviews and Senior Independent Reviews of projects at various stages of completion.*

*Watch for more of Walt's experiences in paving and materials in future stories in this series. If you have memories to share about the early days of Western Federal Lands Highway Division, please email [marili.reilly@dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@dot.gov).*



*BPR workers have always had a chance to see the country. Photo from a 1925 final construction report for a surfacing project on the Chief Mountain International Highway in Glacier National Park, Montana. WFLHD Archives.*