

Summer Hire Perspectives, Part I – BPR, 1961-1962

From an Email from Scott Rustay, August 2009

One of the many roads to employment with the Bureau of Public Roads was to hire on as a summer temp. Scott Rustay took this route following his freshman year at Boise State. Here is the first part of his recollections of five summers spent with the Idaho Division of the Bureau of Public Roads as a temporary civil engineering technician.



A crew of 50 men hand finishing the graded road on the Santiam Highway (Oregon Forest Highway Project NR-23-H), 1933-34. Photo from Final Construction Report, WFLHD Archives.

Picture this: a dusty, sweat-streaked survey crew is hard at work doing some slope staking in the summer sun near Hailey, Idaho. A Cadillac convertible pulls up through the gravel and dust and asks directions to Sun Valley. It was not an infrequent occurrence on the Trail Creek Road project where **Scott Rustay** worked the summer following his freshman year in college for the Bureau of Public Roads. “They would always look a little disappointed when we told them they had just driven past it a few miles back. I guess it didn’t meet their expectations for a first class resort.”

The project that Scott worked on from June through August of 1961 was led by Project Engineer **Emory Waller**. Scott recalled that “initially, our staking crew was made up of very 'green' temporaries with a very patient permanent party chief. This was my first exposure to slope staking and it took a while for the concept to sink in.”

The project office had been set up in Hailey, about 15 miles south of the Sun Valley-Ketchum area, because of the high cost of lodging in the resort community. “I shared a small apartment with another Boise temp,” Scott said. “It was located about 20 feet off the highway at the west end of town. Traffic noise was pretty intense but was

usually drowned out at night when the big thunderstorms came through—a mixed blessing.

“The construction contract was awarded (to) Aslett Construction from Twin Falls,” Scott said. By the time construction work started in July, “Emory got more permanent help, for which he was extremely thankful.” By then Scott was splitting his time between grading inspection and the project office.

“We used to get from the office to the job in an orange 9-passenger Carryall with a knuckle-busting metal rod carrier on top,” Scott recalled. “The Party Chief’s main enjoyment was driving as fast as he could over the rough construction sub-grade and bouncing the heads of back seat passengers against the top of the van. I guess this was his way of encouraging seat belt use. Our office man was a long-time seasonal hire who worked with BPR in the summer and managed amateur boxers during winter months. He also owned rental properties and was always looking for creative ways to make a buck—con artist would be too strong a term but he did operate on the edge.”

Hired as a GS-3 his first summer, Scott came back in June 1962 as a GS-4. The Division Office in Boise sent him to work for Project Engineer **Jim Jensen** on a survey crew on Idaho 21, the Lowman-Stanley Highway. The crew was working the Lowman end of the job with Party Chief **Neal “Soft-Shoe” Smith**. “‘Soft-Shoe’ got his nickname from the corked (spiked) boots he wore,” Scott added.

“At that time, Highway 21 ended just beyond the turn-off to Grand Jean, about 25 miles NE of Lowman. We parked the Carryall at the end of the road then crossed a stream, which in June was at flood stage.” The stream crossing was made via a 50-foot log that had been felled across the stream by the survey line crew. It made a “‘primitive’ foot bridge,” Scott said, and “on some days water was lapping over the log as we crossed. It BOUNCED too! No one wanted to admit that they were afraid, so we just ran right across and hoped for the best!”

From a point just beyond the stream, they worked their way north, “cross-sectioning and slope-staking/RP setting...along a rough trail cut by the line crew the year before.” There was heavy rain for the first two weeks, and the crew would be soaked by lunch time.

While the men were working, Soft-Shoe collected chunks of pitch-filled wood, which could be used to get a fire started within minutes, even in a downpour. “On the first day I made the mistake of putting a can of pork and beans beside the wood stack to warm once the fire got going. In about five minutes I realized that I couldn’t retrieve the can without risking 3rd degree burns!” Scott remembered that the Party Chief had another solution for lunch: On Monday morning, he’d “pack a sample sack filled with a brick of cheese, a loaf of bread and maybe some canned meat....He would then hang the sack up in a tree at the end of each working day, picking it up and moving it with us the next day.” The food lasted through Friday, and “he’d take the sack back to refill every weekend. Bears only got to it once....

“It was beautiful, primitive country and a great place to work,” Scott remembered, until one Monday when they came back and found that local shepherds had used the trail to get their sheep “from the pastures at Stanley to the transport trucks at the Lowman. After that it was not unusual to find a sheep carcass down at the bottom of gullies, right

where our cross section went. As time passed, it didn't take a very sensitive nose to find the carcasses. Those days we sometimes passed on having lunch."

Progress on the survey "virtually stopped" when they reached steep canyon areas, Scott said, prompting Project Engineer Jim Jensen to spend a week with the crew "to encourage a little more production. We found out on Monday that his idea of lunch was a candy bar eaten on the move. On Tuesday we all scattered at lunch time—those 30 minutes of rest were pretty dear to us."

Scott found out that summer that proper footwear was essential for the work. As he recalled, "I splurged and bought a pair of White Boot Company work boots for the incredibly high price of \$42, (but) I decided I couldn't afford to pay the extra \$8 or \$10 to add Vibram soles, which had just been developed." Instead, his boots had the standard boot sole: durable but very slick. "For the next two weeks I had very sore feet as the high instep boots gradually remolded my feet during our long hikes."

Once his feet finally adapted themselves to the boots, they worked out fine. Then they started some work on "a steep, grassy slope. It took me only one step to figure out I should have sprung for the Vibrams." He'd slid about 20-feet down the slope before he could grab onto enough grass to stop his momentum. "The week on that slope was a long one for me."

Scott occasionally found himself reflecting on what a great summer job he had landed with the BPR. "It soon occurred to me that each week, on the way back to Lowman on Sunday evening, we passed car after car of vacationers who were regretfully returning home after a very short weekend of playing in the woods. We, on the other hand, were headed in for a week of picnics in the woods and we were being paid to do it! What a life!"

Watch for more of Scott's adventures as a summer temp and other stories about his work on paving, materials, and surveying projects. Retirees with memories to share about their early days with the BPR are welcome to submit them to me at marili.reilly@dot.gov.



A crew hand-slopes a talus slide on the Santiam Highway (Oregon Forest Highway Project E-23-G1), 1932-34. Photo from Final Construction Report, WFLHD Archives.