

# Getting Hired at the Bureau of Public Roads – Part III

## *Compiled from emails and individual interviews, 2008-2009*

*There were several avenues to getting hired at the Bureau of Public Roads during the 1950's and 1960's. These included hiring on as a summer temporary, moving up through the training program, and being chosen from the Office of Personnel Management register. Retirees recalled their experiences coming to work at the BPR, both for jobs in the field and in the office.*

Through whatever means new employees get their jobs, there is always government paperwork to be completed. **Ottie Johnson**, who spent 15 years in administrative jobs at the Bureau of Public Roads and Federal Highway Administration, wrote in an email in March 2009 that she was picked off the register as a clerk typist in 1968. “I was hired by **Harold Hall** (and) was to start work on December 31, 1968,” she wrote. Excited about the new job, and despite a severe snow storm, she dutifully headed out to the Regional Office in Portland “to be finger-printed and complete the necessary paperwork.” It was terrible weather, with blowing snow and icy roads. “My husband, Earl, put tire chains on the car to ensure our getting there,” she said, but as they were crossing the Interstate Bridge, “one of the chains broke and we clanked our way over to the Portland office.” When they arrived, there was a big surprise in store: “Only one person was there,” she said, and that was just “to let employees know there would be no work that day.” The Vancouver office was also closed, so she ended up starting work in the new year.

She would be on the job a couple of months before the fingerprinting was finally accomplished. “**Lee Horrocks** took me to the Clark County jail to have this done,” she said. “What a scary feeling that was, hearing all those doors clank shut behind us.”



*By 1965, part of the wing of the north building had already been lost to freeway construction. This view looks west along the north side of the building. Some of the downtown buildings still standing include the Heritage Building (on 6<sup>th</sup> between Broadway and Main) and the Smith Tower Apartments (5<sup>th</sup> and Washington), then under construction. The segment of this building that still remains currently houses the Right-of-Way and Survey offices. WFLHD Archives.*

There were a lot of changes made to the building over the years, Ottie remembered, and another employee, who came to Western Direct Federal Division around 1980 or 1981, recalled what a “spartan place” it was. **Allan Stockman** transferred from the Federal-aid side of FHWA when the environmental unit was just being set up. “Walking in the door the first day,” Allan said, he came into a wide open office setting. “People worked in big rooms,” and the corner of the office where his environmental section was located was a room “filled with all these big layout tables, and a couple of drafting tables.” The unit had four or five employees, and there was only “one phone for these people....hanging on (a) pillar in the middle of this huge room.”

In those days, it was expected that people would put in 60-80 hours a week to get the job done, Allan recalled, and this was done without any overtime pay. He noted this was “different from Utah and Colorado divisions” where he had spent his first ten or so years in Federal-aid work.

“**Bill Parsons** and I were the first two people that I can think of that came from Federal Aid jobs directly over to WDFD.” Neither of them had worked in Federal Lands offices before, other than on their short, training program assignments, and he said they were able to “bridge a gap there,” between the program side of the agency and the project work. They were some of the first people who “did not actually go through their instruction programs. That's how you would start with Federal Highways at WDFD,” he explained. “Anyone they hired...started out in the field. You started on survey, you started on materials testing and construction, as GS2's or 3's and you worked your way up, and that's how everyone did it.”

Although he didn't have the benefit of the internal Federal Lands training program, he thought it was a good opportunity. Employees on the program had “development charts, (and) they had to work in these different areas.” As head of the environmental section, Allan looked forward to having those people temporarily assigned to his staff. “We needed people from design and construction....because they had so much good experience. Then...we could train them in environment so when they went back (into) construction and design they actually knew a little bit about environment...it really made a world of difference in what they did in design and construction” after they had worked in environment.

“We did that for 3 years, 4 years....and most of the guys liked it, once they had a chance to taste all the different” types of work in the office. Then, as changes were made in work processes, and more and more work was parceled out to consultants, the program was eliminated. “A lot of us went to (Division Engineer) **Jim Hall** and said...you can't stop that. We spent years of getting this thing going. It's working.” But, Allan acknowledges, “I don't know what pressure he had,” and management had to make a decision about the program.

The internal Federal Lands training was a nice complement to the Highway Engineer Training Program. **Willis Grafe** and **Walt Langlitz** completed that program two decades apart, and both spoke highly of the opportunities it provided. “I was given one of the very first undergraduate assignments to the Junior Engineering program,” said Willis Grafe, who started his training in 1948. Although he left the agency before graduating, he spoke highly of the program: It “saved our skin during World War II because they were the ones who kept everything going. The guys who trained in that program...were the backbone.” Willis had done surveying work on the Alcan Highway in the early 1940's, then joined the Navy and was stationed in Pearl Harbor when the war ended. “The whole fleet was there waiting to go into Japan on the invasion. And don't you think that was a sigh of relief....They blew off all their rockets. They had a fireworks demonstration that I think was the biggest the world has ever seen.”

Graduating in 1968, Walt Langlitz said, “The training program was exactly what I needed and gave me enough exposure to various aspects of the BPR to settle on a career path that never changed.” He, too, took out time from his career for the Navy. “Shortly after completing the Training Program, I received notice from my local draft board that I was number one on their list. I had received a student deferment while I was in college, and then received an occupational deferment while I was in the

Training Program. Faced with induction,” he said, “I volunteered for a 30-month program with the Navy Seabees from September 1969 through December 1971.”

When he came back, Walt got to continue the tour of the U.S. that he'd begun in the training program. “WDFD was my preference” for assignment, he said, “but that was denied because Oregon was my home state. I wound up in Denver as my second preference.” He spent 13 years in Central Direct Federal Division before getting that transfer to Vancouver.

Another means of getting good training was to join the agency as a temporary employee on summer assignments. That's how **Scott Rustay** came to the BPR, hiring on through the Division Office in Boise. “At that time the Idaho work was managed by the Boise office, and project engineers were headquartered there,” he said. His first assignment was in 1961 after his freshman year at Boise State, and after that first summer, “I was pretty well hooked on the BPR and highway construction. Being in the middle of all that big equipment and watching as a road began to appear from those stakes we had put in the ground was a real kick! Getting per diem as well as a salary was also a big deal.”

From those summer years at BPR to his later years with FHWA, Scott couldn't help but notice the change in how the agency was perceived. “Looking back, it seems like one of the biggest changes from the 1960s to when I retired was the attitude of the general public toward our work. During my five years as a temporary, I remember most of the locals—who were directly affected by dust, noise, and delays—were delighted to have the roadwork. They were happy to sell us food, lodging, vehicle maintenance, services, etc., and really looked forward to more tourist income and better transportation to the outside world.

“By the mid 1970s, that all seemed to change. Many locals came to view the projects as an unwanted intrusion that did nothing for them.” They saw road improvements as benefiting outsiders who were just passing through, “or worse than that, might decide to move in and bring change to a world that they dearly loved.” Scott recalled that “long time construction supervisor, **Jack Gleason**, used to tell a wonderful story about carrying a Red Ball Shoe Company business card that he could show in north Idaho bars when he was asked what he did for a living. That way he could dodge the locals' comments about the roadwork and get on with a peaceful dinner.”

After his five seasons as a temporary, Scott said he “was sold on making the Bureau a career.” Those years gave him exposure not only to the work he would make a career of, but also to some “unique individuals...Many of the project engineers had gotten their starts during World War II—some in the Canal Zone; some on the Alcan Highway through Alaska. Those in the lower grades came from all kinds of backgrounds, but most were raised in isolated small towns and considered the woods almost as a second home. Living in tent camps and being away from home was no big deal to them. Most felt lucky to have a job that paid well and didn't involve life-threatening work like logging or mining. While they did have some interesting quirks, they were also very talented when it came to...the work.”

*Ottie Johnson worked her way up to Procurement Agent at WDFD, transferred to Bonneville Power Administration in 1983 as a Supervisory Purchasing Agent, and retired from Federal Service in 1988. She and her husband live in Crosby, North Dakota. Allan Stockman joined the agency in 1969 and had his HET Federal Lands assignments in the Denver office. He was interviewed near his home near Tucson, Arizona. Willis Grafe worked in WDFD in the 1950's. After assignments in Oregon Division and headquarters, he retired from FHWA in 1976. Walt Langlitz was recruited for the training program from Oregon State University in 1965. Scott Rustay entered the Highway Engineer Training program in the spring of 1966 after graduating from the University of Idaho.*

*Retirees with memories to share about the early days of Western Federal Lands Highway Division, please email [marili.reilly@dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@dot.gov).*