

Life in the Camps: Prince of Wales Island, 1980-1996



In the late 1970's and early 1980's WFLHD started looking for employees willing to work on Prince of Wales Island. "There weren't very many people that wanted to go up there," **Joel Petersen** recalled .

He went to Craig, Alaska, in September 1980 to find housing for seven people, the first survey crew sent to the Island. In such an isolated area, it was difficult to find adequate lodging, but he finally

secured space in a fishing lodge in Klawock and arranged for meals on a separate contract.

The crew took a float plane from Ketchikan, Joel explained. "The weather would be bad a lot of times, and you couldn't make it. You had to come back and try again the next day...."

"They gave us one way tickets, back then," he said, "because they didn't want you skipping off the island....you had no way out.

"We were up there two or three months, then they'd give you a ticket to go back."

One or two people actually did skip out, he said. "As I recall, they were temporary employees and they got tired of it. They bought a ticket and flew out and we never saw them again."

If the plane couldn't land in Klawock or Craig, they'd put down in Hollis instead, Joel said, "and you'd have to get a ride. We didn't

**Western
Federal Lands
Highway
Division**

A Glimpse into an Earlier Era

Article 52
September 2014

**Compiled from
Emails and
Interviews, 2010**

Approximately 30 years after Western Federal Lands Highway Division became involved in road improvement projects on the Prince of Wales Island, the road system was recognized as an Alaska Scenic Byway. In commemoration of this event, WFLHD retirees and employees were invited to share their memories of work on the island.

Above: Float planes, boats, and ferries provide the only access to Prince of Wales Island. Photo provided by Brent Coe, WFLHD Archives.

Float planes and boats provide the only access to the Island



Craig, Alaska, 1979. By 2010 the population of the largest city on Prince of Wales Island had grown to about 1,200 people. Photo courtesy Jay Worthington.

have any (government) vehicles up there,” so they used what was known locally as “rent a wreck.” The vehicles they rented were really “banged up, baling wire on the doors...some of them had windows; some of them didn’t.

“I remember the island not having any paved roads. There were just...single lane roads with turn-outs...If you got over 30 or so, you were going really fast, because it would just beat you to death.”

The crew also spent time in Craig, which, like the rest of the island, had no paved streets. “It never stopped raining,” Joel said. “It was just a mud hole.

They worked six ten-hour days and on Sunday “everybody would go to town and try to get cleaned up, or do laundry, and get ready to do it again the next week.”

They bought tickets and flew out and we never saw them again.

The remoteness also had an impact on law enforcement activity on the island. The sheriff was a member of a local tribe, Joel said, and “he was the only police on the island.” If the state police were needed, “it would take them 6-8 hours to get out there (by) boat.... Everybody was on their own....

The Tlingit and the Haida both

have communities on the island, he noted, “and it was interesting to find out a little about the local tribes. They were separated in their different towns, and they’d all come together (in Craig) on Saturday night...It had to be interesting, to say the least.”

Jay Worthington was on Prince of Wales Island in 1979 doing Control Survey on the Hydaburg Road. “I went up there with **Jack Kirkpatrick, Ted Breneman, Steve Pratt**, and, I believe, **Al Bonde** (for) a 30-day assignment. **Jess Robins** went at the same time to the survey crew Joel Petersen was on.”

Jay said one of the most memorable events “was when Joel thought he could wade across a muskeg hole instead of going around like the rest of us. He was lucky it was only about ten feet deep.



The scenic beauty of Prince of Wales Island after the rain. Photo courtesy Jay Worthington.

Once surveys are completed, design work “explodes”

“(Then) he was upset because we didn't stop and build a fire so he could dry out. Wasn't much use,” Jay reflected. “It rained all the time anyway and we were always wet.”

WFLHD completed a lot of survey work in the early 1980's, Joel says, “before any of the designs were done on the Big Salt Lake Road. After that, then it really exploded” with work for the Design section.

By that time, about 1985, “I was working in Design with **Walter Langlitz** on the design of the Big Salt Lake Road. “I bet I was up there 10-15-20 times for lengthy stays. I got to know Craig and



A bridge site on the Big Salt Lake Road. Photo courtesy Jay Worthington.

He thought he could wade across a muskeg hole instead of going around.



Leonard Sandoval (left) and **Rick Pressley** (right) stop for lunch along the road. Jay Worthington admits “I can't remember the name of the one in the middle, but he's the one that had his paycheck punched by a bear.” [\(See story #37\)](#) Photo courtesy Jay Worthington.

Klawock pretty well...staying there in the main town, looking at different projects.”

“I did the original line and grade for the (environmental) permitting process. It involved lots of bridge alignments, culverts and drainage, and permits, and I remember it was quite involved.”

Joel said he and Walt would go up there “for a year or two, back and forth, working on the Big Salt Lake Road and

getting all those bridges sorted out: where they could be and where the alignment could cross. Lots of hiking in the brush and the tundra, seen lots of fish.... we would be out topog'ing in the rivers up there. Those stories you used to hear about (how) you could walk across the river on the fish backs? It was almost true; I've seen it there. It really was just frothing with them.”

Larry Adams worked construction on the Hydaburg Road, arriving in October 1990. “I finished up a job begun by **John Arriaga**,” he said, and when he left it, “**Al Gould** took over....We had five different contractors; one was a native corporation.”

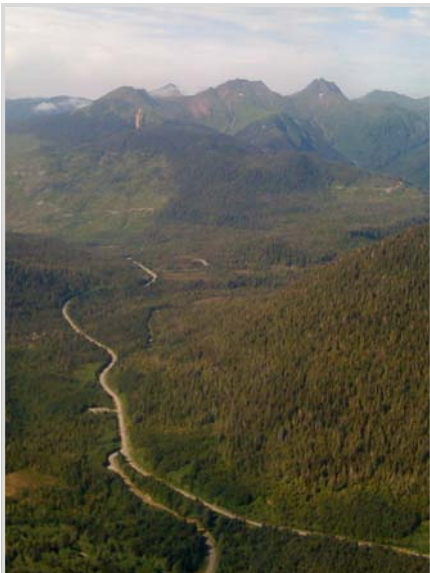
Larry also recalled the bad weather. Since he lived on the island year around, he would stay on after the project closed

Weather events provide notable memories

down, “flying down to Vancouver for engineering conferences” each winter.

On two occasions they were grounded by fog on the way back. “We spent two Super Bowl Sundays in Ketchikan; (we) couldn’t get back,” he said. Pilots who made the flights frequently had developed a macabre sense of humor. Sometimes, he said, they “made some comments when we got into turbulence – Jump!” Not all of the passengers appreciated that humor.

The island “really got nasty when it came to weather. I think we averaged over 250 inches of rain a year,” he said. “One Christmas Eve, (while) we were living in our trailer in Craig, we heard this crash. The wind was blowing about



An aerial view, 2010, shows the remoteness of the roads on Prince of Wales Island. Photo provided by Brent Coe, WFLHD Archives.

80-90 knots.” Larry and his wife looked outside and saw that a tree had fallen onto the trailer next to them. Fortunately no one had been at home.

Despite the weather, the crew still found time to go fishing. “Fishing

We got a lot of visitors, especially when the fishing was good.

was excellent,” he said. “We got a lot of visitors, especially when the fishing was good.”

Phil Ditzler spent the summers of 1984-86 on the island as a co-op student. His first assignment was with a survey team on Hydaberg road, with crew chief Jay Worthington. Al Gould was leading the construction crew, at the time.

The days were long, and in their spare time, “we did a lot of fishing and crabbing,” he said. “It was always a lot of fun.” The crew “did a lot together on our spare time,” he said, citing fishing trips with Earl Pepper (who



Control Lake, 1979. Photo courtesy Jay Worthington.

worked for Al Gould) and his wife Lucille. “They would pickle salmon; they would go clamming...I’d always go out fishing with Lucille or Earl. It was amazing how good the fishing was. Sometimes everyone would have a fish on at the same time.”

Phil returned to Alaska and Prince of Wales Island in 1995 taking over as Project Engineer on Big Salt Lake Road, when Larry Adams retired.

“The project was so far from Klawock and Craig and Thorne Bay they created this man camp called Adamsville... They named it after Larry,” Phil explained. “It was on a waste area, an old fill,” he said, “and it was just beyond the junction of Big Salt and North Prince of Wales Road.”

The contractor and FHWA had their offices there “as well as trailers for their folks to live in.” The water source, he remembered, was piped in “from muskeg up on the hill.”

Adamsville an unlikely backdrop for family life



A float plane arrives at the survey site, 1979. Photo courtesy Jay Worthington.

He left his family behind when he went up to the project, but brought them up there to live with him as soon as he could.

“Nora, my wife was pregnant,” he said. “She had Nicholas down in Tacoma,” and flew up with him on a float plane when he was still only four weeks old. “Caitlin was a year old,” he added. “I remember my kids taking baths in that muskeg water. It was very clear, but a golden color.”

Phil said he has fond memories of being up there with the family. “There are no distractions—just work and the family—and that was awfully nice.... It was a lot of fun.”

The Ditzler family lived in one of the house trailers at the camp and had a nice view of the hills. “Being in that man camp, you just had to walk

across the parking lot to go to work,” he said. The camp “was used for the contract I was on and the contract before mine, I believe, and then it was de-commissioned.”

Ron Carmichael arrived in WFLHD as Division Engineer in 2000. “One of our largest and most important Federal Lands programs was the Forest Highway Program,” he recalled, and “one of the most significant Forest Highway programs” was in Southeast

“I remember my kids taking baths in that clear, golden, muskeg water.”

Alaska. A visit to that area became “one of my first travel priorities.



FLH Associate Administrator Art Hamilton, center front, and FHWA Executive Director Bud Wright (hidden from view) visited a Forest Service waste area on Prince of Wales Island. Photo courtesy Ron Carmichael.

“Of course what most folks from the Lower 48 don’t know is that to get to Prince of Wales Island you must fly into Ketchikan,” and from there, “the only way to Prince of Wales Island is by boat or float plane....

“I remember that the flight from Seattle to Ketchikan was only half full of passengers; the other half of the plane was full of supplies, cargo, and mail. That was my first ah-ha moment when I realized that Southeast Alaska was different than anything I’d seen in the Lower 48.

“My first impression of Prince of Wales Island was its immense beauty,” he said. “This was immediately followed by a sense of isolation.”

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A Glimpse into an Earlier Era

For another view of construction projects on Prince of Wales Island, see the earlier article in this series, [“The Prince of Wales Island Road System: From logging roads to State Scenic Byway.”](#) Contributors Joel Petersen, Jay Worthington, Larry Adams, and Ron Carmichael are all retirees of WFLHD. Phillip Ditzler is currently Division Administrator in FHWA Oregon Division.

The stories in this series have been developed by Marili Reilly from interviews and correspondence. Retirees who would like to share their memories may email marili.reilly@dot.gov.

Prince of Wales Road System designated as Alaska Scenic Byway

Continued from page 5

From 1980 to 2010, 88 miles of road on Prince of Wales Island were improved using \$139 million in Forest Highway funds. Upgraded geometry, drainage, and surfacing brought the primitive arterial



Above: Project Engineer Dusty Escamilla. Right: Ribbon Cutting at the Organized Village of Kasaan. Photos provided by Brent Coe, WFLHD Archives.

roads to a safety standard appropriate for passenger cars. Projects included Big Salt Road, Control Lake to Thorne Bay Road, Sandy Beach Road, North Prince of Wales Road, and Coffman Cove Road.

The Organized Village of Kasaan, in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Transportation State Scenic Byways Department and other stakeholders, nominated the 260-mile Prince of Wales Island Road System as a State Scenic Byway. On August 5, 2010, the Village celebrated the achievement of this design-



nation with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, pictured above.

WFLHD continues to be involved in improving roads on Prince of Wales Island, with funding provided by the U. S. Forest Service, Alaska Department of Transportation, and the Federal Lands Access Program.