

Working the Parks Recollections of the Early Days

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Working the Parks Recollections of the Early Days

In 1976, FHWA published *The Trailblazers*, containing employee recollections of early work in the National Parks and National Forests. Following are excerpts

Mount Rainier National Park

Clifford Polk

On the Rainier Park project [in the 1930s], we all camped at Ohanapecosh Hot Spring. I was allowed to camp in the park with my family and the park bears would come up regularly to beg for food. We fed them, and I guess that made them more bold because one day I woke up early to see a bear poking his head through the tent window, within reach of my daughter. I scared him off before he caused any trouble though.

Yellowstone National Park

William B. "Pete" Peters

Once when I was working on the side of a mountain, the contractor's timekeeper came two miles up to tell me my wife and baby had gotten ill and my wife wanted me to come back to camp immediately. The timekeeper offered me his horse to ride down but I knew I could beat any horse in the world down a mountain, and I ran the whole distance They both had dysentery from impure water and we had to get to the nearest doctor who was in Lander, over 100 miles away. The same day, one of the chainmen who was a cigarette smoker got burned while pumping up one of those Coleman lanterns that burned gasoline. It exploded and threw gasoline all over him and burned his arms, face and neck pretty badly. The boys got a blanket and smothered the fire out.

I tried to telephone the doctor from camp but I couldn't get through because of one of the connections in the line. The contractor had told me that if I ever wanted to use his car, he would have a driver take me anywhere anytime. So, the contractor's man and I went to each farmhouse with a telephone on the line and tried to call the doctor until we finally got through. The doc came right out and took care of everybody but when we got the bill, he had lumped everything together for a "call" - he figured since we all worked for the Government, it didn't matter. It did to me since he had spent most of his time on the burned man and I remember it took a while before we got the charges all straightened out.

Bryce Canyon National Park

Karl S. Chamberlain

The field party [in 1923] was made up of a Resident Engineer and one other instrumentman who were regular employees. The balance of the crew were temporary employees, most of whom were students. According to my recollection, expenses were paid to a limit of \$1.20 per day. The automotive equipment consisted of World War I surplus equipment. The Resident Engineer rated a car and another was provided for the crew. Both were Model T Fords of the crank up variety for starting. They used high pressure tires and it was an uncommon day's travel if there was not at least one flat tire - repaired and patched on the spot.

The quarters and field offices on the project consisted of tents without the benefit of floors or other unnecessary luxuries. The furnishings in the sleeping tents were rough lumber bunks without mattresses. Fresh cut pine boughs served as a substitute. A water bucket on a rough lumber stand and a wash basin completed the furnishings. Meals were taken at the contractor's mess at a cost of \$1.00 per day. Food was plentiful, but the mess tent was unscreened. A large horse tent was located in the vicinity as nearly all motive power for the construction was horse drawn. Living conditions were rather primitive. A Saturday night bath could be taken in a round tub with only warm water heated on a small wood stove. On a Saturday night a trip to town could provide a good bath at the barber shop for 25 cents. A cafe meal could also be bought for the very low price of 35 cents plus.

Crater Lake National Park

Norman Wood

During the summer season of 1931, someone decided that part of the Rim Road around Crater Lake should be located inside the crater itself As was then customary on location surveys, the party chief (me) was out in front of the transit party "flagging the line." Along the base of the vertical cliff above me was a narrow game trail and it was along this trail we proposed to run the "P" line. About the middle of the afternoon, of the first day out, I was setting an angle flag along this trail at a point in a small draw along which I could look downward some 800 feet and see the deep blue water of the Lake. As I attempted to drive the lath I apparently shifted my weight and my footing gave way. Down I went - with my axe and bundle of lath. While the lath and axe were never found, I managed during my slide down about a 1:1 slope to catch hold of a large rock imbedded in the slope and stop my slide before I reached the vertical drop below me. I "froze" and was unable to move for a time, after which I dug my boot toes into the pumice slope and transferred some of my weight away from my arms This is the closest I have yet come to going to the big survey camp in the sky - needless to say, I never again worked in such areas alone or without ropes. I cannot yet look over a high cliff without the same cold fear I experienced that day.

In any record of those early days on Forest and Park activities by BPR, it is proper to note the role played by the wife and children of project personnel. Quite often, there was a "no-family" rule applicable on the more remote projects and almost always on location surveys. Under such circumstances families remained at District (Region) headquarters. However, on many

construction projects families were at first tolerated - and in later years certain provisions were made - such as furnishing a tent or available government-owned facilities with consequent reduction in the per diem rate. (During the 1930's this rate was \$1.30 basic, having been reduced from \$1.50 in deference to the "depression.") My personal experiences with family life "on the project" are many and varied. In the summer of 1931, BPR families were first permitted in Crater Lake Park. While NPS made a fine small stone house available to the BPR resident engineer, he was charged one-third of his per diem rate as rental, which actually was a bargain. Crew members were allotted an area for a tent camp. Travel trailers and mobile homes were unknown in those days. Living quarters were basically a 12' x 16' tent on a frame with 4' sidewalls. NPS furnished electricity and water, with wiring and water pipes the employee's responsibility. We had a three-burner kerosene cook stove, powder box furniture, an airtight wood heating stove and steel cots, compliments of BPR. Nighttime temperatures at Park Headquarters (Elev. 6,200) are such that the heating stove was in use both evening and mornings. Refrigeration was a snow bank nearby (until about July 4th), a homemade water cooler, or the nearby creek.

Yosemite National Park

Eric Erhart

In the Spring of 1926 Tom Roach hired on in Yosemite Park as transitman for Harry Tolan. This was the first year of construction in the National Park system Tom was later in charge of driving the Wawona tunnel in Yosemite. One of his favorite stories is telling how they had cut a window in the tunnel wall to outside air. This permitted the tunnel air to exhaust immediately after each successive blast permitting the crew to start working sooner. On one occasion Tom thought about standing in one of the windows when a shot was fired. On second thought he set a loaded wheelbarrow in the window. When the shot went off, the wheelbarrow was blown into oblivion in the next canyon.

Mount Rainier National Park

Rene Wright

Animals were an occasional nuisance around camps [in the 1920s], especially the big, black bears in Rainier National Park. One big fellow would come around the cook tent every day for scraps or whatever else he could find to eat - he knew exactly what time dinner was served. We tried to scare him off with boiling water, sharp sticks, pepper and everything else, but to no avail. The Park Service finally trapped him in a big corrugated pipe trap and hauled him off to the other end of the park. In three days, however, he was back.

Cougars would follow you around to see what you were doing. They would follow you directly in your trail, criss-crossing to stay out of sight. They didn't pose a problem unless you wounded one. Most of the so-called "wild" animals weren't aggressive - they didn't seem to consider us enemies

Landowners were another occasional problem, although most were extremely cooperative. A few would object if you went through the middle of a field. Survey parties were sometimes challenged with shotguns and a local sheriff would have to be called out to control the owner.

Mount Zion National Park

William D. White

The years 1928-30 . . . construction work on one of the largest forest and park roads up to that time was started. This was the Zion Mt. Carmel Tunnel The prime contractor had divided the project into four sections. Each section was under subcontract to a different nationality group. In other words, the first section was all Italian, the second Swedish, the third Finnish and the fourth German. Very few of the workmen in any of these groups spoke English so for the engineering work necessary for stakeout and to interpret the specification requirements we had to single out an individual who understood English and could interpret questions from the rest of the men that required an answer. These station gangs, as they were called, all worked by hand methods, using picks and shovels, single bits, drilling by hand and using mine cars and tracks for wheelbarrows to and [from] embankments. Each station gang had its own camp set up and cookhouse. It was a rather interesting experience. When working with a particular gang one day you might be asked to have lunch with them and it would be Italian type food. The next day you would be eating food that was more of the type served in Germany.

Yellowstone National Park

A. W. Parsons

My assignment on the Red Lodge-Cook City project started in July of 1932 The first big snowstorm of the [1933] season occurred in early October and two men working with the bridge contractor near Cook City attempted to return to Red Lodge by going over the Bear Tooth Mountain summit. As they neared the summit, they could see that they would never make it and abandoning their car they hiked on foot and tried to get to a small shelter shack a few miles west of the summit. They made it to the shack all right but were unable to start a fire or do anything to save themselves as they were found frozen to death there at a later date.