

Partnerships that Work: BPR and the National Park Service

Compiled from Interviews, January-March 2008

Our partner agencies have always helped the Federal Lands program succeed, and employees of BPR and FHWA have worked hard to deliver the product they wanted. Retirees recalled some experiences working with the Park Service and with the public, and times when those partnerships worked well – or faltered slightly.

Even after the Going to the Sun Road was completed, Bureau of Public Roads employees continued to spend time at Glacier National Park working on maintenance, inspections, or reconstruction. **Ray Westby**, who saw the construction of the Going to the Sun Road while growing up in West Glacier, Montana, later headed up the design section at BPR in Vancouver. He remembered that one of the inspectors on the original road, **Mick Moen**, was still at BPR when he came to work there and was a member of his staff.

Ray recalled how they decided on some of the guardrails that were used instead of rock walls in some places: “the Park Service was trying ... out different things,” he said. They needed to cut costs and were looking for something cheaper than the rock walls.

Willis Grafe was sent to Glacier National Park almost as soon as he started working for BPR in 1952. “At that time they used what they called penetration oil mass,” he said. “You scatter oil and aggregate on the road instead of hot mix paving.”

Kenneth Holgate was the Project Engineer when Willis was sent over to work on oiling the Going to the Sun Road. “What they were doing at that time was trying to increase capacity...by widening the road,” but as future designers would also learn, a road carved into the sides of cliffs could not be widened by conventional means.

In this instance, they covered the ditch with aggregate, and then oiled it, Willis said, but the modification was not successful. Without the ditches, the road was overwhelmed by the spring runoff. “The road was nothing but a canal between the parapet wall and the cliff -- and no ditch,” he said.



The Final Construction Report on the project at Columbia Falls-Glacier Park in the 1920's described this photo as “Handrail forms, Bear Creek # 3. These forms were built in 16 foot panels with staggered joints.” H. A. Stoddart, Jr., was the Civil Engineer who submitted the report. WFLHD Archives, 1920's construction.

“You’ve heard the term Beauty Doctor – that’s the landscape engineers with whom you had to work,” Willis said. Those beauty doctors were especially concerned about the rock walls that provide so much character to the road. They insisted on native stone, he said, “but there wasn’t any quarry. We shipped a bunch in from Minnesota, and they couldn’t tell the difference.”

Then, he said, “they complained at us when we’d splatter and get a little bit of asphalt on that rock wall.” But, one time when a big rainstorm came along, “they let the traffic run. (That) rutted up the road and...threw asphalt and mud all over that wall.”



Postcard from WFLHD Archives.

Willis said he and his wife were living “in the village the guys had built when they first built the road.... the bears would shake the doors once in awhile.” From his cabin, he said, “I could hear the cars going by, and I could hear the water,” and he knew they should close the road. When he expressed this to the Park Service, however, they said, ““Oh, we can’t close the road, because word would get back east and we’d lose the whole traffic thing.’ But man, did it ever mess up that wall,” he said. “We had mud all over that wall.”

“It was really a mess,” he said, and finally got the attention of his partners. “They never gave us any trouble any more after that.”

Willis also remembered a Park Ranger fussing about travelers getting stuck on the road. “They used to come up there, and cars would get a vapor lock. It would be hot, and they couldn’t get it going,” Willis said. Then there came a day when the ranger himself got a vapor lock. A BPR crew quickly came to his aid. “Here came the boys with a whole lot of snow and fixed (it)...They told him, ‘Yeah we do that for people all the time.’” Willis said, “We never heard any more about it.”

All in all, though, Willis said he enjoyed his relationship with BPR’s partners. “I’ve always had an easy time with the parks and the BLM.”

John Bucholtz worked in design in the 1960's and said that one of the most interesting jobs he worked on was a road that went through Gardiner, Montana, on the north edge of Yellowstone National Park. The road "went into town and through town, across a 410-foot bridge." He was a GS-7 at the time, and said the job was more complex than the work he was usually given. "It was not only road work but it was sidewalks and it was stairs and storm drains and lighting systems...."

"We had a little problem because of the slope in town – it went down to the river. So one side of the existing roadway was lower than the other. To widen it and then put sidewalks on it, it made that more of a dramatic change.

"The design engineer at the time says, 'OK, what we'll do is we'll put that on a 2% all the way through town.' So it wasn't a crowned road. It sloped all the way, and it was a tangent too...just to make up that little difference."

During the plan-in-hand meeting, he said, "a guy comes up and he says, 'I've got the motel right there where the curve goes across the bridge. What are you going to do about all that water that comes down through my parking lot?' Of course I didn't know about water coming down through his parking lot when I designed it." Gardiner was just a small town with no resident lawyers, but the motel owner hinted that he might take legal action. "He says, 'Am I going to have to go to town....talk to my lawyer and see what we can do about that?' I said, 'No, I'll take care of it.'"

The guy became a little more at ease, then, and asked John where he was from. When John told him they had come out there from Vancouver, "he says 'I've got a daughter lives out in Vancouver. I go out there every year.'" John gave him his phone number. "I says, 'Next time you go out there...Call me up and come down and I'll show you what I did.'"

The man took him at his word and called when he was in town. John brought him into the office and showed him the plans. "I said, 'I put a drain in there, to take care of all the water. It's hooked to the main storm drain system that I put in, and it shouldn't be any problem.'

"That's great,' he says, 'Next time you're out (to Montana), I'll take you bear hunting.'"

Vern Ford recalled that there was a big surge in hiring in the early 1960's when the office took on the missile base roads in Montana. "They had a lot of guys that would normally work in Oregon or Washington (who) were sent over there to supplement the crews that were there," he said.

"They sent me over there to work on the roads in Glacier National Park....We put in the final survey...on what they call the L line alignment for Hwy 2 on the southern edge of the park." When he went back the following year, "we had crews on Highway 2 (and also on) Two Medicine



A deer caught by a WFLHD Construction Branch employee at Yellowstone Park. Construction Photo Archives.

Road and Chief Mountain Road in the park itself.” **Ralph Frame** was the Resident Engineer, he said, “and we worked it all out (of one office) in East Glacier, Montana....I was there the second year,” he said, “in the office taking care of all the records on the three jobs we had going.” After his two years, he said, “I came back to Oregon. I was from Oregon.

Fred Rogers recalled “kind of a goof” that occurred one time when he was sent out to Glacier. At the time, the paving contractor was “to the point where they were paving from the bridge across the middle fork of the Flathead River, into the park, and then around the corner. It stopped somewhere near Lake McDonald.” He met with the Project Engineer, they had their look around, then the P.E. suggested “let’s go out to this restaurant out by US 2 at West Glacier, ’...it’s there by the railroad station,” Fred said. The restaurant was empty when they went in, but it appeared a crowd was expected. “We went in there and here were all these hamburgers sitting out there on plates,” Fred said. It turned out the Park Service people at the headquarters had ordered ahead, but the headquarters “was on the road being paved... The contractor had paved past their entrance, so they couldn’t get out.” He and the P.E. helped out the proprietor by buying two of the hamburgers that were already prepared. Fred chuckled at the goof. “They didn’t take into account lunch time,” he said.

Ray Westby started with BPR in Vancouver in 1950, moved to the Washington Division for about ten years, then returned to Vancouver in 1969. Willis Grafe left BPR during the training program and returned in 1952 after a stint at the Corps of Engineers.

Vern Ford and John Bucholtz spent their careers with BPR/FHWA at what is now Western Federal Lands Highway Division. Fred Rogers spent part of his time on the training program on the east coast and in headquarters. If you have comments or stories to share about the BLM work done by WFLHD or other stories to share, please email me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.



Final Construction Report on Columbia Falls-Glacier Park Project (Formerly Belton-Java) Nyack-Crystal Creek Station (1923-1924-1925) shows “Maintenance stakes carved with a jack-knife.” The report was submitted by E.E. Avery, Chief of Road Survey Party.