

Getting Hired at the Bureau of Public Roads

Compiled from Retiree Interviews and Letters

Retirees have recalled the early years of the training program and their experiences coming to work for the BPR. Whether hired from college or straight off the streets, they've begun with staking and survey, drafting, or other assignments, and those experiences have been the subject of many fond BPR memories.

The Federal Lands Highway Program has reached its 25th anniversary, an event celebrated September 10, 2008, at the Western Federal Lands Highway Division office in Vancouver, Washington. Many retirees were present, and one of them – Francis “Mac” McConnell – brought a letter outlining some of his earliest memories. “On Monday, May 9, 1949, I was hired for the Packwood, Washington, White Pass Highway,” he wrote. He was 19 years old at the time and recalled that “some of the other new hires were **Donald Smith, Bill McLoughlin, and Merle Hewitt.**” Other employees he recalled being on the job included “**Everett Furgason, Vern Ham, Ron Langness, (and) Burt Carnegie... Ted Danils,**” he said, was also there for a short time to “teach us how to survey. He had worked on the Pan-American Highway during World War II.”

Other retirees have recalled how they were hired, and that often very little time passed between getting hired and getting down to work.

Five years after Francis McConnell arrived, **Vern Ford** remembered that the Bureau of Public Roads was gearing up for BLM projects in Oregon. “When I went to work....they were hiring people like mad. I put in my application for a job on a Friday in September 1954 and I went to work the following Monday. They were scrambling for people.” Ford spent the next five years doing survey work, then moved over to construction.

John Bucholtz had a similar quick-hire experience into the drafting section in 1958. “My son and a neighbor kid went to school together,” Bucholtz related. “The neighbor kid’s father, **George Robertson**, worked down here as a designer. He found out that I was just graduating



*John Bucholtz recalled the names of a few of the members of the drafting section. “**Jim McGuire** (foreground) was a draftsman when I came here and then eventually they just turned the as-constructed projects over to him. He was deaf.” At the desk ahead of him in the white shirt is “the back of **Les Becker**. He was the head of the drafting department...I took over” when he retired. **George Robertson** (who told him about the job) is toward the back, to the left of someone in a plaid shirt. **Clyde Boutwell** is in front of the window at the left. (WFLHD Archives)*

from Clark with a drafting degree,” and passed along the information that a pending retirement meant that a position would be opening up.

Bucholtz had not been aware of BPR’s presence here, but, he said, he had lived close to the freeway when it was being built, “and I was amazed at highway work,” so he decided to give it a try. **Wendell Strubel** was head of Design at the time, and Bucholtz said it was “he and **George Forest** (who) interviewed me. The only question I really remember was, did I spend my Saturday nights in a bar? and I says ‘No.’”

Then they asked, “‘Are you under the federal register?’ And I says ‘No.’ I’d never heard of it.” They told him to go to the BPR Personnel office in Portland for guidance on how to get his name onto the register.

He went home that evening and thought about the job, then finally decided, “I might as well. (If) I don’t get that job, I might get another job.” As soon as he told them his name at the Regional Office, they said “‘Oh, yeah, Mr. Strubel called.’ I would have had the job (anyway),” he observed. “I didn’t know that, but that’s how they worked.”

It was also Wendell Strubel who sent **Willis Grafe** to the Packwood project, and Francis McConnell recalled in his letter that Willis arrived sometime after he did. Willis was already in the BPR Junior Engineer training program and related that Mr. Strubel pulled him out of a transit-man course. “He said, ‘**Bill Utz** just fired his transit-man up at Packwood....’ Three weeks later I was sitting on top of the White Pass....We had the camp and the contract up there. I never saw anyone else the rest of the summer.”

Both Grafe and McConnell remembered the Resident Engineer from that the project. **Ray Westby** got to know Utz later and received from him a handful of books and manuals when Utz retired in 1953. Westby arrived in 1950 and noted the Resident Engineer was already “pretty old.”

Memories of the project are still vivid for McConnell. “We had a 1941 Chev Crew Truck, 1946 Chev...1946 International pickup and a Dodge 4x4 Army Crew Truck,” he wrote. “We had all the survey and office gear, light generator, Army cots and mattresses, (and) ram water pump to bring water 185 feet up from Cartright Creek.” They moved into cabins that were built in the late 1930’s for the bridge builders, and covered the barn-like sides with tarpaper to keep out the weather.

“We had to kick the packrats out,” he recalled.

Like Grafe, McConnell remembered driving the ten miles to Packwood for breakfast and dinner until the contractor could get his cook house going.

On the project, “we had a hard time finding P Line. All the wood of the hubs had rotted away and left the hub tack loose in the dirt. The back sites were hub tacks driven through a bottle cap.” The work he was involved with, he recalled, included “some



Ray Westby provided the WFLHD library with a handful of books and manuals that Bill Utz had handed down to him before retiring in 1969. (Photo: Marili Reilly)

heavy timber falling and clearing, then some big cuts and fills. They put a crew that lived and worked at the upper end with another contractor. Willis Grafe was in charge of that crew. We left the jobs December 12, 1949.”

Within less than a month, some of the same crew members went down to Lakeside, Oregon, to do ten miles of location work on Highway 101, beginning about 12 miles south of Reedsport. They left in a snow storm on January 3, 1950, he said, to run lines on Highway 10 and do the railroad and topog. Those he remembered as part of the crew were Donald Smith, Burt Carnegie, Merle Hewitt with brother **Lyle Hewitt**. Four or five others were with **Tom Van Hovel** and Resident Engineer **F. McCrea Thompson**.

*Francis “Mac”
McConnell and
one of the cabins
they used on the
White Pass
Highway Project,
1949. Photos
courtesy Francis
McConnell.*



Then it was back to Packwood, along with Bill McLoughlin, Donald Smith, Merle Hewitt. Bill Utz was again the RE, and “we finished the grading, built a bridge across a dry gully” and used a rock crusher that they had on the job to run the screen analysis. On a southeast road into Mt. Rainier Nat’l Park, they also did some work on a tunnel and some half-constructed bridges started before the War.

One piece of memorabilia McConnell passed along with his letter was the obituary of Waverly Thornton “Bill” Utz, from February 1969. McConnell said it was most likely clipped from a BPR Newsletter and wrote Bill was “maybe one of the first BPR Resident Engineers. He was my first....When I would go home to Portland, I would take him to his home in the Grant District of Portland.”

The article notes that Utz came to this area from Virginia in 1900 and “was the designer of many scenic highways in the Pacific Northwest....He helped build many logging railroads....(near) Sprague, Washington,” and was later a county engineer in Montana and Idaho before finally joining BPR.

At BPR he was “project engineer...on location and construction of the Glacier National Park Highway, Paradise Road in Mt. Rainier, Willamette National Park, the Stevens Pass, White Pass, Snoqualmie Pass and Willamette Pass highways.” In Oregon, “Mr. Utz worked on reconnaissance, location surveys and design for portions of the North Santiam, South Santiam, McKenzie, Oregon Coast, and Willamette River highways....He also had a location assignment in the Neah Bay, Washington, area during World War II.”

The article ends by noting that a number of engineers, who were then still with BPR “were initiated into Federal Government service on projects under Mr. Utz’s supervision.” As Mac McConnell noted, “Bill was quite a Resident Engineer and good to work for.” McConnell was under Utz’s tutelage for much of his first two years “with the Good Old BPR,” he wrote, and added, “It will always be the BPR to me.”

Francis “Mac” McConnell brought his hand-written memories to WFLHD’s 25th Anniversary Open House, September 10, 2008. Vern Ford, John Bucholtz, Willis Grafe, and Ray Westby came into the office for interviews during January and March, 2008. If you have stories to share, please email me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.

(Photo below from February 1969 Obituary, courtesy Francis McConnell)



Waverly Thornton
Utz at age 85 (from
1967 family photo.)