

The Prince of Wales Island Road System: From logging roads to State Scenic Byway

Compiled from email and interviews, 2008-2010

When Federal Highway Administration became involved in road building on Prince of Wales Island, it was to create a “backbone” of roads to tie together the existing routes. Thirty years later, there are just over 300 miles of formally designated forest highways on the island, and 260 miles of the road system on the island is designated an Alaska Scenic Byway.



Coffman Cove, 2000. WFLHD Construction Archives.

As the 1970's were drawing to a close, the Forest Service was looking into different means of developing roads on Prince of Wales Island. America's third largest island—at 2,577 square miles, it is slightly larger than the state of Delaware—is located in southeast Alaska, and a major portion of it is a part of the Tongass National Forest. However, the island is also home to several towns and unincorporated communities, as well as four federally-recognized tribal governments, and roads between those communities were practically non-existent.

The Forest Service approached their partner, the Federal Highway Administration, which administers Forest Highway funds. Western Direct Federal Division in Vancouver, Washington, was at that time headed up by Division Engineer **James N. Hall**, and he noted that “the Forest Service...had a road network” on the island of about 150 miles. They “had been selling timber (there) for a long time, and they used each timber sale to build a little bit of road.” Jim explained that the road system “wasn't very advanced; it was a one-lane road with turnouts occasionally, so you could pass,” but they wanted to expand it into more of “a backbone of a road system.”

Once the decision had been made to build, the projects had to be staffed. “I think that they must have been having trouble finding somebody to go up to this new place called Prince of Wales Island,” **Joel Peterson** recalled. It was around September 1980. “I'd been working two or three years as a temporary, and I was converted to a permanent, GS-3....Apparently as a reward, they sent me...up to Craig,” along with a survey crew of seven young temporary employees.

When Joel later transferred to the Alaska-Washington design team, he remembered there was a lot of discussion going on about standards for the road. “There (were) lots of trips up there with all the

agencies, trying to get them to get the two lanes and get the guardrail,” he said. “One of their main problems” on the island was dealing with the mud during the frequent heavy rains. “It was running off into the rivers, and it wasn’t good for the fisheries and the environment.” Many believed that a better solution would be “putting in proper drainage and getting things channeled correctly, and getting rid of the gravel, and paving” the roads. At that point, he said, “you ended up with something you could maintain.

“It wasn’t a hard sell,” Joel recalled. “Why do you want to build a logging road when you can build a facility you can hang your hat on?”

Jim Hall, recalled he had finally become convinced to push for better roads than what their partner agency originally requested. On his first trip up there, he had been accompanied by **Eldon Green**, Regional Administrator for the Region 10 Office in Portland, Oregon. “We drive around on what roads there were,” Jim said, and “we see one car all day.” The one lane road stipulated by the Forest Service seemed more than adequate for an occasional tourist. But it soon became apparent that a road could be built that would look more like the public lands roads FHWA was accustomed to building. “It only costs pennies more to build two lanes,” Jim said, “so we did eventually build a two-lane gravel road....”



The Prince of Wales Road System as of 2010, from the Alaska Scenic Byways web page, www.dot.state.ak.us/stwdplng/scenic/byways-pow.shtml

down to the water line where we’d hid the boat in the trees.” The boat was often full of water “because it never stopped raining....It was an every day ordeal to drag the boat out, bail it out, get it down to the water.” With the 15 foot tides in that area, sometimes the water would be almost up to the boat, making it easy to launch. “Other days you’d have to build log ramps (to) slide the boat down to the water, because it would be a long ways away when the tide was out.”

They’d load stakes, instruments, and equipment into the boat, “and as many people in the crew as we could get in. Sometimes it took two or three trips to get everybody out there.” Then they had to make their way to another bay where the work was located. The boat, Joel said, was aluminum, “and

Working in the wilderness was much more remote and more of a challenge than what Joel had done in the past. His first task, he said, was to “go up to Craig and find housing” before they could start the survey work. They ended up with “a housing contract and a meal contract with this fishing lodge in Klawock. It turned out...we were in those old, metal ATCO trailers that they had stacked up.” The trailers had wood floors and bunks and “there were three or four people to a room, and we all shared the same washroom....

“You only got breakfast and dinner, and if you wanted seconds for dinner you had to pay again,” he said. “They were pretty skimpy...on the meals, but we didn’t starve to death.”

Joel’s crew was doing the preliminary survey on the road to Hydaburg, “putting in a control line for them to design off of,” he said, and the work was quite a distance from their lodging. Mornings began with a ten- to fifteen-mile drive to the end of the road. “We had rented a boat from a local Tlingit Indian fisherman,” he said, and “we’d have to...pack all our stuff on our backs

the gunwales were kind of cracked on it, and it would give and flop around all the time....(We'd) get out into the open ocean, and boy, it would be a wild ride."

The other bay was more than an hour away, and "you get lost out there in the trees and the islands and everything," he said. Once ashore, they would unload the boat, then "tie two 100-foot tapes together, put a big old anchor or rock on it, and cast the boat off, because when we came back in ten hours, the tide was going to be different, either way out and the boat was going to be high and dry, on rocks, or tipped over full of water."

Their commute had not ended once they came ashore, however. "(You'd) start hiking up the hills, through the devil's club, and downed timber...until you got up to where you were running line. By the time you got up there and got all set up...you might only crank two or three angles." Then, he said, it would be time to pack up and head back down the hill, because it took "half a day to get there and half a day to get back."

"Everybody was wet all the time," he added. "They'd get in the room and the humidity would be 100 percent....You never dried out; it was just wet."

Joel's memories of the Hydaburg Road survey went beyond the work, however. "A guy left his backpack out on line one day, and hiked back out," he remembered. His wallet was in it, and his paycheck was in the wallet. "We didn't find it for several days," Joel said, and when they did it was obvious that "a black bear had gotten into it and wrestled around." The bear had apparently been attracted to some food in the bag, and had even tried a taste of the leather wallet. "There were bear teeth marks though his check." The fellow was able to cash the check, Joel said, but "we thought it was kind of funny that he'd leave his pack out there with his pay check and his wallet."

Another bear broke into the Klawock fishing lodge where they were living. There was "a laundry room downstairs," he said and a black bear got into the room and the door slammed closed behind it. "He was just making all kinds of racket. Ripped the washer off the wall...knocked holes through the sheetrock." Joel and his crew tried to get the door open and free the bear. "Nobody would have the nerve to go down there and try to do it face to face, but we were standing right above him on the walkway, trying to kick the door open and let him out." Eventually the bear created his own exit: He "clawed his way out, right out through the wall."

Soon projects were going to construction and sections were being completed. Work was underway on the North Prince of Wales Roads and in 1990, **Larry Adams**, who had been working on bridges in Denali National Park, became Project Engineer on the section "from Control Lake Junction almost (to) Coffman Cove." He explained that "this was a special assignment. You got a raise in GS if you took this job on Prince of Wales Island...It helped considerably."

He said that "most of the work was dig and dump....We would dig out all the muskeg and dump in some rock." It was a good design, he noted, and "as far as Construction goes, it was pretty much cut and dried. The contractor did all the staking, the contractor did the testing, so all we had to do was sit and monitor."

But there were also some diversions. "One contractor worked (Thursday through Thursday) ten hours a day. We had our 80 hours in in eight days, then took six days off. So, we got in a lot of fishing. Gene Timmerman had a 26-foot Bayliner boat—we really had a good time."



Coffman Cove, April 2004. Construction Archives.

He was on that job for five years, noting that “we had good entertainment in camp. We had three satellite dishes and four channels of TV.” He added that “Mary and I got married at the camp on the back porch.” They had met while he was working in Denali “when the Toklat bridges were going in.” Then, he said, “I did the paving on the entrance road.” When he got the job on Prince of Wales Island, “she moved down to the island.”

The ceremony was small and personal, conducted by a friend. The remote location, he explained, was well served by a unique law: “In Alaska, a judge can appoint a person...to be a guest marriage commissioner for a day. We had a friend appointed and got married on our back porch.”

They bought a house in Hollis, “close to where the ferry lands from Ketchikan,” Larry said, moving there in October of 1990. “We...got it on a five year contract, thought maybe we’d stay there (for retirement), but it was too tough. The only way you can get out to a hospital is by plane, or by ferry, or by helicopter, which I had to do one time.” They stayed on a couple of years past his retirement, April 28, 1995; then they moved to Idaho. Larry says now that he’s had enough of the island. “When we left there, we never looked back. We just got out of there.”



Craig to Klawock Pedestrian Facility, preliminary design, April 2007. Project Development Archives.

If he did return, he would see something much different from the island he left. As Jim Hall remembered, “Every time I would go back up there, there were more cars, and eventually we paved those same roads, because we couldn’t keep gravel on them. There were enough cars...to knock the gravel off.” By the time he retired, Jim observed, “We were paving miles and miles” of roads on Prince of Wales Island.

A few years later when **Ron Carmichael** came aboard as Division Engineer, even more of those roads had been paved, but there were still many gaps in the island’s road system. “WFLHD had built several projects on Prince of Wales Island in the 1980’s,” he said. “Some of the roads were paved while others were unpaved. Upon my arrival in 2000, most of the work on Prince of Wales Island involved reconstruction and paving of major roadways such as Big Salt, while also building new roadways such as the road to Coffman Cove.”

His observations about the remoteness of the island were similar to Larry Adams’s view. “Once on the Island, I realized how those things the rest of us take for granted—food, health care, shopping, getting around—simply didn’t exist or were very limited. Most of the available roads were unimproved logging roads with the few miles of improved roads being those built in the 1980’s by the US Forest Service and WFLHD.”

He recalled a visit early on with an official from Coffman Cove. “He shared how he would have to take a half day off of work to see his child play basketball. He had to take the Alaska Marine Highway system or a float plane to the community where the game was being held. Imagine how many games we’d attend if we had to do this!”

Significant progress was made by the time Ron retired late in 2005. He took one last trip to Southeast Alaska and recalls “It was amazing to see the progress that had been made in the transportation infrastructure....The access for the residents and visitors had been immensely improved

by projects like Big Salt and (the) beginning of the Coffman Cove Road access projects. I couldn't help but wonder what Prince of Wales Island would look like the next time I visited.

"I have come away with a much greater appreciation of the mobility and access that we have and take for granted here in the 'lower 48.' I owe that appreciation to my experiences on Prince of Wales Island in Southeast Alaska."

In May 2010, the Prince of Wales Island road system received the designation of State Scenic Byway from the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. This is a notable achievement for the people of the island who now have better access between their many communities. As Ron Carmichael noted, it is also "a special honor for all the men and women of WFLHD, past and present, who had a hand in making this possible."



*Division Engineer Ron Carmichael took every opportunity to invite guests from headquarters to see WFLHD projects. "I do think getting the big guns up there made them aware....We got discretionary money for Prince of Wales Island and Metlakatla, and that certainly didn't hurt." He is shown at left with **Art Hamilton**, Federal Lands Highway Associate Administrator; **Bud Wright**, FHWA Administrator; **Dave Miller**, Alaska Division Administrator; and **Brian Allen**, Design Operations Engineer. Photo courtesy Ron Carmichael.*

Jim Hall's memories of his first look at the roads on Prince of Wales Island were included in an earlier story in this series, "Forest Service Projects First Impressions." This is the first of a series of stories in recognition of the Prince of Wales Roads System receiving the designation as an Alaska Scenic Byway. Retirees and employees who would like to contribute their memories or photographs to the series are invited to contact Marili Reilly at marili.reilly@dot.gov.