

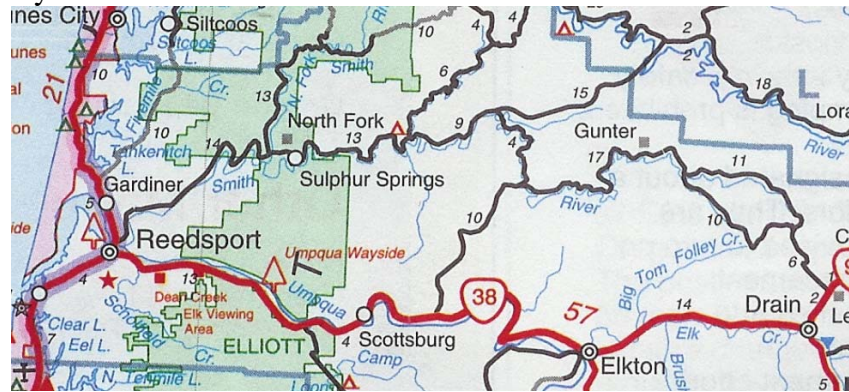
Life in the camps: The Smith River Project, 1955-56

Compiled from Interviews, Winter 2008

During the 1950's, Direct Federal construction management for the Northwest was housed in the Region Office in Portland, Oregon, with the head of the Direct Federal activity reporting to the Regional Engineer. Projects were often in remote areas, and during the construction season, project crews lived in tent camps close to the work.

Ray Westby, who joined Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) in 1950, was Project Engineer around 1955 for a road going up the Smith River. “We had about 40 miles under contract,” he said, for this project near Reedsport, Oregon. The area “was all virgin timber.” Project Engineers were on the job for only one year. “**Al Nelson** was there the first year, I was there the second year, and a fellow from Oregon Division Office was there the third year.”

On the other end of the road, **Willis Grafe**, who had joined BPR in 1948 under the Junior Engineer program, was Project Engineer for a different stretch of the road. During that era, he pointed out, a lot of the Direct



Federal work was done on lands belonging to the Bureau of Land Management. “The BLM lands were all in sections that they called Oregon California Railroad Revested Lands.” The land had been granted to the railroad, but when the railroad went broke, those sections “reverted back and became BLM” lands.

With the BLM money there also came some benefits, Ray recalled. The camp they used at Vincent Creek was built especially for the BLM, and, he said, “there’s still a Forest Service building there.”

“We just had all kinds of problems,” Ray continued. “Today you spend as much money taking care of traffic. In those days, they didn’t do that. Federal Highways was very tight that way.”

The area where they were working “was all sandstone, and it broke big and blocky. (We) never had any crushed rock or anything to handle traffic, and the farmers, consequently, got very disappointed with us.”

Although local people were unhappy at the time, Ray learned many years later that the farmers apparently were aware of the difficulty of completing the work and appreciated the efforts made by BPR to keep everyone happy. “There was one farmer named Daly who recognized we had a problem and we were doing all we could to help. My son’s wife’s uncle was married to Daly’s daughter,” Ray said, and 25 years after he’d been on the project, she sent him “a letter that her dad wrote to her saying how hard we

tried to pacify them and the other farmers.” In fact, she invited Ray and his wife to come down for the annual summer picnic in the Smith River area, which they have attended a couple of times.



BPR trucks at Vincent Creek Camp on the Smith River project. Photo courtesy Ray Westby.

There were two buildings at Vincent Creek camp. One was a cookhouse – they had a full time cook – and the other housed the men’s bunkhouse and latrine. The Project Engineer’s office was at one end of the bunkhouse. They also had three tent frames and a trailer which were used by the men who had brought their families with them. Ray said, “I lived in a tent, myself – the wife and kid and I.”

The crew also included a mechanic named **Don Stonehouse**, and Ray remembered that the tough sandstone provided him with plenty of work. “He kept busy all the time, just putting new brake linings on those vehicles. That sandstone just wore them out. It was a continuous job.”

More than just a mechanic, Don Stonehouse was also responsible for maintenance around the camp – including keeping the electricity flowing. “If you used too much power, you blew a fuse.” One day, Ray said, “somebody wanted to heat water” – one of those heaters you plug in to heat tea water – “and it blew a fuse.” Don stomped into the office and told him, “If they blow the fuse again, I’m not going to fix it.”

“I said, ‘Don, don’t be like that...’” he related. It blew again, and Don let it go for about an hour. Then, says Ray, “this lady who lived in one of the tents came over...and boy, she lit into me. She happened to be the one who was blowing (the) fuse, heating water. So really, running a camp is more work,” he said, than just managing the project.

There were 42 people on the crew. One young man on the Junior Engineer Program – **Dick Cowdery** – would move on to become Division Administrator in Idaho by the time he retired. Most of the crew were young and single, and liked to get away from camp on the weekends. “Our road wasn’t good enough...for a car (to travel) – you had to have a four-wheel drive,” Ray said. But there was another way out – over the hill at Vincent Creek and down to Scottsburg. That road was also unimproved, and in the rain, the clay soil became “too slick – you couldn’t follow it.” So, as Ray related, “You get all these single guys in there checking out on the weekend – you get an unhappy camp.”

For awhile, they found a temporary solution which was workable, if not totally above board: The men could park their cars at the bottom of the hill, and could use them to drive from there into town. If someone also happened to leave one of the camp's four wheel drive trucks at the bottom of the hill, it provided them a means to get back up the road to the camp.

“**Sam Cook** was the boss man and used to come down once a month from Portland. He was a real nice guy, (so) I told him what we were doing.

He was understanding. “He said... ‘Let me talk to the people in the Region.’

“They cut us off – they wouldn't let us do it.”

The Region Office had their rules about what provisions were to be purchased as well. Don Stonehouse, who was really the camp's “jack of all trades, would go down to Reedsport about once a week (and) bring groceries back up” causing expenses to gradually creep up. “The accountant over in Portland – Luckow was his name – he would see that the costs were getting built up and he'd want to know why the cook wasn't making his own bread... instead of buying bread.”

“That camp...was tough,” Ray recalled, “but we got along pretty well.”

Sam Cook was one of bright spots during this period, particularly when Ray was separated from his family. Ray noted that “we had some pretty good people – supervisors – from the World War II era. The old guys....they really went all out to help you. When I was on the Smith River, I lived in Seattle and never got home but maybe once every six weeks or so. And Sam Cook out of the Region would come down. ‘Well, Ray,’ he says, ‘I want you to go back to Portland.’ and then I'd get on the train and go home. So he used to give me breaks.”

The Smith River project, Ray remembered, was “probably the biggest development that Direct Federal had while I was here.” His crew worked on the western end of the road, but the contract was for about a 90-mile stretch, and he said “there was another guy working from the eastern end...I can't remember now where they stayed.”

That other guy – at least for one season – was Willis Grafe. “In Smith River we were building for BLM,” Willis said. “Westby was over at the other camp on the other end of the road. I had the contract on the east end and we went over the hill and down and connected with them on the west side. We had an awful lot of improvising to do sometimes.”

Although Willis didn't mention the name of the camp, **Vern Ford**, who started with BPR in 1954, recalled there was “a big camp on the Smith River in Oregon. There was a place up there called Cherry Brumitt – a tent camp – and that was a big camp. They were building a road up the Smith River and that road, a lot of times, was almost impassable.”

Willis remembered that it was about that time that communicating with the Region Office had become a bit simpler. It was “the first time anybody had a telephone in their pickup truck. When I wanted to call, I could get up on the mountain and call



Tualatin National Wildlife Refuge, 2005.
WFLHD Construction Photo Archives.

either a station in Portland or Eugene.” Increased communication had its trade-offs, though: “I learned that there are a lot worse things than being too far from headquarters – and one of them was being too close.”

Still, as in any remote areas with limited access to resources, Willis said, “we operated pretty independently – we had to. You had to take charge of things. You couldn’t go back to anybody and get something.”

From the Smith River, Willis Grafe left Direct Federal to become an Area Engineer with the Oregon Division, a job he held from 1957 to 1969. Ray Westby headed to the Olympic National Park in 1956 to spend the next four seasons on the Heart of the Hills project. Vern Ford spent much of the 1950’s on Oregon project survey crews.

If you have stories about the Smith River project or other tent camps, please email me at Marili.Reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.

-- Marili Green Reilly