

Life in the Camps – The Libby Dam project, Montana

From an Interview with Fred Rogers, March 20, 2008

Retirees' memories of the camps were not always centered around the work. When roads were being surveyed for the Libby Dam project in Montana, the crew found adventurous ways to entertain themselves while off duty.

Fresh off the training program where his assignments had centered around urban transportation studies and demonstration projects, **Fred Rogers** accepted a job in the survey department at the Vancouver office of the Bureau of Public Roads. He was newly married when he arrived in September 1961, and got his first field assignment near Libby, Montana.

He moved his bride into a small used trailer on the banks of the Kootenai River. “It was leaking,” he said, “water coming through, kind of depressing.” The trailer park where they lived was hardly as remote as other BPR projects, “It was right along the river in Libby,...through the woods.” It was also near a bridge and the “road that came across (the) bridge” had regular traffic from logging trucks headed for “the biggest lumber mill in the state. Across the river was the railroad, now Burlington Northern-Santa Fe-Great Northern.”

Among his neighbors at the trailer park were other employees from the survey crew. “**Tom Hildreth** was there,” he recalled. “(He) was the overall Survey Engineer.”

The road project associated with the Libby Dam was larger than most, both in terms of the survey and later the construction, Fred said. “We surveyed two sides of the Kootenai River up above Libby, Montana.” The road followed the Kootenai River for about 35 miles on the east side to Rexford, before cutting over to Eureka. On the west side it stretched about 50 miles along a forest development road. “In a sense,” he said, BPR was “working under the auspices of the Corps of Engineers, because they were responsible for the dam,” which would be built later. “At the height of it, there were about 50 on (two) survey crews....They had a crew out of Libby – that’s where the headquarters was – and one out of Eureka (each working) different portions.” He noted they made a lot of temporary hires from the local job



Libby Dam and vicinity, northwestern Montana.
(Google Maps)

market. “At that time the Division Office handled all the personnel and assigned construction crews and these temporaries to the survey crews.”

They also had to flag some of the side roads, he said. “The design was laid out here – **Lynn Tingey** was in charge of that. He had topog maps to work on, so he laid out a line, then survey crews (were) to pick that up...and lay that line out” on the ground.

Entertainment could often take as much work as the survey. Fred recalled a raft race that started in Warland, a town that was eventually flooded. “Tom got to know this guy at a tavern there...who let us use some great big logs – Tamarack. So Sunday...we took some logging cable and made this giant raft. There were a lot of rafts, and we raced 25 miles down the river to Libby.”

His crew took one of the rafts. “We had this great big tub full of ice, soft drinks, and beer,” he said. “We started off, then we realized we didn’t have an opener. Somebody came by in a boat and threw us one.” Before they’d floated the full 25 miles, however, they quit the race. They came to the trailer court where a lot of them lived and decided they’d gone far enough. “We never finished, because we got tired. We stopped about 200 yards from the end...We figured, well, that’s far enough.” He said, “In fact, we tried to destroy the raft—just before coming in, but we couldn’t tear it apart.”

At other times work related events could be as entertaining as leisure time pursuits. Fred recalled a safety meeting at a small local hotel in Eureka. “It was kind of a rundown place,” he said, and the innkeeper kept a caged monkey in the lobby. Crews from both Libby and Eureka had packed the hotel lobby. “The Regional Safety Engineer was relatively new – **Jerry Schuler**...Every time (he) would start to talk, the monkey would chatter. The crew just lost it. Jerry Schuler – he could get really red in the face.”

Another story made the rounds about the BPR bureaucracy. “This was in the day when...the whole tenor of the BPR was conserving everything. You turned in a pencil when it couldn’t rest against the inside of your hand.” The story has it that Tom Hildreth couldn’t visually keep track of two crews working in hilly terrain, so, Fred says, Tom asked the warehouse for walkie-talkie type radios – “the old tube radios.” Did that help? “They sent him out one radio and they said, ‘If this works, we’ll send you another.’” Fred says it actually happened: “You could ask Tom Hildreth – I wasn’t there.”

Among other people Fred recalled were **Lyle Mulvanny**, who was involved with the Fisher River Bridge, **Wayne Hiatt** who was hired as a geologist, and **Jim Roddenburg**, who hauled Fred’s trailer back to Vancouver at the end of his assignment. Jim enjoyed a practical joke, Fred remembered. Jim was out with Tom Hildreth, who was driving the Power Wagon, “(They) used to have these throttles for gas. (Jim) took it out and bent it while Tom was driving.”

Pushing roads into new territory, sometimes meant dealing with unfriendly locals. “There’s one section that we ran into some moose occasionally.” Fred said. In another area, they had to keep a lookout for another reason. “There were some recluse people that lived way up there...they had their own hillbilly type of arrangement, and they didn’t like people coming through. Little things like that made life interesting.”

Fred Rogers spent two seasons on the Libby Dam project. If you have comments about this story or would like to share your memories of the camps, please email them to me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov

-- Marili Green Reilly