

Life in the Camps – The Rogue River Road

From an Interview with Vern Ford, March 25, 2008

Jobs in remote areas were often prone to interruption by the whims of Mother Nature. Long distances or convoluted transportation between the camps and the job could also mean shorter days to do the work, and when weather related events brought things to a halt, crews might spend days waiting for an opportunity to get back to the line.

Vern Ford, who joined the Bureau of Public Roads in 1954 and worked survey for the first five years of his career, said one of “the more prominent things I can remember was doing the survey for the Rogue River Road going from Gold Beach up to Agness on the Rogue River.” At the time, there were trails up the river, but no roads, and they contracted for the use of one of the mail boats to get to the job.

Today, jet boats follow the mail boat routes, carrying tourists instead of mail along Oregon’s wild and scenic Rogue River. In those days, the mail boats were “the only method they had to get the mail up the river from Gold Beach.” Agness was one of the larger communities the mail boats served, but, Vern noted, “there were (also) several lodges along the river that were totally isolated. There were no roads to them whatsoever, so they relied on the mail boats to bring in supplies to them as well as the mail.”



Initially, the crew stayed at Gold Beach, and took the boat up river to the work site. “They’d just drop you off on the river bank and you’d scramble up the hillside from the river (to) where the line was going through.” Then the boat would return to bring them back out at night. They worked the project from Gold Beach, then from “the other end at Powers, going over to a spot on the Rogue River called Illahee.” Their camps were located at Gold Beach, “then Agness itself, and then the old China Hat Ranger station.

We moved the crew into those three locations at (different) times just to get the survey done.” At that time there was a Jeep trail that ran from Powers to Illahee and then to Agness. “We later constructed all that,” Vern said. “That was always a big project...that was ongoing for a long time.” While his crew was working the stretch from Powers to Illahee and down the Rogue, they worked out of a Forest Service tent camp at China Hat, partway between the two towns. “We were in there in the winter time and it just rained constantly, but you just put up with it,” he said.

Those crew members who were married lived in trailer houses in Powers and commuted to the camp and the project office. At the time, the crews drove Power Wagons, and Vern said “they’d go over anything.” However, it was not unusual to get stranded on the way to the job. “A lot of times the rivers were pretty much in flood

stage,” he said, and one morning one of the Power Wagons was hit by a slide when the crew from Powers was on their way into the camp. “It just almost tore the back off of it. Made a heck of a mess.” That group made it to the camp unscathed, but couldn’t get back out to Powers and their wives until the responsible local transportation agency had come in and cleaned up the slide.

In about 1957, they moved the crew down to a Forest Service camp right on the Rogue River beside the town of Agness. “When we started that job, the Project Engineer negotiated the contract for one of the boats (and) that was assigned to us full time. So they’d take us in in the morning and drop us off. And the old captain would wait there until we came out at night. When we were at Agness he stayed in the camp with us, because it was quite a few miles from Gold Beach to come up to Agness. So it saved time and (it saved) money, he just stayed there at the camp with us (and had his meals with us). We had a hired cook there – that was quite normal, to have cook shacks on the job.”

There were some bad storms that year, and Vern pointed out that “the Rogue River is famous for how fast it can come up and also how fast it can go down.”

“We used to beach (the boat) there at Agness every day” and make periodic checks during the night. A couple of the guys would get out of bed “and we’d go down with flashlights to check on the boat and see if it was still tied up high enough, so we wouldn’t lose it.” If the river was rising, they’d pull the boat further up the bank and tie it off; if the river was falling, they’d let out on the mooring line so it wouldn’t be stranded ashore.

“One morning, it was about 1:00 in the morning, and it was my turn to get up and check the boat,” Vern said, and he found the river had made one its sudden drops. The boat was “sitting high and dry...we had to go back to the bunk house and get everybody out of bed.” The boats were nearly 40 feet long, and it took the whole crew to get it back to the water. “We took the Power Wagon down to where the boat was at...and had to push with the Power Wagon on the bow of the boat to push it back...down into the water.” For the rest of the night, a couple of the guys would have to get up “just to check on it. Every half hour or hour we’d have to get up and retie the rope, and push the boat out further so it was (still) in the water.”

Their camp was on the north side of the river, and for a time the work – which was on the south shore – was just a short distance downstream. “The whole crew piled in one morning and took off down the river,” Vern recalled. “The captain – he was a pretty savvy old guy ... but he misjudged that morning.” There was a place in the middle of the river called Twin Rocks, and that morning it was covered by the floodwaters. “You couldn’t hardly see anything but a ripple.” The boat hit the rocks and it “pushed the whole keel strap...up through the bottom of the boat.”

The boat started taking on water, so the captain drove it up onto the south shore, getting it beached just as it filled up with water. “We always kept a 55-gallon drum of gasoline (aboard),” Vern said, “and it was floating in the boat,” as were the boxes carrying the transom and the level.

“Guys were scrambling to get out of the boat. The Project Engineer on the job was **Lyle Hewitt**,” Vern said, and when he went to get out, he fell down. His feet hung up in the boat and “his hands were on the bank, hanging onto (it). This one big guy – **Westwood** – he used him for a gangplank, and went right across his back.”

The spot they'd beached the boat wasn't far from the camp, but it was on the opposite bank. Vern said, "we were stuck there until finally somebody came down to the gravel bar on the opposite side of the river." They had to yell in order to make themselves heard over the roar of the flooding river to explain what had happened.

One of the Forest Service guys had a rowboat with a motor and started ferrying them to the camp. "I think we could only get about three or four guys in it at a time, and we had probably about a dozen or more of us....then (he had to go back and get) the equipment."

For several days following the beaching, they were stuck in Agness because they couldn't get across to the work. Even after another mail boat was brought up from Gold Beach, they still had to retrieve the wrecked boat, get it hauled onto the bank, pumped out and refloated. "They worked on that thing for a long time," Vern said.

"It was a pretty tenuous living situation," Vern observed. "It's changed so much now...you've got the road that goes clear up" to Illahee. At that time, you had to hike up a trail, and "if they were roads, they were Jeep trails."

After five years working surveys, Vern Ford went on to work in construction and later worked in the Vancouver Office. He retired in 1991.

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



A construction camp on the shore of Lake Chelan (Chelan National Forest, Washington) from the final construction report for Lake Chelan Road, 1927-28.

WFLHD Archives