

Forest Service Projects – First Impressions

Compiled from individual interviews, Winter 2008

While most projects are completed, some designs never make it to construction. Other projects develop a life of their own and end up bigger than anticipated. Sometimes it is the earliest experiences with prospective projects that prove to be the most memorable.

The advisability of constructing a road through a particular area came into question on a Forest Service project in southwestern Oregon. **Fred Rogers** recalled that our partners wanted a road built in a 16,000 acre area which he described as “untouched and...fragile.” This office, he said, “was totally against building it.” But the design had been completed and Fred and a Forest Service employee were sent out to do a plan-in-hand review.



A portion of the Oregon map showing Forest Service lands near Port Orford.

“It would have been two and a half days worth” of work, he said. “What we did was do a plan-in-hand through an old P line up there on a ridge.” They started up a gravel road about five miles north of Port Orford, and followed the road to its end. Fred said someone from the Forest Service was “supposed to take off from Grants Pass in an airplane and drop us sleeping bags and some food. We got out there a ways, and it was about 4:00, and it was starting to get dark.” What they wouldn’t learn until later was that the plane never took off because of a storm. If they couldn’t make the drop, he said, “they were supposed to fly over...a few times,” but even though “the Forest Service guys knew the situation...they didn’t follow through. So there we are.”

As Fred and his cohort hiked along a heavily forested ridge, they were fortunate enough to come across the meager provisions of a previous drop. “We found an old torn parachute hanging there, and there were some tin cans, so we each took three, like fruit cocktail and whatever – just little tins....One of those was our supper, and one was breakfast, and...(another) supper. We slept out there in the cold rain – about 40 degrees.” When they finally found their way out of the dense forest, they “broke out into some clear cuts and some Forest Service land that was more developed.”

It took some time and some more persuasion, but “finally the Forest Service management came to realize that that wasn’t a good project....I don’t remember what it was to be,” he said. “We didn’t ever build it.”

While that project was rejected after the design was finished, another grew to larger proportions even as the design progressed. **Jim Hall** recalled his first trip to Prince of Wales Island in Alaska to review needs the Forest Service described for expanding their timber harvest road system.

For many years, Jim said, “the Forest Service had been selling timber” on Prince of Wales Island, “and they used each timber sale to build a little bit of road.” The road network they had was not very advanced – a one-lane road with occasional turnouts for passing. But they wanted something more than what they had already accomplished by “using their wooden nickels – that is requiring the guy that bids on the timber to built the road,” and so they asked FHWA to complete the backbone of a road system.

What our partners had in mind was to finish building a 150-mile system to the same specifications as the completed roads, Jim said. “So they said to me, ‘We’d like for you to build a road there, but you have to agree to build the kind of road we want. We don’t want a superhighway out here, we just want a one-lane road with turnouts.’ I thought we could do that and really gave it a lot of thought before saying so.”

Eldon Green, the Region 10 Regional Administrator, accompanied Jim to Alaska. “We’d never been on that island. We drive around on what roads there were, (and) we see one car all day.” That was a group of tourists from Hawaii who had come to Alaska to go fishing. They wanted “to catch some of the big salmon up here,” he said, but nobody had told them the salmon weren’t running. “Eldon and I had happened to see a place that was just frothing with Dolly Varden, so we told them where they were, and they went there to go fishing.”



A 2004 photo of Coffman Cove Road on the northeast corner of Prince of Wales Island. Construction Photo Archives.

After a day’s tour of the island’s roads, Jim and Eldon looked at each other and asked the inevitable question: “They’re going to spend millions of dollars out here for one car?” But that was what the Forest Service wanted, so, they agreed, “OK, we’ll build a one-lane road with turnouts.”

Jim returned to the office, “told the guys what to do, they started studying, (and started) grumbling....Well, our guys could doctor numbers as well as anybody,” he said, and they complained from the start,

“we can’t build public roads (like that). It don’t cost any more to build two lanes than a one-lane road with turnouts.” Every few days he’d receive a new analysis from someone showing that “it only costs pennies more to build two lanes. So we did eventually build a two-lane gravel road for this one car.”

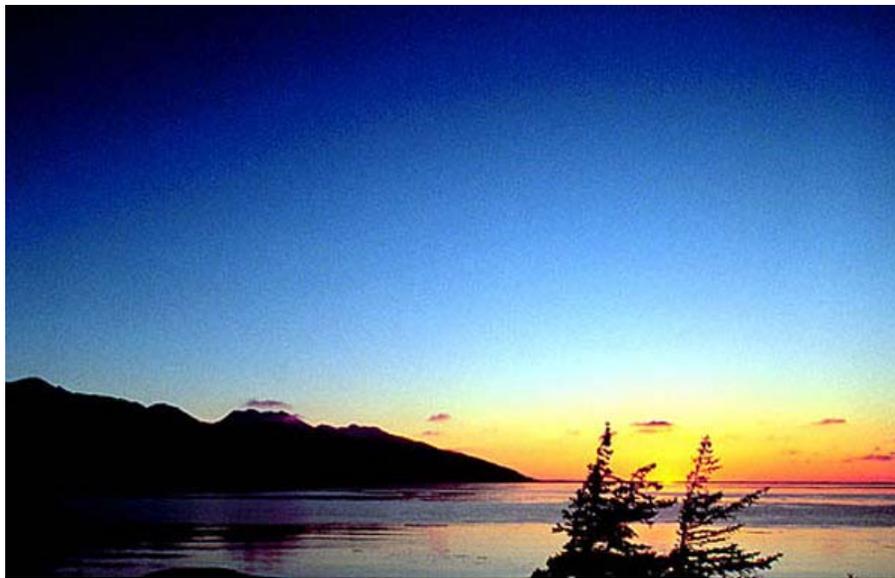
The persistence on the part of his staff was apparently worth it, for traffic on the island continued to grow, Jim observed. “Every time I would go back up there, there were more cars, and eventually we paved those same roads, because we couldn’t keep gravel on them.”

By the time he retired, they had paved “miles and miles” of a road that not long before “had one car on it and was for sure only going to be a one-lane road with turnouts or we weren’t going to be involved.” He now sees the wisdom of the advice he got from his employees. “The guys won me over to the two lane road, and they were totally right. It totally turned out to be a great decision.”

Apparently there was no complaint from our partners, either. By the time the two-lane road was built, there had been enough turnover at the Forest Service that the people who had originally insisted on one lane and turnouts were no longer involved in the project. “Today, they are certainly in agreement with a paved road,” he said, “or at least they were when I retired.”

For Jim it was also satisfying to watch the project evolve in such a short time. “It was interesting to see something go from a concept...where I totally agreed we would build a one-lane road with turnouts – or we weren’t going to be involved – to a paved road....It’s interesting that things changed.”

Fred Rogers spent several years on Forest Highway design in Oregon and later in Montana and Idaho. Jim Hall came to WFLHD as Division Engineer 1978. If you have stories to share, please email me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.



Sunset in Alaska. WFHLD Archives, 25th Anniversary Home Page Galleries.