

## Getting Hired at the Bureau of Public Roads – Part II

### *Compiled from Individual interviews, Winter 2008*

*The Federal Highway Administration training program has evolved through the years. In this second look at “getting hired,” retirees recall their training program experiences in Federal Lands, Federal Aid, and Headquarters offices and their views on trainees and the training program.*

For the Vancouver office of the Direct Federal program (now Federal Lands Highways), retirees recalled that personnel and hiring matters were largely taken care of by the Region 10 Office in Portland throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s. Direct hires such as [Vern Ford and John Bucholtz](#) remembered being sent to Portland to do their paperwork.



*The north side of the materials wing, 1965. WFLHD Archives*

The Region Office also hired recent college graduates for the training program, and sent trainees to their assignments on Direct Federal projects. **Lyle Renz** was hired into the training program in Boise, Idaho, in 1962, and was soon sent to work on the Cascade Warm Lakes Highway. “We were doing the initial staking and construction,” he said, as well as grading on that forest highway. “I was doing survey and construction inspection.”

Trainees were often given a lot of responsibility on their jobs. Lyle recalled that he had a supervisory role “on the old Warren Wagon Road, which is north of McCall. It was just a slide correction project,” he said, “but I acted as Assistant Project Engineer under **Gordon Mead** who was the Project Engineer.” Similarly, **Willis Grafe** said he “was given one of the very first undergraduate assignments to the junior engineering program.” He was still a junior in college when he was sent up to the White Pass Highway to serve as Project Engineer.

Lyle spent another construction season in Idaho in 1963. “We were doing projects on the south fork of the Clearwater...paving and surveying for the next project,” he said, “and I was a paving inspector. Then I went up to work on U.S. 12, up towards Lolo Pass, along the Locksaw River, and I was a paving inspector up there, as well. We lived in Grangeville for those assignments that summer.”

Although trainees are often hired after graduation, many spent some time at the Bureau of Public Roads during their college years. **Fred Rogers** came to work at the

BPR headquarters office in December 1957, working 32 hours a week while finishing his last college course. “I happened to get a job in a bituminous lab there,” he said. At that time the BPR labs were located adjacent to what was then called National Airport.

After graduation, Fred signed up for the training program, and as others have reported, found that BPR moved people right into their assignments. “I graduated Saturday and was on a plane on Monday” to the Georgia Division Office. He spent a year there and “six months or so on the Baltimore Transportation Study.”

It was on the Transportation Study that Fred learned how easy it is to get lost in the system. “I was assigned to a consultant, ... (and) I didn’t get a paycheck. What happened was, it ended up in the dead letter office, because they didn’t know where I was. The record was lost or something. It was finally straightened out, of course.”

At the time, there were government rules against married couples being employed in the same agency, but his wife was able to find a job at the Forest Service in Washington, D.C.

Not everyone who begins the training program completes it, but **Jim Hall** made sure that he got the benefit of the full program before taking a permanent assignment. “When I was in the training program,” he said, “the D.C. Division asked me to come there to be an area engineer.” They wanted him immediately, and urged him to drop out and take the assignment. “I said ‘No, I want to finish the training program,’” and he did. Under the usual procedure, graduates were allowed to apply to offices where they most wanted to work, and he said the others in the program all got one of their top three choices. “I applied to several places,” he said, but “I specifically didn’t apply to D.C. because I knew they wanted me. They sent me there anyway....Out of 60 people, I was the only one who didn’t get any one of my choices.”

Jim also spent some time as a trainee in the Region 10 Office. He remembered going along on a hydraulics review in 1964 with **Herb Gregory** and **Gene Fiala**: “I came over with them and they made their analysis of this office and how it did hydraulics design.” At the time, the office had no hydraulics engineer. “I listened, and everything sounded right,” he said, but when they got back into the car, Herb Gregory had another view. “He says, ‘that’s the damnedest hydraulics office I ever saw. They send the hydraulics guy out and he guesses how big the pipes ought to be. Then the design engineer goes out and he guesses how big the pipe ought to be, and whoever gets the biggest pipe wins.’”

That review made an impression on the 25-year-old engineer. Jim said that when he returned fourteen years later as Division Engineer, “I had an idea that one area I wanted to improve was hydraulics. When I got here...we immediately hired a hydraulics engineer....Up until that time, through the whole history of this program, they never had a hydraulics engineer.”

During their training program assignments, trainees’ performances are closely monitored. **Ray Westby** recalled that he was asked to keep tabs on one



*A current view of Hurricane Ridge near Ray Westby's Heart of the Hills project of 1956-59. WFLHD Archives, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Galleries.*

Young man who came to his job in the Heart of the Hills. It was the first time he'd ever gotten a letter ahead of someone's arrival. "They sent a fellow up there and they sent me a letter, and they told me I was to report on him every two weeks. Apparently somewhere along the line he got into it with somebody." Ray said he never had a problem with that employee. "He was fine...I think probably he had a personality conflict with somebody and they...wrote him up."

Ray was not a graduate of the training program himself, but he had a lot of respect for it. "A lot of the...older residents...didn't want anything to do with them," he said, but viewed the participants in the "Junior Highway Engineer program...(as) kind of a thorn in their sides." Ray was not much older than some of the trainees himself, however: "I'd say to myself, 'You'd better be careful, because they may be the boss one of these days.'" He made it a point to mentor the people who came to him. "So I got along pretty good, and consequently I had quite a few junior engineers working for me."

In many cases, some of those trainees did "turn out to be the boss." One that he recalled was **Dick Cowdery** – who retired as Division Administrator in Idaho – who worked for him on the Smith River project.

Willis Grafe also found that the trainees on his projects often moved up quickly. "**Keith Koehler**, who later became chief of computer stuff in the D.C. office – he was a classmate of mine" in the junior highway engineer program, he said. He also remembered that a future Division Engineer, "**John Mors**...came to me first as a Junior Engineer on the Umpqua, right out of school."

Although it was the Region Office that made the decision of which projects would get trainees for their 3-4 month assignments, Ray Westby always felt it was a worthwhile program and the participants were of high quality. "I think I had one on every job I was on.... I never had one that I felt wasn't going anyplace. Every one I ever had, I was real impressed with."



*A recent view of Mott Bridge on the Umpqua River. WFLHD Archives.*

*After completing the training program, Lyle Renz worked on Direct Federal projects in Oregon until 1971 when he moved over to Federal-aid work in that office. Willis Grafe remained in Direct Federal work after the training program, then moved to Oregon Division in 1957. After Fred Rogers completed the training program, he was assigned to a project in Libby, Montana, spending the rest of his career working out of the Vancouver Federal Lands office. Jim Hall had moved up to head of the Direct Federal office in headquarters before coming out to Vancouver as Division Engineer. Ray Westby remained in Direct Federal work until 1959, moved to the Federal-aid office in Olympia, and returned to Vancouver ten years later as Chief of Design.*

*If you have comments on this story or have other stories to share, please email me at [marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov).*