

From Getting Hired to Getting Ahead – Part II

Compiled from Retiree Interviews, Winter 2008

As Bureau of Public Roads employees moved up the ranks, they were often supported by others in higher places. Retirees recalled the times they offered the helping hand, and shared their views of hiring and promoting once they had moved into supervisory and management positions.

As BPR emerged from the 1940's, its supervisors had values and standards that had been developed during the early years of the agency and some of the most tumultuous decades of the 20th century. **Ray Westby** came to work at BPR a few years after the war, and he recalled “we had some pretty good people – supervisors – from the World War II era.” He worked as Project Engineer on the [Smith River project](#) in 1955, and recalled “the old guys – they were old then – they really went all out to help you.” His supervisor, **Sam Cook**, worked out of the Region Office in Portland, and it was his generosity in particular that Ray recalled. “I lived in Seattle and never got home but maybe once every six weeks or so. Sam Cook...would come down: ‘Well, Ray,’ he says, ‘I want you to go back to Portland.’” Ray would make the trip, then take advantage of the closer proximity to get on a train for a visit home.

The values of those early supervisors were some that Ray came to share. “I don’t want to pat myself on the back,” he said, “but I was one of the favorite project engineers.” Ray recalled he was Chief of the Project Development Division in the Vancouver office when one young engineer came to Western Direct Federal Division. “Just before I retired, **Pat Wlaschin** came out here as a hydraulics engineer and he wanted to get ahead. It’s pretty hard to get ahead as a specialist,” Ray said, “but he was sharp.”

Pat was looking to get some special training, so Ray wrote a letter on his behalf. “We were just getting these little computers – Texas Instruments,” he said. The high-powered calculators had the potential of saving a lot of tedious calculations “if you knew how to do it. Pat was an expert at that and he taught quite a few of the guys around here how to use them.”

It was the women in the office who particularly benefited from having **Vern Ford** in their corner. “I was a fighter for the gals in the office,” he said. He knew most of the women, noting that some had started long after he had come to the BPR. He spent his first 22 years in the field, coming into the office in 1976, and said “sometimes you



BPR Field Office, 1948. WFLHD Archives

wouldn't see them except in the wintertime, (but) they were a critical part of the operation. There wasn't any doubt about that.”

He cited in particular the women in the financial and contracting fields. “They were excellent people. It was rare, really rare, that we ever had a contract go out of here and get out to the field, (with any) kind of clerical error in it. It just didn't happen.” Vern felt frustrated on their behalf by what he saw as an unfairly low grades. “As far as promotions were concerned, and money, it was always the same old thing. When I talked to Personnel they'd say, ‘Oh, we can get that work done – they're easy (to find), easy to hire...’

“It used to make me so darned mad,” he said, “because I thought those girls were really (great workers.)” Personnel and management “had a lot of discussions over it, and they finally started breaking loose and upgrading them.”

Another supervisor who advocated promoting people from lower ranks was **John Bucholtz**. He spent several years as head of the drafting department, and said the drafters – and later the CADD operators – that he hired were not necessarily educated in the field, but he trained them and “we had some good people.” Because of unrelated education, however, they couldn't be promoted. “About GS-5 was about it,” he said.



*The north corner of the upstairs drafting area, 1965. From left, employees have been tentatively identified as **Lynn Tingey**, **John ?**, and **Everett White**. WFLHD Archives.*

John's strategy was to get “them moved out into the design squads so they could be promoted – I hired **John Acerbi** and **Bob Toops**....They got out in there and then they got a chance to grow.”

That move, however, eventually led to the elimination of the drafting department, “which I thought would be OK, because you got some experienced people out there (in design)....

“We put out some good plans while I was running the department. I wanted the people to have a chance to get ahead, and they couldn’t.” He explained that at that time, there was a two-grade interval in civil engineering and technician positions, “so if you were a 7 and you wanted to go to a 9, you had to really get good . There was no halfway between. Between a 5 and a 7 there was no 6.” Even though those who made the two-grade promotions enjoyed “quite a pay raise,” John said he continued to push on behalf of the people working for him. Eventually, he said, they went to one-grade intervals “to fill in those (grades).”

At the time that Ray, Vern, and John were helping or promoting those below them, **Jim Hall** was looking at the organization from a different perspective. Focused on the long-term needs of the agency, the Division Engineer could see the value in developing people from within, but also recognized the need to hire well-trained people who could hit the ground running.

When he took over as head of the Direct Federal operations in headquarters in 1974, Jim said, “we had 1,100 people....When I got out here (in 1978), we had less than half of that. If you lose half of your staff, and you (keep) doing what you’ve always done, you’re going to go out of business.

“When I came here, **John Mors** said to me, ‘If this office gets below 155 people, close it. I’ve analyzed it every way I can think of, and that’s the minimum we can get by with.’”

There were fewer than that, Jim noted, not too long after he arrived in Vancouver. “We were going down – as an agency – two percent a year, but this office was taking bigger cuts because we had the highest staffing relative to the workload we had. So to save Eastern and Central staffing, we were taking huge cuts every year.”

At the same time, the nature of the work was changing. “When I got here, this office was mostly building BLM roads. BLM didn’t need a sophisticated design; they needed good quality construction, and we had that. The project engineers we had hired as young boys and grown up to our program were just outstanding. I would like to have kept it that way.”

The reductions in staffing, however, changed the way the office had to work. While the Bureau of Land Management continued to feed BPR small construction projects, the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980 and the growing Forest Highway program created a need for roads that, he said, required “lots of engineering....”

“It amazed me how people would say that we keep needing to hire GS-2s and raise them up. I love that concept,” he said, but they were already building more projects with fewer people. “If half of your people are GS-2s and you have one person per project, you’ve got a GS-2 (in charge of) the project.” Jim said when he looked into the future and saw that GS-2’s would be running the projects, he had to say, “No, we’re not going to be doing that.” Though employees who had advanced through the ranks in that



Dan Jackson and Gene Timmerman do the survey of Flowery Trail Road prior to recent construction. WFLHD Survey Archives

way would try to engage him in discussion about “hiring people like (them) and bringing them up,” he noted, “I loved the concept, but it wasn’t going to work.”

At the same time, costs were going up, and “relative to construction, costs weren’t going up near as fast as people’s salaries.” Jim observed that “when I got here, there were guys like **Lyle Hewitt** who had twenty people on one project doing great work, and everything laid out perfect. But if you put twenty people on one of our projects today, (salaries) would cost more than...the project....These were the people overseeing the (contractor). You couldn’t criticize the notes, the surveys, the overview – they were perfect. Everything (was) perfect, but it can’t keep going that way,” he said. “We have to get leaner....

“I could see that 20 years ago,” Jim said. “I was 39 and I knew what was going to happen, but I didn’t know how to communicate that. I was not old enough, experienced enough, or maybe smart enough. I had been around and I knew what was happening. I wanted to plan the organization for 20 years down the line, not (for) tomorrow....

“One of the things I decided early,” Jim continued, “(was) that I wouldn’t hire somebody if I couldn’t see their job twenty years later, (and) that it would be one they’d be happy with.” Some supervisors would come to him with a request to fill a job, but he didn’t want to fill a menial job if it had no potential. “(Some) people...wanted to hire a GS-4 that would be happy to be a GS-4 all their life. I just couldn’t resolve myself that any organization full of people who would be happy to be a GS-4 all their lives would be a good organization to be in.... It put me in conflict with those who would do that.”

He wanted people to be able to develop into something more. “You basically hire somebody as a young person, (and) you’ve got the rest of their life in your hands. If you’re going to go out of business, you don’t want to do that. When you finish work here, you can’t really go to work someplace else for the same salary; you almost always have to take a big cut back, and it’s really hard on a person’s psyche.”

Although Jim held firm to his philosophy, he admitted that “gradually, before I left, I started turning loose of authority and letting people have more authority.” He took a back seat and let supervisors make the hiring decisions, but admitted that sometimes “it would just drive me crazy to watch what they would do...because they just didn’t have the same vision of where we were going.” If they’d had that vision, he believes, they might have been better prepared for the future. “They know now what their problems are now, but they should have known those problems 20 years ago.” That ability to anticipate future needs is important, he believes: “Then you’re ready.”

If you have comments on this story or can identify people or places in the photos, please email Marili Reilly at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.