

## Life in the Camps: Clearwater Camp

### *From an email from Paul Anderson, Winter 2009*

*After reading some of the other stories in this series, Paul Anderson sent an email recalling his experiences at the Clearwater Camp while working on a project along the North Umpqua River in Southwestern Oregon.*

Paul Anderson was two years out of high school in the fall of 1957. “I had spent the summer driving truck and was looking for work,” Paul wrote, when he learned through the State Employment Office that the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) was hiring.

He interviewed for a survey crew on a “new highway along the North Umpqua river near Toketee, about 60 miles east of Roseburg, Oregon. They told him what he needed to bring: “warm coat, good boots, and rain gear, and a lunch box and thermos.” If he started work the next day, his pay would start at noon, Paul said, “but I would have to be there by 5:00 pm to get dinner and bedding.” The crew lived at the California-Oregon Power Company’s (COPCO) Clearwater Camp a few miles east of the project. He received the laborer’s wage: \$2.25 per hour, and room and board was deducted at a rate of \$4.05 a day.

The BPR office was in a portable contractor’s shed on skids next to the mess hall and was just large enough to hold “a couple of desks, a couple of drafting tables and a wood stove.” The drafting room – in an old powder shack next to it – contained drafting tables – plywood set atop barrels – and “the only illumination was a mechanic’s light strung through the window of the office. There was no heat, so people would trade places with (those in) the office every hour or so to keep warm.”



The bunk house was also located close by. It was “plain but serviceable, with two-man rooms.” Furnishings were limited to “cots, hanging lockers, small dressers,

and a desk. In the middle was the bathroom.” They also had a lounge that had “a pool table, several tables for playing cards or doing puzzles, a couple of desks for writing, some easy chairs for reading, and a black and white TV that got one snowy channel.”

The work itself took them through some “pretty rugged terrain,” Paul recalled, “and we worked outside all day, every day, rain or shine.” The crew assembled in front of the trucks every morning at 7:15 while the engineer outlined the work for the day with

*This office on skids used on the Willamette Highway near Highway 21, circa 1930’s, may have been similar to the one Paul Anderson remembered at Clearwater.*

the crew chiefs, adjusting crew assignments as needed. “Anyone under the weather could stay in and work in the office. In those days there was always plenty of work checking field notes and drafting.” They were on the road by 7:30, and worked until 4:00, then hiked back to the truck to return to camp.

“Life in camp was set around the mess hall,” Paul said. “The cook blew the whistle at 6:00 am: time to get up, do your chores, get dressed, and get in line inside the bunkhouse. At precisely 6:30 the whistle blew again: time for breakfast. You got a plate and got in line for your eggs, cooked to order. Then you sat at a long table and the cook’s helper served the rest of the meal family style on large platters. What a feast! Juice, canned fruit, hot or cold cereal, two kinds of potatoes, two kinds of meat, biscuits, gravy, and mountains of pancakes and a bowl of baked beans. Then to the lunch table to put up your own lunch....The lunch table was loaded with sandwich makings, fruit, and pie.” He noted that the mess hall didn’t serve lunch to those who stayed behind, but there was always coffee on, and those in the office “could go in to eat where it was warm.”

Dinner was served from 5:00 to 5:45, and Paul said it was “another feast. Two kinds of potatoes, two kinds of meat, a choice of veggies, hot biscuits, and baked beans, followed by fresh pie. Always pie. And baked beans. As with any camp,” he said, “you were expected to eat and get out. Fifteen minutes was about right.” Unlike the mess halls at the old logging camps, however, talking was allowed at the table. They were even allowed a leisurely cup of coffee after dinner at the “snack” table. This table was set up after dinner, and anyone wanting a night-time snack, could return at 8:30. They could get coffee, leftovers, and sandwich fixings, but they had to wash their own dishes.

Paul noted that no one was allowed into the mess hall until the whistle blew. “They lined up in the bunkhouse hallway to wait, then made a mad dash.” One night, however, the whistle blew and nobody moved. Soon the cook's helper came out to see where everyone was. “There was a bear on the mess hall porch.

“Camp cooks were usually a grumpy sort,” Paul recalled, “but they put in long, hard hours.” There was an accepted etiquette in the mess hall. “You learned *never* to tell the cook the food was good: he knew it was good, he cooked it.” The proper way to show your appreciation was to get up from the table, “stagger a little like you were loaded down, and rub your tummy on the way out. That got a stone-faced nod from the cook, but kept him happy.” With about two dozen men at Clearwater Camp, 15 of whom were with the BPR crew, the cook had more than enough to do.

“Like any construction camp,” Paul observed, liquor was not allowed, but there were always a few men who had to “check their car every night about bedtime.”

The fall of 1957 marked the end of the camp era, Paul said, as the BPR adopted cash per diem rules. His own temporary assignment at the COPCO Camp lasted only three weeks, but, he observed “life at Clearwater was interesting and reasonably comfortable, much better than some of the stories I later heard from the 'old timers'.”

*Stories in this series have been prepared by Marili Green Reilly. If you have memories to share about your experiences with the Bureau of Public Roads or the early years of the Federal Highway Administration, you may email them to [marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov).*