

Spur of the Moment Decisions

From an interview with Jim Hall, March 2008

As partners with the Forest Service, Western Federal Lands Highway Division is often involved in building or improving roads through the rough back country of our national forests. Gaining access to such remote areas, far from other roads or development, sometimes requires alternate means of transportation—and often merits spontaneous action.

When an opportunity presents itself, it may often seem just too good to pass up. Jim Hall recalled a few times when he took advantage of some of those “opportunities” during his tenure as Division Engineer at Western Federal Lands Highway Division. Some of those spur of the moment decisions, he said, “almost got him killed”.

One of those close calls arose during a visit to Alaska. He had traveled north to review the Forest Highways program and had arranged a flight on a small private plane. “(We) just happened to fly across the Stikine River, so I said to the pilot, ‘Would you mind flying up the Stikine River to let me take a look at it real quick.’”

That region of Southeast Alaska, just north of Wrangell, was not part of the Forest Highways program. However, Jim wanted to take a look at it because of another assignment he had through FHWA. Jim had been selected “to be the representative to meet with Canada to preserve a corridor for Canada to come through Alaska to the coast.” He explained that “Southeast Alaska comes down and blocks Canada from the ocean, and Canada wanted a Right-of-Way.” One such possibility “was identified along the Stikine River.”

Jim said he wanted to “get an idea of what we were dealing with. We were paying (the pilot) by the hour, and he didn’t care,” so he swung the plane around and headed up the Stikine.

“It was a huge river,” Jim recalled, “like the Mississippi.” Along the shores, the land “was kind of flat, but slopes tapered up on either side. As we got farther up the river, the slopes tapered higher and higher. Finally we were in this canyon, and it was just monstrous; unbelievably monstrous. You don’t see that anywhere else in the United States. It was just huge.”

They had followed the river for some miles into this canyon when they came around a bend in the river, “and the front was just blocked off. It was a dead end.”

Jim said to the pilot, “I thought you knew where you were going!” The pilot said ‘I thought *you* knew where you were going.’” Jim admitted “I didn’t know anything about the area, because it wasn’t on the Forest Highways program.”

The pilot banked to the right, coming up close to the steep vertical side of the canyon, and started to bring the plane around. As they passed the halfway point of the canyon’s width, Jim got a sinking feeling that they weren’t going to make it. The plane was less than halfway through its turn, he could see around them “several thousand feet of vertical slope...and so I said, ‘It’s been nice.’”

“Just about that time, as he comes across,” Jim said, the pilot “sees he’s not going to make it. So he goes (the other) way, and Zap! He’s out of it as neat as can be.

“If it had been an inexperienced pilot that would have been it. But he was experienced. He had worked for the Park Service in a park south of there and had quite a bit of experience.” It just happened that he had not yet flown much in that part of Alaska.

“I didn’t know that he was new to the area,” Jim said, and the pilot didn’t realize “that I didn’t know what was up in there. So we made a spur of the moment decision to go in...and it was dangerous.”

Jim then described a time when he and **Clyde Leighty** were driving through Idaho. “We hadn’t built the Banks to Lowman Road yet, and it was really primitive back in there.” They had been at Banks, he said, and “were going to Lowman, and then back to Boise.” It was getting to be late in the evening and “we got to a place –I think it was called Deadwood Creek–and the road forked.” It was a dirt and gravel road, and “we didn’t know which fork to take, because they were both about the same...no pavement, or anything; no signs.” They had to make a decision, so “we took the left fork.”

As they bumped along the road, they became “more and more suspicious that it might be the wrong road.” Pushing in a bit further, they found themselves very close to a forest fire. “Smoke is everywhere, but we figure we’ve got to get through it, so we keep going. Eventually we get far enough back up in there,” he said, that “we realized this isn’t our road, and we’re going to have to go back through that smoke.”

“When we started back, the fire had advanced quite a bit further, and stumps were coming rolling across the road in front of us and behind us,” he said. “I don’t know what was pushing them, but they were continuously coming off the slopes.”

Although most of the debris wasn’t all that big, there were sharp, broken remains of branches and roots sticking out of many of the pieces. “We drive through; we hit a few of these things, and bounce around.” Finally making it clear of the fire, he said, “we get through, and we’re both saying, ‘That was really, really lucky.’”

They didn’t find out until much later that they had been very fortunate, indeed. “What we didn’t realize was that we had punctured the gas tank,” on some of that spiky debris. They might never have known about it at all except WFLHD got a bill from the rental car company. “I hated to pay the bill,” Jim said, “but we were really fairly lucky.”

He and Clyde had another adventure in Montana at the time WFLHD was getting ready to build the Yak Road. “We thought that from Eureka we could take a Forest Service road over the mountain and see Yak and be on our way.” It was late afternoon, probably about 4:00 and Jim said they were feeling “some concern, because there was a little snow on the ground and it was going to go much higher. We stopped at the Forest Service office and asked if the road was clear to go through that way. They told us, ‘We were just logging up there a few days ago. Sure, you can get through there.’”

Jim and Clyde started driving up the mountain road, “and the further up we go, the deeper the snow gets...Each time you go around a curve on a mountain like that, it looks like you’re almost at the top,” he said, but each time, “we go further, and the snow gets deeper, and we go further and the snow gets deeper.”

Eventually they had to admit to themselves, “it’s really getting scary up here.” In business suits and street shoes, they knew they were “not dressed to get out in the snow...We’re out in the snow 30 miles from the nearest development,” but they kept telling themselves, “we’ve got to be almost to the top.

“Finally the car started dragging the ground, and we thought, ‘Nope, no further...’ There was no way we were ever going to make it across that mountain.” Then they had to back the car down the mountain for about a half mile. At last “we came to a place where we could maybe get turned around. We got turned around and we got back out of there....”

“We were fine, but both of us were so relieved when we got out, that we almost wanted to hug each other.” That, he said, was probably their closest call ever.

Jim noted that he and Clyde often traveled together. “Clyde was the Planning and Coordination Engineer...He always went with me to forest highways meetings and kept the minutes of the meetings, so he and I had lots of narrow escapes together.”

*Fred Rogers related his own close-call during an interview in the Spring of 2008. A WFLHD employee, **Jim Rodenburg**, was a pilot and would sometimes fly employees to meetings in remote areas. “I remember going up with him and **Ralph Frame**,” Fred recalled. “We were going to a public hearing, up at Marblemount, near Mt Vernon” and the Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Park in Washington. Jim followed a route along the Skagit River, but when he made his approach, Fred said, “he couldn’t land. He kept saying, ‘Get down, Get down!’ He was about 6 feet off the ground, the wind was blowing, and he had to come in again and hit it. It was interesting.”*

Stories in this series have been developed by Marili Green Reilly from interviews and correspondence. If you have experiences to share, you may email them to marili.reilly@dot.gov.



Jim Hall wasn’t the first Federal Lands employee to find himself in danger of being snowbound. This photo was taken near Spirit Lake, Washington, in 1937. WFLHD Archives.