

# Summer Hire Perspectives – 1961, Larry Brown

## *From an Interview with Larry Brown, December 2009*

*A temporary job with the Bureau of Public Roads gave Larry Brown a firm foundation of skills in surveying and construction inspection. His memories of three summers in the Colorado Rockies and one in Yellowstone National Park still resonate fifty years later.*

After spending two summers working in Colorado for the Bureau of Public Roads and what is now the Central Federal Lands Highway Division, Larry Brown was sent to Yellowstone National Park to work for his third summer. It was 1961 and he was assigned to a project at West Thumb, which “was a bit of a center at the time,” he said, with cabins, a gas station, a campground, and a store. “They even rented row boats to go out on the lake.” Unfortunately it had been built “on a hot springs basin, and so it was not very stable,” he said. “So they wanted to do away with it and replace it with Grant Village.

“**Fred Behring** was the Project Engineer there, and he had been there forever. Everybody knew him.” Another of the crew members he remembered was **Al Johnson** who later tried out his hand at writing, and Larry has one of his books. “He lives in Arkansas and he's been a lobbyist all these years; worked for the highway department in Arkansas....

“There was also “a young whipper snapper kid – we called him Cowboy. I don't know what he did all summer. We went our way and he went his,” he said.

“We lived in a trailer and we ate in a boarding house. Best food in the world; all you could eat.” The woman who ran the boarding house “would pack our lunches every day,” he said. She prepared three meals a day, and it was “really good stuff. Man, we were livin'.”

“They used to have these little cabins in these villages that you could rent for \$6,” Larry recalled. “They had two rooms: a bedroom, and a kind of a living room, and a light bulb hanging from the ceiling.” The cabins themselves, he said, were “long and narrow and ugly. They had a little stove, and the stove came with a little wood, but you weren't allowed to cook – unless you could sneak it in. I think they just didn't want people burning down the cabins.”

A retiree from Federal Highway Administration was also present at the interview. “My family was visiting Yellowstone National Park about the period of time you're talking about,” **Dave Reilly** said. “We stayed in one of those cabins, and I can remember my Mom was just appalled that she couldn't cook in the cabin. She cooked out in the car on the Coleman stove – or sometimes she would sneak the Coleman stove into the cabin.” His said his family had vacationed in the park “before the



*The crew at Yellowstone in 1961 included, from left to right: **Warren Frame** (Lovell, WY), **Bob Gish** (Pennsylvania), **Bob Jones** (Cheyenne, WY), Project Engineer **Fred Behring**, **Norm Merrill** (Wall, SD), **Al Johnson** (Virginia), and **Bill White** (Denver, CO). Photo courtesy Larry Brown.*

earthquake.” Centered outside the Park, just north of West Yellowstone, Montana, the 1958 quake caused a landslide that resulted in the formation of Hebgen Lake. The Reilly family returned after the quake to see the changes, Dave said, because “my Dad was fascinated by the earthquake.”

Larry added that “all those cabins in all those different villages have been torn down now, except in one spot, at Roosevelt Village.” They're still available if you make your reservations early enough, he added, but “if you want a room in Yellowstone National Park for anytime during the summer, you have got to plan months in advance.”



*Bridge construction at West Thumb, Yellowstone National Park, 1961. Fred Turner and another BPR employee named Bill are standing below the crane. Photo courtesy Larry Brown.*

came time to leave for the evening, he found that his car was out of oil. There was “a leak in the oil pan or something, and I couldn't drive it home. But I liked inspecting that bridge so much – I liked that job, it was my baby.” So he started walking.

He ended up walking all night. “I figured I could hitchhike,” but not a single car came along. “Somebody finally picked me up, after dawn. I learned a lesson that night. In those National parks, nobody goes anywhere at night. There's no reason to go anywhere at that time in the morning,” he said. “It's a wonder I didn't get eaten by something.”

At the time he was there, Larry said, “the girl to boy ratio in the park was about four to one—”

“So he went back there year after year,” his wife, Fran, interjected.

“College girls would come and be maids and waitresses and stuff like that,” he quickly explained.

“The stores in each of these villages around the National Park at the time were called Yellowstone Park stores. They were owned and run by the Yellowstone Park Company.” That privately owned company had the contract for many years, he said. “Finally they lost that bid and they're no longer called Yellowstone Park stores. People who worked in those stores – there'd be some...who would have forty years in there – they'd come back every year. It was their life.” Now, he said, “the only thing that remains of West Thumb is a small store that used to be a Yellowstone Park store. There might be a gas station.”

Since the village at West Thumb was due to be replaced, Larry continued, the BPR was building a road to the new campground. The project included “three wooden bridges: pile driven bridges, about 60 feet off the water.” The Park Service would not allow any metal in the bridge construction, “so even the surface of the bridge was made out of wood. It was 2x4's laid on edge, and hand nailed in. These poor guys,” he said, shaking his head over the work that went into the three bridges. “As I recall, the three bridges were labeled A, B, and C: A was (about) 100 feet, B was (about) 200 feet, and bridge C was about 300 feet long. As a bridge inspector, Larry had to make sure the pile driver would “reach a certain compression without breaking it – so many blows per inch. And so then I'd say 'OK, good! Stop before you break it!”

His boss couldn't have asked for a more dedicated inspector. “One night I was off visiting my girlfriend in Old Faithful, 19 miles away.” When it

came time to leave for the evening, he found that his car was out of oil. There was “a leak in the oil pan or something, and I couldn't drive it home. But I liked inspecting that bridge so much – I liked that job, it was my baby.” So he started walking.

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Since he and Fran have been married, they have taken motorcycle trips to various national parks nearly every year and have stayed at the new campground several times. “Every time we go back I always go look at the bridges and see if they are still standing,” he said.

“We had bears in the camp pretty much daily....There were two loops in the park. You could drive either one of those loops, (in) two or three hours, and you'd see fifty bears.” With those odds, he said, “there was about one bear incident with a tourist per day.”

But it was the bears that visited the nearby town of West Yellowstone, Montana, that provided “the greatest show – the most amazing thing I've ever seen: We could go to the city dump and watch the grizzlies frolic in the dump.”

He and his friends would buy a six pack of beer and they'd park the car at the edge of the dump, and the bears would just “walk right by. They are awesome that close up,” he said. “They'd get into a fight and it would just be the most vicious fight you ever saw in your life. They're moving so fast, and they're so big and so strong, and fur was flying.

“In those days you backed up to the dump and you threw your stuff over the embankment,” he said. “One time we pulled up to the embankment, but couldn't see the bears very well, so we had to get out of the car. So here we are, lined up on the top of the embankment, watching the grizzlies down there. There's one mother with a couple of cubs and they were rummaging and rummaging and



*Employees faced the challenge of mud at West Thumb, Yellowstone National Park. Photo courtesy Larry Brown.*

rummaging.” It was an eerie evening, with a fire burning here and there in the dump, and in the twilight “you can't see them very well.” They stood there talking and watching the bears, “and that was really stupid,” he said, because “all of a sudden, the mother was standing with us on the embankment. It just happened that fast!” They all dashed back to the car. “She didn't try to get anybody, but she just wanted to say, 'I'm the boss here and don't you guys forget it.' Boy, she got her message across.”

Larry recalled there were two brothers living in West Yellowstone who were studying the bears. They were “ranchers, and they were famous for their knowledge about grizzlies. They would go out and crawl into the grizzlies' hibernating den in the middle of the winter” to do their studies, he said, and “they knew more about grizzlies than anybody else at that time.



*Pile driver (and operator “Red”) at Yellowstone National park, 1961. Photo courtesy Larry Brown.*

“The endangered and threatened species act was not in effect at the time,” he said, but “all of the environmentalists at the time were saying ‘the grizzly is declining and is endangered because we are taking away their habitat.’”

“And these two guys, these two old ranchers, said ‘they’re not threatened because we’re taking away their habitat; they’re threatened because we’re shooting them.’” That was simply the most practical way in which the local people could deal with the bears. The grizzlies would “walk right down the centerline of the main street of town and they’d get shot. They’re not afraid of anything, just absolutely have no fear.” Larry couldn’t remember the brothers’ names, but, he said, “You still hear about them every now and then, 50 years later.”

The work, he said, was lots of fun. “I loved it. I learned so much about construction and engineering and stuff and I used it the rest of my life.”

Although Larry did not fulfill the prophesy **Bill White** made during his first year with the BPR, he was quick to acknowledge the value of the experience. Sometimes, he said, it was “a knowledge I didn’t even know I had until I was confronted with it.”

He also admitted to being tempted by an engineering career. Wiggling in a transit, he said, was “common sense,” but the course work in civil engineering had him worried. “It was a tough course. I didn’t know whether I could hack the course in college.”

His career choice was also influenced in a way by his high school counselor. “You know how a young kid gets his nose out of joint. I had an advisor in high school whom I didn’t like. She said, ‘you’re obviously engineering material; go be an engineer.’” Larry said his reaction to this advice was “I’ll show her, I’m not going to be an engineer,” but he thinks now perhaps he should have followed that career path. “It was kind of a natural for me; I really enjoyed it.”

Overall, Larry said, “It was a great job, a neat experience....Throughout those four years I had the total experience on a road, from absolutely a gleam in somebody’s eye to the paving and striping. It was really fun.”



*After retiring from a career in mining reclamation, Larry Brown purchased a small farm in Palisade, Colorado. He is pictured above at his home with his orchard in the background. For the past seven years, he and his wife Fran have spent their winters cruising in the Sea of Cortez and along the west coast of Mexico aboard their sailboat “Merlot.” Dave Reilly retired from the Oregon Division Federal Highway Administration in 2005. He and his wife, Marili, have spent two winters cruising in Mexico aboard their sailboat, “Tamara,” often in the company of the Browns.*

*Stories in this series have been developed by Marili Reilly from interviews and correspondence. Retirees who would like to share their memories may email [marili.reilly@dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@dot.gov).*



*Larry Brown had already left the project when BPR began construction of Bridge A (top two photos), a bridge about 100 feet long that would serve the “new” campground at Grant Village. At lower left, the beginnings of construction on Bridge B, approximately 200 feet long, in 1961. The photo at lower right shows Bridge B today. (1961 photo courtesy Larry Brown. 2010 photo courtesy Wade Johnson, WFLHD.)*



*Bridge C in 1961 (top row) and 2010 (lower four photos). At approximately 300 feet, this is the longest of the three bridges constructed by BPR at Grant Village. (1961 photo courtesy Larry Brown. 2010 photo courtesy Wade Johnson, WFLHD.)*