

LIFE IN THE CAMPS: SMITH RIVER CAMP 1955-1957

A REMEMBRANCE FROM ED SPRAGUE, SEPTEMBER 2011

In the 1950's the Smith River Camp was one of the largest Pacific Northwest construction camps being used by the Bureau of Public Roads. It served as headquarters for several projects, housed survey, construction, and maintenance crews, and was often home to contractors as well.

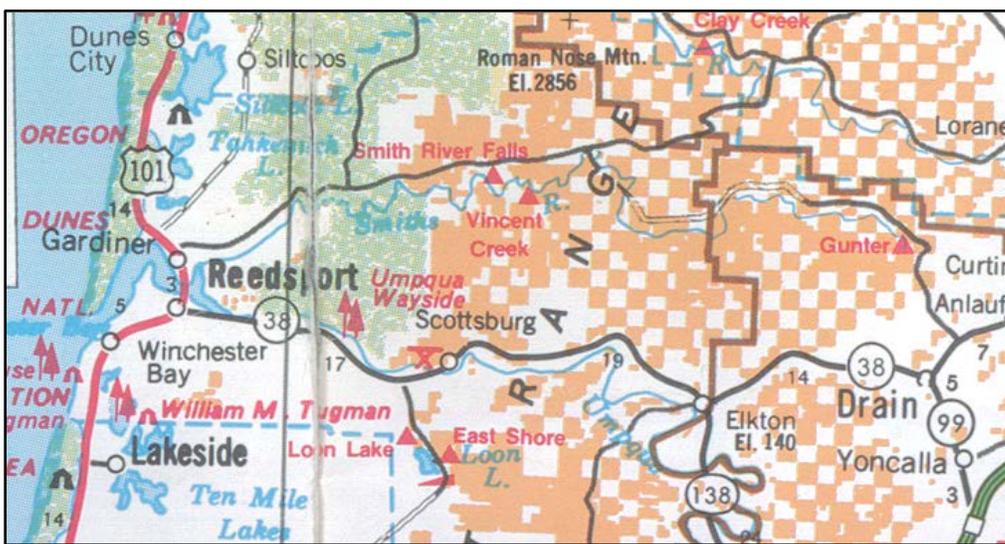
It was a September afternoon in 1955 when the new BPR employee arrived at the Smith River Camp. He had followed a project crew member into the camp, his personal vehicle still splattered with mud after being towed out of a river.

The remote camp, located about 40 miles northeast of Reedsport, Oregon, was accessed by a road of diminishing quality. **Ed Sprague** recalled that “the first part of the road was paved, then it went to gravel, then we were in the work area. I followed a road grader and then he stopped to let me go by at the first river crossing.” A GS-2 who was reporting for his first assignment, Ed got out and “asked if I was supposed to drive my car down and across the river. He said yes, unless I wanted to carry it across.

“I went down across the river and made it up the other side,” he said, but then got stuck attempting to cross the next river. “I was sitting on the top of the car when a Power Wagon came along. **Don Hounder** got out with a chain and hooked onto my car and yanked me out. He said to follow them into camp.

“Many new hires came in on the days following my arrival,” he recalled, and those that liked the camp life stayed with it. Some, however, “wanted no part of staying ±40 miles from town.” The camp had “an old army type four wheel drive Power Wagon” and the camp driver used it to make “a weekly grocery/mail run to Reedsport....(He) used to go around and ask the crew if they wanted anything from town,” and the trainees who wanted out would catch a ride on that next run. Ed didn't leave the camp himself for a good six months after arriving. “I stayed there in camp until May 1956. The roads were such that I didn't want to go out down the river. I waited till Weatherly Creek Road was dry enough to go out to Highway 38 east of Scottsburg.”

The camp was powered by a generator “which they shut off at 10:00 pm and fired up early the next morning. We lived in a long bunk house that housed about 30-plus engineering crew members and camp help, two to a room. I bunked with a trainee from Minnesota. He only stayed about a year, then he went to another job.



Detail from a 1984 BLM Resource Map of Oregon.

“We ate in a large building next to the bunk house,” Ed remembered. “In the morning, just before breakfast, we would fix our lunches.” The cook set everything out on a table: “lunch meats and breads, some fruit, and a large coffee pot to fill your Thermos.”

When Ed first arrived the camp had a cook named **Cecil**. “He was a cranky old cook in the morning, (but) he ran a tight ship...didn’t take any guff from the crew....If Cecil left for a weekend we were on our own to cook for ourselves.” Cecil was there when Ed arrived, remained “for about a year and a half...and was replaced by a cook named **Bill** who...was there when I left....The cooks always did a good job. The meals were very good and not many people complained.”

He recalled that “some of the crew had wives and children and lived in their house trailers using the camp’s generator.” Sometimes, he said, the cook would make a special dinner and “he would invite the families...to eat with the crew.” **Lonnie Rogers**, who lived with his wife in a trailer, “would come through the bunkhouse and



“Shooting stumps” on a reconstruction and grading project in the Mount Hood National Forest. Final construction report, Columbia River Highway, 28-B1, C, February 13, 1939. WFLHD Archives.



Eight-yard Linn tractors were used to haul materials during construction in Willamette National Forest, 1933-34. Final Construction Report, Santiam Highway, NR-23-H. WFLHD Archives.

tell everybody to ‘clean up and cover up’ as his wife was passing through to the cookhouse.” Ed remembered that **Elmer Underbakke** and his wife also lived in a trailer at the camp.

“In those days the BPR also did all the maintenance on the BLM roads, so we had the maintenance crew working out of the camp.” That crew included a foreman and 8 or 9 truckers and equipment operators. “They maintained all the roads...in the area” once they had been completed.

“I remember the maintenance crew needed some help one time” when one of their drivers was sick, so Ed drove a truck for them “for about a week...The foreman was a nice guy. (He) showed me what he wanted done (and) rode with me once... It was something different for a spell and I enjoyed the change.”

M. E. Martin was the Resident Engineer, and the camp was home to crews for five or six different projects, “along with several contractors who were working many jobs. I remember a contractor named Thunderbunk who was working down Smith River doing a lot of rock work.” Whenever they shot a rock cut, he said, “the rock would fly across the river and knock down trees,” leaving virtually nothing standing. “It looked like it had been bombed.”

Another contractor he remembered had a large camp further up the river. Dennis and Sons “worked several projects,” and had even built themselves “a small airport up on a ridge...out Weatherly Creek,” so they could “fly in parts for their equipment.” One of their projects was “the

road to Roman Nose Mountain. There was a big quarry at Roman Nose for many, many years,” Ed remembered, and “the grade on that road was 17 percent, the steepest grade I’ve ever seen.”

Every once in awhile Dennis and Sons invited the BPR crew up to their camp for the evening meal. “It was like eating out—they always served great meals.”

Ed remembered that “roads in the Smith River area were built different above the camp.” Many of these roads were single lane roads with turn-outs, and “they had a 4 or 5 foot layer of shot rock—big rock—which was called cushion which they used when running along river grade through low wet areas. It set the road bed up out of any wet areas 4 or 5 feet.” He added that “the main roads were two lanes.”

“The camp mechanic was **Dick Kimble**. He kept all the vehicles and equipment running. Dick also ran the grader, and (he) opened and graded the Weatherly Creek Road in the spring so we could go out that way to Highway 38.”

By 1956 the Smith River Road was “greatly improved to Spencer Creek.” The crew parked their personal cars at a ranch just above Spencer Creek, and “on the weekends we used to take a Power Wagon from camp to (the) ranch.... We would carpool to Portland in several cars” then meet back in Gardiner, just north of Reedsport on Coast Highway 101, at the Teddy Bear Tavern. Then it was “drive to the ranch, pile out of our cars and into the Power Wagons” and head back to the camp for another week’s work.

Ed remembered driving back to camp with six people in his car one time, and “most were feeling no pain.” The guy sitting next to the front door accidentally hit the handle and fell out. “I was going about 30 MPH. Needless to say he got bruised and skinned up bad.” The fellow was tough, however. During World War II “he had been... a bomber pilot and had a steel plate in his head. We put him back in the car...took him into camp, cleaned him up, and put him to bed. He was up in the morning,” Ed added, though he was moving a bit more slowly. “I think he worked in the office for a week or two to heal up.”

In the rather remote wilderness around the camp, wildlife sightings were not uncommon. “We were pushing roads through the forest and BLM land. Running line out ahead of the construction

was great, the deer and animals were so tame, you could almost feed the deer by hand.”

Ed recalled going into Reedsport for a movie one weekend with another employee, **Jim Brannon**. They were driving back along Weatherly Creek Road on the way back to camp when the headlights picked up four cougars. The big cats “ran down the road for about a half mile in front of Jim’s car. The thing you never forget is the very long tail a cougar has.”

The road curved sharply to the right and the cougars ran up into the brush. Jim stopped the car and “we backed up a little. We could see their eyes, as they had stopped and looked back for a moment.”



A channel change was made to the North Santiam River during a 1935-36 project. Final Construction Report, Oregon Forest Highway Project No. 24-F2. WFLHD Archives.

Once the road to the camp had been improved, the crew members could bring in their own vehicles. One weekend in 1957, he remembered, **Ted Daniels** “brought in a new Oldsmobile, **Leroy Borstad** brought in a new Studebaker Silverhawk, and I brought in a new Ford, all on the same weekend.”

Recalling some of the other members of the crew, he noted that he used to car pool with “**Al Gerolph**...He got there about two days before I did.” **Bill Regal** was one of the party chiefs, “(he) was from New York. **Frances Bennett** was there; they called him Benny and he had a little green man that used sit on his shoulder. He was a character. **Al Calayes** was at the camp; he went to Alaska with the State in the mid 1950’s....**Mel Hanson** and **Jim Kernole** were there; they lived in the bunkhouse.”

Although there were many other employees on the various crews, one who stands out in Ed's memory was the camp swamper. Hew kept things clean and in good repair. Ed remembers him as a "remarkable man who had traveled all over the world. He was always writing letters...and receiving letters from all parts of the world. He never owned a car. He said he would

walk to where he was going. He was really interesting to talk to."

Ed's annual salary as a GS-2 was \$2,960, "big bucks in them days," he said. He enjoyed the time he spent living in the camp. "We worked hard and the food was good, it's something to always remember. There were always great people on the crews and fun to work with."



An Engineering Camp used on the Whitewater Creek Bridge project, North Santiam Highway #24, Oregon Forest Highway Project E-24-D2, 1933-34. WFLHD Archives.

Ed Sprague wrote up his memories of two years at the Smith River in time for the 2011 luncheon of the Old Road Gang. Retirees with stories to share may send them to marili.reilly@dot.gov.