

LIFE IN THE CAMPS: THE NORTH CROSS-STATE HIGHWAY, 1966 – PART I

A REMEMBRANCE BY PAUL ANDERSON, OCTOBER 2012

The North Cascade Scenic Byway in north central Washington, which provides access to the North Cascades National Park, runs through some of the most rugged terrain in the State. Originally known as the North Cross-State Highway, it grew from mining trails and county roads to eventually connect the Okanogan Valley with the ports of Puget Sound.



In the late 1800's the North Cascades were at the center of a busy mining area. Several types of minerals and even some gemstones were found, but no big strikes were ever made.

The rugged terrain made travel difficult. The Army Corps of Engineers and the counties built bits and pieces of road. The miners built trails described as "so rough even blasphemous old prospectors were hard pressed to denounce them sufficiently." But it took over 100 years and the Bureau of Public Roads to finally get a decent road built through the North Cascades.

In the early 1960's the Washington State Department of Transportation and BPR began a joint construction project to address that need. WSDOT would build from the east and BPR would build from the west. By 1966 several miles on each end of the BPR section had been designed and were ready to be staked, but the area was still so remote and travel was

so difficult, it was necessary to camp on the job to do the work. For a couple of summers, BPR crews worked from tent camps to complete the survey to connect the two ends.

Our crew was led by **Wayne Barber**, the Project Engineer, and I was the transit-man. The others included **John Bucholtz**, a draftsman out for some field experience, and **Al Bonde**, a new hire. We also had three college-student summer temporaries: **Steve** and **Bruce**, who were engineering majors; and **Jim**, a music major. **Chuck Borstad** would join us on the east end after the summer temps left.

Before we began work in the North Cascades, however, the crew was assembled at Mt. Hood for a few weeks in May to survey a bypass for Barlow Pass on the Mt. Hood Loop route. One reason for this was to train the new hires; the other was to check for compatibility. A camp way out in the woods is not the place to find out you can't get along.

On the steep cliffs of a narrow gorge above the Skagit River, out of the view of highway overlooks, there remains a series of narrow bridges and half tunnels cut into the rock by miners in the mid 1890's. This is the Devil's Elbow trail, and 500 feet of it still clings precariously to the outside of the mountain while a safe, modern highway follows a tunnel through the mountain's interior.

Photo courtesy National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/noca/hbd/forms5.htm.

We all met at the BPR camp in Newhalem, Washington, one sunny morning in early July.

Harvey, our camp cook, joined us there.

We had a one-time only arrangement with the road contractor to drive us to the end of the new construction. There we met our packer with his truckload of pack mules, and two men from the Vancouver supply depot with two big truckloads of gear and supplies. There was a mountain of gear: tents, cots, food, survey instruments, saws, fuel, and cooking and eating gear. In short we packed in everything needed to set up housekeeping for eight – including a field kitchen and a field office – and to do the survey work.

The packer immediately realized it would take at least two trips to move it all, so we unloaded the trucks and stacked the gear at his direction for easiest loading and to get the BPR drivers back on the road to Vancouver, a nine- or ten-hour drive in those days.

We had planned on following the pack train into camp to begin setting up, but the Forest Service insisted that we first have some fire suppression training, so it was back to town for a couple of hours.

Then came the fun part: getting to camp. We had a one-ton, ten passenger “Super Crummy” to transport the crew and our packs which we drove the five or six miles past Diablo and over the top of Diablo Dam to a lakeside resort. The resort took us by boat the length of Diablo Lake to the landing at the base of Ross Dam, and from there we had a “white knuckle” ride on the back of a flatbed truck up the steep, narrow, and winding road to the top of the dam. At a floating resort on Ross Lake we boarded another boat for a ride

across the lake to the trailhead, before ending our journey with a five-mile hike on a rocky trail to camp.

The trip took well over three hours. Even as we came into sight of the camp, it was just our luck that we had to continue another couple of hundred yards to a bridge, then cross a second bridge into the camp. It wasn’t a long way, but it would add a half mile to our daily hike.

It was late afternoon when we finally got there, but we managed to get set up well enough to eat, find the gear we needed for the next day, and get a good night’s sleep.

Our campsite was a little flat area where two creeks joined, with scattered small trees for shade. The only flat spot for miles, it had been used as an overnight camp for years, so there was a good fire ring, logs and rocks for seating, and no underbrush. Someone had made a log table, and there was even a “shaving shelf” on a tree. Since we planned to stay for about six weeks, we went a hundred yards out of camp and made a comfortable privy.

We were to work ten hour days, and stay out for ten days with a four-day weekend every two weeks. This was a moot point: anyone living in the Vancouver area had to leave town about 4 a.m. on Monday to get back to camp.

The packer brought in the mail and fresh supplies every Sunday. With no refrigeration, our menu was limited to things that would keep for a week. Juice and milk were kept in the creek; we found an old screen box that we hung in the shade for the perishables; the meat stayed in a cooler that Harvey kept



In 1965, the back lot was home to a fleet of pickups and vans, Crummies and Carryalls, of the 1960-1965 vintage. WFLHD Archives.

covered with a blanket and doused with cold water from the creek.

Breakfast was usually juice, coffee, bacon, eggs, and pancakes. For lunch we made our own sandwiches. Choices were limited: it really helped if you liked bologna or PBJs. Apples and oranges were the only fruit that would survive the trip, and any extras like cookies or candy bars we had to furnish and pack in ourselves.

At night we ate a lot of steaks with fried or mashed potatoes, canned veggies, bread, and, of course, beans were a staple.

There was usually pudding or canned fruit for dessert. Once, when supplies were running low, Harvey tried to stretch the pudding by adding a can of fruit cocktail, but we just got lumpy pudding.

Harvey kept a big pot of water on the fire, so we could wash up a little before eating. Bathing meant a pot of hot water for a sponge bath in the privacy of your tent. The more obvious choice was to strip down and jump into the creek. Creek baths were of short duration, however. After all, some of the water came from a snow bank not too many miles upstream, and it was cold enough to keep milk for a week.

To keep the fire going, every night or two we would go out and find a snag or windfall and cut it into

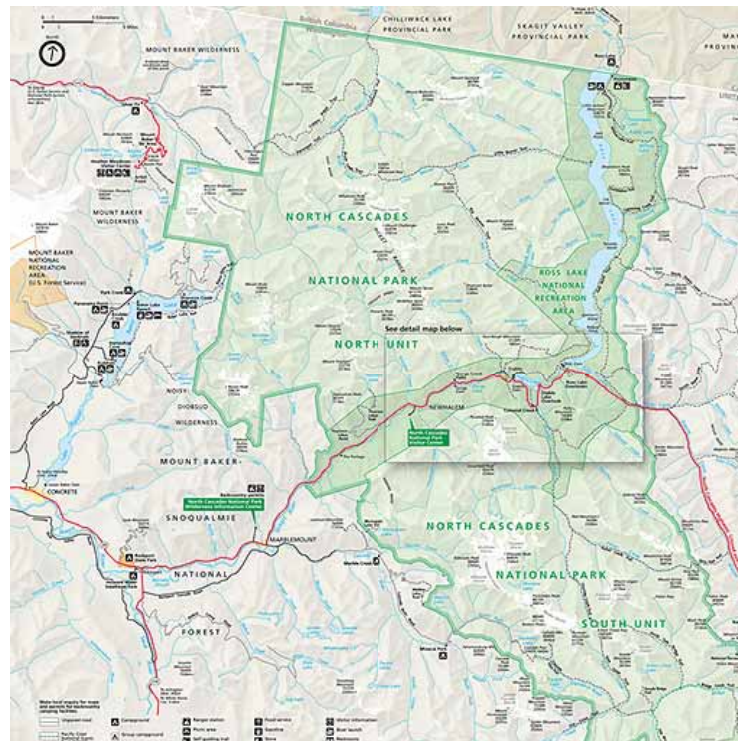
log lengths that two guys could carry on their shoulders. Harvey would cut and split it during the day.

Harvey was afraid of bears, more so since he slept in the pantry. We only saw one bear that summer. We met a yearling on the trail one afternoon, but he soon figured out he was outnumbered and scampered off into the brush.

The first morning was a little disorganized, but we managed to eat, pack our lunches, gather our gear, and get started down the trail on time.

Wayne was in the lead, I was bringing up the rear, and Jim, the music major, was ahead of me in line. I could see him counting heads, then he gave me a wicked grin and started whistling the marching song from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: “Hi Ho! Hi Ho! It’s off to work we go!”

The first couple of miles on the west end were the hardest: steep hillsides, rocky cliffs, heavy underbrush, and lots of timber. Access was difficult: the trail was on one side of the creek, our survey was on the other, and the creek was too deep and swift to wade. There was a bridge at the very beginning of our hike, but after that we had to rely on a couple of old miner’s cable cars or downed logs to cross the creek. We did a lot of walking.



North Cascades National Park. Map courtesy National Park Service, www.NPS.gov

Once the transit was set up, we completed what we were doing at that point, which often ran past quitting time. With that, the poor access, and the long walks, some days we didn't stagger back to camp until 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. When the work got to within a mile or so of camp, we found it easier to just walk the old survey line. Once past camp we were close to the trail all the way.

Rocky canyons can get pretty warm in the summer. A couple of the guys thought a cold beer in the evening would be nice, so they asked the packer to bring some in on his next trip. He was glad to do it, but not wanting to mix private beer with Government groceries on a Government-hired mule, he added a mule to his string and charged them about \$20 for it, his "bargain rate." That was the end of the evening beer.

Paul Anderson began his career with the Bureau of Public Roads as a laborer in 1957. His experiences at the next camp site will be picked up in Part II. Stories in this series are edited by Marili Reilly. Retirees with stories to share may send them to marili.reilly@dot.gov.



Paul eventually moved from Survey to Design, retiring from the Idaho/Montana Design Team in 1999. He is shown above with other members of the 1986 Design School. Front row: Ross Widener, Glenn Kutzera, Pete Gonzales, Vince Hutchison, Bill Howard. Back row: Jeff Place, Paul Anderson, Tom Bennett, Joel Petersen, Jay Worthington, Wade Johnson. WFLHD Archives.