

Life in the Camps: The Smith River Project, 1954



Western Federal
Lands Highway
Division

A Glimpse into an Earlier Era

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From an Interview
with Jack Johnson
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The Smith River Camp was one of the biggest camps used by the Bureau of Public Roads in the 1950's. Its remote location and difficult access made it a lonely assignment for the spouses of BPR employees.

It was one thing to live in a construction camp if you were part of the crew – your work took you out into the field every day and the tent or trailer where you lived provided a place to relax at the end of the day. For spouses, however, the camp was a different experience.

It was 1954 and **Jack Johnson** had just gotten married when he was assigned to the Smith River Road project. “I was working for **Ray Westby**,” he said, “and just a week after I moved my wife into that camp, everyone else who was married got transferred out.”

It had not been an intentional slight, he admitted.

“It had already been pre-arranged... Of course nobody told me: I didn't tell anybody I was getting married.”

At the time there were about 35 men in the camp, “So she got indoctrinated real quick like into the life of the BPR... She was only 18 years old at that time, so she was not used to being isolated from other people.”

His wife had spent the previous summer working in the plant office of a cannery. “There were 100 people through her area every couple of hours,” he said, “and then to show up down there (and be) the only woman, and nobody to talk to...”

“We had no telephone at the camp; there was no mail delivered. We had a mail run going to town two, maybe three times a week.”

With as many as 50 people in camp at a time, “someone would have to go into town and get groceries and stuff...at least twice a week. The groceries were more important than getting the mail, but we would get the mail when we went into town.”

The camp had “its own water system,” and a generator for power, but that didn't mean that every electrical appliance worked well. “My wife said, ‘I'm sitting down here, (I can't) even listen to the radio!’

Above: Vicinity map of Smith River and the Smith River Road project.

“You were always fighting the mud...”

“We had the old rotary calculators,” Jack explained. “Every time they hit a button on the calculator, it buzzed in the radio.”

His marriage worked out, he reflected, but “divorce was not an uncommon situation for the nomads that we were.” Many of the wives agreed to move, “until they found out where they were going and what they had to do.” Even if they were near a town, it may have been a town of only 30-40 people, “So you were not really in what (you would think of as) a town.”

His wife did a lot of reading, he said, but she also made at least one friend. “We had a cook by the name of **Cecil Willister**, I believe it was. He was an old time cook; he cooked for the Corps of Engineers and he cooked at several (of our) camps over the years. My wife would go over there and talk to him. He was a very friendly person and he always had time to talk.”

There were other reasons the camp seemed less than hospitable. “It seemed like it rained every day that I was there for that whole year. Anytime that you came out of there that you weren’t covered with mud...was a very unusual day.”

Jack said that in later years his wife often reminded him that the only way in and out of camp was in a Power Wagon. “You couldn’t go out for an evening. If you were lucky, you could get out of there and back in a weekend, (but you were) always fighting the mud every bit of the way.”

The way they made it work, he said was to set up a schedule. They would meet a Power Wagon, near the mouth of the Smith River. “One rig would leave at 6:00 and another one at 8:00 and another one at 10:00 and the very last one left at midnight.”

Jack and his wife spent one weekend in town, and “We got the midnight run going back one night. There were probably six or seven of us in the Power Wagon.”

The vehicle was equipped with only two seats, plus benches in the back. “You had propane tanks, your groceries that you bought for a week or more...all that stuff thrown in the back.” From where they had parked their own cars, it was about 25 miles to the camp.

“We were driving up the road back to camp...and we were the only ones on the road. No one else used it; you couldn’t even call it a road – it was two tracks, full of ruts – and we got stuck this one night going in there.”

The Power Wagons were equipped with winches on the front, and “The only way you could get out is to...pull yourself out.” That night, however, “We got stuck down below a major cut, so there were no stumps or trees or anything there to hook to.

The river was about 15 feet below them, and “the only place we could go was down over the bank. (All we could

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do was) just wrap the cable around a boulder and hope that it held enough to pull the truck through. We winched about five times to get through this one really bad muddy area.

“By the time I got back in, and (we) got ready to go on, my wife said, ‘where’s your shoe?’ I had lost a shoe and didn’t even know it; it was (that) muddy.”

On the occasions when inspectors came to the camp, they, too, had to contend with the mud. With no telephone and with mail pick-ups only once or twice a week, he noted, “Unless they planned their trips a month ahead of time, we had no idea who was going to come in or when they were going to get there.

“They would usually leave Portland 8:00 in the morning. By the time they



This Marchant calculator may have been similar to what was being used on the project.

would get to where the mud started in Smith River, it was eight or nine at night; then they would get stuck and couldn’t get any farther. By the time they walked that 20 miles into camp, it would be 3:00 in the morning.

“For some reason or another, I guess because Ray liked me,” (17:25) Jack winked, “I always got the three in the morning call...Ray would come in and wake me up and (whisper), ‘we got somebody stuck down here. Would you go down and help them get out?’ I got acquainted with quite a few people” that way, he added.

That fall, when Thanksgiving rolled around, Ray started working on the Johnsons to remain in the camp over the holiday. “They had to have someone stay in camp to keep the generators going so the refrigerators would keep running,” Jack said, and “Everybody wanted to go out for a four-day weekend.

“The Saturday before the four-day weekend, we got together at the cook house.” Many of the crew had left, but a few people were still there, “and Ray kept staying, you know, if I had my wife down here I wouldn’t mind staying down here for four days.

“My wife also was very well acquainted with Ray,” Jack said, and she told him later, “I was sitting there (listening to that, and) I was ready to hit him over the head.”

“He kept that up for about three or four hours,” Jack said, and “at the end of the

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Jack Johnson first joined the Bureau of Public Roads in 1949 and was assigned to a survey crew on Hurricane Ridge. He left within a year for a job at Bonneville Power Administration, then answered the draft and spent two years in the Army. He tried to get back on at Bonneville, he said, but “they’d hire a survey crew for a certain project, and then they’d get rid of the survey crew, so it just didn’t work out.” He returned to BPR in 1953 and worked a season on Stevens Pass before being assigned to Smith River. He would return to Smith River for other assignments in 1959 and 1965-66.

The stories in this series have been developed by Marili Reilly from interviews, correspondence, and archive files.

“I’d give almost anything to go back to that solitude”

conversation, I says, ‘OK, we’re staying here, but I’ve got to be paid for overtime for every day, because I have to go check the road to make sure it is open every day. I have to run down the road, and that takes 8 hours...so I have to have 8 hours of overtime for every day.

“Next weekend,” he added, “I (want) to get two more days off and have a four-day weekend.”

“They thought it over and said ‘well, that’s probably the only way we’ll get anywhere to stay in.’”

The crew stayed at the camp that fall until the first part of December, “when it got so muddy and so wet you couldn’t get in and out anymore. (That’s when)

they closed it all down for the winter. Thank goodness I never got assigned back there again.”

Jack reflected that his wife’s view of the experience softened as time went on. “My wife passed away 13 years ago,” he said, but after some time had passed, she told him, “I’d give almost anything to go back to that solitude. I was all by myself and didn’t have to do anything. I didn’t have to talk to anyone; didn’t have to make any decisions. But at the time it wasn’t that nice.”



George Humphreys (back), Jack Johnson, and Paul Anderson share memories during an April 2014 retiree gathering at WFLHD.