

HIGHWAY HISTORY

The 1933 Road Survey through the Northern Cascades

By David Keller

COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Summer 2004: Vol. 18, No. 2

On February 19, 2003, Valeria Ogden, former Washington state representative and Heritage Caucus co-chair, received a framed, historical collage and commendation from Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) Secretary Douglas MacDonald in a special ceremony before the Washington State Transportation Commission. While honoring Ogden, Secretary MacDonald smilingly alluded to her "70 years of service." In developing the anecdote further, MacDonald noted that he had passed out similar awards many times, even one for 50 years of service, but "never for 70 years." Just how did WSDOT's secretary arrive at this figure; and where exactly was Val Ogden in 1933 and what was she doing?

The answer to these questions takes us back to a world now long vanished, a world with quite a bit of room for personal solutions to complex governmental questions and assignments. Val's father, Ivan "Ike" Bodwell Munson, worked for Washington's Department of Highways (as it was then known). Ike was based in Wenatchee where he worked for District Two as a location engineer. From spring through fall of 1933 Munson led a reconnaissance survey crew through the northern Cascades to find the best route for an eventual road.

Backing up a few steps, in 1895 the Washington state legislature made an appropriation of \$30,000 to explore and recommend a road through the Cascade Range. The newly formed Washington State Board of State Road Commissioners (the predecessor to WSDOT) met in Fairhaven (now South Bellingham) on June 28, 1895, and submitted a "final report" to the legislature that included the following information:

The money was to be spent in three divisions. The western portion of the road went from the Whatcom County line to Blanchard, near the beginning of Chuckanut Drive in present-day Skagit County. This part of the work received \$4,000. It then linked up to Marblemount in Skagit County, proceeding east to "the confluence of the Twitsp [*sic*] and Methow rivers." This stretch received \$20,000. Interestingly, the legislature charged the board with not only building this section of road over the Cascades but also with finding and surveying it. This was due to "contradictory information at hand regarding the different routes." From the confluence of the two rivers the road went "East of the Methow and on the Colville Indian Reservation." This eastern portion received a final appropriation of \$6,000. It terminated at Marcus, just north of present-day Kettle Falls in Stevens County.

Due to complications regarding securing a right-of-way through the Colville Indian Reservation with Indian Agent Captain Bubb, who ignored the request, the eastern terminus of the road was delayed for over a year. Add to that the difficult mountainous terrain, and the project quickly ground to a halt. This, despite a glowing description from the state road commissioners of the

need for this part of the road, "between the Skagit River at Marblemount on the west and the Methow River, at Twisp [sic] on the east." The commissioners added that this road was critical "in developing mining regions, wonderfully rich, but now remote, unfortunately, and furnishing a cheap method for transportation of the cattle of the Okanogan country to the desirable market on the tide water..."

A fitful start was made, but in the more extreme terrain the road was not built and the project was abandoned. In an irony of time, following the state legislature's 1895 mandate to make this the first state highway, almost 80 years passed before it was finally completed and officially dedicated as the North Cascades Highway—State Highway 20—on September 2, 1972.

Work began again when a Department of Highways survey crew, led by Charles I. Signer in 1921, next tackled the difficult problems of the terrain. His survey followed two of the routes recommended by the 1895 report. Signer was considerably more accurate in his cost estimates for the road. His 1921 survey report noted the cost of construction "for the 89 miles between Marblemount and Twisp was \$4,295,000." Later studies praised Signer's engineering skills and labeled his cost estimates "quite realistic."

These two survey expeditions set the stage for the 1933 work party led by Ike Munson. Charged with leading a 25-man Department of Highways project, Munson was told to put a crew together for a "cross-state highway" survey. In his memoirs the self-taught engineer and surveyor wrote,

I started this survey in Winthrop on Decoration Day.... I established the first location camp at the mouth of Early Winters Creek. The second camp we located at Lone Fir Camp, and the third location was the forks of Bridge Creek and some other creek.

In making this location I also had tied into a Bureau of Public Roads survey that had been made from Twisp Pass toward Twisp. I tied into that point on Twisp Pass and located down the Twisp Pass Summit toward a junction with a survey we were making from the summit of Washington Pass down to Bridge Creek. That survey ran from Winthrop, across Washington Pass, down Bridge Creek to the forks of the Stehekin River and Bridge Creek, and up the Stehekin River to Cascade Pass where I tied into a survey that had been made by a fellow by the name of Stacey who was the location engineer for the Seattle District.

That summer was a very interesting summer. We had a large crew; an assistant locator; a party that was taking contours, headed by Frank Culp; I had two check-level parties checking levels, Ralph Batdorf was the transit man, (and) George Kelly was the assistant locator. I reported at the end of that season that I had investigated the area known as the Granite Creek drainage, which is the route of the North Cascades Highway.

It must have been a "very interesting summer" indeed for Munson and his crew. Now we can go back to the original question of Val Ogden's "70 years of service." In 1933 a nine-year-old Valeria, her eight-year-old brother Chuck, and their mother Pearle Munson accompanied Ike as, perhaps, uncounted members of the survey party. Another wrinkle developed, according to Chuck Munson in a recent interview. It seems that many of the young, hard-working survey men had gotten married shortly before their departure on this lengthy sojourn, and they soon began to miss their wives. Since it was impractical to allow the men to leave the survey, a compromise came into play—a number of the wives came up to visit their husbands on at least one weekend during the work.

It took another 39 years for the North Cascades Highway to be completed. However, it is a fitting testimony to the work of a self-taught engineer and Department of Highways employee named Ike Munson and his entire crew that the route they so carefully surveyed and mapped became the one chosen for one of Washington's most spectacularly scenic highways. The survey was accomplished in a timely fashion despite hordes of mosquitoes and extremes of mountain weather that Munson referred to at one point as "hotter than the hinges of Hell." Best of all for Ike and his crew, they got to see their loved ones. And that's how Val Ogden got such an early start on her lengthy career in state service.

David Keller worked for the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) as archivist for two years until 2003. In addition to gathering and processing the WSDOT Historical Collection, he also helped establish a permanent collection of maps and photographs displayed on the second floor of the Transportation Building in Olympia. Currently, he is employed as a senior analyst with the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Photographs for this article were taken from Ike Munson's original Department of Highway's scrapbook-style report, labeled "Cascade Pass Survey," and were graciously provided by Chuck Munson, an engineer, who lives in East Wenatchee. -Robert V. Culp, of Wenatchee, provided background information about this and other surveys, and donated photographs to WSDOT Historical Collection.