

**SUMMARY OF BEN VAN ZANDT'S CAREER  
WITH THE DIVISION OF HIGHWAYS/CALTRANS  
FROM HIS MEMOIRS AS EDITED BY GUY LUTHER**



**BEN VAN ZANDT  
DESIGN ENGINEER, DESIGN SECTION B (EARLY 1960'S)**

This career summary is based on information from Ben's memoirs (The Life of a Polico Kid), which he wrote in 2010, at the age of 86.

Ben's grandparents settled near the town of Philo, in Anderson Valley, between Ukiah and the Mendocino Coast, in the late 1800's. Ben's mother and father, Alta and Don Van Zandt, both worked for the California Transportation Commission (CTC), the predecessor to the California Division of Highways. While Alta worked only briefly as a cook, Don worked first as a draftsman and a surveyor, then supervising work at the Ruby Creek convict camp on Route 299 (relieving Charles Sweet so he could go to town and be married), and as an Assistant Resident Engineer on highway projects. Don completed the last 20 years of his CTC/Division of Highways career as foreman of the Boonville Maintenance crew, retiring in 1953.

Ben was born in Eureka, when his father was supervising work at the Ruby Creek convict camp, but he grew up on his parent's property near Philo, in Anderson Valley. "Boontling" is a dialect unique to Anderson Valley, and Polico is "boontling" for Philo, so the title of Ben's memoirs translates to "The Life of a Philo Kid".

Ben attended Indian Creek Grammer school in Philo, and for a couple of years he was the only boy in a student body of six. In addition to an education, school provided a job, since Ben worked as the school janitor for two years at a salary of \$7.50 per month. This was during the early years of the depression, and the money went to pay the family's electricity bill and whatever small cash purchases were needed.

A kid's life in Philo wasn't all work and school. Ben managed to find time for plenty of trout fishing, hunting, and swimming in Anderson Creek. Later, he ran a trap line for raccoons, ringtail cats, and skunks, skinning the animals and selling their hides.

Ben entered Anderson Valley High School, with a student body of approximately 60, in the fall of 1935. He was a good student, always on the honor roll. In addition, he was on the basketball, baseball and track teams, and played the clarinet in the school orchestra. Ben was Student Body President during his senior year, and was on the staff that produced the school yearbook. He was one of the 16 members of Anderson Valley High School's graduating class of 1939. That summer he worked for the contractor seal coating the highway at Yorkville, driving pilot car.

In the fall of 1939, Ben enrolled at U.C. Berkeley, living in a rooming house on the south side of the campus and working as a janitor at the Faculty Club. It was a traumatic experience, coming from a 60 student high school to a 20,000 student university, and Ben compounded that by taking a course load that included Chemistry and Physics in his first semester. The result was that Ben flunked out in one semester.

Ben then enrolled at Santa Rosa JC for the spring semester in 1940, taking classes to learn what he had not learned in high school. While he was in Junior College, Ben met his future wife "..... a saucy red-haired girl named Alice Frevert."

During the summer of 1941 Ben attended a surveying camp in the Sierras, put on by Fresno State College, and again put in a brief stint driving pilot car for a contractor. That fall, Ben went on a field trip with the Engineering Club to Washington State, inspecting the Bonneville Dam, the Grand Coulee Dam, the Tacoma Narrows Bridge (cables only!), and other engineering construction.

After graduating from Santa Rosa JC in June 1942, Ben worked as an axeman for the U.S. Engineering Department, setting grade at Mather Field near Sacramento. He figured he would be drafted soon, so he tried to enlist in the Army Air Corps. Hay fever kept Ben out of the Army Air Corps, so he enlisted in the Navy. Since he had about three years of college, Ben was sworn in as an Aviation Cadet on October 10, 1942. Since Ben had registered at U.C. the day before, his active duty was deferred until the following spring.

That school year at Cal must have been tough. Ben was down 19 grade points that he needed to make up, chose boxing as his physical fitness class, and turned 21, so he had to learn to drink beer. And, with Alice working in San Francisco, whenever possible he would take the train and streetcar to Alice's boarding house on Octavia St. After their date, Ben would catch the last train back to Berkeley!

Ben reported for active service in the Navy on June 3, 1943, and was sent to Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo for Prep Flight School training, which consisted of half classes and half physical training. Next came War Training Service School, at Susanville, California, where future pilots were taught to fly in 60 hp Piper Cubs. Then it was St. Mary's Pre-Flight at Moraga, where Ben chose boxing for physical training (I guess he didn't learn enough from his physical fitness class at Cal).

From St. Mary's Pre Flight, Ben went to Norman, Oklahoma for more flight training. Trainees flew N3N open cockpit biplanes and Timm's, which were low wing monoplanes for formation training. Ben had trouble landing the N3N's, and was washed out of the flight program just after "D-day".

So, it was back to boot camp at Great Lakes training station. While this was "somewhat of a letdown", Ben turned this into an opportunity by applying for and being accepted into the Midshipman Program. He ran an adding machine in the disbursing office while waiting for the next class, which was held at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

Three months later, on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Ben became an ensign in the U. S. Navy Reserve. Alice, by that time his fiancée, took the train from California to be there for the occasion, and they were married on that day.

Ben received Fighter Director training in Georgia, and San Clemente Island off the California Coast, before being assigned to the USS Saidor, which was being completed at Todd Shipyards in Tacoma, Washington. Ben arrived in Seattle on VJ Day. After on board training on CVE-105 "Commencement Bay" near Port Townsend, Ben reported for duty on the Saidor, and they sailed down the west coast to San Diego. Then they proceeded to Pearl Harbor, where they were assigned as a training ship, based at that port.

Ben was released from active duty in February, 1946, but stayed in the Reserve, transferring to the Civil Engineer Corps. He retired from the Navy reserve in 1982 in January 1982, with the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

After being released from active duty, Ben worked for the Division of Highways survey party at Burnt Ranch. Hod Benedict was the Party Chief, and others on the party included, Eddie Conway, Howard Fellman, Major Eiser, Lou Dorris, Ray Cetina and Ben. The survey party was were locating the line and cross sectioning for honor camp construction of Hwy 299 east of Cedar Flat.

Later that summer, Ben worked for Brick Wallace, the Party Chief at Point Arena. They were staking the arch culvert and fill project on Route 1 at Slick Rock Creek. When the survey was completed the party moved on, but Ben stayed to work for Clair "Buck" Buckman for a while on construction. Later, he worked for Ed Richardson on the Mallo Pass Creek project.

Ben resigned from the Division of Highways in the fall of 1946, returning to Cal for his senior year. Marty Van Zandt was born during midterms on May 3, 1947, and Alice was "under the weather" during finals.

Ben still needed a couple of classes to graduate, so he took a summer job with the Division of Highways as a Junior Engineering Aid, working as a paving inspector for Harold O. "pappy" Hansen who was Resident Engineer on a project on Hwy 101 north of Hopland. When the paving was completed, Ben was transferred to Hod Benedict, who was the Resident Engineer on the grading and paving project south of the NWP undercrossing south of Willits. Co-workers on this project included Margaret Gallaci and Norm Worley.

Ben resigned again to return to Cal in the fall of 1947, to complete the two courses he needed to graduate. He graduated with a B.S. in Civil Engineering in February 1948.

After graduating from Cal, Ben went to work for Contra Costa County as a Junior Engineer, where he prepared plans for various county roads. Ben didn't particularly like the job, and when he received a letter from Lee Redden offering him a position with the Division of Highways in Eureka, he immediately accepted and resigned from Contra Costa County.

Ben was now a Junior Civil Engineer at a salary of \$281 per month, plus \$29 expenses for working on Construction and living away from District Office. He was assigned to Charlie Shervington, who was the Resident Engineer on a paving project near Piercy. Co-workers on this project included Ralph Harkness and Jack Rowe. Ben worked in the field lab, and on the construction survey party.

From Piercy, Ben was sent to Orick to once again work for Hod Benedict. Hod was the Resident Engineer on a project to place cement treated base (CTB) and plant mixed surfacing (PMS or AC) on the old highway through Prairie Creek Park. Once again, Ben did field lab work and pavement inspection.

While on the Prairie Creek Project in the fall of 1948, Ben and Alice were staying in their trailer, which was parked in Orick. Alice was moving some of their belongings from the trailer to a house they were buying in Eureka. Ben was inspecting paving, when a car stopped and Alice and Marty got out. Alice told Ben she had run off the road near Trinidad! She thought Marty was going to open the door, reached for him and ran off into some brush. (I want to hear Marty's side of the story before I pass judgment.)

Ben then worked for Went Lovering, the District Materials Engineer, replacing Bob Lowe on the Materials Department soils truck. This was a delivery truck filled with all sorts of equipment for sampling materials and taking subsurface borings. Borings were taken using a gasoline driven "whacker" which bounced on top of the sampling tube, or a "hand hammer", which was a 50# weight with handles which the operator had to push up and let fall on top of the tube. Ben remembers taking borings on some slipouts south of Trinidad on the highway that his father had worked on before he was born. Ben also did some soils sampling for Mendocino County on a Federal Aid Secondary project on the Willits to Fort Bragg Rd. (now State Route 20).

In May 1949 Ben was transferred from the lab job to H. M. "Pappy" Hansen at Orick. Ben helped slope stake the Freshwater Lagoon Project, and did some inspection work during construction. Excavation of the Lookout Point cut unearthed several Indian graves. After discussions with tribal members near the job, they agreed to re-bury any remains found. About 19 boxfuls of remains were re-buried on the right of way north of the cut. Co-workers on this project included Norm Worley and Ray Sweet.

Later that summer, Ben was assigned to Percy Main who was the Resident Engineer on a paving project north of Last Chance slide. Percy was a real character! His favorite stunt when he'd had a few drinks was to dance while balancing a drink on his head. Ben was his office man and part-time plant inspector.

In November 1949, Ben was assigned as District Representative on a bridge replacement project at Dillon Creek on Route 96. Alton Kay was the Resident Engineer, and Bati Rocca was the Contractor. Ben was working on this project on January 12, 1950, when Alice gave birth to their daughter Carol.

Upon completion of the Dillon Creek project in the spring of 1950, Ben was assigned to Ralph Harkness, who was the Resident Engineer on the project from Dr. Fine Bridge to Winton Corners, the Smith River bypass in Del Norte County. Ben ran the survey party slope staking this project. Among others, his party included John Heino.

On the weekend of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1950, Ben replaced Harvey Patterson as Chief of the District Survey Party. Harvey later became Director of Public Works for Humboldt County. The party performed location, preliminary and construction surveying all over the District. At various times the party included Lou and Fred Dorris, Bob Kay, Ralph Replogle, Monte Hansen, and Charlie Day. When Ben became Chief, the party was in the process of cross sectioning the Scotia Bypass Project. They had to measure the size of the redwood stumps which were mostly covered with poison oak. Lou Dorris and Ben were the only ones on the party who didn't get poison oak, so they had to do all the measuring. On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1950, shortly after taking over the District Survey Party, Ben was appointed as an Assistant Highway Engineer at the salary of \$341.00 per month.

In the Summer of 1951, Ben turned the survey party over to Al Braga and was assigned as District Representative in charge of approach work on the North Fork of the Mad River Bridge, which replaced the old suspension bridge. Milt Swartz was the Resident Engineer for the Bridge Department. The bridge that was constructed in 1951 is still in place, but it has been bypassed and is not in use. On this project, Ben had to shoulder the transit, walk a narrow plank to the top of the east pier, set up the transit on the pier and give line to the west abutment.

In June of 1952, Ben was assigned as Resident Engineer on the project to replace the old Rattlesnake Creek Bridge at Cummings. The replacement was a reinforced concrete double arch culvert. Sam Black was the Bridge Department Representative, and "Rep" Replogle was the Assistant Resident Engineer.

A detour was constructed by building the downstream part of the fill over the completed culvert. The road surface was cement treated soil with a prime and sealcoat, and was completed the day after Thanksgiving. The surface was frozen several inches deep so the contractor's crew spread the cement on the surface and mixed the material with a large machine much like a rototiller, with no water added. This allowed traffic to be removed from the old bridge so it could be dismantled.

During the winter snow and heavy rain caused Rattlesnake Creek to flood. A log deck washed away and came to rest on the debris rack causing it to bend over, but kept the logs out of the culvert. This rack was constructed of steel I-beams set in concrete and had to be re-constructed after the logs were removed.

While working on the Rattlesnake Creek Project, Ben passed both the Associate Highway Engineer and the Registered Engineer examinations, and was promoted to Associate Highway Engineer on September 1, 1952, at a salary of \$481 per month.

During the winter of 1952-1953, Ben returned to the District Office, and was assigned first to the Traffic Department and later to Design.

The fill was completed on the Rattlesnake Creek Project in the summer of 1953, and Ben was re-assigned to a re-surfacing project from Fields Landing to Eureka. Gene Meyer replaced Ben as the Resident Engineer to complete the paving of the Rattlesnake Creek project.

About Mid-March of 1954, Ben was assigned as Resident Engineer on the clearing and grading project on Route 1 (now Route 101) from Route 199 to the Dr. Fine Bridge. At a bid price of approximately \$500,000, this was considered to be a large project at the time. Wunderlick Construction was the contractor. The project passed through a second growth redwood forest, so the clearing resulted in much debris, which was disposed of mostly by burning. Later the contractor obtained permission to stockpile much of the log debris on areas adjacent, but out of sight, of the roadway.

Ben's crew on this job was small, and Fred Dorris was probably the most experienced of the group. Hod Benedict was the Resident Engineer on the project from Eureka to Arcata and he managed to keep the trained men. When Jim McManus was assigned to this job as a new Junior Civil Engineer, Ben recognized right away that he had great potential. Later in his career, Jim became a prominent member of the Department in Sacramento. Shortly after the birth of Alice and Ben's second daughter Bonnie on April 24, 1954, they rented a house on North Bank Road just north of Rte 199.

Around January, 1955, Ben reported to George M. Leatherwood in Advance Planning. Here Ben made studies and wrote reports on various projects all over the District. He also spent a week or so leaning over a low table projecting line and grade for a proposed 4-lane project over a hill south of Hopland on US 101. Then, while driving to work one morning he sneezed and an intense pain shot down my leg. This turned out to be a ruptured disc and resulted in about 3 weeks in the hospital in traction.

Ben was promoted to Senior Highway Engineer on August 1, 1955, at a salary of \$644 per month. With that promotion, he replaced Art Giacomini as District City and County Projects Engineer. In this position, Ben worked with City Clerks, City Engineers, and county Directors of Public Works, County Engineers and Surveyors, helping and advising them on their various Federal Aid Secondary and Gas Tax projects. Ben enjoyed attending County Supervisors and League of Cities Conventions, where he met lots of great people and they all had a good time.

This assignment required contact with various Headquarters people in order to expedite city and county projects and funding. H. B. LaForge was in charge of the Federal Aid Secondary Section, and Clarence Bovey headed the city-county cooperative projects section. Both these men and their staffs were of great help to the District.

Soon after Ben became City and County Projects Engineer, the 1955 Christmas flood occurred, causing extensive damage to the county roads and to a lesser extent, city streets. The damage had to be identified, evaluated as to how to repair and the cost estimated. Ben teamed with E.J. McCracken of the Federal Bureau of Public Roads, and County Directors of Public Works to evaluate the damage. Ben met Hugh Naill, Del Norte Co. Director of Public Works at Klamath on New Years Day to survey D.N. Co. damage. Lake County surveyor Frank Johnson and Mendocino County Surveyor Kemp Richardson and Director of Public Works Walter Severance were also involved in repair work in their counties.

Humboldt County was hit very hard by the storm, with many slides and roads washed out. In order to quickly get an estimate of the damage, Pacific Lumber Company donated their company airplane and pilot to survey the southern part of Humboldt County, and Mercer Fraser Co. did the same for the northern part. Ben helped with the aerial damage assessment, and a report was prepared that included a cost summary. Although this cost was estimated based on a fly-over, the Feds objected when actual repair exceeded the estimate!

In order to make emergency repairs to get Humboldt County roads open, Ben spent many hours calling contractors and equipment owners and asking them to

remove slides, fill slipouts or build log bridges at locations where damage had been identified. If a verbal agreement was reached, Ben would send someone to the project site with a contract.

When Ralph Harkness was promoted to headquarters in Sacramento, Ben was assigned as Design Engineer of Design Section B, on January 4, 1960. His Design squad leaders included Fred Smith, Karl Kampe, Don Wooden, Jim McManus and Dick Rogers. While Ben was Design Engineer, his squads were responsible for making plans for over 100 miles of freeway and conventional highways in District I, including: A section of the Cummings freeway in Mendocino County, the Benbow and Garberville freeways in Humboldt County and the freeway from Crescent City to U. S. 199 in Del Norte County.

Ben was the Design Engineer of Design Section B when the 1964 flood occurred, and caused catastrophic damage to nearly all the state highways in the District. In order to restore the District's highway system, it was necessary to prepare plans quickly to allow contracts to be awarded. Ben was very proud of the way his design squads met the challenge. Between January and May of 1965, they completed plans for about five million dollars worth of repair contracts.

In January of 1969, Ben was re-assigned and named District Advance Planning and City and Cooperative Projects Engineer. He was responsible for planning the location of future freeway and highway projects, and oversaw the city-county cooperative projects section.

Don Comstock and Larry Rubottom staffed the cooperative projects section, and Bob Brown, Eva Morris, and Len Bloomquist staffed the Advance Planning section. Projects studied included: The Eureka Freeway, Jedediah Smith Park Freeway, South Hopland Russian River freeway, and the Route 1 expressway from Route 128 to south of Mendocino. These were all greatly needed projects, but due to lack of funds and environmental opposition they were never built!

During this assignment Ben's supervisor, Jack Smith was ill and Ben acted for him as Assistant District Director for Planning. This involved much interaction with Sacramento Headquarters and local groups.

In April 1976, during another shifting of department heads, Ben was assigned to the position of Engineering Services Engineer. In this assignment He was responsible for Surveys (Bob McClary), Materials Department (Jack Rowe Lab and Dewey Knittel Drill Crew), and Right of Way Engineering (Bill Bryie). Ben's supervisor was Craig Sorenson, and later Del Brown.

During this period there was a major revision in survey practice, as the transit and tape were replaced by the geodimeter. After Right of Way Engineering was

returned to the Right of way Department, Ben was left with Surveys and Materials. Both of these were involved in the preliminary studies for the Redwood Park Bypass on Route 101 north of Orick. Control for and administering contracts for aerial surveys was handled by Surveys. The Laboratory Drill Crew investigated sub-surface conditions throughout the project. We prepared a report recommending cut slopes throughout the project. Ben felt fortunate to have the expertise of Dewey Knittel, an excellent geologist, in the preparation of this report. Much of Ben's time was spent searching for gravel bars and rock sources since these materials were needed for all highway projects.

With Jerry Brown as Governor, and Adriena Guianturco as head of the Department of Transportation, highways seemed to be put on the "back burner". Ben felt like he was "spinning his wheels" and not accomplishing anything worthwhile, so he decided to retire early. Ben had planned to stay with Caltrans until he was 60 years old, but he retired in 1981?, at age 59, with 33- ½ years of service. He has not regretted this move.

After a couple of years of traveling and working on Philo projects, Ben worked for the Bureau of Public Roads on evaluation of storm damage to county roads and city streets. The jobs covered Sonoma, Mendocino, Lake and Lassen Counties; cities of Corte Madera, Larkspur and one or two others. These were temporary jobs, for about 3- or 4 months on two occasions. Another job was with Mendocino County, also dealing with storm damage.

In 1988, John Winzler hired Ben to work for Winzler & Kelly, consulting engineers, to supervise the design of highway projects for Caltrans. With the able assistance of Don Strausbaugh and other staff members in the Eureka Office plans were prepared for a realignment project in Siskiyou County, and a bridge replacement project in Santa Barbara County on Route 1 south of Lompoc. Ben and his staff also worked on two other projects for District 5. After a couple of years the highway projects "dried up", so Ben retired again!

During Ben's time with the Division of Highways and Caltrans, he served under eight District Engineers (later called Directors). They were: George Hellesoe, A. M. (Pete) Nash, Clyde Kane, Alan S. Hart, Sam Helwer, Harold Larson, W. Z. (Bill) Hegy, and John Vostrez. Quoting Ben: "A great group of men!"