

**CALTRANS ORAL HISTORY
A SUMMARY OF MY CAREER WITH THE DIVISION OF HIGHWAYS
BY BOB MYERS AS INTERVIEWED BY RICK KNAPP*
AND EDITED BY GUY LUTHER**



**BOB MYERS
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- **Includes information from a 4-page summary written by Bob and given to Rick Knapp at the conclusion of his oral history interview.**

BOB MYERS CAREER WITH THE DIVISION OF HIGHWAYS

I was born in Selma, California, a little town on State Route 99 about fifteen miles South of Fresno. My father was a railroad station agent, and he traded jobs with other people with the same job, at different places. Until my siblings (an older sister and a younger brother) and I were old enough to go to school, we often lived in places that weren't even accessible by automobiles.

I started school at a little two-room school in a little village called Edgewood, in the shadow of Mt. Shasta. My mother moved me and my siblings around, to schools up in the town of Weed, about 5 miles away, and then to a little, one room schoolhouse in the dairy country, called Cedar Park School. Then we moved on to the other end of the State, to Palm Springs, and I went one year to school there, and then we moved up to Ventura County, and I finished the seventh and eighth grades there.

From the time I was a small boy, I wanted to be a carpenter, a builder, or a craftsman of some sort; I wanted to build things. I used to go to the grocery store where everything was shipped in wooden crates, and the storekeeper gave me all the crates I wanted. I made dollhouses and cradles for my sister, and I made trucks, trains, boats, and airplanes for my brother and myself.

When I was about 12 years old, I was hired by a farmer to pick tomatoes, with about four other kids. I picked tomatoes for a while before the kids got to throwing tomatoes at each other, and when the owner came by he fired me, because I was the stranger in the group and he thought I had caused the ruckus. So I was fired! That was my first job; it ended disastrously.

Later, I worked in a little grocery store in the village of Somis when I was about 13. I was the stock boy, I kept the shelves stocked, and I kept the vegetables and fruits all clean and I kept the glass case that held the tobacco and the candy all clean. And then I drove the brand new Chevrolet delivery van, delivering groceries to the farmers in the area, who had ordered by telephone.

I went to Oxnard High School from 1931 through 1933, and Ventura Junior College for about a year and a half. The depression prevented me from continuing my formal education.

I got a job in a citrus packing warehouse, unloading truckloads of oranges from the field and moving them downstairs to what they called the "sweating room" where the oranges were gassed to bring out their orange color. I did that for eight hours a day, then I'd run home and put on a white uniform, and go work at a Richfield service station until 9:30 at night. In those days, gas sold for 14- to 18- cents per gallon, depending on the grade, and I made 25 cents per hour. Later, I got a regular, full-time

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job in a Union 76 Service Station for \$80 per month, and I worked there until I went to work for the Division of Highways.

While I was working at Union 76, I had a friend who was a State Highway Maintenance Superintendent, for Ventura County. His son and I went to junior college together, and I was complaining to him that I would really like to get into engineering. He said you're in luck, the State is just opening up a new civil service category called Under Engineering Aid. And, he said they're giving that examination all over the State, and I can get you an application for it.

I went into the City of Los Angeles to take the examination. There were about 100 other people in an auditorium, and there were two men up at the podium with a microphone, asking questions. One would ask questions for while and when he got tired, the other one would take over, and they give us a few seconds to answer each engineering question. That was about a two-hour examination. Exiting the auditorium at the end of the exam, I felt like a lost soul, as I didn't see how I could have scored high enough to qualify in competition with students from Los Angeles area colleges and other schools. So, I put it out of my mind and continued at the service station, disappointed that I had blown my only chance to get into engineering. Later I found out that I had passed the test, but I was 231st on the Statewide list.

After about two months, I got a telegram from the City of Eureka, California, Division of Highways, asking if I would accept a job as an Under Engineering Aid, at \$105 per month. And, I immediately sent a telegram back saying I would accept, and I'm on my way, I'll be there in two days. Then my Dad and I got out a State map, and found Eureka on the coast, in the upper left hand corner of the map.

I went to Eureka on Monday, the 12th of October, 1936, and found the District Office closed, since it was a State holiday. I spent the night at the Travelers Hotel, in downtown Eureka, and reported to the District Office at 546 West Wabash, on Tuesday morning. When I got there, I was told that their telegram wasn't a job offer, it was just to learn if I would accept the job if it were offered. But they said, "since you're here, we will hire you." So that's how I got started with the Division of Highways.

I started work as an Under Engineering Aid, and my first assignment was to a survey party of about five people, called a "fly party". We worked all over the District, making very brief surveys, mostly checking previous surveys done by others, to assure that surveys were accurate and ready for construction staking by construction survey crews. I did that for only about a week or 10 days, until I got poison oak so badly that they decided I was an office man. So, I worked in the District Office, plotting cross sections and doing fundamental things in the drafting room, getting things ready so the engineers could estimate the cost of building the road we designed.

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I had hoped to get promoted to Junior Aid, or Senior Aid, but those were depression times, and people weren't leaving their jobs. After a couple of years I was able to take the exam for Junior Engineering Aid, at a salary of \$120 per month. I passed the test and was promoted. I was helping the squad bosses with their design, and when they found I was a draftsman, they had me draw the detailed blueprint plans. I did that drawing with India ink, on wax treated cloth. They don't do that anymore, they do it all with computers. I did quite well at drawing plans, so I wound up doing the plans for most of the jobs, which ordinarily paid \$175 a month, but they still paid me \$120. But it was good experience, and I knew that if the job ever became available, I had proven that I was qualified to do it.

After I had been there about four years, I was allowed to take the examination for Draftsman, which paid \$175 a month. I thought that when I passed it I would be given a job here. However, the District said there were no vacancies.

I had just married a beautiful Eureka girl, Carol Wing, and I needed more money. I was on a Statewide list, so I got an offer of a job from Mr. John Keith, who was opening a new Agency for the State Board of Equalization. My new job was located at the University of California in Berkeley, where I made two-inch per mile maps of California, showing the soil classifications in the agricultural portions of the Counties, and what types of crops the soils would support. The maps were to be used by Assessors in the counties, for the purpose of property tax assessment. Mr. Keith was a great man to work for, and he was well satisfied with my work. I worked at that job for about two years, when World War II started.

I decided I had to contribute my bit to the war, so I enlisted in the Army Air Corps, and until the War with Japan ended, I was flying bombers for the Government. At the end of the War, when I came home, Mr. Keith told me they had hired Fairchild Aircraft Company to make aerial maps. He said he had two jobs that I could choose from: Junior Property Appraiser or Junior Petroleum Engineer. He said that either job would require travel throughout the State. That didn't appeal to me at all, since my wife was expecting our first child in about two weeks, and I sure didn't want to be roaming around the State. But, I thanked him very much for thinking about me.

We came up to Eureka to visit our relatives and friends here, and while I was in the Highway Office, I was talking to people in the drafting room when the District Engineer came in. I'd never met him before, but he asked me if I would like to come back to work there, and I said I yes, I would. So I resumed my career building highways, in November of 1945.

The District hired me back at the title of Draftsman, but I never did any drafting. They put me to work as a Resident Engineer on the Elk River Road, from the South city limits of Eureka, to Ridgewood Drive that goes up to the Cutten area. I was working on a

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County road, but I was paid by the State. And from then on, I worked on construction jobs, as an inspector or something like that, in the summertime, and in the winter I came into the District Office as a designer, but I never worked as a draftsman.

I'd been working on Construction as a Draftsman, and finally I was able to take the test for Highway Engineering Associate, which was the same as the grade that most people had that were managing construction jobs, and doing supervisory work. I was appointed by the District Office Engineer to be in charge of the drafting room, a job called Chief Draftsman. But there was no drafting involved, it was all supervising the Design Department. And I told him: "I'm the least experienced man in this room, all these fellows have been here for years, any of them are more qualified for this than I." He said: "Listen young man, when the light of favor shines upon you, it's a good idea to keep your mouth shut." So I said: "Yes sir, and I took the job." It turned out that the assignment had been ordered by the District Engineer. But I never did like that job, because I never felt that I was accomplishing anything.

But after about two years in that job, another fellow, a fellow who was the Assistant District Construction Engineer, left the District, and that left the position open. So, Dick Warner, one of my friends who was about the same rating, was scheduled to replace that man as the Assistant District Construction Engineer. He told me he just didn't have any interest in that job, and I said: "Would you like my job?" And he said: "Yes I would." So we talked to Lee Redden, and Dick took the Design job, and I went to the Construction Department. That was about 1955, and I spent the next 20 years there, as Assistant District Construction Engineer, doing something I really loved.

In 1974 I was allowed to take a shortened version of the examination for Licensing as a Civil Engineer, and with that my Civil Service title became Associate Highway Engineer.

When I was Assistant Construction Engineer, I spent a lot of time going down there at nights and doing work, because I didn't want to hire any extra people because they would only work the summer months, when the winter came, there was nothing for them to do, and they'd visit with the other people, and keep them from working. So I wouldn't hire anybody, instead I'd go down to work at night, to get things done. That wasn't exciting or anything, but it did get the work done. I felt like I was doing worthwhile work, and a lot of it, so that's where I finished out my career, in November of 1976.

When I retired, I received credit for 40 years of State service, including my work at Berkeley, and the time I was in the Army.

I was asked to comment on how Caltrans has changed over the years. Well, there was no Caltrans when I went to work, and Caltrans wasn't inaugurated until a few years

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before I retired, in 1976. So, up until I retired, things were pretty much like they had been before, but things began to change after I retired. There seem to be fewer engineering titles, and people have other kinds of titles. And, I know nothing about working under the new Caltrans. I've talked to people who've worked there, but I know nothing about it, so I can't compare it.

I enjoyed every day I went to work, from the first day to the last day, except when I was Chief Draftsman, or head of the Design Department. All of the rest of it was absolutely delightful. I felt I was well paid for a good job.

After I retired, I went back to work several times as a Retired Annuitant. I worked out on construction jobs, I worked in the Design Office, and I worked in the Specifications Department. I was only allowed to work six months at that job each year, and I did that about six times. The last time was working on repairs to local facilities after the earthquake, in 1993. I enjoyed that work too.

(Note by Guy Luther: When Rick Knapp interviewed Bob, he asked Bob if his wife knew that the girls at the office considered him to be the silver fox, and said that everyone thought that he should have been an actor. Bob took this as a joke, but I was out on Construction at the time Bob was Assistant Construction Engineer. Almost everyone knew the construction worker's friend, Bob Myers, and if they didn't, he was usually described as the guy in the Construction Office that looks like a movie star.)