Oral History 227-34

Robert Wolf Oral History Project

Interviewee: Bob Wolf

Interviewers: Milo McLeod, Dan Hall

November 16, 1989

Summary: McLeod and Wolf each lay out some of the history of federal government support of road construction with Wolf making the connection between logging national forests and road construction. From there Wolf explains the background of the construction of the Lolo Pass Road and describes the pressures from the Idaho side for this road as a completion of the Lewis and Clark Highway and the 1957 hearings on this issue. He includes the roles played by Senators Gore, Church, and Dworshak.

Hall: Today's Thursday, November 16. We're in the archives of the Mansfield Library and we're talking with Bob Wolf. This morning's conversation is going to be on the 1957 forest road hearings on the Lolo Pass Road.

McLeod: Why don't I start and I'll give you a little background on what I know. That road or transportation route goes all the way back to Lewis and Clark, who went over the Lolo Trail in 1805 and again in 1806. Prior to that time it had been an Indian trail used by both the Salish and the Nez Perce going east and west across the Bitterroot Range. In 1853 John Mullan went over that route looking at it as a possible transcontinental railroad, and his report to Congress was that it would not be a good route. It was extremely difficult, very abrupt, impossible to build a railroad.

In 1866 Congress authorized $50,000 to build a wagon road from Lewiston, Idaho, to Lolo, Montana, under a fellow named Wellington Bird and Major Truax. They quickly found out that $50,000 was not enough to build the road. What they did do was clearing and rerouting
some of the original Lolo Trail.

Again about 1909, there was an attempt to build a railroad from Lolo, Montana, to Lewiston, Idaho. This was called the Clearwater Short Line. In fact, survey and construction began very quickly at Lolo, Montana, and there are still several segments of railroad grade that exist.

After about a year into the project the survey was complete, and they found out they could not maintain a one percent grade and the project was abandoned. So as far as transportation across the Bitterroot Range, there was a stagecoach road completed to Lolo Hot Springs in 1888 and roads up the Clearwater River, but actually being able to travel to and from wasn't completed till about 1961. And I guess what I'm interested in, Bob, is how Congress came about authorizing construction on the Lewis and Clark Highway, and some of the decisions that were made.

Wolf: Alright, Milo. First, I think we ought to get back to the roots of some of these things, which are fairly deep and longstanding. You were mentioning the efforts to construct the Lolo Pass Road earlier. Early in our history, you know, the development of roads was a specialized kind of project. It was often authorized by Congress.

In Maryland, the Cumberland Road was authorized as a special wagon road, and the specifications said, "It shall have no stumps higher than fourteen inches," the theory being that a wagon could clear a stump fourteen inches high. To give you an idea of how crude roads were in forested areas, the original roads simply had to have enough clearance for the wagon to go, and leaving the stumps was all right. Pulling out some of these stumps would be a heck of a job, so the early roads were pretty crude, and that fits in with what you were saying about the
construction of the Lolo Road.

The federal government didn't embark upon a regular program of road building until around 1922 when the late Senator Hayden (the Hayden-Cartwright Act) authorized the federal government to construct a national system of federally aided roads. The general theory was that 50 percent of the cost of the road would be borne by the federal government and 50 percent by the state. The state would agree to maintain the roads. These were called "ABC" roads. "A" was [national], "B" was inter-urban, and "C" was rural.

There had been specialized road building efforts. In fact, as early as 1916 there were appropriations to the Forest Service to build a few roads. But those were roads on federal lands. Those were not part of a general network of roads.

In our early history, roads were typically built by property owners being required to put in a certain amount of work on the road in front of or near their property, or to pay a certain amount, and an overseer was appointed who made sure that each able-bodied citizen contributed his share of work. So when you think of the modern system of highways, that's pretty crude origins. Shortly after the Hayden-Cartwright Act was passed, special additional things were added. One was that in the public land states, an additional amount of money was provided because of the presence of federal lands. So a state like Montana, which would have gotten 50 percent under the ABC program of such roads might be getting 62.5 or 68 percent, I forget the percentages. Each Western state has a different amount.

Then the next step was the institution of a system of forest highways, which were 100 percent federally funded, on and in the national forest, park roads, parkways, and Indian roads. These were all special categories in the road act. Every two years funds would be authorized for their construction and maintenance. These were fairly modest amounts: $12, $14, $15 million.
By the time of the early ’50s, it was around $20 million for forest roads and trails and about $20 million for forest highways. Forest highway money went to the Bureau of Public Roads, a separate agency that had earlier been in the Department of Agriculture (later in the Department of Commerce after 1940). [The Bureau of Public Roads] controlled the allocation of the roads. Forest highways, however, had to be on what was called the ABC system. The state had to agree to maintain them after they were built. So these would be main arteries across the national forest, not the internal roads. Forest roads and trails could be any kind of road or trail. The Forest Service was responsible for their maintenance. Originally, the maintenance money came out of this fund also. In addition, starting in about 1910 or earlier, the Forest Service had been authorized to retain 10 percent of receipts for the construction of roads and trails on the national forests.

Well, you don't have to be too brilliant to figure out that 10 percent of nothing is nothing and some of the forests had no receipts and so they didn't get any money after that. That provision is still on the books even though from a budget standpoint it's been integrated into the budget and isn't shown separately.

Anyhow, the roads were mainly for fire protection and general administrative purposes and some public access. They were of value to potential homesteaders, potential miners and to stockmen. They weren't particularly useful for timber removal. The national forests, up until the end of World War II, only cut about an average of a billion board feet a year, which is a fraction of our consumption even in the Depression. Logging was done very often with a temporary logging railroad or using waterways, splash dams, and floating logs down rivers in the spring. Logging roads were not the norm. Motor trucks were not properly developed for log hauling until that began in the late ’30s and slowly began to catch hold. During WWII to some extent,
but after WWII, the logging truck actually supplanted the logging railroad. Even in the South where there was very little national forest, most of the logging was railroad logging, where they laid down these tracks and clear-cut a huge area and then just picked up the tracks and moved them over a quarter of a mile and continued cutting.

The national forest roads are checker boarded [because of] private ownership for a variety of reasons. Much of that checkerboard ownership was owned by significant timber companies so that, when motor trucks became the mode of transportation, it became easier for people who did not own timberland to have a logging truck and to bid on timber and start buying timber whereas in the earlier situation where the Forest Service specialized in making large development sales, those usually were done with the logging railroad and nobody else had any access. With a big contract area, the company that got the contract had the right to cut the timber, usually selectively, and this changed the situation, though, and the timber companies, large landowning timber companies, were concerned about increased competition for timber. Up to that point, national forest timber had been sold by sealed bids, and also there was no particular policy on access.

But early in the 1950s, I think it was, the Forest Service reached the conclusion that a lumber company was an actual settler residing in the national forest, and if you read the 1897 act, and if you read the definition of an actual settler, and if you read the attorney general’s decision of February 1, 1962, it's very clear that a lumber company never was and is not an actual settler. An actual settler was a particular person. Milo McLeod, citizen, or person seeking to become a citizen who had filed a homestead entry but did not have a patent, was in the process of proving up his homestead. After McLeod got his homestead, he was no longer an actual settler. But he had access, and a provision was designed to prevent the government from
stopping McLeod and others like him from filing their homesteads and getting agricultural land within a forest preserve.

The landowning segment of the timber industry was opposed to the Forest Service building roads for timber production. They wanted to build them. They opposed any increases in authorization. [The] chief of the Forest Service and his associates, seeing there was an enlarged market for timber and, despite having put this policy in effect that let lumber companies build roads through checker boarded areas and control the access, took the position that where the company had control, it wouldn't sell any timber. But nevertheless the Forest Service was seeking to go ahead and improve the forest road system. The executive branch, the office of the president and the Bureau of the Budget, simply didn't think spending money on forest roads was the most useful thing to do. They generally opposed increasing the authorization. In fact, they wanted the authorization eliminated.

Forest highways had a big appeal and park roads and trails and parkways had a big appeal. They were little pieces of pork in the legislative process. Forest roads and trails had a substantial appeal, so every two years this authorization battle would be fought. I believe it was in 1956 in the Eisenhower administration, the secretary of commerce proposed that the forest highway formula be changed. There was a formula for distributing those funds, and they were going to use new values for the national forest that the General Services Administration had put together that were no better than the old ones, really. But they changed the relationship between the Western states.

There was a meeting called by Senator Magnuson of Washington of the Montana delegation, the Idaho delegation, the Washington delegation, the Oregon delegation, and the California delegation. I was in it. I remember Warren Magnuson saying, "Fellows, this is a
situation where we either have to hang together or stand [alone].” He said, "It would be to the advantage of the state of Washington to have this new formula for distributing forest highway funds, but if we let the secretary of commerce do that, there's no stopping the amount of jiggling and juggling he's going to do. It'll set off a battle between us that we don't need. I propose that we freeze the formula the way it is with all of its inconsistencies." That's what they did. And Congress did that.

The other battle that would go forward would be the one on forest roads and trails. I was involved in all those efforts to increase the authorization. Every two years we'd run the authorization up a couple of million dollars, $4 or $5 million, that looked like a lot of money. The timber industry would fight it. Under the Highway Bill any roads the Forest Service needed, wherever they needed them, as long as there was timber. That assumed that half the national forest timber, which is grassland, didn't need any roads.

But the other side of the coin was the forest highway situation where the Forest Service only had relatively limited input, because the state highway commissioners, the Bureau of Public Roads, looked on that as their province. There was a group that wanted to have the Lewis and Clark Highway go from St. Louis to Astoria, Oregon, and links of it had been designated. A lot of it was existing highway. A lot of it approximated where Lewis and Clark went. There was a drive in Idaho and Montana, heavily concentrated in Lewiston, Idaho, to complete this missing link, this impassable link -- the Lewis and Clark trail -- over the Lolo. It was well understood that it was the least desirable route from an interstate transportation standpoint. Bear in mind, in 1956, Congress and the president had enacted the Interstate Highway Act and a 40,000-mile interstate network was also going to be constructed on top of the ABC roads. The Lolo Pass Road wasn't in there and for good reason. There was a better route to Spokane for those with an...
overwhelming need to go from Missoula and the Bitterroot Country over to Lewiston, Idaho. So the main argument for it was a sentimental one, and the desire to have this Lewis and Clark Trail completed as a road, even though it might destroy some archeological situations. [chuckle]

These things had prompted the Public Works Committee to hold some hearings and the chairman of that committee was Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee, the father of the current U.S. Senator. I was selected to be the staff person on those hearings, and we traveled around the West holding a series of hearings on the need for forest roads and trails and forest highways. When we got to Lewiston, Idaho, completing Lewis and Clark trail road was on the agenda.

Governor Smiley was the governor of Idaho. He had written a book that outlined, sort of like Mein Kampf, how he was going to be president. Of course both Senator Dworshak, a Republican Senator, and Frank Church, a Democratic Senator, looked upon Smiley as a guy who was likely to try and knock either of them off, so between the two of them they were worried about Smiley. [laughter]

There was a long chain of witnesses to testify; an extensive hearing record on the vital necessity of building this last missing link in the Lewis and Clark Trail. We needed it for national defense purposes. All sorts of bizarre arguments were made, [such as] a vital link in the transportation network of the Inland Empire; it would bring economic development that was unheard of. That's the way local groups do on a lot of things. Smiley was down there making this huge pitch for federal money figuring it wouldn't cost him anything. The federal government was going to pay for it, so he was insisting that Frank Church and Henry Dworshak pour federal money in there.

We had a little meeting in the hotel in Lewiston before the hearing and there were a couple of other parts of the Highway Act, a thing called Public Land Highways, which was a sort
of a slush fund -- [it was] to which the members of the Public Works Committee would allocate this money to special highways. In their state they were on public land. [chuckle] So what we put together -- and I was involved in developing it -- was a strategy which would require Governor Smiley to allocate all of the forest highway money of Idaho to the Lewis and Clark, which would drain it away [from] every other project he had in mind in the state, and he had to put about four years worth of the money in there. [chuckling] And then we would put in a certain amount of public land highway money and that would build the highway.

So when the hearing was held and Smiley made his big pitch, Senator Gore unloaded this proposition in the hearing and Smiley had no way to back out. [chuckling] He had to agree that the necessary forest highway money would be allocated to the project. I know he knew how much he was allocating. I remember when we had the meeting, Senator Dworshak commented to Senator Gore that he appreciated his interest in this and he wondered, though, what made him so interested in this Lewis and Clark Highway. Senator Gore responded to him, "Well, Henry, there's a great connection between the state of Tennessee and the state of Idaho and this highway." Dworshak said, "What is it?" "Meriwether Lewis is buried in Tennessee." [laughter] You all want to know what the policy reason was? That's the "policy reason" -- why the highway was built.

There wasn't anyone in the Montana or Idaho delegation. We came on over here to Missoula and held a hearing also and Lee Metcalf testified and so forth. There were other additional issues in Montana, but the main pitch on the Lolo road came over in Lewiston with a subsidiary pitch here. The Lewiston people seemed to think they could get Montanans over there to spend money or something, I don't know. [laughter]

There was no analysis of whether it was economically desirable or feasible to build a
road. It was done as a part of completing the link of the Lewis and Clark trail, and because
Senators Church and Dworshak wanted to build it, and Senator Mansfield and Congressman
Metcalf wanted to build it and Senator Murray, it just looked like a nice thing to do. So there
certainly is no analysis that was ever done to justify it.

Now I don't know how useful the road is today. But it was built, there was a big opening
 ceremony. I was invited to it but wasn't able to come out to it. And I must say I've never driven
 over it. I need to do it someday before I die.

McLeod: You really should take the trip sometime, Bob.

Wolf: So that's the story of the Lolo Pass Road. The next year, in fact, Senator Mansfield had
me put together an amendment to the Forest Highway Act and the Park, Indian, and all the other
subparts of the Highway Act, along with the (I was working with the Public Works Committee)
creation of what we called the D Fund, which was a special category of money for roads to
counteract the 1958 recession, a public works program, in effect, and -- I don't know, it was, I
forget, $100 or $120 million, maybe not that much, all told. It was provided for additional road
building under the theory that it would help overcome the Eisenhower recession, as it was called
by the Democrats in 1958. I remember we put the amendment together on forest roads and
trails, park roads, forest highways and so forth.

Senator Mansfield had Senator Gordon Allott of Colorado as a cosponsor. My job was to
go around and talk to every Western Senator and explain the amendment to them and see if he or
she wanted to cosponsor -- although there weren't any women in the West in the Senate. Every
one of them wanted to cosponsor it except John Carroll of Colorado, who said it was too much
money. He insisted that he and I go over to the Senate floor and talk to Senator Mansfield about it. We did. We got over there, met Mansfield in the cloakroom, and he stood there puffing his pipe and looking sort of taciturn as he normally did. Carroll explained why this amendment was too much money and would never get through. Of course, what Carroll didn't fully appreciate was that in order to pass it had to clear with a ranking Democrat and Republican on the Public Works Committee and Mansfield was a master at this legislative stuff. Carroll was arguing with Mansfield about it. Mansfield was just standing there impassively, smoking his pipe. Finally Senator Carroll, in frustration, said, "Why, Mike, you haven't even put the amendment in yet."

Mansfield then took his pipe out of his mouth, looked at Carroll and said, "John, that's just why we're going to get it." Mansfield turned and walked back on the Senate floor. Carroll said, "Put me on the bill." Ten minutes later Mansfield called up the amendment. Senator Robertson of Virginia got up and spoke in opposition to it. The Senate voted and it was adopted unanimously.

After that, Robertson got up on the floor and he had an amendment. He was from Virginia and he had an amendment that he said wouldn't cost anything, and it was voted down. [chuckles] That gives you some idea of the difference between Mansfield's legislative ability and some other Senators. The interesting thing is that Willis Robertson's son is Pat Robertson, who sought the Republican nomination and, of course, Albert Gore is the son of the earlier Senator from Tennessee. But that's the story of the Lolo Pass Road. Are there any questions?

McLeod: There's certainly a lot of background there that I wasn't aware of when I was doing research on the Lolo Trail.
Wolf: Well, you did the research on the early stages of it.

McLeod: I tried to take it all the way up to the final construction of the road.

Wolf: Well, if you came here to the library, got out those 1956-7 hearings of forest roads and trails by the Senate Public Works Committee Subcommittee on Roads, and then looked at the authorization bill for the Biennial Highway Act of 1958, you would find that legislative history there, and also, if you looked at the floor debates surrounding the enactment, it would add to what I told you. What I've told you is the record behind the visible records. But there's a visible record also. It doesn't give you that intimate inside aspect of it.

McLeod: No, but I think, Bob, just the fact that there was no real professional need for completing that road.

Wolf: Or local need.

McLeod: Or local need.

Wolf: If you followed out the logical steps on something like this, there should be a demonstrated local need, and if there is, then the local people should do it. You can make that case, you know. If you can't show there's a national need, then there shouldn't be any federal money going into it in theory. The only other rationale is the road goes across federal land. But that doesn't create a federal need.
McLeod: No. And it certainly does from Lolo, Montana, almost to Lewiston, Idaho. It's almost all federal land.

Wolf: And it certainly wasn't something the Forest Service needed, I don't think, to better administer the national forest.

McLeod: No. In the 1930s they did build a road that basically went from Powell Ranger Station west, called the Lolo Motorway, but it was at about 6,000 feet and essentially followed the Lolo Trail. It was only open from about mid-July until maybe early October due to snowfall. But the snows are so deep and heavy in that country anyway.

Wolf: Well, there's a Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia that exists because of the late Senator Harry Byrd who never was in favor of spending money anywhere on anything except in Virginia. And so we've got this wonderful parkway and the road isn't awfully heavily traveled. It winds and is scenic

[Start side 2]

, hard road that we need to explore.

McLeod: I think that about covers it.
Hall: I have a couple of questions.

Wolf: OK.

McQuillan: You mentioned that the hearings were held here in Missoula. Are those hearings published anywhere?

Wolf: Oh, yeah. We held the hearings, as I recall, in Portland, in Seattle, in Lewiston and Missoula, on forest roads and trails and forest highways, so it's all one volume. We were in different places on different days. Those are available. It's a published hearing. The Senate and House reports on the Highway Act are available. If you find the public law, you can track down the debates on the floor, House and Senate.

McLeod: Excuse me, Bob. Did the Forest Service testify at all?

Wolf: Oh, yeah.

McLeod: In any of these?

Wolf: Yeah.

McLeod: What was their feeling?
Wolf: I don't recall specifically. They testified on various aspects like the need for forests, roads and trails to improve the administration of national forests. I think they took a kind of a neutral position on the Lewis and Clark trail. They explained the importance of the Lolo National Forest and part of the historic thing, but they didn't say they were opposed to it, and they didn't say they needed it.

McLeod: That sounds like the agency.

Wolf: Well, no. Generally speaking, the administration [and they had to speak on behalf of the administration] did not favor added expenditures for a lot of things, because the Eisenhower administration was committed to trying to balance the budget, and so the Forest Service would have had to give very guarded testimony even if it favored the road. To the Forest Service, this was not a high priority thing. They weren't going to try and get, Senator Dworshak, who was a member of the Appropriations Committee, and Frank Church, who was on Interior, and Mansfield was on Appropriations, and Lee Metcalf was a key guy in the House, and Jim Murray was chairman of Interior. They weren't going to try and get them mad. But they weren't going to go out and say, "Of all the things that we need in Montana and Idaho, this is a prime need," because it wasn't. There are lots of things that happen where an agency isn't overly enthused about an idea, but somebody else is and they don't want to fight it strongly, they want to save their strength for another battle. But they're not going to jump up and down and endorse it. Did you have another question?

Hall: Do you remember who the Forest Service officials were who testified at these hearings?
Wolf: Oh, probably would have been Charlie Tebbe, the regional forester. Typically, in these situations, the Forest Service would have the regional forester testify. There could have been a supervisor who testified. That would have been Brandborg for the Lolo.

McLeod: How about Ralph Space?

Wolf: Who?

McLeod: Ralph Space for the Clearwater.

Wolf: I can't remember him. It could be, but I don't remember. I know there were some Forest Service officials there, but that was 1957, '58 and '59 and it's 1989. My memory's a little dim on some things.

Hall: I think that about covers it.

[End tape]