

“Getting Out of the Mud” in Eastern Oregon

“Getting Out of the Mud” certainly applied to my father’s career with the State Highway Department when he hired on as a truck driver in 1923. Leslie V. Bellus had recently returned from active duty with the U.S. Army, where he served during World War I. President Harding’s 1923 visit to Oregon for the dedication of the Memorial near Meacham provided Les with his first vivid memory on his new job. He recalled having been assigned the job of filling up the chuck holes in the road, making it passable and sprinkling down the dry spots to keep down the dust. Chief Cap Sumkins of the Cayuse Tribe and Chief Poker Jim of the Umatilla Tribe presented Mrs. Harding with the Pendleton blanket pictured left. It is now known as the Harding Robe.



Briefly, Les became Patrolman in Imbler, Oregon.

For the next five winters, he plowed snow at the top of the Blue Mountains and served as truck master in the summer.

Although his duties with the State took him all over Eastern Oregon, he confronted his greatest challenges while serving the Blue Mountain Pass. Leslie’s father instilled in him a determined work ethic while on the family farm. That work ethic served him well in these early days of white-out blizzards, deep snow and inadequate equipment. One early snow plow was simply an early model road grader called into action by necessity. This picture, taken on the Old Highway 30 near Hot Lake, demonstrates the ordinary use of the grader. Leslie standing beside the grader, drove the truck that pulled the grader.

When a “real” snowplow became available, he felt privileged to be the driver.

With his jobs sometimes overlapping, Les worked for seven years as Traveling Mechanic. A converted World War I ambulance served as his service vehicle. One of his most challenging experiences occurred at this time. He drove his WWI ambulance through blowing



snow, carrying in his service vehicle, a replacement for the final drive on a Caterpillar Sno Dozer, c.1920's. Stranded on the sharp curves of Cabbage Hill, the driver waited for Les’s rescue. They worked together replacing the final

drive using chain hoists and gin poles. Unable to complete the job by nightfall they burrowed under the Cat, there spending the night each wrapped in a canvas using the Cat like a snow cave.

At the first ray of daylight they began completing the work on the Cat, then using the fully repaired vehicle, plowed their way back to La Grande.

Les enjoyed working as a Traveling Mechanic. The Basque Country of South East Oregon became a favorite stamping ground. After a week on the road he would arrive home bearing new stories of the Basque Shepherds. (Their music, games, friendliness-all uniquely





Basque) **and special gifts for his family.** Pictured: a most welcome gift for his two oldest daughters, a BLOW a TUNE c. 1949. It had cardboard discs punched to play tunes when blown through the mouthpiece.

Leslie V. Bellus married Leaila Ott on Sept. 4, 1930. Three daughters born to this union were: Jacqueline Ione Hays, Feb. 1933, Marilyn Leaila Winburn, Dec 1937, and Lynda Leslie DeLore, Aug. 1949

With the birth of their first daughter Les moved from Traveling Mechanic into the La Grande shops as Equipment Inspector(1933). In 1952 he was assigned the job of Automotive Foreman. He held this assignment until his retirement in 1960.

As Foreman he deemed the repair of the overhead crane too dangerous for his men to climb upon. He did the job himself. His shoulder bumped the wiring on the crane and sent a 480 volt shock through his arm to the beam below. He had pain from that accident for the remainder of his life, but always said he would do it again.

Reaching compulsory retirement age in 1958, he applied for and received a two year extension. Les ended his service on June 15, 1960. He served under five superintendents: R.A. Farnam, Norval Jones, Ill Smith, Joe Campbell and Alvin Norby. At one point he was offered the position of superintendent, but refused stating he preferred working with the men and equipment.

On July 1, 1960, Floyd Query Secretary OSHC, presented Les with an Honorable Award quoted in part here:

“...Our feelings are mixed on this occasion of your retirement which is of such great importance to you. We are sorry that you are leaving the Highway Department, and at the same time we are pleased to know you will now have the time to do the many things which you have planned and hoped for during your working career.
By your service you have faithfully and diligently contributed to the end goal of the Department; namely, to facilitate and effect the location, design, construction and maintenance of state highways and bridges. By your efforts and those of many others like you, you have also made the Highway Department, a better place to work. This is a real tribute and should be a continuing satisfaction to you.”

Indeed, for the next twenty-one years, he and his wife, Leaila, traveled, visited, and spent time with their growing families.

Two of Leslie's eleven grandchildren now work for ODOT. Dawn Winburn Hubble is in the La Grande office serving as STIP Coordinator. Stephen Winburn serves as TMS2 in the La Grande Maintenance Shop. Grampa Leslie leaves a legacy of honesty, diligence, and determination. We, his family, are grateful to have known him.

My thanks to my husband, Keith, for remembering the many events Leslie shared with him. And to my sister, Lynda, for her organized archives of Leslie's paperwork. My daughter, Dawn, for getting me started on this research and maintaining support. My son, Stephen, for supplying the old negatives and keeping me up to date on ODOT, the modern OSHD. And my son, Shaun, for converting the old negatives into usable prints.





The negative of this picture tells us this is a "2 1/2 ton Cat."
Taken in 1925 on Blue Mt. Pass



OSHD 82 derailed track causes concern for workers Jan. 1925



OSHD 82 Cat. pulling two road graders sporting added shelters.



Leslie's Uncle Fred Bellus, photographer in S. Cal. taught Les about photography. Les tried always to have his camera with him. He kept his parents who lived in Santa Cruz fully informed with his activities.

This series taken in January, 1925 is one of the remaining groups of negatives we have found.

SHD employees helping stuck Stage by pulling with the Cat.
The pull chain is visible between the vehicles.