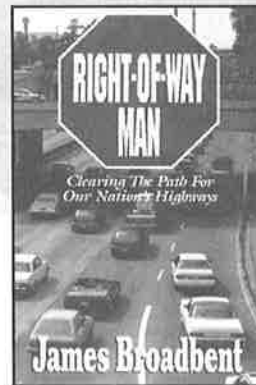
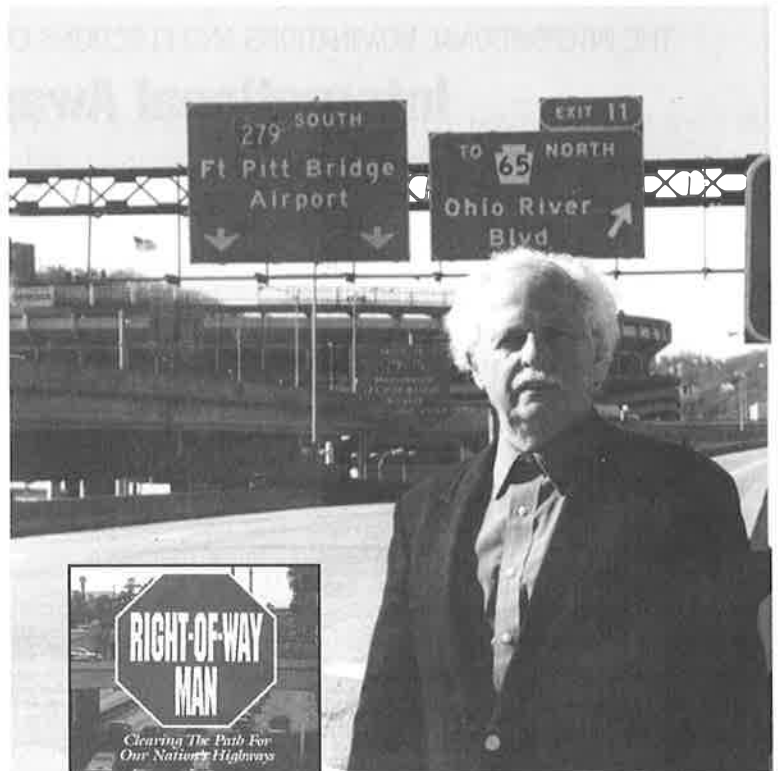


"An exemplary right-of-way agent – gives insight as to how this sometimes difficult and delicate task can be handled effectively."

—Jeffery L. Giltenboth
Pennsylvania Department of Transportation



Unlikely Friends



Excerpted from
Right-of-Way Man

By James S. Broadbent

After I celebrated my fourth anniversary as an engineering assistant at the Highway Department, I assumed I had gained enough practical experience to take the civil service test for right-of-way agents. I took the exam, passing with high marks, and immediately received the coveted promotion and a pay increase. I was an agent at last! When I was assigned to my first project, a house belonging to a Mr. Leo Burger, I couldn't wait to get started.

The morning I drove up to Leo's house I was trembling with excitement. I could barely keep my hand steady as I rang the bell. A broad man with huge muscles opened the door.

"Hello, Mr. Burger," I said, "I'm Jim Broadbent, and I'm with the right-of-way unit of the Highway Department."

Leo eyed me suspiciously and motioned for me to sit down beside him at his kitchen table. It was 9:00 in the morning, and he had just returned home from his night-shift job at the steel mill. He took an Iron City from a case by the fridge, ripped the cap off the bottle and offered me a drink. I'm sure he had no idea he was my very first "assignment," and I certainly wasn't going to tell him.

"No, thanks," I said and launched into an explanation of the state's proposal to acquire his property.

His home in a semi-rural area outside of Pittsburgh, was one of several houses the state needed to purchase in order to construct a section of the proposed new interstate highway, I-79.

"I don't trust the government," growled Leo, looking me squarely in the eyes, "and I don't trust you. You're out to steal my house, get it for the lowest price you can." He

RIGHT OF WAY MAN

took a long pull from the opened bottle.

I was stunned by his outburst. I was in my mid-twenties and had never met anyone who didn't seem to like me. I quickly forgot why I was at Leo's house and concentrated on making him my friend.

"Mr. Burger, is that offer about the beer still good?" I murmured.

Leo grinned, grabbed another beer and opened it for me. It was warm. I hated warm beer, but I drank it anyway. That's how bad I wanted to be friends with this fellow.

I had no sooner taken the first disgusting swallow when Mr. Hyde began turning into Dr. Jekyll. He relaxed, began smiling, then started talking to me. Leo told me about his kids, his grandkids, his job, his church and all his eccentric neighbors. He even told me which neighbors I could expect trouble from when I went to acquire their property. "How did you get started in this line of work, Jim?" he asked at one point, and I told him my brief history. Problems

about acquiring his property seemed to be the last topic on his mind.

Two-and-a-half hours and another warm beer later, Leo had accepted my offer on the first contact. When I suggested he discuss the terms with his wife, he just smiled and shook his head. "She does what I tell her, son," he said.

I left his house, smiling and waving good-bye, trying not to stagger down the steps. I was proud of the way I had turned a potential enemy into a pal.

Over the next several months, I visited the homes of about thirty-five property owners (or "claimants," as we called them), who were also affected by the new highway improvements. As Leo had warned me, some of them were easier to deal with than others, but each new transaction gave me more courage, more self-confidence, and more concern for the needs of the claimant.

At that time, some right-of-way agents were more interested in padding their own nest than protecting the rights of the property owners. These agents did whatever they had to do to get the job done, and the devil take the hindmost.

However, I always thought of the property owners I was dealing with as my employers. After all, it was their taxes that paid my wages, so I always

gave the claimants the benefit of the doubt. These people were losing their homes, and to many that was a traumatic experience. I did whatever I could to help them; it just seemed natural to me that a good right-of-way agent should be compassionate and sympathetic, practical and fair.

My next assignment was also in a rural area, a small mining town. The first claimant I visited was a sixty-five-year-old retired miner named Larry Wilson who had a bad case of black lung disease. He also had no respect for anyone who was not covered from head to toe with coal dust at the end of the day. And I had never even been in a mine.

I went to see Larry four times but got nowhere with him, although I tried every angle of persuasion I could think of, and he called me every belittling name under the sun. Like Leo, Larry didn't like the government, and it seemed he didn't like anything at all. It looked to me as if we would never negotiate a settlement, but my office gave me an ultimatum: get Larry out or else.

I paid Larry a fifth visit, arriving early in the morning to take him off guard and give him less time to think about all the things that got his goat. Larry greeted me in his usual friendly fashion: "What the hell do you want?"

"Morning, Mr. Wilson," I said softly.



This entire block was demolished to make room for I-279.



Nick and his tentants were a colorful bunch, and the bar's ham and cheese sandwich couldn't be beat. Some "great deals" on bogus steaks and watches took place here.

"May I come in?" Larry grudgingly let me inside and led me into the kitchen.

"We've got a lot of differences, you and I," I began, "but I think we should bury the hatchet. I'm sure you wouldn't want to be evicted from here, after all."

Larry glowered at me as he poured himself a cup of coffee, offering me nothing. I knew he would kill me if I tried to evict him.

As I gazed across the table at him, I noticed a wad of chew in his cheek. "What are you chewing?" I asked, just to be personable.

He cocked his head and snorted at me. "Why would a city slicker like you want to know?" he grumbled.

"Cause I'd like a chaw, too," I answered. I was getting desperate, willing to risk being sick to the stomach.

Larry began to laugh. "Aw, c'mon! I don't believe it! Why, you'd probably mess your breeches if you tried."

I took this as a personal challenge. "What kind is it? Copenhagen?"

He shook his head. "Mailpouch."

"That's sissy stuff."

Larry frowned and his face turned as red as the strawberries printed on the vinyl tablecloth. He yanked his tobacco pouch out of his pocket and tossed it across the table at me. "Help yourself, kid." He gave me a little smile.

I opened the pouch, removed a big pinch of tobacco, stuffed it in one cheek and began chewing away. It must have been months old; it was as dry as driftwood. "Where's the spittoon?" I sputtered at last.

"Ain't none!" he crowed, grinning. "I swallow it, kid."

I felt my eyes bulge as I gazed around the room, looking for any sort of container. Larry bellowed with laughter and brought me a brass bowl. "Kid, you're okay." Twenty minutes later, we settled the claim.

While I was working on another project a little closer to Pittsburgh, I almost got relieved of my duties. An up-and-coming legislator for the area got it into his head that I was too young and inexperienced to handle the right-of-way operations in his community. He wanted

to have me replaced by a more experienced agent. Fortunately for me, our office was short-staffed, and my supervisor stood by me. In a short time I was able to prove myself, winning the trust and confidence of the people I worked for. As for the state representative, he ended up in jail after being convicted of various dirty dealings.

After showing myself worthy of the

title of right-of-way agent, I was assigned to a project involving roadway development necessitated by the expansion of the county airport. For the first month and a half, I had no trouble at all with the property owners; our appraisals went smoothly and our supplemental benefits were seen as very equitable. I couldn't shake the feeling, however, that I was headed for problems down the road.

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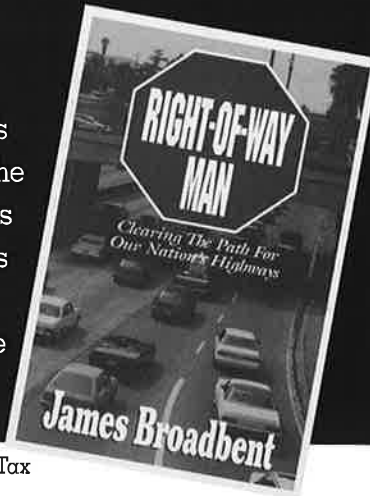
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Right-of-Way Man

By James Broadbent

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One afternoon I arrived at the next address on my list of claimants. It was run-down shack surrounded by piles of debris and the rusted remains of two old cars. The owner, Mr. Solanski, came to the door when I knocked but didn't invite me in. He was an old, bent man, eighty at least, with thick glasses and a few wisps of white hair clinging to his temples. After I identified myself and explained my purpose, he told me to come back when his son was around. "Billy lives right here with me," added the old-timer. "He's the breadwinner. Pays all the bills."

I returned to Mr. Solanski's house a dozen times, as early as noon, as late as 10:00 p.m., but I never caught his son at home. The thirteenth time I came early-8:30-and managed to find "Billy" at home. He was a surly fellow with a big paunch; his clothes were rumpled and stained, as if he hadn't changed them in a week. When he reluctantly invited me inside, I reluctantly followed.

The interior of the shack was even dirtier and uglier than the outside. Billy led me into the kitchen, sparsely furnished with a small table, two chairs, two oil lamps and an icebox. The grime on the kitchen floor was so thick I could have sworn I was standing on a cushion. I couldn't even tell if the floor was tile or carpeting. Chunks of raw meat, buzzing with flies, lay in a coal bucket beside the blazing wood stove. The whole place stank of grease and body odor. "Have a seat," Billy said.

I politely declined. Who knew just what was on those kitchen chairs?

From the kitchen, I could look right into the one bedroom, where Mr. Solanski was just beginning to wake up. Two twin beds were festooned with gigantic cobwebs, strung across the corners of the walls and around the bedposts. I broke out in gooseflesh at the sight of spiders scurrying back and forth across the complex network of webs.

As fast as possible, I explained my purpose and the various entitlements the two men were eligible to receive, then left without delay and hurried home. A good hot shower soon relieved me of the itchy feeling that thousands of tiny feet

were scuttling up and down my body.

I spent the next few days trying to find decent alternative housing for the Spidermen, but I soon found out that the Solanskis were not welcome "in their own township or in any neighboring communities". With good reason, I thought, though I still felt sorry for them. Finally I located a house trailer on a half-acre tract about six miles from the Spider House. It was a lot nicer than the dump they were living in, and remote enough that they could carry on their slovenly lifestyle without offending anyone.

The biggest problem I had, however, was getting them out of their shack. The two insisted on seeing the new property together and in my presence, although there was no way I would consider riding with them in their truck or letting them into my car. What could I do?

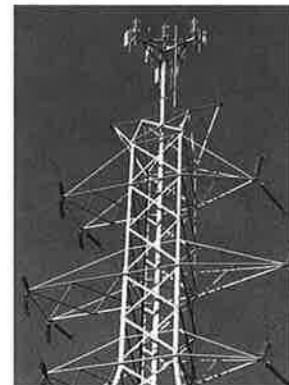
Then the answer came to me: I'd use my boss's car.

My supervisor at that time had a beautiful black Cadillac sedan. I needed the car to show some claimants some property, I told him, because the old man would have trouble getting in and out of my two-door coupe. (This was true, of course. I just didn't go into details about the two men's hygiene.) My boss fell for my request hook, line and sinker and commended me for my compassion.

With a bottle of disinfectant in the trunk, I packed Billy and his dad into the Caddy and drove them to the trailer. No doubt those two felt like kings in that elegant car. When they got to the trailer, they were in a fine mood, laughing and talking. They fell in love with the place on the spot and moved in shortly afterward. They lived happily ever after ... at least, as far as I know. ■

In 1990, James Broadbent retired from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. He spent 30 years working for the highway department, ending up as chief property acquisition negotiator. In his 132-page memoir, Broadbent recounts dealings with swarms of cockroaches, hoards of antiques, drunkards, eccentrics, saints, swindlers, destitute families and irritable farmers with shotguns. Currently a private consultant based in Pittsburgh, Broadbent is a member of IRWA Chapter 55.

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