

# Adventures from the Road

The career path of one right of way agent is paved with good intentions.



BY JIM BROADBENT

As anyone involved in the industry knows, the life of a right of way agent is filled with interesting personal adventures. After 30 years with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, and 20 more in the consulting business, I have accumulated more than my fair share, it seems.

In my career, I have dealt with many wonderful people, some grouchy ones, drunkards, eccentrics, saints, swindlers, destitute families and irritated property owners with weapons. But I saw it all as a matter of course, considering I was usually the bearer of bad news. Looking back over my meager contribution to the construction of so many expressways across the state of Pennsylvania, it makes me proud to know that my efforts toward clearing the path for these roads have resulted in increased safety and efficiency for millions of commuters.

Within a half-mile of my Pittsburgh home lies I-279. It is a massive interstate highway that cost billions of dollars to construct and displaced thousands of people. I personally relocated 100 businesses and 1500 individuals as part of the project. Not that long ago, houses

stood where there is now nothing but stretches of gray roadways. Pavement has replaced homes, shops, taverns, yards, churches and cemeteries. Looking at the highway, a casual observer would never know that people had once lived, loved, worked and played there. They would never realize that it takes more than physical efforts like moving dirt, altering stream beds, pouring concrete and erecting signs to build a highway. It takes a lot of human compromise as well.

With most of my projects, peaceful responses to my efforts were few and far between. In one incident, a disgruntled property owner slated for relocation threatened bodily harm to me if I ever returned, and chased me out of his yard. This had quite the effect, as the man was about 6'5 and 330 pounds, and I stand at 5'7 and weigh 140 pounds soaking wet. I really didn't even get the opportunity to explain why I was there, as there was a lot of questionable publicity surrounding the project, and word was already being circulated about PennDOT's activities around the neighborhood. However, a friendly neighbor of the aggressive property owner advised me that the man's bark was worse than his bite.

Still, my second attempt to contact the property owner had the same result as the first. Once again, he chased me through his yard, and I had to hurdle over a short fence to make my escape. After that, it was decided that when making contact with this individual, a colleague and I would handle him as a team. My colleague took the lead, using a different psychology and approach. When the owner came outside, my colleague started to bang on the porch rail to get the owner's attention and then agreed with everything the property owner complained about. That course of action succeeded. The claim was settled, and the man was peaceably relocated in the end. Sometimes, it takes two to tango!

Two other evictions included a neighborhood tavern and hotel bar one block away from each other, which were owned by the same individual. These were the last two buildings standing on this phase of the project. Since the ownership was the same, the state succeeded in having the court issue one writ of possession applicable to both properties. These structures were real dumps, and it was a surprise to me

that they had not been boarded up or padlocked long ago by the liquor control board or health department. The actual eviction and placement into storage was a two-week process. In each of these establishments, there were numerous sleeping room tenants I had to relocate, including an ex-convict who owed several months of back rent, a man who could no longer speak after an unfortunate accident, and an alcoholic who spent his generous reimbursement check on one heck of a drinking spree. It's difficult to imagine how some of these people lived, until you witness it first-hand.

One of the most memorable experiences I had was not a violent one, but a heart-wrenching one involving an eviction. Unfortunately, eviction becomes the only recourse after occupants have refused to move from an acquired structure. I arrived at a home early one morning with a deputy sheriff and the state's assigned legal counsel to evict the tenants of an

inner-city house. The order from the deputy was clear – the family needed to pick up and leave that day. The young couple picked up a few belongings, placed them in a little red child's wagon and walked down the street pulling the wagon. I had no alternative but to do my job, but that memory tugged on my heartstrings for a long time afterwards.

Following my retirement from PennDOT, I started an acquisition consulting business, which I have operated with my two sons for 20 years. I am now semi-retired, but whenever I hear about the details of my staff's ventures with affected property owners, I am reminded about my personal adventures as a right of way agent, which I wrote in a book called Right of Way Man (see ad on page 51). It is truly heartening hearing one of my right of way agents remind me of an episode in the book that has similarities to a property they are working on.

My stories are not unique - right of way agents everywhere have both sad and amusing stories to tell. This job will take you on visits with a variety of characters in all sorts of unimaginable places, and sometimes the tales just have to be retold. ☘



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