

# Building the Future

## 1930s The Dawn of IRWA

BY KATE SHIRLEY

As 2009 marks the 75th anniversary of IRWA, over the next year we will explore the events, milestones and accomplishments that have advanced our Association to where it is today. We'll begin this retrospective with the decade that started it all – the 1930s.

Throughout the early 1930s, the United States was severely stalled by a grim economic situation. While the country tried desperately to cope with the Great Depression and recover from the stock market crash, agriculture and manufacturing industries were largely halted, and many jobs were lost. To help alleviate some of the economic consequences, Franklin Roosevelt implemented his New Deal in 1933, expanding the Federal Highway construction program, which led to the creation of the Public Works Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority. In hopes of rejuvenating the failing housing market and rampant home foreclosures, the Federal Housing Administration was created as part of the National Housing Act of 1934, the precursor to today's U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.



The Public Works Administration in particular was tasked with leading the country's major construction projects and received initial funding of \$3.3 billion. As a result, the 1930s soon became a significant decade for development. Many notable projects were embarked on, including the Hoover Dam, Grand Coulee Dam, Golden Gate Bridge, Lincoln Tunnel in New York, the Overseas

Highway linking the Florida Keys, the Tennessee Valley project, Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah National Park and many new highways sprung up all over the country. New advances in engineering and technology helped to make many of these projects possible. With automobile ownership on the rise, it was no surprise that many of the engineering projects of the time involved upgrading infrastructure to accommodate the burgeoning popularity of motorized travel. The need for right of way professionals was growing every day.

# for the Past 75 Years



The right of way men of the American Right of Way Association.

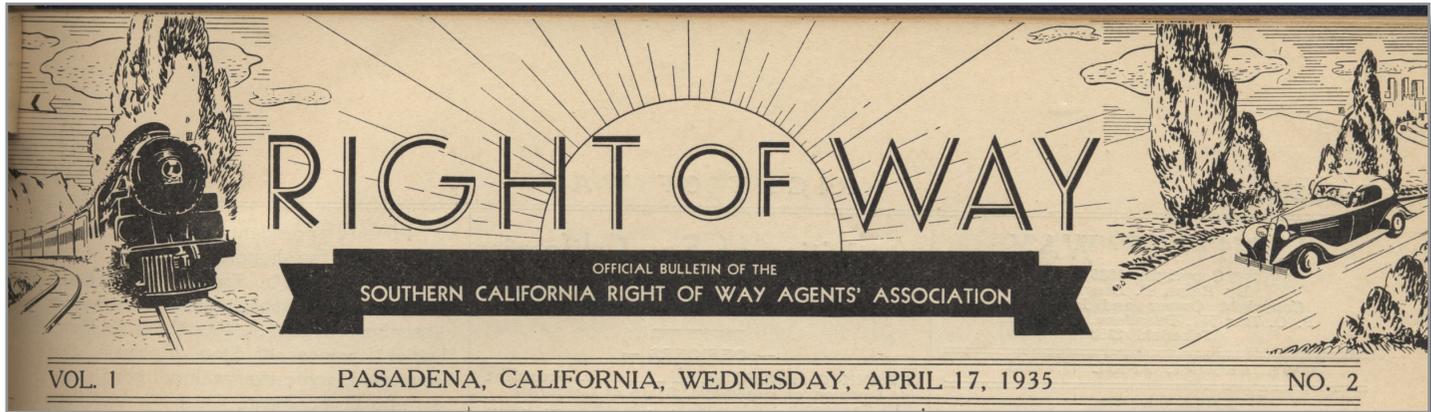
## Right of Way as a Profession

Prior to the 30s, right of way acquisition could be classified as “hit or miss.” Serious, legitimate valuation attempts prior to the start of an acquisition were rarely made. Agents or “right of way men” (as they were called in those days) would often acquiesce to difficult property owners’ demands in the interest of cultivating good public opinion toward the right of way agents and the utility companies they served. Conversely, cooperative or uninformed landowners were often compensated quite poorly. Perhaps it all evened out in the end, but the end does not always justify the means. At least, that’s what Frank C. Balfour thought.

Frank C. Balfour entered the right of way profession in 1931 as a Right of Way Agent with the California Division of Highways. Like other right of way agents of his day, he was sent into the field with another agent to observe for two days, promptly assigned a project, and handed a bundle of deeds, with instructions to get them all signed. It was a daunting task. In those days, most public service/agency right of way agents got into the business

through family connections or were engineers who worked part-time in right of way. Some agents had the reputation of being nice guys who lacked the technical skills, while others found themselves moved into right of way departments because there was a staffing need. Many did not have the necessary skills to really excel at their jobs. The only recourse for those seeking more knowledge in their field was law-based courses, economics classes or internships with title companies.

In short, with the lack of formal training and virtually no consistency in the right of way acquisition process, there was a large disconnect between all right of way agents. Frank recognized early on that there was a critical need to bring right of way men together in order for the profession to really flourish. They needed an opportunity to learn and network - a place where professionals could share their experiences and lessons learned, and benefit from the stories of others. By 1933, Frank had made the decision to bring together right of way agents into one organization, in order to benefit the profession as a whole and to lend increased legitimacy to their work.



## Bringing it All Together

Frank started by discussing his idea with George Mitchell, who at the time was the Chief Right of Way Agent for the Los Angeles County Road Department. George quickly agreed that there was definite need for an association, and together they sat down and conceived the idea for the Southern California Right of Way Agents' Association (SCRWAA). And so on October 16, 1934, the first organized meeting of their new association took place at Pozzo's Italian Restaurant in Los Angeles, California. Fourteen men were in attendance.

They decided unanimously to start the SCRWAA (how's that for an acronym?) in order to "bring together all of those in public and private right of way and land activities, including appraisers, title men and attorneys in an endeavor to unite the efforts of all right of way men toward a betterment of the individual, to promote high standards and a cooperative spirit amongst the members, and to engender attributes which would elevate right of way work to a professional, built upon a foundation of education to equip the members to better serve their employers." On that day in October, the founding fathers of IRWA laid the groundwork for the next 75 years of professional excellence.

The first official meeting of the newly formed Association was held in December 1934. It was at this meeting that the first Executive Committee was elected, with Frank Balfour as president, George Mitchell as vice president, Ralph Beegan as Secretary and Harry Swearingen as Treasurer. It was at this same meeting that Los Angeles "Mother" Chapter 1 was formed.

The newly-minted members quickly realized that there was enormous national potential for the Association and agreed in mid-1935 to rename it the American Right of Way Association (ARWA), a name which stuck until 1980. One of the guiding principles on which the ARWA was formed was the need for education and collaboration, and this was a high priority for the association leadership. As a result, in August 1936 the first draft of the Right of Way Procedure and Land Acquisition manual was published. It had an initial print run of 1,000 copies, and covered topics that were presented at the Institute on Government meeting held that same year. The Association leaders soon realized there was such heavy demand for the publication that 1,000 additional copies had to be printed.

Soon after, the Association held its first right of way course. A 12-week course covering California Land Titles, it was held every Tuesday for two and a half hours. This extensive course managed to attract an average of 83 professionals each week. When you consider that ARWA had less than 200 members at that time, it really puts into perspective how high the demand was for the right of way education and networking benefits that ARWA provided.

## Plans for National Expansion

By October 1936, membership in the Association consisted of 190 right of way men. However, it was becoming apparent that the constitutional limit of 200 members placed by the Executive Committee would need to be reconsidered. In a January 1938 meeting, Frank Balfour led a general discussion regarding this



APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Southern California Right of Way Agents' Association,  
Los Angeles, California

The undersigned FRANK C. BALFOUR does  
(Print Name in Full)  
hereby apply for Active membership in the  
(Active or Associate)

Southern California Right of Way Agents Association, and if elected to membership therein, does hereby agree to abide by the Constitution and By-Laws of said Association.

The data covered by the following questions is required for the statistical and reference records of the Association. Same should be answered carefully and completely.

- (1) Office Address 808 State Bldg., Los Angeles, Calif.
- (2) Residence Address 5207 Hermosa Ave., Los Angeles
- (3) Date of Birth July 30, 1896 Place Pomona, Calif.
- (4) Marital Status Married
- (5) Education Grammar, High School and College  
(Please State in Detail)  
Extension courses in land title, appraisal and salesmanship

DO NOT WRITE IN THIS SPACE

No. 1. CHARTER  
APPROVED \_\_\_\_\_  
REJECTED CHARTER

Membership Committee:  
Geo. E. Hall  
Algoten  
King

ELECTED DATE MCH 6/35

FORM Active

Signed Ralph F. Began Sec'y

Telephone MADISON 1271  
Sta. 337  
Telephone ALBANY 0856

Personality In The News

## F. C. Balfour Faced Shotgun On First State Assignment

By Wilson K. ...



need to expand ARWA beyond the Los Angeles area. The need for expansion was particularly apparent in cities like San Francisco and in the adjoining states of Oregon and Washington. Frank also determined that, in order to gauge further national interest, copies of the Right of Way Procedure and Land Acquisition manual should be distributed to right of way departments in all the state highway organizations (48 at the time), as well as to numerous public utility organizations in the Midwest.

The International Executive Committee did not waste any time, and quickly convinced influential right of way agents in Northern California of the importance of starting ARWA Chapter 2 in San Francisco. The charter meeting of the Northern California (now Bay Area) Chapter was held on April 18, 1938, and James B. Woodson was installed as the chapter's first President.

Now with two active Chapters, the Association was able to offer even more benefits to its members. The more ARWA grew, the more effective it could become in providing education and networking for the right of way professional. The leadership was eager to grow the Association in other areas of the country. In order to preserve the high professional standard of the members, they decided to expand the Association not by forceful salesmanship, but by convincing others of the real importance of membership. From the very beginning, the Association's commitment to right of way professionals was placed above all else. 🌟

