



The Interstate at 50

Bob Steffes

**Working as a contractor's employee on I-80
1959**

My employment working on earth moving during the construction of Interstate 80 began with a short conversation and a few rough words. I had a fairly good background in equipment operation from farming experiences, plus a short formal course on heavy diesel equipment operation, before I went out for this job. I did not have actual road construction grading experience. I heard about the interstate grading operations and had a strong desire to become one of those heavy equipment operators.

I left my family farm home seven miles southwest of Carroll very early one Monday morning in 1959. I headed east, looking for that "dream" construction job. I drove until I came to a string of construction equipment parked along a grading site near Newton. Some of the equipment's engines were already running, getting warmed up and putting out their dark smoke signals. It was apparent they would soon be ready to roll. I drove my old 1953 Ford across the rough grading site (carefully, of course as I didn't want to damage my '53-style dual exhaust and glass pac mufflers) and parked near the end of the row of construction equipment.

I walked toward the equipment operators and asked to talk to the boss. I found the owner of the equipment, a small subcontractor from West central Iowa. If I recall correctly, his name was Ed Anderson, of Anderson & DeBolt Construction Company from Rockwell City. I asked him if there was any chance in getting a job as an equipment operator. He didn't seem to be in a very good mood that early Monday morning as, lucky for me, one of his regular operators didn't show up for work. After a very few words, he walked me over to one of the dirt scrapers not yet being warmed up and he told me to get my "—" up there in the operators seat. I did just what my new boss said, and started working.

In my early hours of working, the boss was watching me closely and would walk along side of the scraper when I was spreading a lift of dirt on the grade. At that time the equipment operator sat right out in the open as that generation of equipment had no cab. The boss always carried a wood lath in a raised position on his shoulder and if I spread the lift of dirt too thin or too thick or if I got caught with my foot riding the clutch, I would get a whack from his lath on my foot. That was his method to obtain accelerated operator improvements.

One part of my job was hauling dirt to build up the access road leading into the Newton airport. Another project was hauling dirt to build up the approaches to the bridge crossing over I-80, around mile post 168, just east of the airport. The borrow pit for the dirt was a hill-top/hillside area near by. As I cut deeper and deeper into the hill, water began to flow out. Before long, I was making the cut, filling the scraper, while on a quite steep decline off the end of the hill. With loading down that steep decline, I could get the scraper mostly full without the assistance of a push cat. However, by the time I got to the bottom of the slope, I was buried in mud about two feet deep. For each load, I would "slide" down the hill, loading the scraper and end up stuck in the mud at the bottom. With the scrapper stuck at the bottom, another operator with a cat and a tow cable would back up, hook on to my scraper and pull me out to dry ground. Getting the scraper loaded in that mud was the first part of the

problem, and the second part was trying to get that huge mud ball out of the scraper bucket, once I got to the grade. It took a considerable amount of time and jerking around, trying to get that mud ball out of the scraper, for each of those wet loads. Progress was slow. Following unloading, there was a lot of disking and blading of that wet dirt that had to be done, by another operator, to get the soil moisture content down and dried to an acceptable level.

The end of the construction season came and I went out in my 53 Ford looking for my next job. After many adventures over the next 27 years, both here and abroad, I started to work at the Iowa DOT in materials research in 1986. I spent a lot of time in my 17 years in that job out on the interstates. Driving I-80 past the Newton area always brought back interesting memories of those days in constructing that interstate in 1959. I wonder to this day if some of those huge mud balls ever did dry out.