



Wendy Lathrop is licensed as a Professional Land Surveyor in NJ, PA, DE, and MD, and has been involved since 1974 in surveying projects ranging from construction to boundary to environmental land use disputes. She is a Professional Planner in NJ, and a Certified Floodplain Manager through ASFPM.

A Celebration of Sorts

2007 marks a milestone in my life. The birthday of a few weeks ago now entitles me to live in adult-only communities, those sheltered enclaves bereft of children's laughter. That aspect is mildly depressing, spurring me instead to keep in touch with the diversity of human experiences through immersion in a less isolated world. But more significant to me is the landmark of 25 years of licensed professional practice, resulting in retrospective introspection.

My decision to pursue licensure erupted in anger as the company I worked for at the time pretty much had chained me to a desk and only let me out to perform percolation tests. Prior to that employment, I had worked for a small firm in which nearly everyone was expected to be able to do nearly everything. And that was where I had fallen in love with surveying's vast breadth and depth, seeing jobs through from start to finish and finding fulfillment in the constant learning process.

But now I was "too good" to put in the field. I protested that cataloguing soils and watching water drain out of holes was hardly experience adequate for admittance to the exam. Oops. Licensure had never crossed my mind before (my degree being in a completely unrelated and different field since I hadn't even heard of land surveying until age 22). So, back to school. And out to the field, too, but at a 50% reduction in pay for the hours away from my "more productive" deskwork. But I was very fortunate to immediately find two mentors in that company, two men who overlooked the fact that I was



of the "wrong" gender, and gave me the full benefit of their experiences and love of the profession.

With just two of us on the crew, Bob Ent always made sure I knew exactly what our objective was, how we would accomplish it, and why. After a day of observations, he would have me check his work in the field book, but using a different method to be sure we did not merely check each other's same mistakes. Early in those experiences was the day in which I learned that a "chain" was really a "steel tape". He had asked me to get the chain out of the back of

the truck, a mystifying request on that summer afternoon since all I could find was a set of snow chains. Fortunately, Bob came around to the back of the truck, remembering that he had put the "chain" away in a difficult-to-reach cranny, and pulled out the tape before I said anything. If he reads this, it will be the first time he will know of this true confession. Had he asked for a steel tape, I would have known exactly what to look for, but with only book learning, I was at a loss. What a lesson!

We slogged through cedar swamps and hauled heavy distance measuring

instruments up steep hills, along with the marine batteries to power them. We hacked through briars, once scratching my cornea badly enough to require a few days off to regain my vision, and sifted through dumps in the woods to find antique bottles. With my big feet, I tripped over monuments under the forest leaf litter and was as elated as if I were the first person ever to find them. I learned how to peg a level, how to decide on a good spot for aerial targets, how to use stadia to estimate distances. Those were exciting and exhausting days.

But after hours there was studying to do. I enrolled in classes, and struggled with homework. I took my books and papers into the office, where another surveyor was studying to gain secondary licensure as a civil engineer. Carl Rettenberger tutored me through vertical curves, traverse adjustments, and anything else that stumped me. I still have some of his meticulous explanatory sketches tucked into my textbooks. Through him, I found that all the math that had entertained me in junior and senior high school actually had real life applications and uses. Magically, some of the theory that Carl reviewed with me suddenly made sense of some of Bob's creative ways to measure inaccessible sites. It all started to come together. Between my two mentors, I began to understand how descriptions should be written to best preserve evidence for the next surveyor, how different equipment affected measurements, and how historically significant the differences could be.

At the time I was applying for examination, my state of residence, New Jersey, had its own eight-hour exam. Meanwhile, across the Delaware River in Pennsylvania where I had acquired the first half of my experience, the relatively new two-day NCEE national exam was in place. I opted to take that two-day test, hoping for reciprocity or comity if I were fortunate enough to pass. I did. It did take a few days after the letter arrived for me to discover this, however, as I was so sure that I had not (knowing so many people who had not succeeded on their first attempts) that I didn't want to find out the bad news. Finally reading the "congratulations" letter, I was certain that a few days later another letter would arrive saying, "Wait, we made a mistake." Miraculously, that never happened. And New Jersey only had me take their short

state-specific test before granting me the second of my eventual four licenses.

I am immensely grateful to my first two mentors, surveyors whom I still consider at the pinnacle of professionalism after meeting so many others. The intervening years have offered so many opportunities to learn even more, offers that cannot be refused. I love this work, which is consistently challenging,

constantly evolving, immensely rewarding in so many ways. How fortunate I am to have found and succeeded in this wonderful profession, particularly knowing so many who groan each workday morning as they face another round of tedium. As I write this during the third week of March, many are celebrating "Surveyors' Week". But I am celebrating "Surveyors' Life".



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