

profile

Paying it Forward

An Interview with Dennis Mouland



I've known Dennis Mouland for almost 40 years. There's a little more gray in our hair than when we first met (well, maybe a *lot* more). Dennis has a quick wit and a great sense of humor. Engage him in conversation for more than a few minutes and he will have you cracking up at some comment or a one-liner he tosses out.

Dennis has worked both in the private sector and also with various federal agencies. He is the former owner of Cadastral Consultants and currently owns Witness Tree Consulting, which offers survey consulting, live seminars and reasonably priced courses that can be taken on-line.

Q. You've been surveying for a long time. What first got you interested in the profession?

A. I wasn't interested in the profession when I first started in it (laughs). I needed a job! I had gotten laid off at a local car dealership. My employer sent me over to see a local engineer (in Prescott, AZ) and he hired me. I wasn't really interested in the profession until sometime in the late '70's. It was then that I decided to make the effort and get licensed.

Q. You are nationally recognized for the courses you've taught over the years. What made you decide to start teaching them?

A. I went to work for the Forest Service in 1980. In 1981 they sent me to an advanced Cadastral School. This was only the second

time it had ever been put on by the BLM and Forest Service. It was a one week course and it just blew me away about how little I knew about Public Lands and other related things. That motivated me to get training in just about everything. I started putting together some simple seminars for realtors for their continuing education and to get some public speaking experience. Eventually I switched to doing them for professional surveying associations. I realized there was a need. If I had somehow gotten licensed and didn't know anything, there were probably others who were in the same boat.

Q. What do you see as the most rewarding thing about conducting the seminars/teaching the courses?

A. That's a simple answer. It's when you see the light come on in somebody's eyes, and it's not about some little trivial thing they just figured out. You know they suddenly understand the big picture on whatever the subject is. That makes it worth it!

Q. What do you see as the most significant changes in the profession during your career?

A. Obviously the technology has totally changed everything, but a bigger change is our society dumbing everything down. We have paralleled that. It amazes me that we can go out and stake something with GPS or a robot and never get out a cloth tape to check it, or we never double-check anything.

It's a cultural change that we depend on technology so much that we never question it. At least in surveying, back in the day, we learned to question *everything*; to double-check everything; to never leave a site without stretching a tape to check things

Q. Do you feel that with the use of GPS, that something has been lost in the way surveys/retracements are conducted?

A. Yes, and that might be two-fold. One is that we're not really evaluating *all* of the evidence. We have turned it more into a mathematical effort. We have a *legal* question about whether something is in the corner or not and we want to address it with a *math* answer. That is obviously incorrect. The second thing is the total reliance on technology without even knowing how to check things. I'm amazed to see people using GPS to stake something that could have been done easier with a pocket tape and a right-angle prism.

Q. You were a key player in the development of the CFedS program. How do you feel about the program these days and the future of it?

A. CFedS was one of the highlights of my career in putting that together and working with Ron Scherrer, of the BLM. We put a lot of effort and a lot of heart into it. It offers a

much more advanced training opportunity to private surveyors that previously had not been available.

The CfedS program is still being handled on a contract basis by Ron, who has since retired from the BLM. I was just put under contract to develop another continuing education class for them, so I continue to be involved with the program as well.

Some people thought the program was all about making more money and getting more contracts, and in some parts of the country, that has come true. But the program was more about some really advanced training so that you could do the job properly wherever you were, but especially if you were up against a federal boundary.

Q. What do you see as the biggest problem with the profession?

A. There are two problems. The first one is, we have become mathematicians rather than land surveyors. The second problem is, we are still allowing the engineering profession to run the surveying profession. I don't have anything against engineers at all, but the problem is that engineering minds think quite differently than surveying minds should. I get very frustrated when I see surveyors at the universities trying to solve a boundary question with sort of an engineering decision matrix at their side.

Q. What is your assessment of the profession as it currently stands?

A. I think the profession is probably better educated than it ever has been. We have more and more states that either have a four year degree requirement, or that have some degree requirement plus hours. We have more opportunity to educate people so that they have a better chance when they start.

Another issue that might be challenging us is the desire of the public to make surveying as portable as engineering from state to state. They want to get away from the State Specific tests and want to lump it all together as if it was a science, which it is not. That is one of the biggest challenges we face right now.

Q. You are like the Bob Dylan of the surveying profession in that, you are very well known and respected, yet you have always done things on your own terms. Any comments?

A. (Laughing) Well, I guess I've moved up because the last person I was compared to was Howard Hughes! I do have a private life

and as much as I get out there and speak and interact with people, I'm pretty private. I have followed my own path, but it has been a really good experience and I don't have many regrets at all.

Q. Do you have any predictions for where things are heading in the future?

A. There is tremendous pressure within NCEES to make surveying portable from state to state just like it is with engineering. There is a real lack of understanding by those pushing for that of the complexities of, not just boundary law, but specifics within boundaries—for instance, the Public Lands or Mineral Surveys here in the west or other things like that. So, I think there's a danger there of trying to lump it all together as one simple profession.

Q. What advice would you give someone who is just getting into the surveying profession?

A. I would tell them that regardless of what they might be told, they will need a formal surveying education, and they will need time to be mentored and apprenticed. I know the word "apprentice" rubs some people in our profession the wrong way, but I believe it really is a two-fold process. Some of the other professions, like engineering, are looking at, once you have your four year degree, you can go for your full license. I think that would be a huge mistake in surveying.

Q. As a parting shot, is there anything you would like to add?

A. I have spent a lot of time talking to people about a lot of different subjects trying to fill the gap. People don't remember much from a seminar—I've heard ten percent, maybe twenty. My goal has always been to *not* shock, but to make people aware of how much more there is to know. What I have tried to do the most is inspire people; motivate them and encourage them. And, while there are a lot of things one needs to take seriously, never take yourself too seriously. ■

A longer version of this interview can be found here: <http://bit.ly/1ETv9aj>

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