

I'll Never Forget That

Recollections from 50 Years in the Field



Bob Vollmer's favorite television character is the Energizer Bunny.

"Every time I see that ad, I say, 'That's the way it should be,'" explains Vollmer in a subtle southern lilt. "You go until you drop. That's the way you do it."

The Energizer battery bunny, with its "keep going" motto, is a fitting choice for Vollmer. At 98-years-old, he is still working full time as a surveyor for Indiana's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). As Indiana's oldest state employee—and possibly the country's—Vollmer's longevity has piqued the interest of the surveying community and the media: the local TV station profiled him; and, along with this article, other stories about his life are being written. The attention has left him a bit perplexed.

"I just figured this is an everyday thing," he says, from his home in rural Indiana. "But when I stopped to think about it, it is kind of unusual."

Unusual, indeed. And commendable.

Setting his Surveying Trajectory

Born in May 1917, Vollmer was a perpetually curious child, especially about how things worked. His childhood passion for electronics led him to pursue work in manufacturing and selling burglar alarms. And then came Pearl Harbor—and at the age of 24, Vollmer

was enlisted into the U.S. Navy and was assigned to an engineering battalion.

Two events during World War II set his trajectory into surveying.

The first was navigating the Pacific Ocean, when he saw an officer with a sextant and a wristwatch. "With just a wristwatch he could tell us in a few minutes exactly where we were in the middle of the ocean," he exclaims. "I'll never forget that."

The second was when he was asked by surveyors to hold their Philadelphia rod while determining elevations. "They'd say, 'Put your gun down and grab that Philadelphia rod! I'll never forget that.'"

After the war, Vollmer enrolled at the University of California-Berkeley and took his first surveying course while studying metallurgical engineering.

He finished his studies at Purdue University and graduated in 1952 with an agricultural engineering degree. He started his career working on flood control and dam construction projects, later getting experience with surveying tools on public-land encroachment projects. In 1973 he made it official and became a licensed land surveyor.

A Surveying Life

In 50 years of surveying, Vollmer has accumulated

enough “field stories” to more than fill the two-inch-thick book he used to carry around to look up trigonometry data. He reckons there isn’t any part of Indiana he hasn’t worked in; he’s surveyed nearly every inch of the 3,000-acre O’Bannon Woods State Park.

Vollmer can still recall his first day on the job as if it was yesterday.

It was a dam construction project in southern Indiana, and it gave him a front row seat to the ugly side of human nature. “A lot of property had to be condemned so citizens weren’t too friendly naturally,” he says. “I had my jeep at the construction site, and one of the people upset about having the dam built put some roofing nails under all four tires so no matter which way I went, I would get four flats. I’ll never forget that.”

Much of his work has involved verifying possible encroachment violations in what he calls the “boondocks”—the forests, parks and riverbanks of the State. It’s in the wilderness, Vollmer says, where surveying can be really exciting and gratifying—he once dug up an original survey stake from 1806—and sometimes, a bit scary.

He’s lost count of the number of times property owners have pointed guns at him, or had close encounters with copperhead snakes, or been attacked by dogs. “It’s all part of surveying,” he says.

He also survived a potentially messy dispute with Al Capone’s lieutenant regarding access to a lake. Vollmer says he talked to him about a fence that had been erected around a lake in the middle of Indiana with “City of Chicago Property” signs on it. “Everything worked out nicely,” he says. “For a gangster, he was a real gentleman.”

However, his strongest memory of surveying was the time he had to be a first responder. It was in the desert near Riverside, Ca. and he heard crying. He followed a narrow path and found a baby, abandoned and screaming.

“It was a little girl and her diaper was full of red ants,” he says. “It made you sick.”

Vollmer and his crew cleaned the baby and turned her over to the authorities. He often wonders what happened to her.

The “Pow” of Technology

To Vollmer, surveying is surveying no matter what the job or where you are. The tools, however, are another story. Vollmer couldn’t fathom his surveying life without today’s modern technology.

“I was trained on the old stuff,” he says. “So there is no comparison.”

Indeed, Vollmer’s early tools of the trade are collectors’ items today. Brass 30-second transits for measuring horizontal and



Bob Vollmer works with his Trimble S6 robotic total station. In his 50-year career, he has witnessed amazing changes in surveying technology. Photo credits: (Left) Tom Campbell/Purdue University; (Right and top of pg 23) Indiana State Department of Natural Resources (IDNR).

vertical angles, dumpy levels for elevations, dip needles for locating sub-surface points and 100-ft metal-ribbon chains for measurements. For calculations, Vollmer used a noisy, mechanical, hand-crank Monroe Calculator, which provided 16 place values.

“Depending on the job, you could spend a week just calculating one curve,” Vollmer says. “Establishing an elevation point on a construction site could take two days because you had to work it out with levels. Today, you take your GPS or total station out there and, ‘Pow!’, you have your answer in seconds. You can’t ask for anything better.”

As the surveying tools have advanced, Vollmer has advanced along with them.

Historically, Vollmer had a four-person crew, but budget cuts reduced him to a crew of one. He credits the technology with enabling him to work on his own, and the instruments ensure he stays sharp and productive and is able to deliver quality work—his wife has also helped him stay sharp and productive by sticking gentle reminders in his car such as, “Dummy, get the battery.”

In the past, 80 percent of his time was often spent removing vegetation to create clear lines. Now his only physical labor is carrying his tripod and instrument.

He stores his Trimble instruments in his survey car: two Trimble

4000 GPS units, and one Trimble S6 total station. His S6, he says, is his “prized” instrument.

“I keep it in the front passenger seat and I put a seatbelt around it to make sure it doesn’t get damaged,” he says. “I can do dang near anything with that S6.”

He likes to show it off as well. Recently he demonstrated the S6’s robotic and direct reflex capabilities to a reporter. Standing in a park, Vollmer saw a basketball hoop about 400 ft away and asked him to pick a point on the hoop to shoot. The reporter chose the half-inch-thick rim attached to the backboard. Vollmer sighted the point and shot it with the S6 with no rodman. “He was amazed,” he says.

“Trimble works better than anything else,” he says. “I appreciate quality: that’s why I use Trimble.”

In thinking about turning 99 in May 2016, Vollmer did admit that he is starting to feel his age both mentally and physically. He isn’t sure how much longer he can continue his surveying career. But he is absolutely sure that he will not retreat.

“I don’t believe in retiring,” he concludes. “I don’t believe in letting grass grow under your feet. When you retreat, that’s when you get in trouble.”

“Energizer Bunny” indeed.



Bob Vollmer keeps his “prized” Trimble S6 belted in for safety in transit; still going strong at 98, he’s Indiana’s own “Energizer Bunny.”
Photo credits: (Left) Dale Gick/IDNR; (Right) WTHR TV.