

# Cranes, Dirt, and Concrete

## Operating Engineers Local 701 celebrates 100 years



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dropped “steam” from its name in 1928 (though it kept the steam gauge as its emblem.)

In a 1978 consent decree resolving a federal lawsuit filed in 1974, the Local 701 committed to admitting black and Hispanic apprentices to its training program.

In their century of progress, Local 701 members have run the machines that transformed Oregon, building every bridge, dam, highway, and sky-

scraper in the region.

The Local’s history is told in a 1999 book by Kirsten Bovee called *Every Member is the Union: The Story of Local 701* — and in a commemorative history book distributed at a Sept. 15 celebration of the union’s centennial.

If the men were hard in the Local’s early years, it may have been because those were hard times. Unions in the 1920s were often secret organizations. Employers often wouldn’t hire a worker unless they signed “yellow dog” contracts agreeing not to join a union.

In 1929, a stock market crash set off what became known as the Great Depression. Over the next four years, employment in construction dropped 78 percent. In 1933, Local 701 accepted a 20 percent wage reduction.

The turnaround came with President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, which included an unprecedented federal commitment to building infrastructure.

That was followed by the war. World War Two put the construction economy in overdrive. At breakneck speed, Local 701 members helped build a reconnaissance blimp hangar known as the Tillamook Naval Air Station; Camp White near Medford, which would later train up to 45,000 soldiers at a time; and a top secret site in Hanford, Washington, where atomic weapons would be manufactured.

They also helped build — almost overnight — what was briefly Oregon’s second largest city: Vanport. From August 1942 to September 1943, 9,942 buildings were built to house workers at three Kaiser shipyards. But the brand new town was destroyed in a catastrophic flood May 31, 1948.

Many Local 701 members spent the war years in construction battalions like the Naval Seabees, building the airbases, warehouses, and landing facilities that helped the Allies win the war.

In the post-war era, the federal commitment to infrastructure continued with the 1956 Federal Highway Act, and lasted through 1970.

Over the course of five decades Local 701 members helped construct 26 dams on Columbia River, the Astoria Megler and Fremont bridges, US 26, I-5, and I-95.

It was also an era of big strikes. Local 701 members in construction struck 34 days in 1958, 54 days in 1961, and 63 days in 1973. Sand and gravel operators struck 26 days in 1971.

Local 701 grew and expanded. In the early 1950s, it absorbed Local 500, taking in five Southwest Washington counties. In 1993, it added Stationary Engineers Local 87.

But the 1980s were a return to hard times: a recession, major downturn in construction, and a president who launched an era of union-busting when he terminated 11,345 striking air traffic controllers.

Prior to 1980, almost all public construction work was done by union-signatory contractors. Since then, the local has had to battle continually to hold onto union market share.

Local 701’s membership peaked in 1980 at 6,000 members, but by 1983, half of them were on the out-of-work list. Today the membership is just over 3,500.

But Local 701 continues to thrive, providing training, employment, and some of the highest wages and benefits in the construction industry. Its 100-year mark comes at another boom time, providing opportunities to new apprentices. They’ll be the ones to carry Local 701 into its second century.

— Don McIntosh



The Operating Engineers joint apprenticeship training committee re-named its training center “The Mark Holliday Operating Engineers Training Center” at Local 701’s 100th anniversary party. Holliday was instrumental in acquiring the 87-acre plot in Canby, Oregon, in 2011. The site has developed into a state-of-the-art training facility for apprentices and journeymen. (Photos by Michael Gutwig)



At the 701 centennial, Business Manager Jimbo Anderson gave hay rides with his fully-restored 1939 9N tractor.

