



Vance Breshears - LS 5842

Vance is one of those positive individuals who believe they have always had the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time and most significantly with the right people. That good fortune began with his parents where the word "can't" was not a part their vocabulary and continued with Carol, his wife of more than fifty years (whose vocabulary frequently included "will not") with whom he has three children and eleven grandchildren.

Born in 1936 in the hills of Yell County, Arkansas (forty miles from nowhere) he, his father, mother, and four siblings—all seven in a 1936 Ford—migrated to California in the early 1940s and settled in the Visalia area where he says his little bit of growing up occurred.

He is probably most widely known in the surveying community for the twenty years of assisting surveyors in their preparation for the Professional Land Surveyor examination and he considers that involvement a major highlight of his career because it involved working with hundreds of dedicated surveyors (some of whom refer to him as "Pappy") who are now part of California's solid core of professional surveyors.

Vance began his surveying career in 1958 on dam and tunnel projects and had a rather rude but meaningful introduction to surveying by his first real Chief of Party "Mac" McGinnis—an old-timer who had the exterior characteristics of an old leather boot and whose demands and expectations were very high. Mac was sixty-five years of age, had been surveying since he was seventeen and knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. The rude part was the first day when the old-timer made it clearly understood through a "set up" lesson that he would not compromise his standards and required quality and quantity of work, especially for a rookie. The old-timer's philosophy was that one must learn with a minimum amount of guidance and direction, but not be taught. He would allow the occasional question that couldn't readily be answered by observation or reading. For Vance that was one of those good fortune experiences for after weeks of working to earn acceptance as a member of the crew, the old Chief took him under his wing and helped him understand the necessary balance between quality, productivity, and pride in the work—the foundation on which he built his surveying career. The old-timer retired after that project and Vance says that he has never known another like him.

In April 1960, as a result of a bet and a challenge, Vance took a Division of Highways examination and was well-placed on the pass list. After turning down three job offers from various parts of the state he was offered and accepted a position in District 11, headquartered in San Diego. In June 1960 he began his forty years surveying career with the Division of Highways (now Caltrans). In his words, it was another example of being in the right place at the right time with the right people. He has said that he clearly remembers going home after a few days of getting to know some of the Surveys staff and being challenged by them and enthusiastically telling Carol that "these are my kind of people."

In 1962 after various chainman, instrumentman and substitute Chief of Party assignments he was assigned as a Chief of Party; was a Chief until 1970; transferred to the Surveys Office for the experience; returned to the field in 1973; was a Chief until 1983 when he was promoted to Field Supervisor. There he remained until 1990 when he was promoted to District 11 Surveys Branch Chief—the first non-engineer to hold that position and was the position he held until his retirement August 1, 2000.

During his forty years as a Caltrans surveyor Vance was part time faculty at SDSU for a few years, contributed to the university level surveying text book "Surveying Note Forms" and also participated in the development and instruction of numerous technical and professional Caltrans surveyor statewide training and development programs. Three of those were the Chief of Party Academy in 1970 and '71, Surveying for Rights-of-Way in 1984 and '85 and Caltrans Land Surveying in 1988 and '89—an expanded version of the Surveying for Rights-of-Way program.

Vance received a number of awards and recognition for his work and involvement with others. The awards and recognition included—the 1994 American Public Works Association Outstanding Public Agency Employee Award; the 1987 Sustained Superior Accomplishment Award given by the State of California; and a National University Leadership Award. Once again, Vance maintains that the recognition, awards, and most enjoyable career came about as a result of the early influence of the old-timer Chief of Party and his continuing good fortune of being in the right place at the right time and with the right people—working with "the best of the best."

While Vance was enjoying all that surveying and involvement, Carol was guiding the three offspring through their education years. All three are alumni of the University of Southern California. Daughter Dena has a BFA degree from the school of Theatre and Drama and is an Emmy Award television drama writer. Son Vance Jr. has a degree in Physics and, after a tour as an officer in the Marine Corps, holds commercial certificates for multi-engine aircraft and helicopters and now has his own acoustical and video design consulting business. Son Derek has a Masters degree in music and is a music professional on the east coast. Clearly none of the three chose to follow Vance in the surveying profession. He strongly suspects that looking like an old worn out piece of rawhide at forty and having a vocabulary limited to a few crude words and phrases did not appeal to them.

Autobiography by Vance Breshears and submitted by the San Diego Chapter, CLSA