

## Then and Now: Road School Has Changed Drastically

While attending the 110<sup>th</sup> Purdue Road School Conference and Transportation Conference and Expo in March, three longtime INDOT employees couldn't help but reminisce over how much it has changed along the way.

The first Road School took place in 1914 — five years before the 1919 creation of the Indiana State Highway Commission, INDOT's predecessor. Written reports were presented. But then, like now, the event was an opportunity for transportation professionals to discuss the best ways to build and maintain Indiana's roads.

Since then, written reports have given way to multimedia presentations, and overhead projectors have made way for PowerPoints and drone-footage videos. Attendance at the event originally attracted dozens, then swelled to the hundreds, and now, the thousands.

Sessions in just two buildings have expanded to gatherings in five or six facilities, and a handful of topics has ballooned to 18 tracks to educate attendees about the latest transportation-related best practices, technologies, and trends.

"This year will be my 50<sup>th</sup> with INDOT, and I have attended Road School most if not all those years," said Research & Development (R&D) Director Barry Partridge. "I remember my first year as a young engineer, in awe of the veteran engineers. I networked with people at Road School who otherwise I wouldn't have."

Back then, R&D typically gave a first-day presentation in front of all the attendees on the significant research findings and the state of practice in transportation research.



*Rusty Fowler (from left), Jane Twaddle, and Barry Partridge at this year's Purdue Road School in West Lafayette.*

"Even the presentation tools have evolved," said Partridge. "The overhead projectors were common in technical sessions, but for large-group presentations, we used slide projectors. I remember making decks of slides, giving them to the projectionist, and watching as the slides would inevitably get stuck. For charts and graphs, an artist/illustrator would make them on posterboard, and then take a slide photo of the chart to create a slide. That's a far cry from the computer graphics of today."

Even when PowerPoints came into vogue, the transition wasn't always smooth. Many were uncomfortable with using the Microsoft tool when it debuted in the late 1980s; after all, it was new technology at the time.

Purdue University Distinguished Professor of Engineer Kumares Sinha, who has been at Purdue since 1974, was director of the Joint Transportation Research Program (JTRP) when PowerPoint first was used at Road School. Dr. Sinha asked Bob McCullouch, formally of the Local Technical Assistance Program but a JTRP information technology administrator back then, to advance his PowerPoint slides for him.

“If Dr. Sinha would go off-script and touch on different topics and ideas in his presentation, it created quite a challenge for Bob, but it was entertaining, nevertheless!” said Partridge.

Vincennes District Deputy Commissioner Rusty Fowler grew up with Road School. His dad, Marston Fowler, started at INDOT in 1958 and attended Road School annually during his 50-year career. This would mean that Marston, who is still alive, attended the 44<sup>th</sup> Road School in 1958.

“I saw my dad dedicate his life to transportation, and Road School was certainly something that I was aware of while growing up,” said Fowler. “I thought it was so interesting that my dad was ‘going to school’ as an adult. He always brought something home for me, like a Purdue notebook or other types of memorabilia. That’s something I also did while my kids grew up.”

In late 1988, INDOT hired Fowler, who attended his first Road School the next year.

“I remember being excited to not only attend Road School but go back to my alma mater so soon after graduation,” said Fowler. “The experience gave me perspective that I still carry with me today and share with new hires: Our work impacts every industry, every day.”

Only the birth of his daughter and a trip to Mexico have stopped Fowler from attending every Road School since he was hired. As for the differences between 1989 and today, he said the number of attendees and topics have increased markedly.

“I remember common themes of technical sessions were Winter Operations and Maintenance such as culvert installation, crack sealing/filling, and seal coat,” said Fowler. “Today, there is a wider breadth of topics because of the growth in our industry — green technologies, diversity and inclusion, communications strategies, leadership, industry relations, and much more.”



*Rusty Fowler (from left), Jane Twaddle, and Barry Partridge next to the John Purdue statue on the Purdue campus.*

Fowler enjoys the learning aspect of Road School but said, “In my humble opinion, Road School’s networking opportunities are just as valuable.”

Seymour District Design Manager Jane Twaddle had a unique perspective in 1981 while attending her first Road School: She did it as an out-of-state college student.

“As a senior at the University of Illinois College of Engineering in March 1981, I attended Road School because of its reputation and opportunity to learn,” said Twaddle.

Fast-forward 25 years to September 2006, when INDOT hired Twaddle. Since then, she has attended Road School annually, making presentations at technical sessions four times and being part of a group that was presented a Quality Achievement Award in 2009 by the JTRP.

Twaddle’s memories of the 1981 Road School are fuzzy, but she remembers the Purdue Memorial Union and “loving the campus and presentations.”

Although 110 years have come and gone, Purdue Road School has remained strong — despite, and because of, all the changes.