

The one-day surveyor

Ronald Reagan's brief career as a "rod man"

—by Matthew Parbs

As featured in *Illinois Heritage*, edited by William Fury

Ronald Reagan's perhaps most important contribution to the surveying profession was the declaration of National Surveyors' Week, designated as the week of March 11. Less known is his brief surveying career.

After Reagan's freshman year at Eureka in 1929, the future president needed money for the next semester's tuition. Even after working his usual summer job as a lifeguard, Reagan was still short of cash. With no prospects of paying for college, Reagan decided to drop out of Eureka in order to make some extra money.

One of Reagan's high school friends worked as "a rod man" in a surveying company that did work in Lowell Park, north of Dixon. He advised Reagan to quit his job as a lifeguard and apply for work on the surveying crew, which paid more money.

Reagan got the job. The surveyor promised that after a year's worth of surveying, he would pay all of Reagan's expenses to attend the University of Wisconsin. With such a golden opportunity at hand, Reagan resolved to apply himself seriously to surveying.

His first day on the job, however, was also his last. He awoke that morning to torrential downpour that washed out the job. Reagan never even left for work. Instead, he called his girlfriend, Margaret Cleaver, and spent the rest of the day reminiscing about football and Eureka. He missed the small liberal arts college and life on its campus. That fall he was able to work out a financial aid package with his football coach to stay at Eureka.

As often happens with serendipitous events as this one, one



left to wonder what would have happened if it hadn't rained that day. One take on the incident was that Reagan saw the hand of Providence in the downpour. Either way, he re-enrolled at Eureka, went on to be President, and never did become a surveyor.

Surveying came to play from time to time in Reagan's other occupations—when he was an actor, a governor of California, and President of the United States.

As a movie star, he portrayed surveying, even though his role was not that of a surveyor. In the completely fictional, *Santa Fe Trail*, he played George Armstrong Custer who, in real life, led a surveying crew into Native American territory.

As Governor, Reagan appointed county and state surveyors, but it was as President that he left an indelible mark on surveying. His biggest contribution to the profession came in 1989 when he focused on privatizing certain functions of the government, including mapmaking, and so increasing "efficiency, quality, and innovation." As a result of this action, the private sector and within it private surveying and mapping firms, have seen considerable increase in business volume and profitability.

is Reagan's involvement with surveying came full circle on February 13, 1984, when, as President, he issued Proclamation 5151 declaring the week of March 11 as the "National Surveyors Week."

The commemoration was "in recognition of the significant contribution made by surveyors to the United States," and Reagan urged the people of the United States to "look back at the historic contributions of surveying and look ahead to the new technologies which are constantly modernizing this honored and learned profession."

The Springfield, Illinois, based National Museum of Surveying was founded with those principles in mind. To honor surveyors, the Museum will observe this year's National Surveyors' Week (March 20-26) with ceremonies and activities paying tribute to professional surveyors and their contribution to society. All are invited to participate.

But, any time you happen to be in Springfield, come and visit the National Museum of Surveying (located at 521 East Washington Street) to learn the history of surveying and discover its significance to the growth and development of the United States. Meet the other American presidents who worked as surveyors, and explore the science of surveying through the exhibit "Science on a Sphere," a unique digital display that will delight and fascinate kids of all ages.

Open Tuesday through Saturday,
10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Visit the Museum online at:
www.surveyingmuseum.org