Reminisce Of An Old Surveyor, Part III

Other Equipment

by
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This is the third and last article on surveying equipment and procedures that are now relegated to history. I have been surveying for around half a century. I started before electronic distance measuring was common. Transits and steel tapes were the prevailing equipment found in a survey firm. Metal detectors were rare. As a result, I have had experience with surveying equipment that will never be used again by the modern surveyor.

My two previous articles have discussed taping, the compass, and the transit. I shall now delve into other procedures and equipment known and used in historical surveys of which I often took part.

Plane Table – In the early mapping surveys I often participated in, we used the plane table and alidade to prepare a site map and topographic map while in the field. In the days before computers, the plane table was an excellent tool to prepare an accurate map in a hasty manner. I have been told that almost all the soil maps prepared in the 1920s and 1930s were done using the plane table and alidade. I had not made my debut on the surveying field at this time so I have no first-hand knowledge of the accuracy of this information.

The plane table was a large board, the dimensions of which I can no longer remember. It was the size of a typical drawing board that engineering and surveying students once had to purchase when studying in their major. This board was mounted on a tripod. The board came with the tripod mounting ring fastened to the underside of the board. The mounting ring was of a size that was equivalent to the transit mounting ring. The board, once mounted on the tripod, was set up at waist level. There was no attempt to plumb this over a known station though I suppose there were situations when this should be done. It was possible to do so.

A large sheet of paper was fastened to lay flat on the top of this board using tape or tacks. The alidade was then placed on the board, atop the paper. I suppose an alidade could be described as a transit scope fastened to a flat scale – the scope being above and parallel to the long length of the scale. Somewhere on the scale was a bubble that was used to level the drafting board or plane table.

With the plane table leveled, a long shanked pin was inserted through the paper into the board. The represented the observer's position. The mapping of the area could now begin.

The rodman, armed with a stadia board, would hold the stadia board at a point to be located by the person at the plane table. Using the stadia hairs apparent when viewing through the scope in the alidade, the distance from the alidade to the stadia board would be determined. On the plane table, the scaled distance would be measured from the long-shanked pin along the edge of the alidade where a point would be marked and labeled on the paper. The orientation of the scale's edge on the alidade being the same direction as the scope is pointing. This procedure was repeated numerous times until the surveyor was satisfied the paper fastened to the plane table was complete with the information necessary for the map being produced on the plane table.

Elevations could be obtained by the simple expediency of setting the alidade level using a scope bubble for this purpose. Most alidades had a plate and Vernier to read a vertical angle that would allow the elevation to be determined by trigonometry. Many alidades had what is known as a Beaman scale that would allow calculations without having to look up trig values. I will omit discussing the Beaman scale and how it was used. In truth, I would be rather rusty in remembering how to use it after more than four decades without practice.

The end result is that the survey crew returned to the office with a completed map of the area often including contour lines. The only consistent fault I found with the plane table was the fact that survey work on a hot summer day using a graphite pencil often left the map sheet covered with smudges.

Stadia Board – I have mentioned the stadia board when speaking of using the plane table. The stadia board can be visualized as a level rod with much larger graduations. The stadia board was somewhat wider than a level rod in order to accommodate the larger graduations. The larger graduations allowed for seeing the rod at longer distances.

I suppose reading stadia distances is a lost art. It was a rather simple procedure unless there was trig involved. The difference in the rod readings between the upper stadia wire or hair and lower stadia hair was obtained and multiplied by 100 giving the distance in feet, assuming the stadia board was so marked in feet and decimal parts of a foot. I will confess to reading the stadia rod at ranges that I could only read half of the stadia rod – that is using only the center wire and top wire or bottom wire. In such cases the interval between the middle and upper or lower stadia hair was multiplied by two before multiplying by 100.

In theory if the stadia rod could be read to the nearest 0.01 of a foot, the horizontal distance could be calculated to the nearest foot. Conversely, if the instrument operator made an error reading of 0.01 of a foot, the horizontal distance would be in error by a foot. This precision was acceptable for most mapping projects.

I will say that I met more than one old surveyor that laid off subdivision lots using stadia to the annoyance of the modern surveyor who finds the distances between corner monuments varying by as much as two feet with no consistency in the error that would allow a dependable deficiency or an overage to be applied when retracing the lot boundaries. Perhaps I have solved a mystery involving some old subdivisions and corners found.

Heliotrope – I will comment briefly about the heliotrope though it's use in private practice was very limited. The heliotrope was an elongated target, fasted to a tripod, and plumbed over a point. The heliotrope I used was composed of two rings along the elongated board with a mirror at the end farthest from the instrument observing the heliotrope. One heliotrope I used actually had two mirrors that allowed the sun's light to be bounced from the sun using the first mirror of the heliotrope to the mirror in the back of the heliotrope that then reflected the sun's beam through the two rings to the observer. The double mirrors was required if the sun was behind the heliotrope as it was pointed toward the instrument. The rings in the heliotrope were aimed at an observer standing behind an instrument that was being used to measure angles. The mirror at the rear was adjusted to reflect the sunlight down through the rings toward the instrument operator producing a bright light for the observer to aim upon. Given the sun's apparent movement, the person at the heliotrope had to continuously adjust the mirror. I was always impressed that when standing at the instrument, I could see the bright light reflected by mirror on the heliotrope for up to 30 miles away in some cases.

Subtense Bar – I suppose the subtense bar I used from time to time was more common than a heliotrope in private practice but not by much. The subtense bar appears as a much shortened level rod rotated from the vertical to be horizontal or roughly parallel to the ground. The subtense bar was mounted in its center on to the top of a tripod. The tripod was centered over a traverse station or control point. From one end of the bar to the other was a known distance. The subtense bar that I used had a sight tube in the center. The bar was rotated about the tripod top until the sight tube was centered on the instrument operator. This would put the length of the subtense bar perpendicular to a line between the subtense bar and instrument. The instrument operator would measure the angle between the ends of the subtense bar. Using trigonometry, the distance between the instrument and subtense bar could be calculated. The accuracy of the distance was a direct function of the accuracy in measuring the angle. The subtense bar was a very useful tool in measuring those distances that could not be taped. I would often use the subtense bar in measuring distances across water bodies. I also used it from time to time when I did not have an extra person to help me tape the distance.

Plumb Bob – I will repeat my statement from my first article and say that I don't believe a plumb bob can be found among the equipment of the modern surveyor. The plumb bob was necessary for taping. It was necessary to hang the plumb bob under the tripod in order to place the instrument over the point, there being no optical plummets on survey equipment at the time. Finally, the plumb bob was required to give back sights and fore sights over marks and monuments in the field. I have heard of more than one employer that docked the pay of an employee that forgot to bring their plumb bob to the field.

The use of the plumb bob would seem rather easy but it was not. Consider my previous explanation on the use of the plumb bob when taping. Hanging the plumb bob under the tripod to allow the instrument to be centered over a mark required the person to have mastered the art of a slip knot. A slip knot allowed the plumb bob to be raised or lowered depending on the adjustment of the tripod legs and how close over the mark was necessary to aim the point of the plumb bob. To use other than a slip knot caused a knot to be left in the string. A knot in a plumb bob string was a crime commiserate with wanton destruction of property.

The person had to be adept at wrapping the string around the head of the plumb bob. The wrapped string was fastened in such a manner that a tug at the string's end would unwind the string without leaving a knot. Many surveyors purchased gammon reels that alleviated this task.

Leroy Set – I will depart from surveying equipment in this one instance to speak of the LeRoy set. While it may not be classified as surveying equipment, almost every surveying firm had a LeRoy set unless the firm had a person gifted with beautiful handwriting.

The LeRoy set was a lettering set using lettering templates and a scriber. The scriber had three arms. One arm went into a long slot on the lettering template. A second arm went to a pin that followed the indent of the letter or number in the lettering template. The third arm held a pen that would ink the letter or number on the paper, mylar, or vellum. The letter templates came in different sizes, fonts, and styles. I spent many hours using a Leroy set. Probably a quarter of that time was spent getting the ink to flow smoothly out of the pen. I may have exaggerated this time a little. Getting ink to flow was an art that usually involved ink on the tongue and lips not to mention scattered across the vellum or myler. This reminds me that another quarter of the time was spent removing ink that did flow out of the pen but in the wrong location or too copiously on locations without enough pounce. Enough said on that topic as it brings back many frustrating moments.

Chain – I will admit to only using a chain one time. I would be perceived as really ancient had I admitted to frequent use of the chain – so I won't do so. For those surveyors that have never seen a surveyor's chain, the surveyor's chain does not appear like the chain an individual would find in a hardware store. The links in the surveyor's chain are approximately 7.92 inches. Each link is a length of wire with a loop at each end of the wire shank that connects to a ring loop that connects to the loop on another similar link for the chain. A four rod chain will have four brass tags with one to four fingers. One finger is found at the one rod length along the chain. Two fingers are found at the two rod length and so on. When measuring, a surveyor would count the number of rods plus the number of links to the object measured – although many a rural surveyors simply gave the number of rods and perhaps half rods without bothering to count individual links.

While there is sag in a steel tape, it hardly compares to the large sag found when holding the chain above the ground. Furthermore, every loop in that damn chain seemed to catch and clog with sticks, grass, mud, and other debris gathered when dragging the chain along the ground. To further agitate the temperament of the user – in one case being me - the debris would somehow snag and hold two link loops together thereby doubling the chain back upon itself involving some length of the chain. If there is a log with some small appendage sticking from the log you can count on the link loop snagging that appendage. There were always some vegetation protruding from the ground that would snag the chain. Links soon stretched or even broke. Of course, these problems were all relayed to me since I can't be that old to have personally experienced the agitation caused by measuring with the chain.

Dip Needle – Metal detectors were around since World War II but their widespread use in surveying firms seemed to occur in the mid to late 1970s. Surveying without a metal detector resulted in many pin cushion corners since an existing pin or pipe that was buried to mark the corner was not always found before a new monument was set.

One trick that I often employed before owning a metal detector was to hold a compass and slowly float the compass just above the ground and look for twitches in the compass needle. This technique allowed me to find many metal corners that were just below the ground surface. In the 1960s up to the widespread use of metal detectors, dip needles were commonly used to find the buried metal corners. Dip needles were composed of a box with a long, looped strap. The box contained a magnetized needle. The box had a window allowing observation of the needle.

Using the long strap to allow the surveyor to stand up, the box was hovered over the ground while the needled was observed. The sensitive, magnetized needle dipped when influenced by nearby metal. By this means, the surveyor could discover if there was a metal pin, pipe, or bar below the ground surface. The dip needle was not as sensitive to buried metal as modern metal detectors. I don't believe I ever found a pin or pipe that was buried more than half a foot below the ground surface using a dip needle.

EDME – Early electronic distance measuring equipment, known as an EDME or EDM, using shortened initials, were a separate item of equipment from the transit or theodolite. Often the operator would have to remove the angle measuring equipment and mount the EDM directly on the tripod. Later, the EDM and angle measuring equipment were configured so the EDM was mounted on the standards of the angle measuring instrument.

The first EDM I used was a tellurometer or cubic tape. A tellurometer was set up on both stations and pointed toward the other station using a null needle to find the optimum pointing. Each tellurometer would determine the distance between the opposing tellurometers. The two distances were averaged. The tellurometer used microwaves to determine a distance. You could switch between speaking to the other operator and measuring a distance. Distances were calculated using a paper form that I shall mention again with the next item of distance measuring equipment.

Later I used a Hewlett Packard laser EDM. With this instrument, you knew you were pointing at the reflector because you would see a bright red light as the laser light was reflected back to the instrument. That probably did not do my eyes any good. Not that standing in the path of microwaves was healthy.

Both items of equipment, the tellurometer and laser EDM, required a needle be nulled, numbers read, frequencies shifted, and an entire sheet of a paper form employed were various readings were made, entered, and manipulated. I believe the form was published by an IRS agent who first invented the 1040 long form.

Temperature and atmospheric corrections had to be hand calculated. Prism corrections were applied to every measurement of the laser EDM. It was a complicated and time consuming process to determine a distance. Yet, it was far faster and more accurate than obtaining long distances by taping.

If my memory serves me, the Guppy was the first instrument I possessed that gave a distance directly without a lot of data entry on to a form and intermediate calculations. I will not further describe this popular EDM. After the Guppy, the angle measuring and distance measuring were combined into one instrument known as the total station.

These early EDMs were powered by twelve volt batteries. I often used the battery in my car or hauled around a heavy twelve volt battery to power the EDMs. To save weight I later used a motorcycle, 12 volt battery. If my memory serves me correctly, the batteries never seemed to last an entire day. They seemed to always be drained at the farthest point from the road.

I will end discussing the early EDMs with the statement that the horizontal distance always had to be calculated using the zenith or vertical angle. If the EDM was mounted on the standards of the angle measuring equipment, the offset had to be taken into account. Long distances often required numerous prisms stacked upon each other in order to get sufficient light reflected back to the EDM to effectuate a measurement.

GPS – I suppose someone seeing this heading will exclaim that the GPS is not an old piece of equipment relegated to history. If you had seen the GPS equipment I first used, you would admit it was historical and that equipment is relegated to history.

The historical GPS equipment was large and cumbersome. Several twelve-volt car batteries were often required to operate the equipment and obtain sufficient satellite data. The GPS receiver could not be used at any time of the day or for that matter any day of the week. There were not sufficient satellite constellations to allow for 24-7 operation of the GPS. Depending on the satellite constellation configuration for that day, data could only be collected during a limited time window. I often occupied a station in the darkest hours of the night in order to comply with a pre-determined window of opportunity for receiving satellite data. I met more than one police officer that was very suspicious of my activities.

Spending hours on a station to obtain sufficient data was common. In fact, multiple observation windows (think days) of observation were often required. In the earliest GPS, the timing of when the GPS was to be turned on was important. When I speak of timing, I mean down to the odd minute.

Now I ask, does this GPS I have just explained remind you of what a person now uses as they run around with that light weight GPS receiver on a prism pole, collecting numerous locations in a day?

Other Equipment: My colleague, Carlton Brown, has written several articles about slide rules and early calculation machines so I shall not mention those. I will say that when I first started surveying there were no calculators. I used logarithm tables and had to look up trig functions in a book. Unless you have tried to look up log and trig values in a book of tables, you have no idea of the errors that often resulted from trying to interpolate values using the tables in the book

I have no doubt there were other items of equipment used by historical surveyors that I have not mentioned for the simple reason that I have never used the equipment or forgotten I used the equipment when writing this reminisce. Forgetting is easier and more common as I get older. I am sure surveyors of my age can add their thoughts and should do so before we pass into history.