

EXPERIENCES OF A HIGHWAY COMMISSIONER

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RELAX EVERYBODY!

I am going to make this short. Amos of the firm of Amos and Andy would say, "Ain't that something."

I wonder if you people in the back of the hall can hear what I am saying. If you can't, you aren't missing anything.

Colonel Breckinridge was making a speech in Lexington one time and was interrupted by a heckler. When the Colonel would get warmed up, this heckler would holler "Louder!" This happened two or three times. Finally the Colonel located him. He run his hands up through his hair and orated extemporaneously as follows:

"When the stars cease to adorn the blue canopy of heaven, the moon pales into insignificance, the sun ceases to shed its radiance over mankind. The Angel Gabriel descends to Terra Firma and places one foot on the land and one in the sea and blows that last blast of the trumpet to summons the quick and the dead before the bar of justice, and the Almighty God, there will be some asinine fool from Peoria yelling, "Louder, Gabriel, louder!"

This oration, discourse, speech or discussion is not extemporaneous. Professor Terrell told me to stick to the text because he was afraid a damn or two would slip out; and if it does, you can skip it, classify it as a lapsus linguae. I can assure you that whatever you call this, it is void of bull. Bull is a dangerous thing. Beauchamp told two bull stories and look what happened to him.

General Sherman said (and I think I am far enough from Georgia to be allowed to quote the General), "I am not a candidate, if nominated I won't run, and if elected I won't serve."

I feel very much like "the man without a country." The engineers say I am a politician and the politicians say I am an engineer. Now let's do a little defining. Politics is the science of government and engineering is the science of economical management and you put them together like Ike and Mike, they look alike, and it doesn't make any difference whether it's politician or engineer as long as we get the people out of the mud and get our money's worth, which reminds me of what Mr. Dooley said relative to an argument between the doctors and the Christian Scientist. "If the Scientist had a little more science

and the doctors had a little more christianity, it wouldn't make any difference which you had as long as you had a good nurse."

I would like to say that there is no politics in the highway department, and I will attempt to prove it by illustration. There is a community in Kentucky that has been isolated since the steam boats quit plying the rivers. There is one Republican in that community and we are going to build a road in there this year.

The subject of this "what have you" is the "Experiences of a Highway Commissioner." The experiences are varied and the problems are indeterminate, like indeterminate equations, there are more unknowns than there are equations.

The County Judge of Kosciusko and the County Judge of Ossawatimie supported by a liberal delegation from each county came in to see me about a road. Neither Judge was interested in the road, and when I exhibited some reluctance to meet with their request, they became very much in favor of the road and they twisted my arms until it hurt.

The County Judge of Summitt County came in to see me and brought his eight magistrates with him. Each one of the magistrates wanted one mile of road in his district. We are trying to build a road system. To accede to their wishes would be a calamity.

The County Judge of Wise County came in to see me and had with him the County Clerk and five magistrates. They had a pretty good project; however, there was a stream in the middle of it. They did not want to build a bridge and said they could get three miles more of road if I would leave out the bridge. They said that the old bridge now in would serve the purpose although its rated capacity was two tons. Kentucky now has possibly 3,000 sub-standard bridges. To add another sub-standard bridge to the road system would be a tragedy.

A delegation from Sioux County headed by the County Judge was in to see me and asked that a certain road be built. They say that this road is a school bus route, milk route, and mail route. It has a church and a cemetery on it, and that it connects two state highways. It is approximately three-miles in length. A map which was made in 1937 shows there is a church on it and that there are two houses on it and also a cemetery. An investigation shows that the church has been abandoned and the fence around the cemetery has fallen down. Why the cemetery should enter into the demands for the road I am unable to see. Those who are in the cemetery can't get out, and those who are out don't want to get in, and to confuse the matter further, they only want to build half of the road; thereby eliminating the only possible excuse for the expenditure of \$45,000.00 for the road that connects two state highways.

Mr. Brown of Durham County was in (I think the county was named after the famous bull) and he had a certain road in mind that he thought should be built, in fact he was very insistent. He wanted the road built because it could not now be traveled at all seasons by the school bus. He was telling me about the children trudging through the rain and mud and I could see Mr. Brown's children stair steps, one six, one eight, one ten, and one twelve, and I felt sorry for Mr. Brown's children and another man was in from the same community and I asked him if he knew Mr. Brown and he said, "Yes." I asked him how many children Mr. Brown had and he said, "Hell, he ain't married." He also told me that Mr. Brown owned a 600 acre farm on this road.

A gentleman from Plaquemine County came in to see me. The same gentleman was in to see me last year. He had been born and raised in the mud. Last year we constructed his road at a cost of \$54,000.00. This year he wants that road blacktopped. This man is a fine gentleman and he gives a very good reason for blacktopping this road. At first glance you would say that the man had a duroc cross, but the reason he gives for wanting a blacktopped road is because his wife has asthma.

A delegation from Pendennis County came in to see me. They have a road they say is a very important road, built to a good standard, has a good base, and they want the road blacktopped. I promised them that I would have somebody look over the road and if possible we will blacktop it. One of the men from the office goes out and looks at the road and reports that there are many 20° and 25° curves, that the alignment is very bad. There are some very steep grades running up to 20%. The right of way is from 20 feet wide to 28 feet wide; that the road has grown up in bushes and trees; that there are no ditches and no room for ditches. There are seven bridges that need rebuilding. One wooden bridge has dry masonry abutments, 15 foot span, 11 foot roadway, floor laid on 4 log stringers, one of which is broken. There are no handrails and it is dangerous. One bridge is located in such a way that it is nearly necessary to turn around and back across it. In several places the site distance is not more than 100 feet. This road reminds me of the home town ball team when I was a boy. We had lost three or four games in a row, and one man commenting on it said, "You got no pitcher, and you got no catcher, and the whole damn team is on the bum." That, I think, describes the road in question.

A delegation from Valhalla County wanted a certain road blacktopped. A routine letter was sent to the district engineer asking for a reconnaissance. In a few days a reconnaissance was received and the

letter showed that it was made by Russell and Barlow. I found this Russell-Barlow combination to be a very "dull tool." The report showed no right of way, no line, no grade, no drainage, fact of the matter is, the reconnaissance only showed the length of the road. The road was 5½ miles long. Yet, Messrs. Russell-Barlow recommended that the road be blacktopped and the district engineer signed the recommendation. The district engineer did not read it. That recommendation hit the desk of the district engineer at a time when both telephones were ringing, had a delegation of people in the office and three delegations waiting outside of the office and he just signed it as a matter of course. You know the district engineer has signed everything except the Declaration of Independence.

I have a long distance call from Nietzsche. It is Judge Zarathusta. A location has been made in his county. The new location eliminates a bridge which will probably cost \$30,000.00. The Judge doesn't want to eliminate this bridge because he says the right of way will probably cost the county \$500.00. The county doesn't have any money. I tried to explain to the Judge that the \$30,000.00 required to build the bridge is his money, but he can't see it. The Judge is disgruntled and I am discouraged. It is a "Hell of a situation, nobody speaking to anybody, and dogs barking at strangers."

Mr. Deweese called me from Natchez. Mr. Deweese is the county lawyer of Winnebago County. Mr. Deweese was in to see me a short time ago, and I thought that I buttered him up right good; in fact, I thought I buttered him on both sides. Mr. Deweese, when he called, was in a very hostile frame of mind; in fact, he was ugly and said many things that "Weren't fittin'." I was at a loss to know how he got that way and my temperature began to rise. Finally Mr. Deweese ran down and I slipped in a question edgewise. The question was "Do you have an audience?" He answered, "Certainly," and started again. When he ran down again, I asked him if he had an audience of eight or ten, and he said, "And more than that, etc." and I thought of Kipling:

"If you can hold you head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you"

Mr. Curlin came in the other morning and he had just received a call from Mr. Knox of Podunk. Mr. Knox wanted to know from Mr. Curlin why a survey had not been made from Wolf Run to Bear Trap. Mr. Curlin couldn't answer Mr. Knox and asked me about it. We looked at the map and through the correspondence, and found that this particular road had never been mentioned. Mr. Curlin asked me

why Mr. Knox called him about it instead of me and the only reason that I could give was that Mr. Knox was putting on a show, and to make it good he called "the high man on the totem pole."

A few days ago I got a letter from Hideeho. A bridge on a county road had failed and the man wanted the bridge repaired. The letter states "Now I am a taxpayer." I've a lot of respect for a tax-payer; we have something in common. So, I make an investigation and I find out that it will cost \$9,600.00 to repair the bridge, but to eliminate the bridge will only cost \$2,000.00. A little short relocation will do it; however, it increases the distance to the community store, which is a post office, approximately 400 feet. This does not suit Mr. Taxpayer so he circulates a petition. Everybody signs petitions. They don't mean anything, but this petition poses a mathematical problem. This is the problem — "If a man will 'walk a mile for a Camel', how far will he walk for \$7,600.00?" Roughly, I should think from here to Seattle.

The Rural Highway Commissioner is called upon sometimes to attend to things over which he has no control. Fact of the matter is, he has a lot of extra-curricula activities.

The telephone rings and the receptionist says that Mrs. Mabel Titmouse wants me on the phone. Mrs. Titmouse has a very engaging voice, like Tallulah Bankhead, but she has got troubles. Her husband is a truck driver and it seems that when he gets his check, that his wife is not his "number one gal", and he gets him a bottle and gets his "number one gal" and they spend the check and he comes home broke, and Mrs. Titmouse wants him fired. Of course, I have nothing to do with personnel, and I tell her to take the matter up with the county foreman and she says she did and he did nothing. I, then, suggest that she take the matter up with the district engineer, and she says she did and he did nothing. I, then, suggest that she call it to the attention of the Highway Commissioner; she says she did and he had done nothing yet. I, then, tell her about the Old Methodist Hymn which says, "Take It To The Lord In Prayer." She says she talked to Him about it first. I am certainly not a Domestic Relations Court.

Mr. Jones calls me from Mexico and says that his driver's license has been revoked and he wants it back and, of course, I have nothing to do with that, but I do ask the Captain of the State Police about it, and he says he does not know anything about it and that I ought to contact the Department of Revenue. I asked the Department of Revenue about it and they tell me that Mr. Jones had an accident in December, 1951, and his license was revoked and his license was reinstated in February, 1952, and he was told at that time to go to the State Police and get a driver's test. He had failed to take his test and

therefore his license was revoked the second time. I relay this information to Mr. Jones.

A highway employee called me on the 'phone and he wants a new pick-up truck, and pick-up trucks are like "hen's teeth," they are scarce. I asked him what was the matter with the truck he had and he said, "the block had burst" and I asked him how that happened and he said, "It froze." I told him that if the district engineer found it out he might "ground him" and it was quite possible that he would put a "new mule in his stall."

There is nothing mysterious about the operation of the Rural Highway Department. You have a Rural Highway Fund which amounts to 5 million dollars. You have a Rural Secondary Fund that amounts to approximately 12½ million dollars. These funds are divided according to a formula that you are all familiar with, that is, the old Rural Highway Formula which is set up by Statute. In addition to this, the Federal Government gives us approximately 2 million dollars, making the total fund 19½ million dollars which is to be spent on county roads and is 37% of the total road fund.

If your county is given Federal money, it, of course, will have to be spent on roads that are on the "FAS" system. These roads on the "FAS" system are the most important roads in your county. They serve more people. The roads, of course, will have to be built under Federal supervision and to Federal Standards, and you will, of course, get a better road and last but not least, the Federal Government will pay one-half the cost of these roads. These are, I think, three good reasons why we should go along with our "Benevolent Uncle."

No road should be built that cannot be maintained. The highway department does not have any additional funds for maintenance and if rural secondary money is spent on a road, it must be taken over for maintenance, and if the road is a liability instead of an asset, the highway department is in danger of being rim-wrecked, and I would not want to do that to the highway department. Mr. Curlin is a "good-egg".

You can't build a road without a right of way and right of way is the county's "little red wagon" and, of course, it causes a lot of trouble. If you were going to build a road from here to Heaven and pave it with gold, there would be right of way trouble.

Nearly every week there is a bridge failure in some county in the state and I am called upon to spend rural secondary money to replace these bridges, and it is a good deal and I am for it. To replace these bridges, it is necessary to have right of way and invariably we have trouble with the man on the "nigh" side. We very seldom have

trouble with the man on the "yan" side which reminds me of a story that they tell around MacMillin's Landing. This is the story: The Cumberland River was in flood stage and six or seven men were on the river bank looking across and there was one lone citizen on the other side doing likewise, and one of the men remarked, "I wouldn't live on 'yan' side of no damn river."

Highways that are being built now will probably exist for the next 100 years with some alterations and improvements, and bear in mind the only thing permanent about a highway is the right of way. If you can not acquire the right of way peacefully, the law provides that you can condemn.

The engineers that make the locations have had a lot of experience in highway location. Everybody knows where the road should be located better than the engineers. Engineering is the second oldest profession and the amateurs are always considered better than the professionals.

A man came in and told me that a certain citizen had said things about me which were not very complimentary, and I think of Henry Watterson. Marse Henry said some things uncomplimentary about the President of the United States and the Cleveland Plain Dealer attempted to take him to task for criticizing his Party Chief, and he answered in this way, "Things have come to a hell of a pass when a man can't criticize his own jackass."

When I was appointed district engineer, the "scraper" which is the mouthpiece for the General Contractor's Association said that I was apparently qualified for the job and when I was appointed Rural Highway Commissioner, the "scraper" like the "X" in Cuba was silent. My qualifications were not even apparent, but if Mark Twain was right when he said that the qualifications necessary for any job were ignorance and confidence, I am enimently qualified. I am broke out with ignorance and like the farmer's barn, I am teeming with confidence.

Thank you and good luck.

