

DAVE STEVENS AND HIGHWAY PROGRESS

Remarks by Francis C. Turner, Director of Public Roads, Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, in presenting the George S. Bartlett Award to David H. Stevens, Chairman of the Maine State Highway Commission, at the Annual Meeting of the Highway Research Board, Washington, D. C., January 15, 1969

I have been given the pleasant task today of conferring another honor upon a man who has earned just about every honor available to a highway official and a lot more besides. The honoree today is David H. (for Highways) Stevens of Maine.

It was once said of another great highway engineer and official -- Dewitt Greer of Texas -- that "there's nothing left for him now but canonization." And that assessment applies with equal force to the Chairman of the Maine State Highway Commission.

I might interject here that Dave is the only full-time Chairman the Commission has ever had, having served in that capacity since January 1954, when a full-time Chairmanship became operative under a law passed the previous year. Mr. Stevens is now serving his third seven-year term as Chairman. He was appointed to these terms by three different Governors and has served under a total of nine so far. It would appear that Maine's Chief Executives are considerably less durable than Dave Stevens. One of those nine Governors, incidentally, who worked for Dave Stevens, was Senator Edmund S. Muskie, the recent Vice Presidential Candidate.

Today, on behalf of the sponsoring organizations, I have the honor and pleasure of presenting Dave Stevens with the George S. Bartlett Award, which is made annually "for outstanding contribution to highway progress."

The Award is jointly sponsored by the American Association of State Highway Officials, the Highway Research Board, and the American Road Builders' Association.

Thus Dave Stevens today joins a long list of previous winners of the Bartlett Award dating back to 1931 when the first of these was presented to the late great "Chief" Thomas H. MacDonald, the long-time head of the Bureau of Public Roads. I might remind you also that the competition for this particular award is keen, since it is not restricted solely to highway engineers in public or private practice, but can go to legislators, journalists, industrialists and other friends of highways in the private sector. The sole criterion is outstanding contribution to highway progress.

Dave Stevens has symbolized highway progress both in Maine and nationally. His contributions to highway progress have been substantial and lasting, not just in terms of building good roads at the lowest possible cost-- and to a great many people that is still an important objective -- but by recognizing and taking steps to minimize the social and human disruption which is necessarily involved in many highway projects.

If you are curious about vital statistics, I will tell you that Dave was born in Guilford, Maine, on January 30, 1907, and received his early education there. He was graduated from the University of Maine in 1928 with a B.S. degree in Civil Engineering. In 1929 he was an instructor in Civil Engineering at the University, then was employed by the New York Telephone Company for three years in its engineering division. He is a registered professional engineer.

At age 25 he became town manager of Ashland, Maine, then went back to home town Guilford for two years, and then to Milo for five years as town manager. In 1942 he was named State Tax Assessor -- a position he held for five years before he was appointed Commissioner of Health and Welfare for the State of Maine. He served in this capacity for seven years and that brings us chronologically up to 1954, when he assumed what appears to be a lifetime assignment as Chairman of the Maine State Highway Commission. With this background of engineer, telephone man, teacher, town manager, State Tax Assessor, Health and Welfare Commissioner, and Highway Commissioner -- and then translating all of these into current-day terms -- he is at once an academician, an urbanologist, a social scientist, a fiscal expert, a communicator, a highwayman -- and thus a one-man self-contained Design Concept Team.

Operating from a State which is sometimes considered to be remote and populated largely by trees and potatoes, Dave has been a national figure during most of his highway career. His service as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Highway Research Board -- a service which ends at this session -- is one evidence, but only one, of the national stature he has attained.

He is a past President of the Association of Highway Officials of the North Atlantic States and of AASHO and still serves on its Executive Committee. In 1965 he received the Thomas H. MacDonald Award for outstanding service in highway engineering. He has also been honored by his alma mater, the University of Maine, with a Distinguished Achievement Award, and by the Maine Good Roads Association for "integrity and devotion to duty."

This information and other data for biographical sketches or gossip columns about Dave are readily available elsewhere, so let me talk a little about the human side of the man and his work which won't be found available in printed public format. First, what is the secret of his success? Certainly one answer is just plain hard work: his average work week is 60-plus hours and, according to an associate, he spends all the rest of the week thinking about it. He drives himself without mercy and expects his assistants to keep the same pace.

According to one of his close friends, Dave is a real ham actor and loves to assume the characteristic role of the legendary down-east Yankee -- frugal, penny-pinching, parochial, even including the nasal twang and all the mannerisms of a true salt-water lobsterman. In the course of a year he probably chairs over 100 public hearings, and it is at these public hearings that he is said to be at his best. He often shows up at these hearings wearing a rather old and carefully wrinkled baggy suit along with a long-billed baseball cap. I'm told that this is his official uniform for such occasions.

In his day-to-day operations he seems to think he is still a town manager who has converted the whole State of Maine into a sort of overgrown small town. He knows almost everyone and greets town officials, legislators and other dignitaries by their first names. His ham acting, however, serves only to cover up a very shrewd and experienced insight into just what the local problems are likely to be and how they should best be handled.

Although Dave Stevens has reached the top in his field, he has never lost touch with the people his Department serves, and through the years has continued to find time to personally go to the people with his programs.

This is true not only for large and important projects but also for the relatively minor project in some remote rural area. This has often called for long hours of travel at night and into the early morning, to be sandwiched between his many executive duties in Maine and his frequent national commitments here in Washington or some other part of the country.

There seems to be a tendency these days to consider that recognition of the human side of the highway program is something newly invented by people outside the highway field. Dave Stevens' routine operations over a long period of time are living proof of the utter falsity of such a notion. Let me illustrate with just a couple of widely-varying examples out of many which show his concern for fundamental human values.

He recognizes that an issue in rural Maine might be smaller than one in its few metropolitan areas but that it nevertheless is no less important to the local people directly concerned. According to my information source, one public hearing was held in a 200-year old town building while the total audience of five persons sat around an old-fashioned log-burning stove. This hearing for just five interested persons included the town's three selectmen, plus only two additional private citizens. Sitting in front of the stove with his feet on the woodbox and wearing his overcoat, rumpled suit and long-billed baseball cap, Dave gave these five people a complete explanation of the project, and patiently answered their questions with the same concern as though they were 500 in number; while also taking a substantial part in some off-the-record cracker barrel discussions that likely had nothing to do with highways.

Although Maine is essentially a rural State, there are some urban problems. For example when an expressway plan was being developed for the Portland area, Dave moved his people in in force. They spent eight full months just discussing the plan with the local people, listening to them, answering their questions and ironing out trouble spots before even scheduling a public hearing. There is no law or regulation either in existence now or proposed which says you must do all this preparatory work. Dave once explained his modus operandi in these words: "Two-thirds of my time is taken up making sure other people understand what's going on."

Now I would be less than candid if I have implied that there has never been any difference of opinion between the "lifetime" Chairman of the Maine State Highway Commission and the Bureau of Public Roads. Because Dave's dedication to his work and his determination to wring the very last nickel of highway money out of the Federal Treasury for Maine's exclusive benefit have sometimes brought him cross-ways with the Federal government's endless abundance of rules and regulations, none of which have ever been acceptable to Dave. Fortunately for us in Washington, however, these wars are usually waged at the local level by beating on the Bureau's long-suffering, hard-headed and heavily-bruised Division Engineer in Maine. But despite his general orneriness with respect to all things Federal, Dave still is a good friend of the Bureau, and we have never yet failed to work out a solution to every problem and still remain on speaking terms after the fighting is over.

The lesson to be learned from this is that there is room for dissent within the Federal-State partnership which has served the Nation so well since the pioneer Federal-aid Road Act of 1916. A partnership composed solely of "yes-men" would soon fall of its own weight because any successful venture requires the stimulus of dialogue, discussion and divergence of thinking and approach to preserve interest and action. The point is that the equal partnership between the State highway departments and the Bureau of Public Roads in building the Nation's road network has worked well for 52 years and is still working well, despite frequent efforts to dissolve it in favor of some plan which would give the Federal government a larger than equal share in control of the program.

One of the reasons for the success of this partnership is the fact that Maine is just as equal a partner with the Bureau of Public Roads as is New York or California or any other of the more populous and wealthier States. But the principal reason is the dedication of those many men of the caliber of Dave Stevens, who have made the partnership work.

Dave, on behalf of the three sponsoring organizations and your many friends among them and everywhere across the country, I am proud to present you with the George S. Bartlett Award and to welcome you to the ranks of the many distinguished previous recipients of this honor. Congratulations to you!