

Address by Thos. H. MacDonald,
Commissioner of Public Roads,
New York City, October 15, 1940.

PAN AMERICAN HIGHWAYS SYMBOLIC OF PAN AMERICAN UNITY

On this occasion it is difficult to determine the one of several reactions that seems to be the most important. It is a most welcome opportunity to extend personal greetings to friends and co-workers in all the Republics of this Hemisphere. From Mexico, through Central and South America to the Argentine, there are many engineers, officials and citizens with whose efforts and accomplishments I am familiar, and for which I have great admiration. It is an occasion which might profitably be employed to recount the actual accomplishments in road building of the past decade.

But it seems to me that possibly more important than any other aspect are the potentialities for the accomplishment of large undertakings through Pan-American cooperation which have been unquestionably demonstrated by the progress in highway improvement. It is this aspect the thread of which I should like to trace briefly from the early beginnings, not so much for the purpose of repeating history as for the symbolic implication of accomplishment with certainty through the investment of faith, of patience, and of intelligent effort.

Following the thread of highway development, it becomes at once apparent that, important as is this main objective, the concomitant consequences and the by-products of community of interests springing from personal contacts and joint efforts among the engineers, officials and contractors, and including those who do even the simplest of the labor tasks on all slowly but surely developing works of enduring

character, inevitably lead to international and intra-national unity and enthusiasms that make it possible to engage progressively upon undertakings of increasing magnitude and consequence.

The subject of highway development as a major desirable public undertaking first received recorded official notice in the Fifth International Conference of American States held in Santiago, Chile, in April of 1923. From this time on the thread of activity along engineering, financing and economic lines runs continuously, sometimes slowly or hesitatingly, but nevertheless constantly. In these early years it was not quite possible for those of us who were close to the developments and perhaps impatient in our enthusiasms, to evaluate the accumulating strength of the movement to provide better highways throughout the Hemisphere that were so necessary to the development of international unity, social values and the unlocking of national resources.

Following the adoption of the policy of advancing highway development by the Pan-American Union, the first approaches were naturally through conferences. In 1924, on invitation of the Highway Education Board, a group of 38 engineers and officials from Mexico, Central and South America visited the United States and made a long tour of inspection of highway engineering and construction methods. In the course of this trip representatives visiting 12 or more States, made many personal contacts and enduring friendships with engineers and officials of the United States.

This trip was followed by the First Pan-American Highway Conference at Buenos Aires in 1925 on the invitation of Argentina, and the Second Pan-American Congress at Rio de Janeiro in August 1929. Also,

in 1929 there was a conference in Panama, and a second conference there in 1931. These latter two conferences were directed to the ways and means particularly of expediting the highway from the Republic of Panama to the United States, while the other conferences were directed toward the development of the Pan-American highway system which in its conception visualized adequate highways connecting all the capitals and serving the major populations of all the republics of the continent.

To those of us who sat around these early conference tables and were familiar with the conditions which had to be met by the highway organizations at the inception of their work in every country, the progress which has now been made is positive assurance of the early establishment of communication by highways within the countries themselves and between all countries of the western world.

Since 1929 the Congress has authorized the engineering participation of the Public Roads Administration continuously, with the highway departments of the countries involved, in the location and construction of the Inter-American highway between the southern border of Mexico and Panama City.

With the notable work which Mexico has already accomplished and is continuing, the completion of this highly important highway from the United States to the Canal Zone has been very materially advanced by the financing which has been arranged by Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama through the Export-Import Bank of the United States.

The precise objectives which were outlined in the joint reconnaissance surveys through which the proposed Inter-American highway was

definitely outlined and agreed upon, have eliminated waste and loss of direction in all of the work which has been done since. The definite engineering surveys and plans for this first highway also made it possible, when the Government of the United States provided an appropriation for advancing the construction, to use the available funds in the building of a number of the most important bridges along the route.

South of Panama a recent survey indicates that of 8,097 miles of the South American section of the Pan-American highway, reaching from the Panama-Colombia border to Buenos Aires, Argentina, approximately 4,147 miles or one-half of the distance now provides paved or all-weather surfaces. A considerable part of the remaining distance may be traveled during dry weather. Notable progress is being made by Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru. All of these countries have successfully attacked and accomplished projects presenting almost insurmountable engineering and financing difficulties. At the present moment construction vitally important to our own national defense is going on in the Republic of Panama and elsewhere along the line.

In Panama a project is just now assured which has been only a hope for many years, which will complete the Trans-Isthmian highway and connect the Atlantic and Pacific Coast populations of the important Panamanian cities by an adequate highway.

From this brief review, the important highway development within all the countries of the western Hemisphere must be convincing to those who have doubted whether easy communication by highways might become a reality between these countries within any reasonable time.

There is yet much work to do, but this will be accomplished at an accelerated rate because the highway departments within the countries themselves are daily becoming stronger and more influential and efficient. The development of highways to the extent they are seriously necessary will be one of the major assurances of Pan-American unity in all matters important to the future welfare of this Hemisphere.