

Rex Whitton--the Man from Missouri

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While serving as Federal Highway Administrator (1989-1993), Dr. Thomas D. Larson prepared a weekly Administrator's Note for FHWA employees. Two of them discussed one of his predecessors, Rex Whitton. They are reproduced here because they provide a unique insight into one of the FHWA's greatest leaders.

Rex Whitton--the Man from Missouri

Administrator's Note, Volume 2, Number 10, November 16, 1990

by

Thomas D. Larson

[Rex Whitton Photo Gallery](#)

Those portraits in the hall outside my office--"Chief Highway Executives Since 1893"--continue to intrigue me. I've mentioned them before--they start with stern-looking General Roy Stone (1893-1899) and, for now, end with Bob Farris (1988-1989). I'm not sure if they are there to inform passersby of past leaders or to remind the current occupier of this post of the big shoes to be filled.

I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with some of the recent Administrators, but of course I can only read about the others. Rex Whitton, for example, was our Administrator from January 20, 1961, to December 31, 1966. His picture is just to the right of the entrance to room 4211, our Executive Secretariat--opposite our entrance, so I see it every time I go out. (You can find a copy on page 194 of *America's Highways 1776-1976*.) I never met Rex Whitton, but like most students and instructors of Civil Engineering, I knew of him as a giant in the highway business.



Recently, with the help of Richard Weingroff from our Program Development office, I had a chance to flesh out that image, thanks to some old newspaper articles and speeches saved by the DOT Library. In one of Whitton's last speeches as Administrator, he said, ". . . it is sometimes useful in getting a clear perspective on the road ahead to take a quick look at the road behind." With 1991 and the approach of a major turning point for our program, I thought a quick look back might be useful. In this note and one to follow, I'll review Whitton's days as Federal Highway Administrator--and see how they relate to our work today.

Perhaps you'll think I was drawn to Whitton by his background. He was born on a farm in Jackson County, Missouri, and milked 10 cows a day, hoed corn, plowed the fields, shocked wheat, and put up hay for his family while attending a country school. He worked his way through the University of Missouri, graduating in April 1920 with the degree of bachelor of science in engineering. His grades, he told a reporter in 1961, were, "Just average, and maybe I'm bragging a little when I say that."

Whitton began working for the Missouri Highway Department 11 days after graduation, earning \$110 a month as levelman on a 15-mile stretch of road in Johnson County. He moved steadily upward in the department, finally becoming Chief Engineer in 1951. The only interruptions in his steady progress occurred when he decided to stay in

two jobs longer than necessary because he wasn't satisfied he had learned enough about those phases of highway construction.

He became President of AASHO in 1955. As such, he represented AASHO in the debates on Capitol Hill leading to passage of the legislation that launched the Interstate Highway Program with a few strokes of President Eisenhower's pen on June 29, 1956. Whitton was especially proud of the fact that under his leadership, Missouri let the first contract following approval of the legislation (for paving a section of I-44 in Laclede County, let on August 2). Whitton received the 1958 Bartlett Award and the 1960 Thomas H. MacDonald Award, as well as being named one of 1960's Top Ten Public Works Officials--all before he became Administrator.

Along the way, he met his future wife, Callie Maude Lowe, while on a 20-mile grading job in 1924. They married a year later. In 1961, on the verge of taking office as Federal Highway Administrator, Whitton credited much of his success to his wife. "She goes everywhere with me and makes my life wonderful." The other reason for his success? "I always figured I wasn't too smart, so I had to work just a little harder to make up for it." Those two factors will work for anyone.

A description of him, written in 1961, surprised me:

You might expect . . . to meet a human dynamo [after all those accomplishments, I would!]. On the contrary, Whitton moves and acts like a man with low metabolism. He moves slowly, speaks softly, smiles rarely and gives the impression of relaxed friendliness . . . Almost six feet tall and slender, Whitton could pass for a man in his early fifties [he was in his early 60's at the time]. His dark brown hair, showing a little gray, is still thick . . . He keeps his weight at 170 pounds by watching his diet.

He was scrupulously honest and occasionally impatient with lobbyists, some of whom referred to him as "that sorehead over in the Highway Department." Possibly no greater tribute could be paid to the head of a highway agency.

He was dedicated to completion of the Interstate System on schedule, but used freeways only when he was in a hurry. "We take the back roads," he explained. "That's the finest way to travel unless you're in a big hurry to get somewhere." He and his wife collected antique glass and, as he told a reporter in 1964, ". . . you don't find antique shops on the big new interstate highways."

The Bureau of Public Roads was part of the Department of Commerce at the time. When Secretary of Commerce-designate Luther Hodges (then the Governor of North Carolina) offered Whitton the job, he declined. "But Hodges told me it was my duty to serve and that I owed it to the country. So on that basis I accepted."

You may recall my theory that history is strongly circular, as demonstrated by my adventures on "A Mule Called Jack" (Administrator's Note, August 24, 1990). As it happens, Whitton dealt with many issues 30 years ago that we see, in altered form, in our work today. The whirlpools of history still spin, so I wondered how Whitton dealt with some of "our" problems.

Take financing, for example. We often hear calls to "spend down" the balance in the Trust Fund. I know from long experience that trying to explain the workings of the Trust Fund and the reasons for the balance is a little like explaining term life insurance. Eyes glaze over. Whitton, however, had to confront the aftermath of "spending down" so far that we went beyond our means.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1958 had increased authorizations, but not revenue, and temporarily set aside the Trust Fund's pay-as-you-go mechanism. The idea was to accelerate the program and "prime the pump" during a late 1950's recession. Only borrowing from the general treasury and a temporary gas tax increase approved in 1959 kept the Trust Fund solvent. As one Congressman described the problem in October 1959, ". . . we barely missed detouring the whole construction program up a blind alley." Serious consideration was given to major changes in the financing of the program and the costly urban segments.

During his initial months in office, Whitton was involved in securing new legislation to restore order to the Interstate Program. After considerable debate, Congress rejuvenated the program by passing the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1961. It increased revenue for the Highway Trust Fund and assured development would proceed on a pay-as-you-go basis. President Kennedy signed the bill on June 29--exactly 5 years after President Eisenhower signed the 1956 act. Whitton said:

I have among my proudest possessions today one of the pens used by the President in signing the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1961 It is not an expensive pen but it is the most important one I ever owned for it was an instrument of writing a solution to the highway financing crisis which has bothered so many of us for several years.

Whitton was right. The 1961 act set the program on a steady course that has continued to this day. (And I think I know exactly how he felt--I have never been prouder than on the day last March when the President and Secretary Skinner released the National Transportation Policy.)

Changes were also needed to handle the expanded mission. During Whitton's tenure, he set up the Office of Planning, a function that had previously been combined with research. He also established the Office of Right-of-Way and Location to deal with two of the most difficult areas in the Interstate Highway Program, created the Office of Highway Safety, and brought in specialists (ecologists, behavioral scientists, civil rights specialists, etc.) to deal with the new circumstances. In all, the Bureau expanded from 4,521 employees to 4,839 during this period.

Another change allowed Whitton to deal with what turned out to be exaggerated allegations of corruption (sometimes called "The Great Highway Robbery"). He created an Office of Audits and Investigations, headed by a former FBI agent, to toughen our oversight capability. This office, plus increased inspections, sampling of materials, audits, and investigations, helped restore the program's reputation with the public and the Congress.

We, too, must change to meet the challenges of a new era in our history. We recently reorganized Washington Headquarters to accomplish several goals, including the mainstreaming of environmental issues and the sharpening of our technology transfer functions. "I'm not afraid of change," Whitton told a reporter in 1966, and neither should we.

One of our biggest problems today is congestion. Creeping along an "expressway" during "rush hour" is bad enough. But congestion also takes a toll on our national productivity, our environment, and our civility. Some critics think the problem was caused by too many cars and too much reliance on highways. Next year, that claim will surely be heard many times. It's nothing new, of course--but it never has been true. We have long recognized that highways alone are not the full answer to urban transportation problems. Here's what Whitton said about this subject in 1966:

There is every prospect that the demands for new and expanded highway facilities will continue to increase [However, the] fact is that all of the additional urban freeway mileage it might be possible to build . . . would probably not be enough to accommodate the tremendous traffic loads of future years. We will need all the help we can get from other modes of transportation to serve our cities. And often, even that will not be enough.

Quick, did Rex Whitton or Tom Larson make the following statement: "If it takes rails or subways, let's have them." The answer is: Rex Whitton, but it could just as easily have been Tom Larson, or any of my other predecessors. My successors will probably say the same thing.

I'll return to the Man From Missouri in a later note to discuss some of the other issues he faced in the early days of the Interstate Highway Program.

Sincerely yours,

T. D. Larson

I have never seen a problem that did not present an opportunity; nor an opportunity that did not present problems. In any sector of human striving it has always been true that problems and challenges are the bedfellows of progress.

Rex Whitton

1962

Administrator's Note, Volume 2, number 12, November 30, 1990 "Well Done, Mr. Whitton"

by
Thomas D. Larson

That was the headline on an article in *Transport Topics* when Rex Whitton retired as Federal Highway Administrator on December 31, 1966. *Engineering News-Record* summed up Whitton's tenure by saying, "Always he stood for economy and sound engineering, while trying to serve esthetic and human needs as well."

My Note of November 16 discussed Whitton's background--his early years on his family's farm in Jackson County, Missouri, his rise from a \$110-a-month rodman to the head of the Missouri Highway Department in 1951, and some of his work as Federal Highway Administrator. I closed with a few comments about traffic congestion, which, unfortunately, is of even more concern today near the end of the Interstate program than it was at the start.

Construction of our urban highway networks didn't solve the problem, but it didn't create it, either. As Whitton pointed out, "Even ancient Rome had to ban chariots from parts of the city for certain hours because of congestion." New York City's current transportation crisis, he noted, actually began in the first half of the 19th century. The problem was the success of the city and the failure to plan for its orderly expansion. (In one speech, Whitton jokingly blamed the problem on Elisha Graves Otis, who built the first passenger elevator in New York City in 1857, and thus made high-rise offices and apartments possible along roads and streets designed only for low-rise occupancy.)

Whitton often quoted a President Kennedy comment (and one today's citizens are pressing harder on):

It has always struck me as ironic that so many of our citizens--so ingenious in quickly devising ways of ending almost every minor irritant--would so readily tolerate every morning and evening the incredible congestion of our antiquated highways that takes a heavy toll in automotive costs and depreciation, to say nothing of human nerves and tempers.

Like his predecessors, Whitton saw urban planning as one key to solving congestion, and he fostered it throughout his term. During his days in Missouri, he said, he had received "a liberal education in urban planning." He told a 1962 urban transportation planning conference that, he and other "State highway department old-timers" thought they knew something about highway locations:

But when we faced up to urban transportation problems and city planning problems as an integrated whole, we realized we knew very little about what the cities wanted and needed. And neither did they, in many cases. So the need for cooperative planning was brought home to me pretty forcefully.

He summed up one of the lessons he learned by saying, "The combination of transportation and land-use planning to a very large extent will determine the future character of the city." He strongly backed a provision of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962 formalizing an urban planning process that Federal, State, and local officials had initiated before

his arrival in Washington. After July 1, 1965, Federal-aid projects could be approved in urban areas of 50,000 population or more only if they are based on a ". . . continuing, comprehensive transportation planning process carried on cooperatively by States and local communities" (the start of the now-familiar 3-C process).

He saw the third C, cooperation, as the critical element. In words that could just as easily have come from the 1990 NTP, and that deserve our continuing emphasis, he said:

[A] community's participation in the planning process means much more than voicing needs, desires, and opinions. It means taking a fair share of responsibility in the operations of the planning process. And it means assuming a fair share of the effort and cost of the construction and other programs developed therefrom.

In addition to planning, Whitton supported efforts to find practical solutions to urban transportation problems. He searched for what he called "street stretchers" and what we think of today as transportation system management. He backed traffic light synchronization, joint development, and early experiments in traffic surveillance and metered traffic inputs to increase operational efficiency--activities we are still supporting and that led to the current experiments with IVHS.

For all the success of the Interstate System we now celebrate, it nevertheless inspired many critics. I, and many of today's FHWA people, remember vividly the early confrontations as alien cultures--basically rural highway builders and city dwellers with uniquely urban values--met over the location of urban freeways. On Whitton's fifth anniversary as Administrator, he told a reporter that big city highway construction was "his biggest headache." (Some of the earliest battles were in San Francisco, and we are still debating what to do about one of the resulting unfinished projects, known as the Embarcadero Freeway, which was damaged in last year's Loma Prieta Earthquake.)

The resulting decline in the image of highway agencies and officials bothered Whitton greatly. As part of a 1966 speech to a Public Understanding Workshop, Whitton reprinted a cartoon that he described this way:

That growing public concern over the highway program, or that developing image of the highway builder as an indifferent monster, symbolized by the heartless bulldozer, is illustrated by a comic strip published just last month, in which one of the characters says, "I'm a famous character from history. My men swept down on the civilized world, destroying everything. Nothing was sacred. Who am I?" The other character replied, "That's easy. The world's first highway commissioner." As people who have devoted our lives to public service, we have a right to resent that type of characterization.

Even before Section 4(f) and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, Whitton issued instructions in 1963 that States assess impacts on fish and wildlife areas. Perhaps because of his love of the back roads, Whitton was a strong advocate for roadside beauty and the use of landscaping and wildflowers ("Highways are the windows to the beauty and grandeur of America"). His participation in Lady Bird Johnson's May 1965 "Landscape-Landmark Tour" of Virginia's I-95 by bus earned a reference in her 1970 book, *A White House Diary* (although she misspelled his name). Mrs. Johnson reported that soon after the tour began, she relaxed, slipped out of her high-heeled shoes, and "drank coffee and munched homemade cookies that Mrs. Rex Whitten had brought along."

Since we just completed a successful conference on moving environmental considerations into the mainstream, I was interested to see that this pioneer in the field was 30 years ahead of the message in our Environmental Policy Statement. On November 17, 1965, for example, he told the American Society of Civil Engineers:

The social implications of our actions must be weighed in every step of a highway project, from the location phase through the actual construction. Every conceivable effort must be made to minimize any adverse impact of a new road.

That was the heart of my keynote address to the environmental conference, held in the Pere Marquette Lodge in Grafton, Illinois, on October 29, 1990.

How about research? One of my goals has been to increase research funding and expand the scope and application of our efforts. Whitton was well aware of the value of research. He made it a ". . . personal dedication with me, more than any other single task I have undertaken in Washington, to see that research assumes its proper role." When he addressed the AASHO Road Test Conference in May 1962, he had a line I've used a few times myself:

Research funds have been ridiculously small in comparison with the billions being invested in highway construction. It would be indefensible to push ahead with a program of this size and scope without spending research money to find the answers we need to know.

Safety was another of Whitton's major concerns. In 1964, 47,800 people were killed on our roads, which amounted to 5.7 deaths per 100 million miles of travel. "No nation--least of all one as generally affluent and skillful as ours--can tolerate such a senseless toll."

He refused to be satisfied with programs aimed only at driver skills. He believed highway officials should also seek to improve the vehicle and the road to reduce the toll. Although he emphasized safe highway design and safety research, his best known effort was the Spot Improvement Program to identify low cost, high-payoff safety improvements that could reduce hazards by removal of such roadside obstacles as trees and poles, installation of guardrails, improvement of lighting, and flattening of side slopes.

In the years since then, safety has continued to be a high priority, not just for us but for the entire Department. Gradually, thanks in part to the excellent safety performance of the Interstate System, we have improved our rate. But although last year's record low fatality rate of 2.2 deaths per 100 million miles of travel is a remarkable decline, the total number of fatalities remains essentially the same--and no less intolerable!

Whitton also stressed the importance of transportation to our economy. Reading a speech he delivered in 1962, it's hard to tell if it is Whitton or David Aschauer talking:

An investment in the highway plant, to increase its capacity, in turn increases the potential of economic and social development both locally and generally. Highway improvements produce transportation savings, which in turn result in increased highway use and produce an extra dividend in goods, services, and personal satisfactions . . . Major highway improvements encourage private capital investments which result in better and higher uses of land and the strategic rearrangement of industrial plants, businesses, social services, and residences. These changes bring about economies of scale that make possible production gains in excess of the immediate transportation benefits.

The 50th anniversary of the 1916 birth of the Federal-aid highway program fell during Whitton's term (on July 11, 1966, to be exact). In a speech to AASHO's annual meeting in November 1966, he took a look back at what had been accomplished as well as a look to the future. "Change is the outstanding characteristic of our highway program," he said, and went on to discuss the evolution of urban highway development, aesthetic roadside concepts, research, and other topics I've commented on here.

Looking to the future, as we do today with our reauthorization plans, he was optimistic:

I have been around long enough . . . to have confidence that our highway program is not frozen by tradition, that it has not only resiliency but also the flexibility needed to respond to any new challenge. And I have confidence that its response, that your response, that the response of the highway engineer, will be more than adequate to what our Nation expects and deserves . . .

When Whitton retired at the end of 1966, he told a reporter, "The job has been rewarding, exciting and challenging, and only occasionally depressing." (That's a fair assessment, based on my own experience.) "Now at 68, I want to get out while I am still winning--or at least I think I am still winning." *Engineering News-Record* summed up his career this way:

He was a prime salesman of uniform design and construction standards, traffic safety, beautification, and the recognition of the human and esthetic values involved in highway location, design, and construction. His greatest contribution may have been in persuading the state highway departments . . . to come to grips with urban highway problems

Whitton became a consultant in the Kansas City office of Howard Needles Tammen and Bergendoff. In his spare time, he supervised three farms, totalling 281 acres, including one 25-acre plot that his great-grandfather had settled in 1840.

Rex Whitton, a great man from Missouri and a great Administrator, passed away on July 7, 1981, in Kansas City.

Sincerely yours,

T. D. Larson

Most voters may not be aware that they work nearly 40% of the time for the government. But they have realized that, whatever the amount, they do not get enough in return to justify the burden.

Equally disturbing, the effort of catering to the demands of so many special interests diverts government attention and expenditures away from what it should be doing: activities that cannot be handled efficiently by the private sector. These include financing roads, airports, schools, and other forms of infrastructure

Gary S. Becker
University Professor of Economics
and Sociology
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Business Week, November 26, 1990
