

Bannister Luther DeBerry

Chief Engineer, Texas Highway Department

February 1, 1973 - June 30, 1980

Bannister Luther DeBerry guided the department in the mid-1970s through one of its toughest transitions, including budget cuts, drastic employee reductions and monumental reorganization. Federal and state funding cuts forced moratoriums on right of way purchases, canceled lettings and prompted mass employee lay-offs. The work force shrunk about 28 percent -from 19,500 employees to 14,000. At the same time, the Texas Highway Department and the Texas Mass Transit Commission merged into the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation.

DeBerry, who went by his middle name "Luther," was one of the first spokesmen for the new department to urge people to quit quibbling over the relative merits of highways or public transportation. He was fond of quoting a transportation official who said, "The reason the railroads declined so quickly was that the railroad people made the terrible mistake of believing they were in the railroad business. They were not. They were in the transportation business." Then DeBerry would add: "We are not in the highway business. We are in the transportation business."

Even though his seven-year tenure was marked by tough times, tough talk and even tougher decisions, no one ever doubted that DeBerry was ever mindful of the best interests of Texas citizens and the smooth flow of transportation. His peers honored him for guiding the state to a "highly complex and challenging sphere of modern transportation systems" despite the difficult times.

DeBerry separated the department's functions into two parts - an operations side, supervised by Mark Goode, and an administrative side, overseen by Marc Yancey Jr. The two were extremely effective aides to DeBerry. Texas Joint Monthly magazine in the mid-1970s described Yancey as "a likeable, diplomatic ambassador for the department who could, in meticulously chosen language, probably convince the head of a local Sierra Club that a proposed Interstate highway through his living room was actually a splendid idea."

In describing his former boss, Goode, who would succeed DeBerry as executive director in 1980, said, "They don't come any better. He's still one of the most intelligent persons I've ever known in the business. He's the fairest, and he's just as kind as can be on everything. I have never heard him say a bad word about anybody. Now, I'm sure there were some people he didn't care for, but you would have never heard him badmouth anybody ... Man, have I been lucky being with him all this time."

As DeBerry rose through the department's ranks, he made time to be a mentor and friend to younger engineers. "I use to have one policy when I was resident engineer, and some of these young graduates didn't like it," he said. "When we started a new [engineering] graduate, I wanted them to know everything from the ground up. I'd tell them the first thing you have to do is find out where all this information is coming from. I said I want you to go with the party chief and start at the foot of the line. You'll be the tail chainsman. And when you learn everything there is, get up to where you can run the instrument. Of course, they don't have to do that now because it's all aerial photography and computer-type work. Still, it's not bad to go out and look at it once in a while on the ground."

DeBerry assumed the executive director post on February 1, 1973, at the height of the Arab oil embargo and nationwide gasoline shortages. He would be the first to hold the title of engineer-director instead of the original state highway engineer. He also helmed the department during severe budget shortfalls, high inflation, employee lffs and the great upheaval as the department merged with other state agencies to become the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation.

As it turned out, DeBerry was the right man for the job. Former Commission Chairman Reagan Houston described him as "a very low-profile kind of guy. Very quiet. But when he did say something, we usually found that he was way ahead of everybody."

DeBerry had learned from Greer the Master, and his skill as an administrator came to the fore. Commission Chairman A. Sam Waldrop said at DeBerry's retirement, "He has guided the organization through some of its most difficult and challenging years. Under his direction, the men and women of the department have shouldered new responsibilities in transportation while having to deal with rising costs, shortages and dwindling resources.

He served the department whenever and wherever he was needed. Just as he settled into one district, Greer would caution him: "Don't set your hook too deep too early on there." Worried about his longevity with the department, DeBerry said, "I thought he might think I wouldn't make it." He eventually learned that Greer had bigger plans for him, and they didn't include staying in one place. When DeBerry received his 40-year service award from the department, his wife, Pauline, recalled at least 33 moves they made during his career.

Born in the Red River County community of Bogata on May 7, 1914, DeBerry got his first experience building dirt roads with mule-powered equipment on his father's cotton farm. He chose engineering early on as a career, and he stuck with it. His first experience with the department was on a summer job with a surveying party in 1934 while he was still a civil engineering student at the University of Texas at Austin. At that time, engineers wore khaki pants, starched white shirts and bow ties - even in the field on sultry Texas summers. Nevertheless, he loved the work. He officially joined the department full-time as an instrumentman in Sherman after his 1937 graduation. His early career was spent in the northeast Texas area, but other assignments took him throughout state.

He advanced through the engineering ranks, including resident engineer at Emory and senior resident engineer at Greenville to assistant district engineer at San Antonio and district engineer at Lufkin and Dallas, where he directed one of the department's largest construction programs.

Completed projects - especially those in highly populated areas - gave him a sense of pride. "We did so much more work back then," he said. "Back then, when things were cheap, we had \$100 million worth of work on contract at a time. It's about more than tripled in price since then. I had to approve every location and really make the final decision on what the design would be, number of lanes and so forth," he said.

In 1968, he was appointed to the department's No. 2 post and became its chief administrative officer in February 1973. When he moved to Austin, he gained a new job title but an old neighbor - his boss, Dewitt Greer. Squeezed by the perennial Austin housing shortage, the DeBerrys found a house next door to the Greers. "I was nearly afraid to buy because I didn't really know him that well," said DeBerry. "But it was a wonderful experience, and we got to be really good friends."

DeBerry received many professional honors. He was recognized as a distinguished engineering graduate of the University of Texas and a recipient of the Thomas H. MacDonald Award, the highest award of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. He also served as president of the Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials and director of the Transportation Research Board.

In 1980, shortly before his retirement, the Luther DeBerry Award was established to honor individuals working in transportation-related organizations who made the greatest contributions in Texas. He was recognized as the man who best represented the change to unified transportation planning and excellence in maintaining a multi-modal program.

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