

Dewitt Carlock Greer

Chief Highway Engineer, Texas Highway Department

July 1, 1940 - January 31, 1968

Long before Dewitt Carlock Greer ever thought about working for the Texas Highway Department, he applied for a job as engineer for the city of Athens, Texas. He got the job with three stipulations - that he grow a mustache, put on a hat and quit wearing his Aggie belt.

For the rest of his career, his colleagues kidded him about his youthful appearance - even into his 60s and 70s. But little else.

No one commanded as much respect and awe as Greer - unless it was his mentor Gibb Gilchrist. So valuable was his service, that he was named Commissioner after his retirement and, ultimately, the stately 1933 headquarters building across from the Capitol was named in his honor during his lifetime - a rare honor for a state employee.

He had no pastimes but declared, "My work is my hobby." More specifically, the Texas Highway Department was his life.

Born on July 27, 1902, in Shreveport, La., Greer moved west with his family to Pittsburg, Camp County, Texas, when he was 3 weeks old. Boyhood friends and A&M buddies called him "Dee," but everyone else - including department employees - called him "Mr. Greer." He was noted for thriftiness with the taxpayers' money as well as his own, for diplomacy, fair dealing, brevity with words and a sense of humor.

Greer learned early about the value of a dollar from his banker father. "My old daddy told me, 'Son, never borrow money - lend money,'" he once said. As state highway engineer, Greer supervised the spending of \$4.5 billion without any scandal marring his department - a tribute to his frugality. Personally, he never used credit cards.

After graduating from Pittsburg High School in 1918, he enrolled at Texas A&M University that fall. Originally, he was drawn to electrical engineering, but after a summer of working road construction between semesters, he preferred civil engineering. "I liked the whole idea of outdoor work, engineering and the status symbol that went with it; lace-up boots," he said. He graduated in 1923 with honors with a degree in civil engineering and a second lieutenant's commission in the U.S. Army.

After a brief stint as landscape engineer in Dallas, he became the first engineer for the new State Parks Board, assigned to construct a park near Boerne using 30 convict trustees as his workforce. Greer recalled this as "the most interesting year in my life," although he never received the pay he was promised because the Texas legislature failed to appropriate funds for his salary.

The park project ended after gubernatorial pardons, prompted by the Fergusons' administration, freed his workmen. After returning to assist a real estate developer in Dallas and Athens, Greer became the first Athens city engineer in 1925. Later, he claimed he "spent their [city bond] money, ... built them some roads ... and married the prettiest girl in town."

He and Helen Colton were married eight months after he began working for the department.

His early training instilled in him an important lesson in managing the department. "They taught us in school to build a bridge where we thought it ought to be and then divert the steam under it," Greer said. "It can, and has, been done. But I've found that if the creek has been there 200 years, it's better to bridge her right where she stands. I learned that when you change nature, human or otherwise, you're asking for trouble."

In later years, he would use that example to explain his reluctance to see governmental highway officials embrace mass or rapid transit. "Putting the money under the rubber" became a policy that Greer established and his successors continued. Since most state funds for highways come from motor-fuel truces and other levies on road users, Greer insisted that the funds be applied for maximum benefit to taxpayers.

His first job was as an instrumentman laying out a highway system for Henderson County. In 1929 he was appointed acting district engineer in Tyler, later district engineer, where his youthful looks and slim build earned him the nickname of "The Kid." His shyness and awkwardness while public speaking helped reinforce that moniker. Over the years, however, he developed a presence and ease as a public speaker who was constantly invited to "share a few words." A Dallas Morning News reporter once commented, "He says something appropriate, and, more appropriately, he says it and sits down."

Greer developed a special affection for Tyler. For one thing, it was the beginning of his long association with his mentor, Gilchrist. They would sit on the Smith County courthouse lawn and discuss road building at length.

In 1936, Gilchrist appointed him head of the department's division of construction and design in Austin. Greer at 34 was the youngest division head in the department's history. But the Austin job had its drawbacks; he had to take a salary cut. He earned \$408 a month as Tyler district engineer; as chief engineer of construction and design at the Austin headquarters, his salary was \$333.33.

When his mentor Gilchrist left the department in 1937, Greer remained. After the departure of Julian Montgomery, the Texas Highway Commission in 1940 appointed Greer, 37, to the top post. Gilchrist had been considered the best in the business, and Greer was unproven, untested and, except for department insiders, relatively unknown. Nevertheless, he largely followed the policies established by Gilchrist, stressing integrity, economy and delegation of responsibility to district offices and division heads.

Although he was considered a master road builder, Greer's major concern was safety. His mother died in a west Texas traffic accident caused by a drunk driver. He reminded engineers to "constantly strive to design accident-proof highways." Failing that, he urged them to "design for safer accidents."

World War II interrupted his plan to launch an expanded program of highway development, as work was performed largely on military roads and many highway department employees joined the armed forces. Greer's attempt to enlist was rejected by military authorities. When the war ended in 1945, the Texas Highway Department had plans ready for what became at the time the greatest construction program in the history of the world: "getting Texas motorists out of the mud."

To do this, the department proposed adding 50,000 miles of paved highway to the 26,000 miles of all-weather roads existing in 1944. The major milestone was passage of the 1946 legislation that ensured road-use taxes would be directed specifically to the highway department for road construction. In 1949 the legislature approved the Colson-Briscoe Act, (of which Greer was the chief architect) allocating funds for statewide Farm-to-Market roads. With the help of federal funds this program enabled the Texas Highway Department nearly to double the number of paved rural roads in the state within two years.

Much postwar funding, mostly from the federal government, built interstate highways, in which Texas led the nation. More than 40,000 miles of paved farm roads also were constructed in Texas. Texas Parade magazine at the time was effusive in its praise: "Not since Cheops erected his great Pyramid in Egypt, perhaps, has so singular a monument as the Texas highway system been engineered to one man's dream."

Considering the vast sums of public money that the department had at its disposal, the department under Greer could have been mired in scandal, patronage, and illegal financial dealings. None of that happened. Greer kept a firm, but honest hand in the department's business. Texas Monthly summed up this era of expansion: "The special strength of the Texas Highway Department is its conscientious administrative tradition - and that is the result not of some nebulous code of loyalties but of the direct personal influence of specific men in specific positions. The man most frequently credited with developing this high standard of honesty is Dewitt Greer, a quintessential Aggie".

Greer, who started his Highway Department career during the time of Ferguson patronage, had turned the entire department's reputation 180 degrees to iron-clad honesty. Said one department employee, "A contractor couldn't buy him a cup of coffee."

After his 27 years as chief administrator, Greer found himself back at the department, this time as a member of the Texas Highways and Public Transportation Commission for 12 years. In 1969 Governor Preston Smith appointed him chairman of the highway commission, a position he held from 1969 to 1972. Texas Monthly reported that putting Greer on the commission was "like picking Winston Churchill to be king of England." That statement is somewhat true, except that Greer commanded much more respect. His successor, James C. Dingwall, continued the same practices and policies, and Commissioner Greer didn't meddle in day-to-day operations, Dingwall said.

Greer received nearly all of the honors in engineering and state administration circles during his career. Scholarships and grants were established by friends in his name at Texas A&M and the University of Texas at Austin, where he taught as a professor of engineering practices from 1968 until 1972.

When Greer retired in 1981, the state highway headquarters building in Austin was named for him.

Greer's legacy lived long after him. Dingwall and his colleagues, B.L. DeBerry and Marcus Goode, would become a fortunate triumvirate - all three were what many described as "products of the Dewitt C. Greer school of highway construction and honorable public service." Eventually all three would hold the top executive post, and all three served with the same honesty, integrity and concern for Texas transportation as their mentor had.

Greer died at 84 on Nov. 17, 1986, at his home in Austin and was buried in the State Cemetery.

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