

## **George A. Duren**

First Chief Engineer, Texas Highway Department

*June 4, 1917 - May 19, 1919*

George A. Duren, the first state engineer, offered the best available training at the time to the fledgling Highway Department - he was a civil engineer with experience working on railroads, the chief mode of transportation for the time. Because highway engineering grew out of railroad engineering, early highway design was strongly influenced by railroad techniques. Many of the department's first handbooks actually were railroad books, and many first engineers, like Duren, were railroad men.

The department's early highways, just wide enough for one car, and the narrow, trestle bridges testify to the railroad influence. But road engineering had one distinct difference: The train never left the track, but the vehicle could always leave the road. A highway engineer had to consider the entire transportation process - from road to rubber to steering wheel to driver. The course of action was far more complicated than it seemed from the onset.

It didn't take him long to start thinking about roads instead of rails. Duren had the dubious distinction of buying the department's first automobile and getting it to Austin without benefit of a road map (which wasn't introduced until 1936). M.C. "Cap" Welborn, one of three division engineers at large in 1917, described how the purchase of the brand new Ford happened: "George Duren, state highway engineer, and the chairman of the Highway Commission [probably Curtis Hancock] went to Dallas to get it. They drove the car down to Austin over all sorts of roads, going everywhere but where they wanted to go. They would have to stop and inquire how far it was to the next station and where they were. When they arrived in Austin, they turned it over to me to drive and said it was all right because it had been christened. They had run over a polecat [skunk] and the car smelled for weeks after-wards."

The son of Alexander Duren, a Confederate veteran, and Winnie E. Robinson, Duren was born March 1881 in Petty's Chapel, a mile northeast of Corsicana. His father, a herder who drove cattle north to railheads, settled in Navarro County, eventually becoming a farmer and stockman with a 600-acre ranch. The elder Duren also served as a county commissioner and later county clerk. Religion was also a center of the Duren family. His mother was a charter member of Corsicana's First Presbyterian Church in 1868, and his father donated land for a Baptist church in Petty's Chapel shortly before his death in 1890. George was 9 when his father died.

At the time, Corsicana was a progressive, incorporated city of 5,000 with a city fire department, municipal water works and telephone system. In 1894, workmen in Petty's Chapel attempting to drill for water hit a large pocket of oil and gas. This was the first significant discovery of oil west of the Mississippi River and led to Texas' first oil boom.

About this time, the Durens moved into Corsicana, where his mother devoted herself to educating George and his two sisters. Despite his father's death, the Duren family was respected and enjoyed a comfortable place in Corsicana society.

When Duren enrolled at the University of Texas at the turn of the century, Corsicana was flourishing with 9,313 inhabitants. Duren graduated with a bachelor of science in civil engineering in 1903, serving as president of his senior class. He worked for the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway Co., a vast South Texas line at times operated by the Southern Pacific Railway.

During these years, Navarro County courthouse records show he had considerable transactions in real estate and with oil and mineral leases.

Records are unclear exactly why Duren was named state engineer under the administration of Gov. James Ferguson. However, Navarro County had a vigorous Good Roads Association that had already created several highways into Corsicana, and Duren as city engineer figured prominently in these projects. The association by 1917 was campaigning heavily to pass \$200,000 county bond issue for more improvements.

The law creating the Highway Department required that the commission name a capable, professionally trained engineer with experience with highway maintenance and construction. Upon his hiring, Highway Commissioner H.C. Odle of Meridian described Duren's two main qualifications: He was "a competent engineer" and a University of Texas graduate.

Corsicana citizens were proud to have one of their own rise to such high ranks. The Corsicana Democrat and Truth reported: "Mr. Geo. Duran, of this city, has been appointed state highway engineer by Gov. Ferguson. The job pays \$5,000 per annum, one thousand more than the governor gets. The highest salaried job in the state. Mr. Duren's friends are all jubilant over his appointment." The governor's salary was indeed \$4,000 a year.

Duren supervised 10 employees working out of the House of Representatives chamber in the Capitol Building. Their first task was the statewide registration of motor vehicles.

By the end of 1917, they had signed up nearly 200,000 vehicles. Within three years, registrations had doubled. Besides the first department car, Duren's administration included many firsts, including the first construction of a 20-mile section of untreated flexible base 16 feet wide between Falfurrias and Encino, and the first hard-surfacing project, a 25-miles stretch of Hays County, roughly following the current Interstate 35. Begun in July 1918 and finished in March 1919, the Hays County highway was 15 feet wide with a single bituminous surface treatment 2.5 inches thick. Another first for his administration: The first secretary was Birdie Dee Eccles (Mrs. W.R. Eccles). She was born Nov. 30, 1894, and died Sept. 23, 1990, in Roswell, N.M.

Duren also hired Julian Montgomery, who would later be state engineer from 1937 to 1940. Montgomery organized the department's engineering branch and designed the state's first bridge and culvert standards. In 1919, Duren accepted a position as "engineer of public roads" for Harrison County, and by 1920, he and his family were living in Marshall in a rented house.

Duren's departure from the Highway Department in 1919 attracted little attention from Austin political observers. For example, the Texas Monthly Review and State Topics, a respected political affairs magazine of the time, did not mention Duren or his leadership as it reported on department or the Texas Good Roads Association. Duren's resignation garnered no mention. Instead, the magazine concentrated its coverage of the highway department to industrial development, state rights and protective tariff. However, his successor, Rollin J. Windrow, garnered a half-page glowing news feature in 1919, when he assumed the post.

When Duren arrived in Marshall, Harrison County was overwhelmingly agricultural and rural, with cotton being the reigning crop. Duren's county job closely followed the standard pattern of operation. The county commissioners' court employed an engineer who was approved by the State Highway Department. Duren, as former state engineer, had no problem getting approval.

He was responsible for making location surveys and preparing plans and cost estimates under the supervision of the department's district engineer. The county commissioners' court would then apply for state or federal funds to carry through the project. The county engineer supervised construction and maintenance.

By 1923, Duren had moved to Dallas, where he worked for the E.R. Chamblin engineering and surveying firm. Within two years, he was named city engineer of University Park, newly incorporated in 1924 and then located on the outskirts of Dallas in the shadow of Southern Methodist University. As University Park developed before World War I, water and sewer lines had been furnished by the university. The cities of Dallas and Highland Park refused to annex the area because laying new lines and providing fire and police protection would be too expensive.

In 1924, the city of University Park incorporated with a population of 1,200. In August 1924, voters approved a \$150,000 bond election to set up fire protection and to finance water and street improvements. Duren was probably University Park's first city engineer, authorized to upgrade services.

He remained with University Park until probably 1930 but continued to keep his business interests in Navarro County. By the late 1930s, Dallas County deed records show his residence as LaSalle County, Illinois, but his wife and daughter remained at their Dallas home.

Adapted from:

***An Informal History of the Texas Department of Transportation***

By Hilton Hagan

1991

Published by:

Texas Department of Transportation

Public Information Office

2000