

Gibb Gilchrist

Chief Highway Engineer, Texas Highway Department

March 4, 1924 - February 15, 1925

January 26, 1928- September 30, 1937

Ordering an assortment of musical instruments for World War I soldiers was perhaps the most influential event in Gibb Gilchrist's life that would shape him and the Texas Highway Department forever.

During the Great War, while serving in France, he commanded a company of about 200 soldiers. After Armistice and just before he shipped out for home, he ordered musical instruments for his company. "These soldiers of mine were all musical, and I picked a mean guitar myself at times; so, I obligated \$1,500 of the company funds to buy a group of orchestra instruments for the men," he said.

As the commander, he could do this, but he had to keep careful records. By the time the men were ready to leave for home, the instruments still had not arrived. Gilchrist left instructions for the instruments to be turned over to the YMCA in Paris. He later received confirmation that they indeed had been delivered.

"It was a good thing I did this because, 15 years later, the War Department called on me to tell what I had done with that \$1,500. Fortunately, I had retained my papers and could tell them the whole story," he said. "There is a moral about this: Any money dealings you have with the government, you had better keep a good record because they spend lots and lots of money themselves to see that you do keep records." He never forgot that lesson as he worked with government and academia.

Musical instruments notwithstanding, Texas' transportation system would have never garnered the outstanding reputation it did at the end of the 20th century had it not been for Gilchrist's leadership at the beginning of the century.

Commissioner David Laney, Transportation Commission chairman from 1995 to 2000, commented in late 1999, "This state has had many great state highway engineers. Each one has built on his accomplishments. He was truly one of a kind. There is not one of his successors who has not stood on the shoulders of Gibb Gilchrist. In many ways, I feel like a kid following a trail of giant footprints and struggling to match the strides."

Gilchrist's career was as varied as the state's topography: engineer, highway commissioner, educator and Texas A&M University president. Whatever he undertook, he left a gold standard for future generations to follow. He weathered pressure from those involved in political chicanery and less-than-honest business practices to mold the department into his own image: professional, hard-working, forthright, honest and responsive to the citizens.

Born in Wills Point, Texas, on December 23, 1887, he was the youngest of eight children. His father, a Confederate veteran, died when Gilchrist was 3 weeks old. Graduating from Wills Point High School in 1904, he stayed in school another year to study English and Latin. Originally, he wanted to attend Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., but the school turned him down. His district congressman offered him an appointment to Annapolis, but Gilchrist didn't want to serve in the Navy.

He enrolled at Southwestern University in Georgetown for a year, going on to receive a bachelor of science degree in civil engineering from the University of Texas in 1909. From 1910 to 1917, he worked as a construction engineer for the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railway. Called to military service during World War I, he served as an engineer, rising to the rank of captain. He commanded the 540th Engineers, a group of African-American soldiers sent to England and France to build roads and rails. These were his soldiers for whom he tried to get musical instruments.

Gilchrist and his soldiers, mostly from southern states, developed a good rapport. "As we gathered around at Camp Lee [being discharged after the war], I saw tears in many eyes, and I think I shed some myself. It was a great experience working with those people," he recalled.

Returning from the war, state engineer Rollin Windrow hired Gilchrist in 1919 as the San Antonio division engineer, responsible for 36 counties. Later, he served as division engineer in San Angelo. Windrow and Gilchrist had worked together years earlier on the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway in West Texas.

By 1921, voters had approved \$100 million in county and district road bonds with state and federal grants following. But it wasn't enough. Texas had barely 100 miles of continuous pavement. To make matters worse, the department's beginnings had been bumpy. In the first seven years of its existence from 1917 to 1924, it had had three different directors.

When Gilchrist took over the state engineer job on March 4, 1924, Gov. Pat Neff was in office, but in just a few months, Miriam Ferguson, wife of the impeached former governor, was elected. The cronyism and excesses of the Ferguson years returned in full force. Less than a year after taking over as state engineer, Gilchrist resigned on February 28, 1925.

For the next three years, the department had five different directors, leaving it in disarray and without continuity. The state's roads didn't fare much better. Meanwhile, Gilchrist was a consulting engineer to private businesses from 1925 until 1927.

Maybe the muddy roads and mud-slinging 1926 gubernatorial election was one of the best things that happened to the Highway Department. Tainted by scandals and her husband's political shenanigans, Miriam Ferguson waged a tough re-election campaign against Attorney General Dan Moody, the reform candidate. Both candidates hit the roads - literally - drumming up support.

Newspaper accounts described how the Ferguson car ran off a 5-foot ditch near LaGrange and the passengers pushed the car back on the road. Meanwhile, Moody waded through a deep mud hole near Abilene to reach his speaking engagement. Moody won, taking office in 1927, and, in 1928 he renamed Gilchrist to the state engineer post. He would be the best director the department had since its beginning and the one who left an indelible imprint.

By November 1932, Gilchrist found himself working under another Ferguson administration. Miriam Ferguson was again elected governor. The department feared more unprincipled dealings. However, her second term proved less politically volatile than her first. During this time, the department built its first permanent home, a stunning eight-story art-deco building on East 11th Street in Austin, across from the State Capitol. The highway commission held its first meeting in the new building, completed in September 1933. The building, still in use, is now called the Dewitt C. Greer Building after one of Gilchrist's proteges.

Gilchrist's and the state's national stature in the meantime soared. Gilchrist served as president of the American Association of State Highway Officials in 1936, when Secretary of State Cordell Hull appointed him to the permanent International Association of Roads Congress as a representative of the United States.

That same year, the multitalented Gilchrist wrote the music and lyrics "Texas Over All," in honor of the Texas Centennial. The song appeared on the [1936 Centennial road map](#). "I wanted to have a song put on this map," he said. "Not finding one to suit me, I wrote one. The [music](#) smacks of plagiarism, but the lyrics are mine," he said.

The chorus extolled the state's greatness:

*Our dear old Texas is the grandest
Texas is the biggest and the best.
The Lone Star is the symbol of everything
That's better than the rest.
Texas, we salute you,
Your courage and your pride will never fail,
Texas, we love you truly,
Texas over all*

Despite these successes, the department's real enemy was the economic devastation of the Great Depression. Federal aid and in state gasoline-tax revenue were cut, causing a temporary curtailment of projects and hiring. Matters were worsened because Gov. James Allred and Gilchrist were cool to each other. "Allred didn't like me and I had no great love for him, although I tried to work with him on one or two occasions," Gilchrist said.

The rift between Gilchrist and Allred affected the entire department. In 1936, Allred advocated diverting millions of highway dollars into an old-age assistance program. Department officials successfully struggled with lawmakers to defeat Allred's plan, but the result was an administrative reorganization, which forced Gilchrist out of his job.

The next year, Gilchrist assumed the position as dean of the School of Engineering at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now Texas A&M University). At first he thought that becoming dean at A&M seemed a paradox since he was an alumnus of its rival, the University of Texas.

He got the job, but it paid \$850 less than he was making with the Highway Department. However, the college offered him a house. "I didn't know much about being dean of engineering," he recalled. "I had been rubbing elbows with reality for a good long time. I learned one thing, that when you don't know about it, find out; and it's not necessary to tell anybody that you don't know." His first lesson involved finding out "just how much time deans could waste" with meetings. He quickly streamlined processes and procedures to reduce needless meetings

During his first year, he established a Department of Aeronautical Engineering. By 1940, he was actively involved in developing engineering programs for the war effort. He also served the U.S. Office of Education in engineering, science and engineering management courses. Austin College awarded him an honorary doctor of science degree in 1939. He also held honorary degrees from Baylor University and Southwestern University. In 1945, he was named chairman of the Texas Post-War Economic Planning Commission.

On May 25, 1944, the Texas A & M board of directors appointed Gilchrist university president. Earl Rudder, his successor as dean of engineering, instituted many changes into the program Gilchrist had developed. Despite his admiration of Rudder, Gilchrist always felt that the A & M engineering program would have been better had it remained a cooperative but independent part of the University of Texas.

Mustering the same energy he had while heading the State Highway Department, President Gilchrist promptly began reorganizing the school by integrating its research and extension services into the academic branches. His idea was to focus A&M's engineering and agricultural research and instruction on the development of Texas resources and to establish community technical training centers throughout the state. He formed new departments and reorganized the engineering department.

Among his administration's most important accomplishments was the establishment on November 14, 1944, of the Texas A & M Research Foundation, a nonprofit state organization that allowed grants to be made to the university for research that would otherwise have been beyond its legal authority to conduct. During his presidency, Texas A&M emerged as an engineering school of national reputation.

Gilchrist also worked with Dewitt C. Greer, his successor at the State Highway Department, and Thomas C. McDonald, former chief of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, to create the Cooperative Research Program between the A&M College and the Texas Highway Department. This partnership ultimately led to the creation of the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) in 1950. While he did not formally have the title, TTI considers him its first director.

Gilchrist ran into opposition during his tenure. In order to deal effectively with student hazing, he reorganized student administration and discipline. Some protested, but the legislature cleared his administration in spring 1947. The issue was attributed to students and faculty who disliked his reforms. In response to this, A&M board of directors in May 1948 established the Texas A&M College System (now the Texas A&M University System) and named Gilchrist as the first chancellor, effective September 1, 1948. He served until August 31, 1953.

Upon his retirement, he was made an honorary member of the A&M Class of 1913, the year he would have graduated had he gone to A&M. Official A&M records still count him with that class. The University of Texas also honored him in 1959 as a Distinguished Graduate a half century after his graduation.

Gilchrist spent his retirement in College Station, where he died on May 12, 1972, at 85.

On Nov. 11, 1999, Texas A&M University and TTI dedicated the Gibb Gilchrist Transportation Research Building. Located at 2929 Research Parkway in the Texas A&M University Research Park, the Gibb Gilchrist Building is the first building solely occupied by TTI and designed specifically to meet the needs of researchers working on the leading edge of transportation research.

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