

James Colin Dingwall
Chief Engineer, Texas Highway Department
February 1, 1968-January 31, 1973

As one longtime Highway Department employee put it, "God is a hard act to follow." Perhaps the only man in Texas who could have followed Dewitt C. Greer as state high-way engineer was James Colin Dingwall. Not surprisingly, Greer handpicked his successor - and he picked a good one.

During his remarkable career, Dingwall had garnered an impressive record as the builder of many of the state's urban expressways and the first toll roads at a time when many had misgivings about such a concept.

Dingwall was unfazed. Eventually, Texas' open highways became among the best in the nation, thanks to his vision. By the time he assumed the top administrative post, he was responsible for more than 70,000 miles of paved, all-weather highways, many of which he helped build.

Succeeding the legendary Greer left Dingwall equally unflappable. He had served as Greer's assistant for 10 years, and the two men had remarkable rapport. When he assumed the department's highest post, Dingwall told a Dallas Morning News reporter, "I'd rather follow Mr. Greer than anybody I know."

Two years after his retirement as state engineer, Greer returned to the department as chairman of the Highway Commission. During that time, the department hummed along "without missing a heartbeat, as Dingwall hoped it would," according to an account in a 1969 issue of Texas Parade magazine.

Nevertheless, Dingwall was able to put his own imprint on the department but left Greer's policies largely intact. Because he was Greer's right-hand man, he was the closest person to observe Greer's special techniques of handling pressing business, especially as Greer assumed the commission chairmanship.

"Most of the day-to-day judgments and decisions in the Highway Department were made by others (staff), usually in the form of written recommendations, many times more than one," Dingwall was quoted in Greer's biography. " ... A decision would then be made and the matter considered settled. No more rebuttals or bickering. This was good administration, and I followed the general pattern after he left the department."

Nevertheless, he grappled with issues Greer never had: double-digit inflation, equal rights for women and minorities, burgeoning environmental issues, protracted delays in completing the Interstate highway system and a controversial plan to build a 12-story office building across from the Governor's Mansion.

Another issue hitting him head-on was the environment, especially air quality, that had emerged in the final years of Greer's administration. Environmentalists in the 1960s predicted that by the 1990s, Texas would be "covered with asphalt."

Dingwall countered: "The figures nation-wide show in the last 20 years there's been a small percentage of roads added and most of them are in new subdivisions. All the work we do now is to upgrade roads. The road is already there. We're not adding any new miles."

Despite all the revolutionary changes he experienced, he guided the department at its largest - nearly 21,000 employees. His administration was marked by its efficiency. Dingwall was known as an enemy of useless paperwork and bureaucratic delays.

Born in Comanche in November 8, 1907, Dingwall began his state highway career in 1928 after attending Southern Methodist University. While in school, he worked building Trinity River levees in Dallas. "The pay was pretty good," he told The Dallas Morning News in 1967, "as I recall, \$120 a month when we were enginemen on the drag lines and better when we got promoted to dump-men. "

Although he did not earn a degree, he was respected and admired for his engineering skills. Signing on with the highway department in Abilene in 1928, he then worked as a lab assistant. Early assignments took him throughout West Texas and the Panhandle.

During World War II, he eventually attained the rank of major with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, supervising the construction of air bases at Laredo, Guatemala, Brazil and the Azores.

Returning to the state highway department after the war, he was named Houston's urban supervising engineer in 1947 to direct construction of the Gulf Freeway, the first major construction of its kind in the state. In 1950, he was named head of the Road Design Division at the agency's Austin headquarters.

Four years later, the Texas Turnpike Authority called on him to build the \$58.5 million Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike. He supervised the financing, design and construction of the thoroughfare, which is now part of Interstate 30.

Contractor Pete Gilvin of Amarillo described his masterful ability to get things done: "The greatest engineering ever done was Dingwall's on the Dallas-Fort Worth toll road. He got the contract, bought the right of way and built the road in less than three years. Today, it takes at least seven years to get any federal aid job done."

Returning to the department in 1958 as assistant state highway engineer, Dingwall worked directly under Greer. When Greer retired, Dingwall was named as his replacement on February 1, 1968. At the time, engineers moved frequently around the state as the department assigned them.

Nevertheless, Dingwall strongly urged them to become involved in their communities. Mark G. Goode Jr., who would later become engineer-director from 1980-1986, told how Dingwall encouraged him when he first moved to Lufkin as district engineer: "He told me, 'When you go to that district, that's your home. You start participating in civic activities, and you start living like that's where you're going to be for the rest of your life.' And he's right. That's the way we did it."

Dingwall was well known as a national leader in transportation. He served as president of the American Association of State Highway Officials in 1972, serving as chief spokesman for the states on federal transportation programs.

He was also a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, the American and Texas Societies of Professional Engineers and an honorary member of Chi Epsilon, a civil engineering fraternity. He retired in January 1973 at 65 and returned to his hometown of Comanche.

He died on May 12, 1991, at 82.

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