

Charles Henry Purcell

January 27, 1883 – 7 September 7, 1951



C.H. Purcell was born in North Bend, Nebraska, on January 7, 1883. He attended Stanford University for one semester and then transferred to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he earned a Bachelors degree in civil engineering. After graduating in 1906, he worked at variety of civil engineering jobs. His first full-time position was with the Union Pacific Railroad, where he designed a steel girder bridge in Wyoming, his first bridge. He then worked in Peru as a mining engineer, returning to the United States after two years to become chief engineer for a logging railroad in Oregon.

After several positions in the private sector, in 1913, Purcell was hired by the Oregon State Highway Department as a bridge engineer on the Columbia River Highway project, and later appointed assistant to the State Highway Engineer. In 1918, he was hired by the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads as District Engineer for the District comprising Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana with headquarters at Portland. Purcell was offered the position of Oregon State Highway Engineer, which he declined.

In 1928, Purcell was appointed by Governor C. C. Young as the California State Highway Engineer. In 1929, he was appointed technical adviser to the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge Commission, which commissioned construction of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. When the commission finished its work, Purcell was appointed by Governor Jim Rolph as the Chief Engineer responsible for the design and construction of the bridge.

In 1937, he was appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to a federal Committee on Planning and Design Policies, and in 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt selected him to serve on the National Interregional Highway Committee, whose final report persuaded Congress to authorize the Interstate Highway System.

Purcell continued as California State Highway Engineer through 1942, when he was promoted by Governor Earl Warren to Public Works Director for the State.

He died at his home in Sacramento on September 7, 1951 at age 68, just five weeks after he retired.