

Spencer Van Zandt Cortelyou



Spencer Van Zandt Cortelyou was born on February 17, 1881, in Harlingen, Somerset County, New Jersey. When he was three years old, the family moved to Ewing, Nebraska, and six years later to Omaha. In 1898 he enrolled in civil engineering at the University of Nebraska and graduated in 1902 with a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering. The family moved to Los Angeles in 1903, where he was employed for a short time as a draftsman by the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, later a part of Union Pacific. After passing a Civil Service examination, he accepted a job in the Philippine Insular Government in July, 1903, serving in various positions as surveyor, supervisor of Pampanga Province, District Engineer of the 4th, 11th and 12th Districts, and later as Acting Assistant Director of Public Works of Manila.

Returning stateside in December, 1907, he consulted on irrigation projects in the Imperial Valley until 1909, when he accepted a job with the Los Angeles County Road Department Chief of Survey Party with the Los Angeles County Road Department.

On February 1, 1912, he was offered a position as principal assistant engineer to W. Lewis Clark, the Division Engineer in the newly created Division VII of the California State Highway Department, which at that time, included the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside, Imperial and San Diego. On July 1, 1915, when W.W. Patch took over as division engineer, he continued Cortelyou in his position as assistant division engineer.

On January 1, 1924, Cortelyou was appointed division engineer. Originally there were only seven divisions in the state highway organization, but in late 1923 the number was increased to 10, and District VIII, with E. Q. Sullivan as district engineer, was formed with headquarters at San Bernardino, taking over Riverside, Imperial and San Bernardino Counties from Division VII.

In 1933, when the Legislature greatly expanded the State Highway System and for the first time extended it through the incorporated cities of the State. There was further re-districting and District XI was formed, consisting of San Diego County from District VII, and Imperial County and a portion of Riverside County from District VIII. This left District VII with the three counties of Ventura, Orange and Los Angeles, the latter being essentially metropolitan in character.

Early efforts of Spencer Cortelyou were devoted to developing the rural state highways to which the system was then confined. Preliminary surveys for the Ridge Route through the Tehachapi Mountains connecting Los Angeles with San Joaquin Valley were started in 1912. The construction was completed in 1919 and was based on standards of design within the realm of financial possibility. It cut 50 miles off the best route on former traversable roads between Los Angeles and Bakersfield. This road proved to be of such commercial importance that a reconnaissance survey for a much bolder location with minimum radius curves of 1,000 feet and saving an additional 10 miles of distance were started in 1927.

It was in the field of freeways for the metropolitan Los Angeles area, however, that Cortelyou's influence, personality, and leadership weremost effective. Early recognizing the inherent topographical features of the Arroyo Seco as favorable for developing a highway with freeway characteristics, Cortelyou played an important part in the location, design and construction of the Arroyo Seco Parkway to the end that this freeway was dedicated and opened to taffic on December 30, 1940, although the freeway law establishing regular and widespread legal authority for constructing freeways was passed by the Legislature just the year before. It was only by the splendid cooperation of officials and engineers of the Cities of Pasadena, South Pasadena and Los Angeles, and the State that this pioneer freeway for Southern California was made possible of fruition at such an early date in the absence of legal precedent to guide them.

Prior to opening the parkway to traffic, Cortelyou obtained the approval of AASHO to reroute U.S. Highway 66 over the Arroyo Seco Parkway.

Other freeway projects initiated under Cortelyou's supervision were the Ramona Freeway, the Santa Ana Freeway, and the Hollywood Freeway, all of which under progressive construction at same time as the Arroyo Seco Parkway. That portion of the Harbor Freeway acting as a distributor for Los Angelesdowntown traffic, connecting through the already completed "Four~Level Interchange" structure with the Arroyo Seco, the Santa Ana and the Hollywood Freeways, was also under construction. The Santa Ana Freeway is at that time was completed and open to traffic as far as Eastman Street, a distance of about four miles.

These were all freeway projects of great complexity in design, acquisition and clearing of rights of way, and construction, and stand as monuments to the engineering genius of a great man. More particularly they stand as testimonials to his greater genius for working in harmony with his own organization and with public officials and engineering staffs of counties and cities so that their combined efforts represent truly cooperative enterprises in the public welfare and interest of value beyond measure.

In December 1946, he became an Assistant State Highway Engineer with two District Engineers to assist him, remaining in charge of District VII as he had been for nearly twenty-three years. He retired from this position in October 1949.

He was elected an Associate Member of ASCE on April 4, 1911; a Member on January 16,1928; a Fellow on June 6, 1959, and Life Member in 1946.