

Thomas H. MacDonald, who headed the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) from 1919 to 1953, is a towering figure in the history of highways. He helped to revitalize the Federal-aid highway program by initiating a system focus, with emphasis on roads that were “interstate in character,” in the Federal Highway Act of 1921. By the time he left office, he has ushered the Nation to the brink of the Interstate era. During these years, he was recognized as the greatest authority on highway development and a man of unquestioned integrity and commitment.

He was, at the same time, a quirky individual whose unusual personality has intrigued historians almost as much as his achievements. One of his associates, E. H. “Ted” Holmes gave a flavor of this aspect of Mr. MacDonald in an oral history (excerpts at <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/holmes.htm>). Author Tom Lewis said of Mr. MacDonald:

Photographs of him show a man of complete formality and propriety. His five-foot-seven-inch thickset frame always appears perfectly erect. His dark suit jacket—usually single-breasted—is buttoned neatly over a vest and dark tie. His hands always hang tensely at his side, while his eyes stare directly and intensely into the lens. His round face, marked by taut lips, a high forehead, and thinning hair, looks imposing and cold.

The actual man was little different. Thomas Harris MacDonald wore a coat and tie even when fishing or horseback riding on vacation in Nebraska. Colleagues and subordinates described him as reserved, austere, dignified, and cool, and often spoke of the severe stare of his cobalt-blue eyes. “When you were in Mr. MacDonald’s presence you were quiet. You spoke only if he asked you to,” one subordinate remembered. “He came as close . . . to characterize what I would call royalty.” Subordinates, colleagues, and his closest associates always addressed him as “Mr. MacDonald” or “Chief”—never “Thomas” or “Tom.” To his wife, even in the private intimacy of their home, he was always “Mr. MacDonald.” In accordance with a demand he had made in his youth, his brother and sisters called him “Sir.” [Lewis, Tom, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American life*, Viking Penguin, 1997, p. 5]

The FHWA’s 1976 publication, Trailblazers, also provided a perspective on Mr. MacDonald as seen by three of his employees. The publication is a collection of chapters by former employees recalling their days in BPR’s Federal Lands construction unit. (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/blazer01.htm>) Three of the chapters recalled visits by Mr. MacDonald. They are excerpted here:

Stories from the Early Days of the Bureau

By
William B. "Pete" Peters

I was on the Trans-Mountain Project in Glacier Park from 1925 to 1928. In July 1925, Dr. Thomas MacDonald, the Commissioner of Highways, came out to see first-hand what the project was all about. He was a gentleman in every way and one of the first men at the top of the Bureau of Public Roads. Naturally, as soon as it was learned that he was coming from Washington, DC, we had elaborate instructions about how to entertain him, feed him, etc. We had all the fresh vegetables and good food brought in by pack string for his arrival, as well as such luxuries as chairs. One of the men and his wife agreed to serve as chefs and we were all ready. Then we got a telegram saying he would be a week late, and we were happy to eat all that good food ourselves before it spoiled. He finally did come the following week though, and stayed for four or five days.

One incident occurred during his stay that is worth mentioning. Dr. MacDonald, Dr. Hughes [Laurence I. Hewes, who directed the Federal highway construction programs in the 11 western States and the Territories of Alaska and Hawaii], and Mr. [C. H.] Purcell [BPR's District 3 Engineer based in Portland, Oregon] wanted me to take them on a horseback trip to the summit of a high mountain so that Dr. MacDonald could view the whole park and the project. We had to hike up the last half mile because it got too steep for the horses, and we carried lunch up with us. On the way back down, we had to cross a snow slide with a stream flowing under the slide. Purcell rode across on his horse, but I decided it was best to lead my horse across. Next came Dr. MacDonald on the finest, biggest horse; and he was a big, heavy man, too. He rode across halfway when the horse broke through the snow and fell over on his side with Dr. MacDonald below him. I yelled for him to kick loose and get away from the horse and he did, but slid down the side of the mountain until he came to rest in a pile of rocks. He had no broken bones but had been greatly frightened, as we all were.

We got him back on his horse and about three quarters of a mile further on, came to a 80 or 100 foot high water fall, right on the trail crossing. Upon seeing this, Dr. MacDonald proclaimed, "Well, I have always wanted to take a real cold shower!" I told him I wasn't in the habit of having ice water showers, but I would join him. This wasn't a real safe place to shower because the waterfall brought rocks down occasionally and one of those rocks on the head would have knocked you cuckoo. But we all decided to strip down to our shoes and by the time Hughes and I were undressed, Dr. MacDonald was already in there, thoroughly enjoying it. We saw that his back had been badly scratched when he slid down the mountain and the cold water probably provided some relief. I just got a little wet and so did Dr. Hughes - I just could not stand it. After the shower, we returned to camp and Dr. Hughes said that this would make an awfully good news item to be sent in to the AP. Dr. MacDonald said, "Oh, no. Don't mention this incident to anyone. We don't want any publicity from it."

Inter-American Highway 1940 - 1957

By
Norman Wood

As a part of the "war effort" the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers initiated a project to open a "Military Road" along the general route of the IAH [Inter-American Highway] on a war emergency basis. The Corps moved into each Central American republic with U.S. cost-plus-fee contractors with what was apparently limitless funds, and a war priority classification, which classification was also granted to the BPR effort

After withdrawal of the Corps of Engineers from their Military Road project and the step-up of activity by PRA (BPR) [Public Roads Administration, BPR's name during the 1940's] on the Inter-American projects, General [Philip B.] Fleming [administrator of the Federal Works Agency, a New Deal agency that housed the PRA], Commissioner MacDonald and E. W. James, Chief of IAH, made an overland inspection trip between Tapachula, Mexico, and San Jose, Costa Rica. The party was accompanied by Ralph Mills, of the R. E. Mills Construction Company, which company held a \$12 million contract with PRA on the mountainous section of the IAH south of Cartago, Costa Rica. M. L. Harshberger was in charge of Costa Rica activities at that time and he, Thomas Guardia and a mechanic met the group at Tapachula, with military type jeeps. They traveled over all types of roads, ox-cart trails, etc., inspecting work in progress in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. There was no IAH activity in Panama at this time.

Rodolfo Zuniga, our bridge engineer in Costa Rica, and I went overland by Jeep from San Jose and met the party at Managua, Nicaragua. Prior to this trip, I had spent many hours in the Army type Jeep - was then and still is (now called CJ-5) a versatile vehicle - and I don't know what we would have done on IAH activities without the jeep. However, on the trip to Nicaragua I found they were not designed for comfortable use on graveled or paved highways. The short wheel base and stiff springing is not for "washboard gravel" or any road which is rough, including concrete pavement with expansion joints. The IAH was up to gravel surface condition from the southern Nicaraguan border to Managua, some 100 kilometers (62 miles). While progress is slower, I would much rather drive a Jeep over unimproved roads than gravel or pavement. That final 100 kilometers was a "back breaker" and we had to turn around that next morning and accompany the inspection party over this section. The only suitable facility for overnight stop for the party between Managua and San Jose was at our construction camp at Las Canas, Costa Rica, some 250 kilometers (150 miles) for Managua. This, of course, wasn't a long trip even in those days. However, travel in Costa Rica was all on ox-cart road with fords only at river crossings. Anyway, we left Managua at 5:00 a.m., in the morning, nine of us in four Jeeps. One Jeep was a "service unit" driven by the mechanic who had extra gas, tires, oil, water and tools for emergency repairs. Gas and water were in five-gallon GI cans which had been replenished in Managua.

Apparently during the refilling process at the IAH plantel (equipment depot) in Managua, the water and gas cans somehow got mixed and at the midday service stop, the Jeep driven by Marv Harshberger and carrying General Fleming and Commissioner

MacDonald had its gas tank filled with water. Of course, this unit didn't get far down the trail when it quit cold. It didn't take the mechanic long to discover what had happened and I suspect it was one of his more embarrassing experiences. Rather than delay the entire group while the gas tank drained and other things necessary to get all the water out of its system, the disabled Jeep and the mechanic were left behind and the party proceeded, arriving at the Las Canas camp about 5:00 p.m. The mechanic made it about three hours later. We noted that the next morning the gas and water cans were identified in large red paint letters, in both English and Spanish.

The long Jeep trip from Managua was a rough, hot and dusty one. The Las Canas camp had a bath house with hot-cold water shower facility made up of a series of shower heads along the wall, with no partitions. This resulted in a rather informal social gathering when two or more had the shower urge at the same time. The inspection party group was no exception and I will always remember some of the comments made, the most interesting of which was a long dissertation by Mr. MacDonald to the effect that we humans no longer appreciated the real values in life. It was his point that up to that time in his life, he could not recall a happening which he appreciated more than the hot shower he was then enjoying, and the inconveniences, such as water in the jeep gas tank, were minor events in life. I think this was a side of Mr. MacDonald which few in BPR had the privilege to observe.

Federal Highway Construction - - Western Regional Office

By

Eric E. Erhart

1927 looked like a year when very tall western top hats were in vogue. I (officeman), Leonard Henderson (day laborer), J. E. Jensen, and Julius Brannan (party chief) were assigned to the north rim of the Grand Canyon to survey an access road from Fredonia (Jacobs Lake) into the park.

Julius Brannan was chief of party and had set up camp with a large variety of World War I surplus equipment. All tents were different sizes, shapes, and color so the camp was a polyglot affair. To compound matters, water had to be hauled over a rough road for 35 miles. Anyone over-using water was looked at with a jaundiced eye.

One day Mr. Norcross, then chief of Forest Service, inspected the camp and project. He was quite critical of Brannan for spending too much money on the camp. [One] week later Thomas McDonald, Dr. Hewes, [BPR District Engineer] B. V. Finch, and some Forest Service personnel showed up at the camp. When Thomas MacDonald was introduced to Brannan he commented "You have the dirtiest camp in the United States." As a result of camp conditions, Mr. MacDonald went back to Washington and sent out a nationwide request to find out if uniforms could be adopted for all Bureau crews. The replies were somewhat negative and this was as close to dress alike as the Bureau would ever come. The newly designed uniform went to naught.

Before leaving camp Mr. MacDonald advised Brannan to tell Chief of the Forest Service Norcross to "Go to hell" since they hadn't overspent in setting up the camp.