

MAN WHO LOCATED CARLSBAD ROAD CHUCKLES AS HE RECALLS EARLY DAYS

By Bob Bundy

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Motorists today whiz along the Carlsbad Highway (U.S. 180-62) or Mesa Boulevard while a native of Kansas who is now and has been since 1917 a dyed-in-the-wool El Pasoan chuckles to himself as he recalls those early days 52 years ago when the two thoroughfares weren't even dreamed of.

A civil engineer from way back who learned his profession the hard way, he is enjoying a life of leisure after a highly active career in El Paso and throughout the southwest which included locating the Carlsbad Highway, and work on Mesa Boulevard, the Lower Valley irrigation system and the City's present water and sewage treatment plant.

The works of James B. Easter, who recently turned 81, are not confined to El Paso area. At his home at 2314 N. Kansas, where he and his wife and family have lived since 1926, he can also reminisce about highway work done in New Mexico a portion of which is now U.S. 66, and his duties as party chief for the group which surveyed the site for Caballo Dam.

As if that wasn't enough for one man. Easter also got in on the groundwork for a lot of today's space science accomplishments when he went to White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico (then known as White Sands Proving Ground). He stayed put there for six years before retiring in 1958, the same year in which the name of the proving grounds was officially changed. His major activity was preparing the first basic maps of WSMR and many of the instrumentation and launch sites in use today.

His work was confined mainly to the office of the mapping and surveying section but, from time to time he managed to get out to do some on-location work at Stallion and Pony sites and launch complex 32, the HAWK and Sergeant firing areas.



REFLECTIONS—James B. Easter; a retired El Paso civil engineer who has left his mark in many ways in the El Paso region during his 50-year career, has plenty of time now to reminisce, about his activities in constructing the Carlsbad Highway (180-62) some 40 years ago. He and Mrs. Easter now enjoy the quiet life at their residence, 2314 North Kansas, which has been home base for the family.

His work also included locating roads and utility routes and installation of the flood control drainage system in the post headquarters area.

DISCUSS ROUTE

The location of the present route of the Carlsbad Highway is a high point of his career in El Paso. It was a case of literally starting from scratch to locate a road which would directly connect El Paso and the Caverns

He recalls that back in the late '20s, there was agitation for such a route. Easter and

other members at that time of the local chapter of the American Association of Engineers, later merged with the American Society of Civil Engineers, often discussed the highway proposal during weekly meetings.

At the time, the only ways to get to the Caverns were to drive from El Paso eastward to Van Horn and then take the gravel road from there north into New Mexico or else a circuitous loop up and around via Ruidoso, N.M., and then east and south into Carlsbad.

The late Fred Wilson was county engineer at the time and through his efforts and others interested in the project, Commissioners Court approved the idea of building a road to Carlsbad the Caverns. There wasn't an awful lot of money for highway work in those days and automobiles were beginning to appear in ever increasing numbers. Highway location work was on a catch as catch can basis, he recalls.

One proposal was to utilize the old Butterfield Trail route.

So Easter and two companions, Charles "Chili" McKemy and L.G. (Skipper) Lyon, loaded their gear a barrel of water and one of gasoline on an old Model T truck and started out over the sand hills and dales.

The trio scoured the Region in addition to other country engineering work, to locate a route. It was soon evident that the Old Butterfield Trail could not be utilized since it looped into New Mexico and that state was reluctant to help with such a project. So that idea was given up and another one substituted.

Easter was personally acquainted with the Hueco Pass area and a route through the Hueco Mountains, utilizing the pass and down Soledad Canyon through Hueco Tanks

into El Paso was surveyed but was found unfeasible because of the necessity of exceedingly heavy construction. The route through Pow Wow Pass was investigated and accepted. It required about a year to complete the preliminary work.

FROM DISTRICT

Then El Paso and Hudspeth counties got together and formed a road district to provide funds for the venture. The commissioners of each county served as the ex-officio directors of the El Paso-Hudspeth Counties Road District of Texas.

An election was held Sept. 17, 1927, which provided \$425,000 for the Carlsbad project. In the same election, \$525,000 in bonds, was approved for improvements to the Bankhead Highway—U.S. 80—from El Paso down the valley. Bonds were sold to obtain the money.

According to terms of the election the \$425,000 was to be spent for a road from El Paso easterly across the county, south of Hueco Tanks through the Hueco Mountains and then easterly through Hudspeth County to the county's east boundary line near the Patterson Hills. Also a connecting road taking off at a point in Hudspeth County just east of Hueco Mountains in a northeasterly direction to the New Mexico line, a distance of approximate 15 miles.

At a later date Culberson County got into the road-building act.

Easter and his crew established a permanent base, Camp Pow Wow, in Pow Wow Pass and that was the project's base of operations. Plans were drawn and the route was surveyed. Easter recalled that the survey line started at Montana and Roosevelt and went straight out, Montana, past the old city water

well which was the last human habitation for 100 miles or more at that time.

It was lonesome work and out in the boonies the principal source of entertainment for the crew consisted of radio programs heard over the predecessor to the present KTSM.

There was no Indian troubles (they were all on reservations by that time) but herds of antelopes caused the crew trouble from time to time.

"And in the winter it was awfully cold."

Water, the lack of, that is, was a major problem, during the project. Mules were the principal source of (horse) power in those days before mechanization and they required lots of water and feed. The feed was no problem but providing water was until it was solved by acquiring an ample supply from the stock tanks on the John Helms ranch which was crossed by the highway route.

MEN AND MULES

The work was done by mules and men. toward the last an old gasoline-powered shovel was acquired to help in the road construction.

Easter noted that Helms was most cooperative in assisting the project. The route crossed about 40 miles of ranch property.

The initial construction contract, for approximately 20 miles of road, was let in 192x to the Lamar Davis firm of El Paso. The project called for grading and graveling work.

The next contract, also for 20 miles, went to Lee Moor Construction Co. and took the road through the Hueco Mountains.

The construction progressed slowly but surely across the high plains and over the

higher mountains until the job was completed in 1930. And Easter stayed with the project until it was finished.

Things economically began to get rough about that time and in 1931, like a lot of other people who went where the jobs were, Easter hired out to an oil firm and went to California to work, primarily in the San Francisco area. He stayed there about a year before returning to El Paso and his family and "Boy! was I glad to get back" is his feeling about that return.

From that time until his retirement in 1958 he worked mostly in the El Paso region.

Easter, like so many other men who have risen to the top of their profession in the day when college educations were not so easy to come by, generally started from the bottom.

Born in a small community in Western Kansas, Aug. 2, 1888, he came with his family to their ranch at Rye, Colo., several miles south and west of the then growing steel city of Pueblo. He is a graduate of Pueblo Central High School.

He was a hand on the family spread for a while before he hired out in 1908 as a chairman with a survey crew running the route for a railroad through that part of the country. And he was launched on his engineering career which was to end 50 years later in New Mexico.

He first came to El Paso in 1917 and began working for the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Anton Railroad, later the Southern Pacific. Then came the work on the irrigation system in the Lower Valley and it was during this period of activity that he first became acquainted with Wilson. And the friendship continued through the years.

He stayed here until 19xx before venturing into New Mexico.

There he was a district engineer for the highway department and from 1920 until 1924 was based at Santa Rosa. Some of his survey work proved useful in locating the route for famed "Route 66" in that portion of the state.

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He moved later to southern New Mexico to survey site for Caballo Dam and [. . .] done for the Bureau of Reclamation. His next move was to return to El Paso where he began work for the county. His first job was constructing the present Mesa Road route. Then came the task of resurveying the county, a check of all individual properties in the county for tax purposes.

He also had a role in setting up the present route of Trowbridge Drive, then known as Womble Boulevard.

At other points in his career prior to going to work at White Oaks, he did a stint in Arizona in the vicinity of Flagstaff laying out the route for a logging railroad in the White Mountains.

Another bit of surveying he did in El Paso was locating work for a storm drainage system.

While he was getting started in Colorado, he met a the girl who in 1912, became Mrs. Easter. She was a kindred soul, a native of Eastern Kansas. After covering a great deal of territory and raising a family of seven children, Mr. and Mrs. Easter observed their golden wedding anniversary in El Paso in 1962 and are almost seven years along on their second 50 years of marriage. The family today includes 20 grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

SUNDAY REST AND RECREATION—*Six days a week Easter, McKemy and Lyon scoured the countryside, locating the route for the Carlsbad Highway.*



On the seventh, a common form of relaxation was listening to the Sunday morning church services of the First Methodist Church of El Paso over the church's radio station which later became KTSF. McKemy and Lyon are shown here basking in the sunshine and taking turns listening on earphones to the radio programs —(Easter Photo)

The three sons, J.M., Jack and Sam, served in the U.S. Navy in World War II. Today J.M. is an engineer here with the telephone company, Jack is a civil engineer in Toledo, Ohio, and Sam is chief draftsman with a construction company in Saratoga, Calif.

Of the four daughters, Mrs. Phyllis Wetzig and Mrs. F.L. Wood live in Saratoga. Mrs. A.O. Vickery, a resident of Wilton, N.H., and Mrs. J.H. Fischer lives in Pasadena, Calif.

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(Continued On Page 5)

Surveyed Site For Caballo Dam

(Continued From Page 4)

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