

Lestle Wilber “L.W.” Newcomer

1906 - 1967



BIOGRAPHY

Lestle Wilbur Newcomer, “Newc” to his friends, was born in Alexander, Kansas on November 23, 1901, the ninth of ten children born to Dilliard Sidney and Catherine Osborne Newcomer. His parents, both children of Civil War veterans, lived in a sod house on a homestead of 160 acres.

One of the few men in Butler County’s history to achieve high office in an organization of international dimension, it was said that Newcomer was at home the world over. A man of keen common sense and an engaging personality, he had a knack of making and keeping friends and an enthusiasm which knew no bounds.

At only 9 years of age, he applied to Lester Cooley of Alexander to drive an extra team of horses to a furniture-laden wagon bound for Colorado. Driving the wagon alone for over two weeks, he later remembered nearly smothering himself with blankets drawn tightly over his head to muffle the coyotes’ howling. When his employer sent him home by train, he thought he’d been around the world.

After being among the first class to graduate from Alexander’s new high school in 1919, Newcomer entered Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan, Kansas. Besides his studies, he was active in baseball, basketball and tennis. The Mechanical Arts section of the school was at that time expanding from carpentry and blacksmithing into the area of engineering. By 1923, Newcomer earned two degrees, Bachelor of Science and Civil Engineering. He returned in 1932 for a second Civil Engineering degree, presenting original designs for the surfacing of roads.

Earning the name “Mr. K-State”, he remained an ardent supporter of the college and its athletic program all his life. At times heading the Kansas State Alumni Association and the endowment

campaign, he also helped recruit football players and set a record of life-time attendance at basketball and football games.

Following college, Newcomer first worked one year as a design and construction engineer for the White Eagle Oil Company in Augusta, Kansas. He then held a similar job for six months with the Chicago Elevated Railways.

Hired as bridge project engineer for the Missouri State Highway Dept. in late 1924, it was in Missouri that he made his first effort at bridge building, in the Missouri Ozarks. When he offered to show his work to some friends in later years, he discovered it was now beneath 40 feet of water – the Lake of the Ozarks. Remembering the bridge, he said “I always try to hide my ignorance”, assuming one of the roles he played best – that of the folksy philosopher dispensing county wisdom, in accents to match.

Newcomer moved to El Dorado, Kansas in 1926, marrying Mabel Graham on June 24th. A lovely and gracious woman much admired in the community, she proved a tremendous asset in her husband’s career. There were two daughters and one son born to this union. Living in several locations in the early years, the couple soon made their family home at 1139 W. Central.

Heading up jobs with the WPA during the depression, it was common for worker’s wives to come pick up their husband’s checks on pay day. One winter day when the temperature was below zero, a wife came to Newcomer’s office, two small boys in tow. Both boys were crying, their ears frozen. Newcomer asked the mother why they were out in such weather without their heads covered. She replied that the WPA won’t buy stocking caps for the boys and they didn’t own any. He promptly sent them to a local clothing store to pick up two caps at his expense.

When America entered World War II, Newcomer was in his 40s and not subject to the draft. He volunteered for the Navy, where he commanded the 6th Special Seabee Detachment seeing action in the Pacific Theater. He served 26 months, most of the time on the islands of Fiji, Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Guam and Ulithi, building or repairing anything that needed doing. He later remarked that his experiences on those islands would fill a book

In 1965, a number of unpublished stories were found, written by war correspondent Ernie Pyle before his death in 1945 by Japanese fire. Published as a memorial to Pyle, about a third of one of these was devoted to Newcomer, referred to as “Newk . . . one of my best friends . . . a super-swell guy”. Pyle described Newcomer as tall and skinny, with a hook nose with knots in it, which came, according to Newcomer, from never turning his back on a good fight.

Newcomer remembered receiving a package while stationed in Guam from his sister-in-law in Kansas. She sent some candy and a book written by Ernie Pyle, noting that she liked the way he wrote. She had no idea that Newcomer knew Pyle. Just then Ernie walked into his tent. Newcomer said, “Look here, Pyle, you really got the woman fooled”, showing what she had

written. Pyle grinned; he took the book and wrote on the fly-leaf, "Newk and I like it, too." The book became one of the sister-in-law's prized possessions.

Newcomer was a skillful raconteur, a fascinating teller of tales. Possessing a poet's heart, he penned hundreds of poems to his wife, children, and friends. The rhymes didn't always match, but they were heartfelt.

A devoted member of the First United Presbyterian Church in El Dorado, he served in various church offices throughout the years. He was a founding member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity at Kansas State University, an active member of the American Society of Civil Engineers, and a member of Patmos Masonic Lodge No. 97 A. F. & A. M.

In 1938, Newcomer served as state president of the Kansas County Engineers Association. He was president of the Kansas English Society in 1953, president of the El Dorado Kiwanis Club in 1937, and an original member in 1947 of the State Board of Engineering Examiners, continuing with that organization until 1960. He was also on the Board of County Consultants for the Bureau of Public Roads.

Listed in *Who's Who in America*, Newcomer penned a poem in honor of this. Entitled "Who's He", the third line reads "So, Honored Man of Proud "Who's Who," Be happy as can be, That honors have been given you, For soon you'll join "Who's He??"

During his time in the Navy, he became friends with men like Admiral "Bull" Halsey, Ernie Pyle, and former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey. He also numbered among his acquaintances Dwight D. Eisenhower, Nelson Rockefeller, Pope Paul VI, and many of the nation's outstanding statesmen and business leaders

L. W. Newcomer died on December 21, 1980 of a heart attack while visiting one of his daughters in Virginia.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Upon arrival in El Dorado, Newcomer went to work as Assistant County Engineer. He soon became the top man of that office. As a friend of the great and near great, he carved out a career which did much to turn national and world-wide attention to El Dorado and Butler County.

COMING TO THE AREA

It was his college fraternity brother, Ira Graham, who convinced Newcomer to come to Butler County. He often bragged about his hometown. Working for a short time as engineer with the White Eagle Oil Company in Augusta gave him the chance to become acquainted with Ira's

sister, Mabel. After working at jobs in Illinois and Missouri, he was drawn back to the county in 1925, to eventually marry Mabel. Although his work took him all over the world, he made El Dorado his home for the rest of his life.

ACHIEVEMENTS

While working in the County Engineering Office, Newcomer was involved in building Highway 54 south of El Dorado, and Highway 77. Along with regular road construction in the area, he worked on many bridges, including low-water bridges placed in areas where the volume of traffic did not warrant the expense of a larger bridge.

These low-water bridges needed to be high enough to allow water to overflow the bridge by no more than 2 feet in times of high water. Any higher overflow would bring loose brush and debris onto the road. One bridge in the area was always getting jammed up with brush, taking many man-hours to clean. Newcomer decided to lower the bridge to prevent this in the future.

To avoid the expense of scaffolding, he cooked up a plan which used ice blocks as temporary piers. After jacking the bridge up, the concrete piers were knocked over and laid into position on their sides. 500 lb. blocks of ice were ordered to be delivered from the local ice house – people in town thought he had lost his marbles when they heard he was putting ice under a bridge! With the ice placed into position and the jacks removed, there was loud popping and cracking but the ice held. So the men went home for the night. In the morning, the ice had melted and the bridge had settled down right into position.

This got a big write-up in Engineering Record, an engineering publication. Newcomer was the only person in the world to set a bridge on piers of ice blocks. Doing so saved the county about \$2500.

Newcomer invented, built and patented a portable rock screen for sizing material to be put on roads, used during 1931. However, when the patent ran out years later, Newcomer was away at war; a big company took the patent over.

During the Great Depression, Newcomer was responsible for coming up with construction jobs for his quota of 842 men, mostly unemployed oil field men, through the Civil Works Administration, followed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA). Men worked in 3-days-per-week shifts at \$3 per day apiece. Jobs were as simple as finding and picking up rock to be made into gravel for road foundations to complex building projects. Among the larger projects built during this time were county plants for El Dorado and Augusta, El Dorado's football stadium and track, the baseball plant, and the Forest Park band shell. Newcomer drew up the plans for the football stadium himself, the first concrete stadium for a high school in the state. He asked all local businessmen to contribute one bag of cement each, at 60 ¢ each, to help defray the cost.

“Just to show the desperate state of the economy, I should mention one minor project,” said Newcomer. “On a ditch digging job near Towanda a former millionaire, a preacher and an ex-convict worked side by side. Today’s young people have no conception of what it was like then, and I hope they never will.”

After having commanded a Seabee unit in World War II, Newcomer returned to his county engineer’s office until in the early 1950s, when he obtained a leave of absence to help with the new turnpike project. He made this move official when he joined the Kansas Turnpike Authority (KTA) in November of 1954 as head engineer. During his time in the Seabees, he learned much about building fast and under pressure, cutting through to the heart of a matter. This served him well during the hectic 22 months on construction the 236 mile Turnpike. Building such a massive highway in so short a time was unequalled in the world, setting a standard for other states to follow. It was the first major turnpike built west of the Mississippi, with only a minor turnpike in Oklahoma preceding it.

Originally Oklahoma was to meet Kansas at the border with a four-lane highway. But they did not finish theirs in time. Their end of the deal was not finished until a year or two later. At first, the turnpike did not seem successful, being simply a road between two points with few feeder facilities at Kansas City and seeming to end in a wheat field south of South Haven (actually it ended on a tiny township road at the state line). Years later the two ends of the highway were hooked up with supporting traffic and other improvements were made. Newcomer’s extensive technical knowledge and untiring devotion to his work led the Turnpike into its greatest period of expanded public favor and financial improvement.

Having served one year as first vice-president of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association (IBTTA), Newcomer was named president in November 1965. This international non-profit organization, including 14 nations at the time, is member-supported, serving the individual and collective needs of public agencies operating toll and tax-supported bridges, tunnels, highways and ferries in the US and a number of other countries. Since its founding in 1932, it assumed ever-increasing importance with the resurgence of toll facilities in the early 1950s and the acceleration of their development elsewhere in the world. The association’s headquarters was in Washington, D.C.

In September 1966, Mr. and Mrs. Newcomer left El Dorado to attend the 34th annual convention of the IBTTA, the first part to be held in New York City, where Newcomer was the featured speaker. The next portion was held in Rome and Florence, Italy, where he was one of the chief speakers. These meetings, the first to convene on two continents, included

discussions on improving toll facilities, information services for motorists, and the relationship of toll-supported highway facilities. The association was recognized as a vital repository of technical and financial know-how for toll operations.

Preparing to deliver a dissertation on "The Brotherhood of Man" in the upper chambers of the Vatican in Rome on Sept. 26, he learned it was also Pope Paul's 69th birthday. When he asked the proper manner of extending greetings, he was hastily informed that such things "just aren't done!", Newcomer decided to handle it in his own way; on completion of his speech, as the Pope stepped down to personally congratulate the speaker, Newcomer dismissed protocol and said "I wish you a very happy birthday, your Holiness." With surprise and decided pleasure, Pope Paul VI replied, "Ah, you know?!" At the close of the formal ceremonies, the Pontiff insisted on granting Newcomer and his wife a private audience.

Although he had by then retired from regular employment, Newcomer was called upon in 1975 to serve temporarily as the director of the Kansas Highway Department. His eldest brother had served as a Kansas legislator, but Newcomer was decidedly not interested in a political appointment. Reluctant to take the post, he at first refused. His ascension to this post came about as a matter of accommodation to Governor Robert Bennett and his administration. He insisted that he would only spend thirty days in this office, unless of critical need. He helped in choosing his replacement.

A highlight of Newcomer's distinguished career was a three-month period he spent in Taiwan as a consultant to that government during a major highway construction program. On other occasions he served as a consultant to the Japanese and Spanish governments.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

In 1957, Newcomer was granted an honorary degree for outstanding service to the Wichita Professional Society of K. E. S.

During the IBTTA's international convention in Rome, Italy, Newcomer was presented a medal of commendation for "World Leadership" presented by the Italian government, along with a medal commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Autostrade highway.

During a private audience with Pope Paul VI, the pontiff, in a rare public presentation, awarded him a silver-gold medallion in recognition of his "international leadership and accomplishments". This medal was one of the engineer's most prized possessions.

A highlight of Newcomer's retirement party in 1971 was when it was announced that the L. W. Newcomer Scholarship Fund for engineering students at Kansas State University was being established.

Newcomer was also awarded distinguished service awards from the Kansas County Engineers Association, the Kansas State College of Engineering, and from the State of Kansas for meritorious service to the state. He was honored by Kansas State University's Chi Epsilon chapter for 1974-75, and received the University's award for Distinguished Service.

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