

Proponent Testimony on SB 357

Naming a portion of Highway 81 near Belleville for Merle M. Miller

It is my pleasure to share with you a special man's dream. He dreamed of a four-lane highway running north to south across Kansas from Nebraska to Oklahoma. He also hoped that the other states would come on board to extend it across their states. That highway was called the Pan American Highway, to be known as US 81.

This man was Merle M. Miller, editor and publisher of the Belleville Telescope, Belleville, Kansas and my Dad. As is typical of a small town publisher, he took the problems of the world on his shoulders. He felt that the highways were the answer to growth in Kansas. Belleville is located where two highways cross, Highway 81 (north and south) and US 36 (east and west), and it became known as the "Crossroads of America." Dad was well aware of the significance of good highways on the economy of Kansas.

For many years, Dad traveled all over the state of Kansas and the adjacent states promoting good highways. People used to ask Dad how long he had been interested in highways, and his answer was "all my life". His father, A.Q. Miller, was one of the founders of the earliest highways in Kansas, Nebraska and Missouri.

Dad could remember riding in the family car with his Dad as they explored dirt roads to determine highway routes. They always carried a shovel to "dig out" when they got stuck, and getting stuck was a common thing. Dad could remember one Sunday trip, his Dad AQ had taken them on a mud road that had only two deep ruts. The ruts were so deep once the car was in them you couldn't get it out. They came upon a turtle trying to climb out of the rut and he kept sliding back in. After a short wait, his father AQ impatiently drove on much to the whole family's misery.

Dad was president of the Pan American Highway Association in 1967, when he was encouraged by friends to take a caravan of 23 cars and 63 people following the highway from Winnipeg, Canada through the U.S. and Mexico, across Central and South America. Dad had lots of friends, and one couple who had lived in Peru when he was a Pan Am pilot, offered to plan the itinerary, figure out how far they could drive each day, and check with friends concerning the availability of gas and places to stay. After crossing the border into Mexico, the group learned to fill up with gas whenever they saw a filling station, don't stop along the roadway because of the danger of bandits, try to keep vehicles together for each other's protection, don't wander far from your vehicle, and don't lose your money or car ownership papers. The trip covered more than 16,000 miles. With this "Caravan of Good Will" they succeeded in promoting US81 and the Pan American Highway as an international highway.

Dad continued his efforts to support the paving and other improvements of US 81 for many years, because he felt it was the best direct north and south route across the nation and we needed one major expressway to carry north and south industrial and tourist traffic.

A four-lane section of US81 between Salina and Minneapolis was completed in 1971, but Dad wanted it to be completed from that point all the way to the Nebraska line. He also met with the Governor of Nebraska and a group of highway supporters from York, Neb., to encourage a 4-lane extension from the border to York, Neb., where it would interconnect with US80. Dad was able to see this dream completed in his life time!

I was living in Pratt at the time and that first road trip to Belleville on US81's new 4-lane brought tears to my eyes. At that time I had hoped that a portion of that special area of Highway 81 would be a source of recognition for my dad, Merle M. Miller.

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