

MUNICIPAL ENGINEERING AS A PROFESSION.*

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There no longer exists the need to drive home the fact that municipal engineering is a distinct profession. There was a time when the statement would have been met with a shrug of the shoulder or a curl of the lip. To-day no dispute is possible. The profession is recognized universally, and its separate existence is proved in that the legislature is the one notable exception that has not yet awakened to the fact that this very lusty infant is among us and is making vigorous outcry for its rights. The pedigree of this interesting infant is lost in obscurity. Road foremen, inspectors of nuisances, village grocers, ex-policemen, drapers and civil engineers of the old school are among its pregenitors, and it is possible that each of these crossings has had its healthy influence upon the matured product.

I am not going to weary you with any of the clap-trap which is talked about the nobility of the profession. Paragraphs on this read well as the peroration to a presidential address, but they mean nothing. Every useful profession honestly practised is as noble as any other, and, after all, men do not usually enter professions simply because they are noble. A means of livelihood is the first need, and opportunity finds it for us. There is certainly no profession in which the possibilities of doing good to one's fellows are so great as that of municipal engineering, but it can scarcely be claimed that the engineer had that fact in view when he competed for his appointment. The inspector of nuisances stands in the same position, and the soft sawder of the professional sanitarian is obvious. To speak of the inspector as a hero who girds on his armour and goes forth to fight the battle in the high cause of humanity is, again, just merely clap-trap. I have met inspectors whose ideals were not quite so high as this.

While speaking of the sanitary inspector a few words on his behalf may be said. There are, of course, inspectors whose sole work is to carry out the orders of the medical officer of health. They are a kind of sanitary police, in whom the organ of smell is popularly supposed to be abnormally developed. They call on cases of infectious disease, and may possibly convey the various complaints wholesale about the district—precisely as the doctor may do. No precautions are taken, and the inspector goes cheerfully from small-pox to diphtheria, from diphtheria to scarlet fever, and so on, calling by the way for refreshment and physical sustenance. His lengthy journeys in rural districts compel this, and I am finding no fault with him. His other duties are to investigate complaints, and to furnish his medical officer of health with sufficient detail to make a formidable report to be prepared and signed by the latter gentleman. There is, however, another class of inspector whose duties include the planning and supervising of engineering works. He is mostly known as a sanitary engineer, although no such appointment is officially recognized. The word "sanitary" is, however, damning, and he is regarded as quite inferior to that official whose whole duties may consist of the maintenance and repair of macadam and gravel or flint highways. The matter is one well worth the consideration of the profession in general, and the hand of fellowship

should not be refused simply because of the restricted definition of a word which really embraces very much.

Municipal engineering is a profession which will some day be found to have usurped the whole field of engineering, except that form known as Government engineering. The consultant will, I am afraid, have a very bad time; but the inevitable has to be faced. As matters are now, the municipal man is not encouraged to prepare schemes of any magnitude, and many who are really capable—there are, of course, quite as many (if not more) who are not capable—conceal their knowledge. There is always trouble about payment where the salaried officer is concerned, and when a fee is arranged it is usually only a proportion of that which the consultant would be paid. Honorariums are merely a means to an end—the end being the payment of an amount equal to about one-tenth of that which is morally due. To come back to my point, however. In every direction now municipal trading is being extended. Municipal schemes to run means more responsibility for the officer, and the necessity for a better class of officer—a more highly-trained and more intelligent man. This, again, means higher salary, larger staff, and better accommodation, together with the less frequent requisitioning of the consultant. It may be urged that never was the consultant so in evidence as during the last few years. It is quite true, but it has to be remembered that he is largely engaged in installing first schemes. Extension will not, in scores of cases, go to him; for the necessity for a highly-trained man to run a concern does away with the necessity for another highly-trained man to repeat, to improve or to extend what has already been done.

There has been much talk of late about improving the status of the profession. The term is a misleading one. What is wanted is to improve the status of the members of the profession, and every man who realizes that he is an adviser, and not a servant, is working on right lines. Municipal engineers must realize their own importance. I do not mean that they should cultivate deep voices and contort themselves into ponderous attitudes. I mean only that they must feel their responsibilities, and recognize the fact that supremacy is their place in local life. Even the chairman of the council is merely a cipher when contrasted with the municipal engineer, and he should, as far as possible, be made to feel this. The chairman may be the better man in many ways, but when it comes to engineering he should be made to recognize the fact that he must play fourth fiddle, and must feel happy that he has not been relegated to the orchestral triangle. A man is estimated in this world much at the value he places upon himself, and the humble, shrinking individual who is led by his council is never likely to command either respect or a periodical increase of salary. The blatant gentleman who boasts freely is much more likely to succeed for a time, but his day is not usually a long one, and he is the last man to make capital out of a reverse of fortune.

I will say nothing harsher of councillors than that they are entirely unnecessary, and I am sadly afraid that security of tenure will be difficult of attainment so long as district councils exist. It is not to be expected—it would be foreign to human nature—that councillors would welcome the continued services of a man with whom they had quarrelled, and of whose services they had endeavored to rid themselves. The life of the officer would be a miniature hell; indeed

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