

HISTORY MAKER

ROBERT WELLS NEILSON

Born: Feb. 23, 1893, Asheville
Died: Dec. 5, 1984, Winston-Salem
Known as: A half century in the Winston-

Salem Public Works Department, after which he compiled the two-volume Winston-Salem-focused "History of Government"

As the newly merged city of Winston-Salem worked to find balance between the needs of a rapidly growing industrial city and those of a quieter, more stable church-centered community, Robert "Bob" Wells Neilson served the city's Public Works Department.

He served the department at its inception in 1915 as a civil engineer who staked out the reservoir on Salem Creek.

For 50 years, he worked in that department as the city embraced the advances of the 20th century.

His tenure as assistant director for 25 years and then director for 12 oversaw installation of miles of water mains, the construction of safe water and sewage treatment facilities, the advent of city waste dumpsters and paving of nearly 300 miles of city streets.

He retired in 1965 and spent the next year compiling an extensive history of the city's government, pulled from official records and his

own unique position in the process.

The middle child and only son of hardware salesman Robert L. Neilson and his first wife, Edith M. Wells, he was born in Asheville. His father remarried and moved the family to Winston by 1910. Robert studied civil engineering at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1913 and returned to Winston-Salem, where he was hired as the city surveyor.

At the time, raw sewage was dumped directly into Peters Creek, most city streets were unpaved, and trash disposal was left to the individual. The 1915, city charter established the Department of Public Works to oversee streets, the water system, public parks and building and street lighting. The Board of Aldermen expanded the scope to include sewer systems, public structures, cemeteries and the collection and disposal of garbage.

Neilson played significant roles in establishment and modernization of these



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elements.

In 1950, he investigated a new way to handle garbage and recommended the city purchase 30 dumpsters and two trucks to haul them to the landfill. A few years later, he championed the innovative "Dempster Dumpster" with the "packmaster" plate that compressed the contents.

In October 1953, Neilson became the fourth Public Works director of the city. He

put radios in city equipment, recommended construction of Peters Creek Parkway and paved 400 city streets.

Neilson worked with 13 city mayors through a period when Winston-Salem's population grew 138% to 115,000. Frank Tursi suggests in his history of Winston-Salem that Bob Neilson could be called "the father of modern Winston-Salem."