

# ARTBA Broadens Scope as 'Golden Age of Roadbuilding' Unfolds

By Tom Kuennen

The onset of the Interstate era in 1956 brought new life to a roadbuilding industry which never had fully recovered from the disaster of World War II.

In the 1960s, mile after mile of fresh pavement was being placed in cornfields alongside battered two-lane rural roads.

New, sleek, wide concrete and steel bridges began to span rivers next to hulking trusses. New structural engineering techniques and materials came into play. Contractors and government agencies had stable, predictable budgets and funding sources with which to plan business strategies and future projects.

Flush with cash, equipment manufacturers were perfecting new, modern designs of roadbuilding equipment that would permit greater productivity and more efficient use of project funds, like concrete slipform pavers.

For better or worse, urban slums were demolished and residents were relocated under housing programs carried out in conjunction with urban expressway construction.

It was not until later, however, that some contractor, engineer and government members of the American Road & Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA) began to think of the 1960s as a "golden age of roadbuilding."

That's because for one, brief, postwar decade, accelerated highway construction was welcomed by public opinion as a local boon, and communities fought in favor of road projects, not against them. That would begin to change as the 1970s approached.

"The activity and enthusiasm surrounding the Interstate program in the early 1960s seem to have a golden glow about them," wrote AASHTO in its definitive history, *The States and the Interstate* (1991)

"Those were golden years," said 1985 ARTBA Chairman Bob Hirschman, chairman of Elderlee,

Inc., and L.S. Lee, Inc., in York, Pa. Hirschman joined ARTBA in 1956, when he worked for H.J. Williams Co., in York.

"There was a lot of work to do," Hirschman said. "There were 42,000 miles of highway to be built. Now there was a plan and we knew they were going to be built. The contractor could look forward to something being out there instead of the whims of each individual state and its department.

"Previously, because there was no federal Interstate funding, you could not know what a state was going to do," Hirschman said. "But with the federal match, no state wanted to lose federal funds, so they had to have a program to build highways."

## A Culmination of the 1956 Act

Federal and state highway contracts awarded in the 1960s bear out Hirschman's contention.

The value of contracts awarded nearly doubled in the decade, from \$3.8 billion in 1959 [\$21.8 billion in 2000], to \$4.4 billion in 1963 to \$5.5 billion in 1967 and \$6.6 billion in 1969 [\$31.5 billion in 2000].

Likewise, new and rebuilt highway mileage increased substantially, and not just on the



Concrete spreading process during the construction of Interstate 80 northeast of Seneca, Ill., in 1963. Photo courtesy of the National Archives.

Interstate system. The total amount of new and rebuilt highways using federal aid hit 172,685 miles in the years 1960 through 1969, inclusive.

"To a large extent, the 1960s were the culmination of the accelerated Interstate road program, and there was a lot of work going on," said

1969 ARTBA Chairman Bob Bartlett, P.E.

The Sixties were a love affair with the automobile and with better highways on which to drive them, Bartlett said. "For the industry, it was a love affair with making road improvements that were so vitally needed. That's why it was a golden era."

During his ARTBA tenure as chairman, Bartlett was Pennsylvania secretary of highways. "There was a lot of construction, a lot of design," Bartlett said. "A lot of equipment was being sold. And people wanted the relief from traffic congestion and from long overnight trips that now take four hours.

"So the roadwork of the Sixties was a fulfillment of America's dreams," Bartlett said. "It constituted an increase in the overall construction market, and we didn't have all of the regulatory, labor, environmental, public hearing, review and other constraints that bedevil the implementation of such a program as we have today."

Bartlett acknowledges that these constraints

**"Our critics are many. Yet, we have gained wide acceptance. As a national program, the Federal Aid Highway Program has proven itself a sound, workable partnership between the Bureau of Public Roads, and the state highway departments. It has proceeded with maximum efficiency and effectiveness to achieve the massive road network we have today. With the completion of the Interstate in the 1970s, the United States of America will have achieved the greatest, most efficient national network of highway facilities in all human history."**

*Russell Holden, Vermont Commissioner of Highways, to ARTBA at its 1967 convention in Miami Beach*

## ARTBA TIMELINE

### 1960

ARTBA meets in Cincinnati.

### 1961

Ralph Bartlesmeyer, Illinois chief highway engineer, elected ARTBA chairman at Atlantic City convention.

### 1963

Boyd S. Oberlink, Allis-Chalmers Mfg. Co., elected ARTBA chairman.

may be in the public interest. “People will say these are valid expenses and valid time delays,” he said “But the Sixties was a decade in which much was done because it could be done, and it was a ramping-up to meet the public’s demand.”

## ARTBA Played Advocacy PR Roles

ARTBA played strong roles in public advocacy and public relations in the boom years of the Sixties.

“ARTBA was the advocate for the industry,” Bartlett said. “We were able to bring to public and legislative attention the roadbuilding needs of this country that were not being met. They did it by implementing public affairs programs, and by advocating public participation at state and local levels. It also actively educated and worked in favor of various federal programs that were authorized over the years, as well as annual appropriations.”

To better administer its growing responsibilities, ARTBA constructed its own office building at 525 School St., S.W., in Washington, D.C. ARTBA’s building was dedicated in June 1965.

The association also spent time in the 1960s advocating the creation of a federal cabinet-level agency to oversee the development of the Interstate Highway System and to manage other transportation issues.

This goal was achieved when the U.S. Department of Transportation was created in 1966.

“The American Road Builders Association speaks often and effectively before Congress and other governmental bodies,” the association said in a 1960s brochure. “Its voice has been heard consistently supporting and advocating a sound and adequate highway program, and the testimony of its leaders has been instrumental in the enactment of enabling legislation. It has also consistently supported Federal-aid in airport construction.”



The ARTBA Building at 525 School St., S.W., in Washington, D.C., opened in 1965.

“[ARTBA] maintains a public information program in support of the public information activities carried out by the state highway departments. We develop factual information and make this information available to newspapers and to various cooperating individuals and agencies, such as the state highway departments, Bureau of Public Roads engineers, good roads associations, county and municipal engineers, highway contractors, local chambers of commerce, and others.”

ARTBA Chairman Boyd S. Oberlink, Allis-Chalmers Inc., in 1965 testimony before a joint congressional committee

In the public relations arena, ARTBA was promoting two association-produced, 16 mm films, *We’ll Take the High Road*, on the problem of communities where an expressway will be built; and *Engineering Your Future*, to interest students in highway engineering.

In the early 1960s, ARTBA was deeply involved in the launch and sustaining of what is now called the annual National Transportation Public Affairs Workshop (NTPAW). The workshop drew state public affairs coordinators and private sector specialists into a workshop setting where common goals could be pursued.

In 1959, several highway industry groups, including ARTBA, organized an autonomous public information group known as the Better Highways Information Foundation (BHIF), a history of NTPAW provided by the Iowa Department of Transportation states.

That group, in conjunction with what was then the American Association of State Highway & Transportation Officials (AASHTO), sponsored a “Public Understanding Workshop” in Washington in February 1961. BHIF, in cooperation with AASHTO, held subsequent workshops in 1962 in Kansas City, Mo., and in 1963 in Washington, D.C.

In 1964, BHIF was terminated and AASHTO and ARTBA agreed to conduct the

workshop, with a 1964 session held in New Orleans. At that time, AASHTO agreed to sponsor a National Highway Week and ARTBA agreed to sponsor the workshop. In 1967, the AASHTO-ARBA Joint Committee (later the AASHTO-AGC-ARTBA Joint Committee) became the administrator of record.

The 1967 and 1968 workshops in Seattle and Hershey, Pa., were both sponsored by ARTBA. But following the launch of The Road Information Program (TRIP) by ARTBA in 1968, outright administrative support for NTPAW fell under the joint committee.

In April 1965, 68 public information professionals representing 30 state highway departments and other segments of the highway industry worked for 2 1/2 days at the fifth such workshop. Topics covered highway safety promotion, job-site PR by contractors, exhibits in retail locations, film production and a potential National Highway Week.



In 1965, testimony before a joint congressional hearing, ARTBA Chairman Boyd S. Oberlink, Allis-Chalmers Inc., called for funds for the Department of Commerce for a program of public information and education, with an emphasis on highway safety.

“Many agencies of the federal government engage extensively in public information and education activities, but very little, relatively speaking, is done in the highway field,” he said.

## ARTBA Battles Opponents of Highways

None of this endeared ARTBA to the growing opponents of highway construction.

### ARTBA TIMELINE

#### 1964

ARTBA meets in New Orleans.

#### 1965

Association builds new Washington, D.C., headquarters at 525 School Street, S.W.

John Moss, president, Moss-Thornton Co., elected ARTBA chairman.

In Helen Leavitt's 1960s-formulated screed *Superhighway-Superhoax*, published in 1970, she purports to show how ARTBA and other allied associations all were part of an evil cabal which was ramming unwanted highways through America's cities and countryside.

"ARBA explains that there is nothing wrong with public officials belonging to ARBA, a trade association, because ARBA speaks for its entire membership and feels that the views of the highway officials who administer the program are important to the process of developing policies which are in the best interests of the highway program as a whole," Leavitt wrote in ironic candor.

The Hon. Jennings Randolph, Democrat from West Virginia, is one such politician,

she wrote, but there hardly could be a more distinguished member of ARTBA. In 1933, he entered the House and served there for 14 years, active in public works and well-versed in highway construction.

In 1948, he left Congress and worked for ARTBA as treasurer for 10 years, while also working as assistant to the president of Capital Airlines. In that post, he served on ARTBA's Municipal and Airport Division.

In 1958, Randolph was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he attained the chairmanship of the Senate Committee on Public Works. He retired from the Senate in 1985 and died at the age of 98 in 1998.

She also dismissed ARTBA's film, *We'll Take the High Road*, as a Hollywood propaganda piece engineered by ARTBA's then chief executive, Gen. Louis Prentiss.

**"From sea to shining sea we are strangling in a concrete strait-jacket that pollutes the environment and makes driving a nightmare. This book tells why."**

*-- Jacket blurb of "Superhighway-Superhoax," by Helen Leavitt (1970)*

Martin said in his ARTBA talk, *Highways and the Great Society*.

Martin elaborated on external benefits to society of highway spending, increased employment and ripple employment due to new roads, the saving of lives from better highways, and ongoing transportation planning and research.

In his presentation to ARTBA, Martin pre-saged today's intermodalism and demand management congestion control techniques. "We must consider possible changes in the motor vehicle itself," he said. "We must consider the possible future division of travel among automobiles, buses, rail transit, and possibly new forms of transportation."

Beginning in 1962, federal law required that federal aid highways in urban areas be constructed to conform to comprehensive planning that would take into account all modes of transportation.

The conformity requirement appeared in President John F. Kennedy's Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962. Henceforth, Interstate construction would be subject to the "3-C" process of "continuing, comprehensive and cooperative" planning.

States and cities over 50,000 population would have to develop future programs that considered other transportation modes, and to follow guidelines of other federal agencies.

"Implementation of this requirement, which is now underway in most of the cities

**"ARTBA's been a true leader on behalf on the construction industry, and it has done yeoman's work on behalf of the motoring public for the entire 20th century. I'm proud to have been chairman, proud of its accomplishments, and proud to have been a member for part of its 100 years."**

*1969 ARTBA Chairman Bob Bartlett*

## Highways and the Great Society

President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Great Society programs of the 1960s irrevocably inserted Big Government into U.S. culture, and highways and ARTBA were in the thick of it.

"In outlining his goals for the Great Society last year, the president reminded us that in the remainder of this century, urban population will double, city land use will double, and we will have to build homes, highways and other facilities equal to all those built since the country was first settled," said Clarence D. Martin, undersecretary for transportation, Department of Commerce, at the 63rd annual meeting of ARTBA in Washington, D.C., in February 1965.

"Despite the splendid record of 19,000 miles of Interstate now open to traffic, our record of construction inside our cities calls for vast improvement,"



President John F. Kennedy during the signing ceremony of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962.

## Opposition To Expressways Began Early

While urban expressways were welcomed throughout the 1960s, it was not until the 1970s that public opinion began to sway against highways as the environmental movement blossomed. But intellectual sentiment began to rage against the big new Interstate program as early as September 1957.

That's when the first antihighway conference was held, reported the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The conference—titled "The New Highways: Challenge to the Metropolitan Region"—was sponsored by the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company in Hartford.

The Hartford Conference was the first formal confrontation between the highway community and city planners and critics, and was led by urban intellectual Lewis Mumford. For the first time, urban planners and critics—not the highway community—received favorable press coverage.

Mumford, in a scathing denunciation of the Interstate program, said that the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 "was jammed through Congress so blithely and lightly ... because we Americans have an almost automatic inclination to favor anything that seems to give added attraction to the second mistress that exists in every household right alongside the wife: the motor car."

### ARTBA TIMELINE

#### 1966

**Bureau of Public Roads consolidated with other agencies into the cabinet-level U.S. Department of Transportation.**

**J. Burch McMorran, superintendent, New York Department of Public Works, elected ARTBA chairman.**

#### 1967

**Dan Hanson, Sr., joins ARTBA as deputy executive vice president.**

covered by the act, can do much to rationalize the transportation systems of our cities and make them responsive to, and coordinated with, long-range civic needs,” Martin told ARTBA in 1965.

## ARTBA Launches TRIP

A landmark in highway public relations took place in 1968, when ARTBA launched The Road Information Program (TRIP). TRIP, now independent of ARTBA, is an educational effort dedicated to publicizing road needs on a statewide and national basis.

Creation of TRIP was approved by ARTBA’s board at its 1968 convention in Las Vegas, based on a plan developed by the association’s Public Information and Education Committee, headed by Mike Spronck of CIMA, also ARTBA’s Manufacturers Division. Also participating in the early launch were Jess Buchanan, president of The Asphalt Institute, and Ralph Heffner and Don Stabler, members of ARTBA’s Contractors Division.

TRIP began with \$50,000 seed contributions from ARTBA and CIMA, and in May 1968, hired Don Knight—a newspaperman—to operate the program under T. Randolph “Randy” Russell, ARTBA’s director of public relations. “I came in as the TRIP coordinator and worked with the ARTBA Contractors Division to get it going,” Knight said.

Later, he said, it was realized that TRIP’s funding must come from a broader base than only ARTBA and CIMA, but that potential contributors might be reluctant to contribute to TRIP if it remained completely under ARTBA’s umbrella. “To make it successful, many other organizations had to be behind TRIP, and the only way to do that was to incorporate separately, which we did in 1969,” Knight said.

In November 1970, TRIP held its first

board meeting as an independent organization, and last year celebrated its 30th anniversary.

## Putting the T in ARBA

As the decade of the 1960s drew to a close, the drift toward multimodalism—as evidenced by the Great Society philosophy—was becoming very clear.

The consolidation of multiple transportation modes within the U.S. Department of Transportation in the mid-1960s presaged the movement of ARBA from strictly a roadbuilding entity to one representing transportation builders of all modes.

On Oct. 16, 1966, Congress combined over 30 separate transportation agencies, functions or entities—foremost among them the Bureau of Public Roads—into a large department of cabinet-level status. At this time two-thirds of the DOT’s mission involved highways.

Many ARTBA members were divided as to whether multimodalism meant a diminution of highways against competing modes, or a broadening of ARTBA’s scope to encompass the entire transportation infrastructure.

While ARTBA did not change its name until 1977, the debate there unfolded in the late 1960s, led by Bartlett. That’s why it’s said that “Bob Bartlett put the ‘T’ in ARTBA.”



ARTBA Past Chairmen (right) Bob Bartlett (1969) and Ralph Bartlesmeyer (1961) speak with John Volpe (left), the second U.S. Secretary of Transportation.

“It was an evolutionary process,” Bartlett said. “We set up a modality advisory council to the association that included recognition of other transportation elements. We were able to start working as an advocate for transit,

rail and airport transportation construction programs, which ultimately was confirmed by the name change in 1977.”

**NEXT MONTH:**  
**Environmentalism Comes To Fore**  
**As Interstate Work Advances (1970-1979)**

## 100th Anniversary Trivia..

1. What year was the Materials & Services Division established?  
 A) 1948                      C) 1954  
 B) 1951                      D) 1957
2. What year was the Highway Trust Fund created?  
 A) 1948                      C) 1956  
 B) 1952                      D) 1960
3. What year was the Planning & Design Division established?  
 A) 1956                      C) 1964  
 B) 1960                      D) 1968
4. Which of the following ARTBA presidents who also served as an engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers?  
 A) Dan Hanson  
 B) Pete Ruane  
 C) E.L. Powers  
 D) Louis W. Prentiss
5. Which U.S. President signed legislation creating the U.S. Department of Transportation?  
 A) Lyndon Johnson  
 B) John Kennedy  
 C) Dwight Eisenhower  
 D) Richard Nixon
6. Which former first lady once spoke at an ARTBA annual convention?  
 A) Pat Nixon  
 B) Mamie Eisenhower  
 C) Bess Truman  
 D) Lady Bird Johnson

Answers: B, C, A, D, A, D



### ARTBA TIMELINE

#### 1968

**Robert S. Holmes, U.S. Steel, elected ARTBA chairman.**

**Burton F. Miller appointed association president (1968-71).**

#### 1969

**Bob Bartlett, Pennsylvania secretary of highways, elected ARTBA chairman at Chicago convention.**