

TURNER RECOLLECTIONS- Alan E. Pisarski

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Being Chair of the History Committee has been the most fun I have had in all my activities over the years with TRB. It has been my privilege to have a front row seat from which to observe some absolutely first class people applying their craft. So it has been with this activity regarding the role and place in transportation history of Frank Turner. Like most of us I share knowledge of Frank Turner, off in the distance somewhere, as an eminent actor in our field, but fortunately in my case that appreciation was leavened by knowledge of the man personally in his (and I guess, my) later years.

The early years can be best exemplified by a story I recall from my first days in the Office of the Secretary US DOT. When my bosses met with Secretary Volpe to exhort him to address issues of transportation and land use interactions – Volpe responded: “Go see Frank Turner down on the fourth floor – he makes more land use decisions before breakfast than I will in my entire tenure!”

More recently I often had occasion to see Frank more personally as a member of a totally unstructured group that got together monthly or so to do “show and tell” about transportation issues, that Frank had helped to organize. He was always the quietest in the group but the meeting was always better when Frank was present. Over the years, as his eyesight faded more and more, he began to leave his old car at home and take to the benefits of metro that was a short drive from his home. Even that became a chore at some point, and I began to pick him up and drop him off for the meetings. Frank lived alone for many years, taking care of himself, in a modest home in Arlington located, I thought ironically, in one of the worst traffic situations one could imagine. His driveway backed onto a T intersection with blind spots in two of the directions. I shuddered every time I went in or out.

Those trips were a treasure to me. Particularly after the meetings when something in our session had triggered some long ago stream of thought or experience in him and he shared them as we drove home. The one occasion I remember best was his recounting of how the first attempts to get funding for the Interstate in 1955 had ended in failure in the Congress. He was very much down then after what he saw as not only a bitter loss, but a situation from which he could not see any successful way out.

He said he was sitting in his office looking rather disconsolate when Francis Dupont, then Bureau of Public Roads Commissioner, passed by and saw him. Dupont went to his office and returned with a gift. It was a fine watch that Dupont had acquired on a recent trip to Europe and had intended to save as a victory present for Frank. Seeing him so down he decided that the watch would do better right now. He gave it to Frank not just to cheer him up but to use it to recognize that time works to your favor sometimes and that patience and continued effort over time will eventually work.

By that point in his story we had reached Frank's terrible driveway. We went inside and I sat in the living room while he rummaged about and came out with the watch to show me. As I sat and held it he told me of the subsequent efforts to bring together a way to fund the system. Of course, we know that the subsequent efforts in 1956 were successful and the system was born – and as we say in the Committee – the rest was history.

I am delighted that TRB has chosen this mechanism to remember Frank Turner. And I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce to you the work and thoughts of some very fine people about a very fine man. (Damian Kulash, President and CEO of the Eno Foundation and Committee member, deserves special mention for the original idea for the TRB session on Frank and for assembling and organizing the people and materials for this undertaking.) As Chair of the History Committee I have to use this occasion to make the point that this panel was not a paper session and because there was no taping of the session, all of this material would have been lost in the moment it was created. TRB must consider mechanisms to record those sessions like this one that deserve preservation – perhaps a fund that will permit the costs of taping to be defrayed. It was only through the efforts of many people that this panel was turned into a permanent record that you have the pleasure of enjoying today and others will have the opportunity to enjoy tomorrow.

AEP