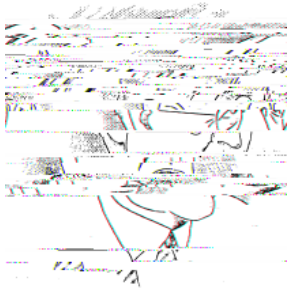


Bob Fletcher, Montana's Roadside Historian

By Jon Axline, MDT Historian



The Montana Department of Transportation was profoundly impacted by the Great Depression during the 1930s. Beginning in 1933, the federal government attempted to ease the effects of the economic calamity by funding public improvement projects in the states on an unprecedented scale. The subsequent road and bridge-building boom coincided with an expansion of tourism in Montana during the depression. The old State Highway Commission actively sought ways to attract tourists to the Treasure State through a series of programs developed by the department's Plans Engineer, Robert H. Fletcher. Fletcher was the perfect man for the job. A gregarious natural-born story teller, he turned his love of Montana and its history into one of the most unique interpretive signing programs of its day, the highway historical markers.

Born in Clear Lake, Iowa, in 1885, Bob Fletcher came to Montana in 1908 and worked as a surveyor for the United States Reclamation and U.S. Land Services, and as Helena's Public Works Director before his employment by the State Highway Commission. In 1928, the Commission hired him as a Resident Engineer. Three years later, in 1931, he was promoted to Plans Engineer and spent the next decade developing and writing the state's tourism promotional material. In May 1935, he implemented the highway markers program to "publicize points of interest along [the] highways and thereby make their use as pleasant, attractive, and instructive as possible." Over the next six years, the team of Fletcher, department graphic artist "Shorty" Shope, and sign-maker "Ace" Kindrick, wrote, designed, and built over 100 highway markers, many of which still stand next to the state's highways. Many markers were located in roadside parks and picnic areas (also a Fletcher innovation) that also enhanced the motorists' experience in Montana. The folksy, laid-back writing style of the highway markers proved immensely popular with both Montanans and visitors to the state, garnering praise from such notables as historian Bernard DeVoto and journalist Ernie Pyle.

Along with the historical markers, Fletcher wrote the department's promotional material, including *Headin' for the Hills* (1937) and *Picture Writing* (1938), published the first of the state's colorful highway maps in 1934, and established visitors' centers at Montana's ports of entry. Based on a successful program in South Dakota, the ports-of-entry stations were rustic-looking log cabins designed and built by the highway department. They were located at each of the main highways on the

Montana border and were manned by “well-mannered” college students duded up in blue jeans, western-style shirts, cowboy boots, and bandannas. The attendants distributed promotional literature, answered questions about Montana’s history, recreational opportunities, accommodations, restaurants, and other attractions.

Fletcher also established a roadside museum program and was able to convince the Highway Commission to purchase the Pictograph Cave site near Billings in 1938. Only two roadside museums were built by the highway department during the 1930s. The first, built about 1935, was located at the junction of U.S. Highway 12 and 91 in Helena near a roadside beautification project adjacent to the city dump on North Main Street. That building now stands next to Louie’s convenience store on Eleventh Avenue in Helena. In 1938, the department constructed the second museum at Fireman’s Park in Laurel. Fletcher worked tirelessly to scrounge artifacts for exhibit in the museum, built the display cases, and hired a Crow Indian family to run the museum. The family lived in a tepee on the museum grounds and provided demonstrations of Indian life to tourists passing through Laurel on U.S. Highway 10. Many of the artifacts displayed in the museum were excavated from Pictograph Cave.

From 1938 to 1942, Fletcher also edited the MDT’s mimeographed newsletter, *The Centerline*. More a booklet than anything else, the newsletter included articles written by department employees, information about pending federal legislation, departmental gossip, and humorous interviews with a few select engineers. He also took the time to author a collection of cowboy poetry, which was illustrated by Shorty Shope, and put out the first compilation of highway marker texts in 1937. Because of his tourism programs, the newsletter and his publications, there is little doubt that Bob Fletcher was the highway department’s most well-known employee in the 1930s.

In 1942, Fletcher resigned from the department to take a job as the Public Relations director at Montana Power Company. For several years, however, he continued to write historical marker texts for the Commission. He served for a time as a trustee of the Montana Historical Society and authored one of the seminal books on the Montana cattle industry, *Free Grass to Fences* in 1960. Fletcher died in California in 1972 at age 87. His legacy during the Great Depression continues. The highway historical marker program is still vibrant with new signs added every year. Although the wording has changed on some, they still tell the story of Montana’s colorful history to anyone willing to stop and read them.