

## Oscar Epstein Career and Life - Boston Globe Article 2012

### Oscar Epstein, Mass.'s oldest employee, keeps on working

By Eric Moskowitz

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Oscar Epstein rides the Green Line to work at the state's Highway Division.

The son of an immigrant tailor, Oscar Epstein grew up in the old West End, peddling papers with Melvin Nimoy, whose kid brother would become Spock. He served in World War II, studied engineering on the GI Bill, and helped design Route 128, that symbol of postwar prosperity and suburbanization.

Now 89, he reads the newspaper *The Forward* in Yiddish, nurtures a bunny named Horatio, and cut his own lawn until last summer, using a push mower. All this would be notable enough if Epstein were playing shuffleboard in Boca. But he's not much for Florida, and he never retired.

A few weeks ago, Epstein began his 64th year with what is now called the Department of Transportation's Highway Division. MassDOT named him employee of the month for December.

"I want to recognize Oscar Epstein; he joined the Highway Division in 1949," Secretary of Transportation Richard A. Davey said, waiting for the gasps to subside at the last board meeting. "Let me repeat that: He joined the Highway Division in 1949."

The award was not about longevity but work ethic. Epstein enjoys his job so much that his co-workers sometimes catch him humming. When his Green Line commute is delayed, he docks his time card, stays late, or draws down vacation time. He once considered retiring and collecting his pension, but dropped the idea after discovering he could not keep coming in as a volunteer.

So it figured that Epstein was at his desk, working, while Davey read the commendation and the nomination from - Epstein's supervisor recognizing his attitude, attention to detail, mentorship of younger co-workers — they are all younger — and intellect, remaining a quick study.

"So many others that should get it," said Epstein, shaking his head. He politely declined to be interviewed until his son persuaded him otherwise; he agreed under the condition that it not happen in the office (too much attention) and that no one try to buy him lunch or coffee. He does not let even his children — a psychologist, a dentist, and a Los Alamos scientist — treat him.

Epstein's boss, Michael Schwartz, recalled taking over the group that assembles and reviews highway and bridge design contracts about eight years ago and sizing up the team's lone engineer: a slightly built man already in his 80s, shy and mumbly around new people.

He quickly learned not to underestimate Epstein. “When I give him an assignment, he’s like a bulldog,” Schwartz said. “I shouldn’t say this, but when I write something, I always have Oscar proofread, because I always make mistakes.”

State records show Epstein is the oldest of 34,974 employees under the governor, a list that excludes legislative staff and some quasi-public agencies, though a wildlife biologist and a public health analyst were hired earlier.

Epstein might have edged their tenure, too, if not for the war and a foray with a private firm. Taking night classes toward a master’s, he became friendly with a classmate who worked for the state, which was hiring engineers for its own construction spree seven years before Eisenhower established the Interstate Highway System.

Better job security, his friend promised. “‘You’ll get a job, and you’ll stay,’” Epstein recalled the friend saying. “I guess he was right.”

He started a day before his 26th birthday, with a starting salary around \$3,000; he now makes \$80,000. His reasons for staying are simple: He likes the work and the people.

Epstein looks like Bobby Valentine by way of Michael Dukakis and Al Lewis, television’s Grandpa Munster, dark-eyebrowed, a face creased from frequent smiling. He sounds how you would expect someone to sound who grew up in the West End, the Jewish-Italian enclave razed 50 years ago: like Miracle Max, Billy Crystal’s character in “The Princess Bride,” but with Boston’s non-rhotic Rs.

Family life mirrored work: He stayed, others got accolades, fine with him. The middle of three boys, Epstein’s older brother went to MIT and became a math professor at Technion, Israel’s MIT; his younger brother went to Harvard and became a chemist, settling in New Jersey.

“They were real smart,” he said. “Way ahead of me, these guys.”

Epstein went to Northeastern, moving as far as Chelsea and Brookline, looking after his parents. His father, Harry, died at 68, still working; his mother, Fannie, lived into her 90s.

Epstein delivered The Daily Record, but has spent a lifetime since staying out of the papers. His name has appeared in the Globe twice, for a seventh-grade honor at Boston Latin (1936) and an engagement notice placed by his future in-laws, the Paticks, in 1947.

Young Oscar hauled clothing and helped his father pull apart seams, labor that steered him to college. He interrupted his studies to volunteer for the war, at 19.

Studying civil engineering, not electrical, he was surprised to be assigned to the Army Signal Corps, running power and communication lines to the front in France and then Germany. Better pay, fewer hazards than infantry.

“They made a mistake, but it was a good mistake,” he said.

Discharged in '46, he met Adele Patick at a dance, drawn by her brown eyes and appreciation for books. “A good catch,” he said.

With the state, he spent several years designing highways and about 15 drawing bridges and overpasses. He misses the satisfaction of seeing designs become real, but considers his current job well suited to his age. He appreciates the friendliness of his co-workers, who often invite him to lunch and sometimes call at home.

He took time off once, caring for Adele during the three months between her diagnosis with ALS and her death in 2010. He misses her and misses her cooking. His salary does not go as far now that he eats out often, frequenting Legal Sea Foods; it beats frozen meals and, best of all, is near work. “They know me over there,” he said.

His children know better than to broach retirement. “Work is who he is,” said Bennet Epstein, a South Shore psychologist, proud of his father’s transition from slide rules to software. “He’s not a golfer; he doesn’t fish. He likes to read. Work . . . is his hobby.”

Sitting in the food court below the Transportation Building, Epstein said he would stay as long as he feels healthy and productive.

“I like it here,” he said, shrugging. And then he got up. He had to return to work.

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