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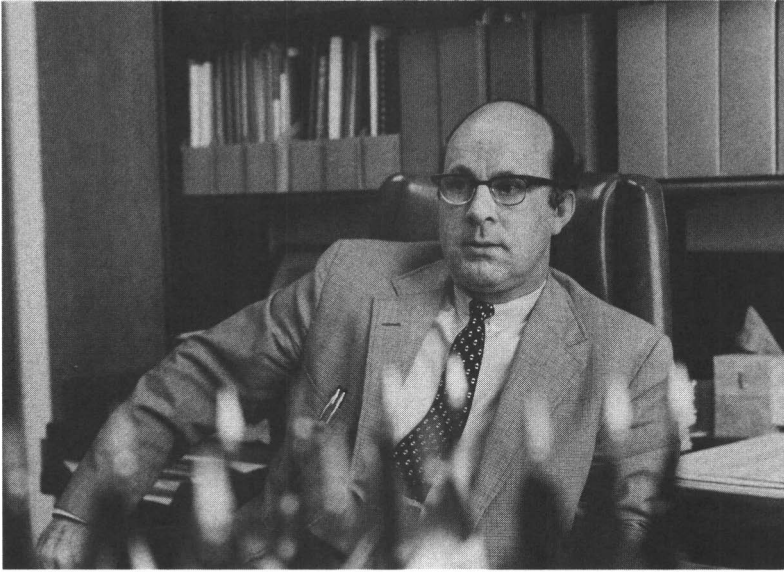


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John Whisman

It has been said that the difference between a dreamer and a leader is that one has the capacity to help us see the future and the other has the ability to help us get there. John Whisman was a leader. He, Bert Combs, John Sherman Cooper, Jennings Randolph and a host of others of his generation had a vision of what Appalachia might become. Theirs was a generation that had come of age in World War II and shared an abiding confidence in the ability of the American way to overcome challenges, to fight poverty and depression, and to build a brighter future through science and technology. It was a “can do” generation that learned to work together for a common goal.

But in a generation of visionaries it was John Whisman who also knew how to turn that vision into action. He was always their planner whether he was figuring out a more efficient way to read a bomb site in

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World War II, sketching out the Kentucky parkway system on a napkin with Bert Combs, or designing his next Frank Lloyd Wright style house. He helped to design a system of strategic governmental programs that would forever change the mountains and would transform national policy toward the region. John can rightly be called the father of the Appalachian Regional Commission and of the Kentucky Area Development Districts. He knew how this system of area strategic development should work, and, combined with the political skills of Bert Combs and Ned Breathitt, he helped to bring more change to the Commonwealth and to eastern Kentucky than at any other period of recent history.

I first got to know John Whisman in 1989, when John and Ann moved back to Kentucky after their retirement. John, of course, never retired. He only shifted his field of operations, for he was a man with a mission—if only he could convince others to see the world in the systematic and strategic way that he understood reality. He was first and foremost an engineer who wanted to make the system work more efficiently, to design a system of program delivery that made the unlikely possible and brought people together to accomplish a shared task. Above all he loved Kentucky and especially his native Eastern Kentucky, and he returned when he believed that the system of strategic development that he had helped to create had weakened and lost the energy and popular support of his earlier years.

When he walked into my office that day he didn't look like a man who had been an advisor to Governors and Presidents and the architect of major agencies and programs. Despite his many years of dedicated public service, John never acquired any financial security or personal wealth from his work. He always lived on the margin, like the people he cared about and tried to help. His worn suit and long hair masked a man of great intellect, tremendous experience, and deep commitment. He was one of the most insightful men I have known, and although, as Ann has politely said, "he had a gift for obscurity" in some of the things he wrote, few questioned his creativity and conviction. I was drawn to him most, perhaps, by his passion, his concern for people and for making government work on their behalf. Over the past six years I have spent many hours with John, sharing ideas, identifying issues and leaders, and identifying ways to bring diverse interest groups together to revitalize the strategic planning process in Kentucky. He was confident that if you could just get people together, talking with each other, communicating and working together you could achieve what others said was impossible. He would always leave my office re-energized and me tired, and within a couple of days I would receive one of those

Whismanesque twenty-page memos outlining our discussion complete with charts and graphs to illustrate his ideas.

The major focus of his work over the past six years was the restoration of the Area Development Districts and the Kentucky Strategic Development process to the vitality that he had known before he moved to Washington. Central to this effort was the work of the Governor's Kentucky Appalachian Task Force which made the revitalization of community-based strategic development a core goal in its vision for Eastern Kentucky. John was never one to dwell very long on the problems, he was more interested in creating structures that could address those problems, but he recognized that his work in Eastern Kentucky was only half done. While major progress had been made in some areas, the region still needed special attention, and the entry for that attention must come from within Appalachian communities and from Appalachian leaders themselves with government providing appropriate technical support. The banner had been passed to a new generation that struggled with the same issues that he had once faced, and John was determined to finish his job and pass on his knowledge and experience in creating effective change. The ongoing work of the regional Task Force and a rededicated Area Development System stand monument to his efforts.

There is a verse in Proverbs that reads: "Where there is no vision the people perish." John Whisman helped us to keep dreaming, to keep thinking about what we might become and how we can work together to get there. Above all, he helped us to design governmental systems that could make things happen if we would only use them effectively. He helped to provide a vision for the people, but more than that, he helped the people themselves to dream.

John used to wear a tie on special occasions that had significance to his life—a hand woven tie embroidered with the map of Appalachia. He wore it with pride. Perhaps more than any other single individual of his generation, he helped to shape modern Appalachia and his legacy will live on in all our lives. Like the piecing together of a mountain quilt, John pulled the scraps of a diverse and scattered region together into a new cloth. The region is still diverse, still a mixture of the old and the new, but John has helped us learn how to come together with strength and purpose. Wherever he is today, we can be confident that John is organizing, trying to make things better. He would want us to do the same.