

Fifty Years and Counting

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When Bill Levin asked me to participate in this session he suggested that I use “selective memories” about SECAC and posed several possible topics for my consideration:

1. Joys and pitfalls of running the annual conference
2. Presidents I have known and loved
3. Development of the *Newsletter* and/or the *Review*
4. Recollections of highlights of various meetings and/or sites
5. Changing financial considerations

While it is not my intention to address any of these specifically, I will probably touch on each in some way and without doubt the latter at some length. I will specifically avoid number two: Presidents I have known and loved. I hope it goes without saying that I have respected, enjoyed, and even loved all of them. And this presentation is truly from my selective memory, for before I delivered the SECAC archives, including minutes, to the University of Tennessee Library, I did not have time to compose this paper. It is probably just as well because you are spared the minutia that I would have been tempted to include had I had access to the raw data.

What I want to do in this brief presentation is to review the history of the SECAC staff position and consider its significance for the organization. I have realized that it is almost impossible for me to address this topic without reviewing my personal involvement in SECAC, without addressing the history of the organization, and without divulging some personal history and information. I hope that you will indulge that.

My first experience with SECAC was in 1950 when I was a graduate student in the newly established MFA program at then Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina, now the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. I do not remember the organization’s name at the time, but I had the usual student awareness of the preoccupation of the faculty, of assignments to clean the

studios, and probably of the suspension of classes. Any sessions that I attended have long since disappeared from my memory.

My next awareness of SECAC came ten years later when I, a new member of the faculty of the Art Department at the University of Georgia, was invited to participate on the program of SECAC, which was again meeting in Greensboro at UNC-G. Andrew Morgan, head of the Art Department of the University of Mississippi, who had been a fellow graduate student at UNC-G, was driving to Athens to pick me up, and we were to drive on to Greensboro. I am not sure but think this was in March, and an unexpected and unseasonably heavy snowstorm interrupted those plans. Andy had the courage to go on to Greensboro, but I canceled.

Later in that year, 1960, I married Howard Thomas, senior painting professor at the University of Georgia, and during the eleven years until his death in 1971 we attended a number of SECAC conferences which I recall quite clearly: in 1962 we went to Knoxville where the conference was hosted by the University of Tennessee and where we were welcomed at an opening party at the home of Buck Ewing, chair of the Art Department; in 1963 a group of us drove from Athens to Tuscaloosa where the conference was hosted by the University of Alabama and where some of the sessions of the Southeastern Composers Conference, meeting simultaneously, were a particular attraction; in 1964 we went to Chapel Hill for a meeting hosted by the University of North Carolina, with a welcoming party at the home of Joe Sloane and a memorable business session when the "Statement of Standards and Principles" was formulated and adopted; and in 1966 we went to Chattanooga for a conference hosted by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where my husband introduced his longtime friend Carl Holty, who was the guest speaker.

Howard Thomas enjoyed SECAC for many of the reasons that I hear you say that you participate. He liked its size, which he found comfortable and relaxed. (During our eleven years together we never attended College Art Association meetings.) He thoroughly enjoyed, respected, and maintained contact with his colleagues in the Southeast, many of whom were actively involved in SECAC. I heard many stories and many references to those individuals who were part of the Southeastern art community in the '40s and '50s: Gulnar and Gerry Bosch, Emil Holzhauer, Dawn Kennedy, John Allcott, Ed Yaghjian, Creighton Gilbert, George Richey, Hollis Holbrook, Kenneth Ness...the list could go on and on.

After I became officially involved in SECAC in 1973, I had occasion to organize minutes and other papers, and I was still reviewing my late husband's files and papers. I found that Howard had been active

in SECAC from its beginning. I have no written record that he was present at the organizational meeting of the Southeastern Regional Conference of the College Art Association on January 17, 1942, at Sweet Briar College, but I do have documentation that at the meeting on October 31, 1942, at Salem College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Howard Thomas was acting secretary, for John Canaday, and was elected president at that meeting. Records show that he held that post until 1947; meetings were not held from 1943-45 because of the war.

The Eighth Annual Meeting of the Southeastern College Art Conference, held in Louisville, Kentucky, in March 1949, was really the first annual meeting under that name. The minutes of the 1948 meeting include the following:

Howard Thomas reporting on organization proposed the following: a. that the name be changed from the Southeastern Regional Conference of the College Art Association to the Southeastern College Art Conference (since the College Art Association does not recognize us as a regional or branch group); b. that a broad simple statement of the purpose of the organization be drawn up (we have never had a constitution); c. that dues be raised from \$1.00 to \$2.00; d. that the following states be added: Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Kentucky, Tennessee, making a total of ten counting those already members of the group (i.e. Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida). It was moved by William McDermitt and seconded by John Rembert that this report be accepted as a basis governing our future actions. The motion carried.

So, the SECAC that we know came into being. The people that I heard about from those founding years, the people that I had the opportunity to meet and know, form so many connections with those who are today active participants in the organization.

Now that I have placed myself in a context of SECAC's beginning years and have given a fragmentary outline of SECAC's history, I want to address the past twenty-eight years and my role as SECAC staff.

SECAC continued operating from 1949 to 1973 much as it had from the beginning, with all functions fulfilled by volunteers. It is my understanding that the 1972 conference was a near financial disaster, and out of the experience came the idea, set forth by John Schnorrenberg, to create a part-time staff position. The objective was to provide continuity and a greater degree of financial control. The organization at its meeting in Atlanta in the spring of 1973 designated me as the SECAC staff person. I

honestly cannot remember the specific title of the job, but I have record that the remuneration was \$100 per month.

It was in 1973 that SECAC changed its meeting date from spring to fall, so a second conference was held in the fall of 1973 in Nashville, Tennessee. That was my first conference as SECAC staff, and it was a particular pleasure to work with my friend and former colleague, Ham Hazlehurst, then chair of the Art Department at Vanderbilt and president of SECAC.

My role as SECAC staff shifted when I began full-time teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1974. I became secretary-treasurer of the organization on a volunteer basis, and a staff assistant worked under my supervision. It was SECAC's good fortune—and mine—that Kay Smith became the staff assistant. When, in 1981, I assumed a job in Reston, Virginia, and no longer had time for SECAC involvement, Joan Gregory of UNC-G became secretary-treasurer and Kay Smith continued as staff assistant and provided fifteen years of continuity and professional support.

What was happening to the organization as a result of having a staff? Of course, those were the days of three-by-five cards, of lists typed on a manual typewriter, carbon copies, and hand-entry bookkeeping. But we were developing systems for maintaining membership records, systems for conference registration, and systems for accounting for and reporting on income and expenditures. There were conference planning meetings and conference budgets.

For ten years I was on the periphery of SECAC: I attended a couple of conferences for personal pleasure and heard through Kay Smith about some of the activities and achievements. Then in 1991 several things happened: Kay Smith took a full-time job which precluded her continuation as SECAC staff, and I decided to retire from my job in Reston and return to Chapel Hill. As an indication that the staff position had professional status, I was asked to come to the meeting in Atlanta to be interviewed for the position of administrator. The position of administrator really rolled into one position the responsibilities of the volunteer secretary-treasurer and the staff assistant.

In the years that I had been inactive many changes had occurred, but the two that seem most significant to me were that SECAC had acquired a computer, with all the attendant changes in record keeping that this tool made possible, and that the presidency had been separated from the conference site. As you know, the president is now elected to serve a three-year term, and each conference site has a local chair. Financially, the organization was on solid footing with a reserve of \$10,000.

Certainly, one of the things that please me the most is that, in the ten years since my reentry into SECAC, that \$10,000 reserve has increased to \$75,000. A bequest of \$15,000 from the estate of Gulnar Bosch accounts for part of the increase, but the rest is due to procedures and planning that are central to what we have accomplished in the past decade. Our financial oversight has steadily become more effective and disciplined. While not all conferences make a significant profit, we have not had a deficit conference. This is the result of better conference planning and budgeting. We have developed a conference planning manual which gives direction to conference hosts covering the three-year period from the time an invitation is accepted, and there is continued staff and Board of Directors monitoring of all aspects of planning, including financial. Having a reserve not only provides a source of income from its earnings but insurance against any unforeseen and unavoidable disaster which would leave SECAC financially vulnerable.

SECAC has two major activities: the annual conference and publication of the *SECAC Review*. The conference is one of the principal concerns for staff, and over the years much time and effort has been expended in trying to make the logistics as smooth, workable, and effective as possible. Staff has no role in planning and developing the program; that is the responsibility of the host institution. However, staff does provide support and assists in gathering information that expedites the work of the program chairs. Every conference is different, and the problems that occur at one conference generate ideas and systems for solving those problems. Some years ago we often had program participants come to the registration desk and express surprise when they learned that membership and registration fees were required of them. We even had participants who refused to pay, believing that they were doing the organization a service by participating on the program. We seem to have eliminated that problem through the development of conference policies and guidelines for program participants. It is a constant challenge, and an ongoing principle of operation, to provide maximum assistance and the continuity that comes from experience without imposing systems and procedures that become bureaucratic encumbrances to innovation and individuality.

The *SECAC Review* is not a staff responsibility, but its growth and development into a significant professional publication must be noted. In preparing the issues of the *Review* to deliver to the University of Tennessee I was struck by the change in the appearance of the journal. From a thin, mimeographed, stapled few pages it has grown to an impressively designed, bound, and weighty volume. It is staff's function to handle post-publication distribution of the *Review*, and my impression, from the orders that we get from both domestic and international sources, is that it is a highly respected professional journal.

The *SECAC Newsletter* is a staff responsibility, and it is an ongoing challenge to make it as readable and informative as possible. I would emphasize that communicating with members is a major challenge for staff; providing content and designing materials so that members read and respond to them in a timely fashion is always an objective. I should note here that getting internet connections and developing a website in the past three to four years has been a major factor in improving communications, and the potential for utilizing these tools can certainly be expanded in the future.

Membership in SECAC has grown at all levels. Today individual membership is between 400 and 500; institutional over 100. Keeping membership fees, as well as conference fees, as low as possible has been an objective for the organization. It has been important to keep the organization affordable for people who are in institutions of all sizes and with a variety of resources. As you know, SECAC has three membership categories: individual, student, and institutional. The latter provides a significant part of the SECAC budget. It is interesting to examine the history of SECAC dues. As has been noted, individual dues were increased from \$1.00 to \$2.00 in 1948. They remained \$2.00 through 1961. Institutional dues were first reported in the 1958 treasurer's report, but only the gross amount collected was included. I assume that they were \$15.00, the amount reported in 1961. Student membership of \$1.00 was first recorded in 1968. If we use the 1961 figures of \$2.00 for individuals and \$15.00 for institutions as benchmarks, we see that over a period of forty years SECAC dues have increased to \$35.00 for individuals and \$100 for institutions. Over a period of thirty-three years, dues for students have increased from \$1.00 to \$10.00. I have not had the opportunity to compare these increases with those of other comparable organizations, but there does not seem to be reason to claim rapid or exorbitant increases in SECAC membership fees.

I am not a good reader of crystal balls, and I do not consider myself a visionary. I can only raise some questions about management that I think the organization will need to confront in the coming years:

1. How long will a part-time staff be adequate?
2. How long can SECAC function out of a home office?
3. What conference sites are going to be suitable? SECAC has already outgrown many of the smaller communities where member institutions are located. Conference sites must be attractive communities with facilities large enough to house and provide meeting space for at least 300 people. And they must be accessible by air and/or other modes of public transportation.

4. Will more staff involvement in planning conferences be required? For example, would it provide added continuity for staff to participate in contract negotiations with hotels?

5. Can SECAC devise a more efficient and effective way of managing its financial resources? Can and should this continue to be a staff function?

SECAC in 2001 is a strong organization. Its financial base is sound and its structure seems very workable. Its real strength lies in the people it serves—the art community in the Southeast and increasingly from outside the region. It has a vibrant, energetic, and intellectually involved membership. It has been a unique privilege, and a lot of fun, to work with this organization for over a quarter of a century. I feel that I have been involved in a production with a large cast of lively, colorful, stimulating characters, and the threads that have connected us are woven into a fabric that is strong and durable. The projection for the future is very bright.