American Water Works Association

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The Authoritative Resource on Safe Water®

AWWA's Story

Founded in 1881, AWWA is the authoritative resource on safe water, with more than 57,000 members worldwide sharing knowledge on water resource development, water and wastewater treatment technology, water storage and distribution, and utility management and operations. AWWA provides knowledge, information and advocacy to improve the quality and supply of water in North America and beyond and advances public health, safety and welfare by uniting the efforts of the full spectrum of the water community.

AWWA is an international nonprofit and educational society and the largest and oldest organization of water professionals in the world. Members represent the full spectrum of the water community: treatment plant operators and managers, scientists, environmentalists, manufacturers, academicians, regulators, and others who hold genuine interest in water supply and public health. Membership includes more than 4,600 utilities that supply water to roughly 180 million people in North America. Through our collective strength we become better stewards of water for the greatest good of the people and the environment.

The year of AWWA's birth was 1881, and what a year it was. The Boer War was raging in South Africa. The exploits of the Apache medicine man Geronimo in the Southwest forced the U.S. and Mexican governments to commit 8,000 troops to ferret him out of his mountain stronghold. In Tombstone, Arizona, the Gunfight at the OK Corral captured the nation's imagination as Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday vanquished the Clantons. In New Mexico, Billy the Kid busted out of jail, killing two deputies. A couple of months later, he was ambushed and killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett, spawning a new legend.

1881 is the year that Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross. Pope John XXIII, William Boeing, and Pablo Picasso were born. Fyodor Dostoevsky, Benjamin Disraeli, and Jim Bridger died. It is also a year in which three U.S. presidents occupied the White House – Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield (assassinated by a disgruntled jobseeker), and Chester A. Arthur. And, a group of 22 men agreed to exchange water information.

Against this background, another event occurred in 1881 – it didn't attract attention, but it would have a profound effect on the public's health and standard of living. On March 29 in Engineers' Hall on the campus of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, 22 men representing water utilities in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee founded the American Water Works Association (AWWA). They adopted a constitution that stated the purpose of the association as being "for the exchange of information pertaining to the management of water-works, for the mutual advancement of consumers and water companies, and for the purpose of securing economy and uniformity in the operations of water-works." That first meeting covered topics ranging from the "poisoning" of water by lead pipes to the efficacy of using corncobs for fuel.

The 1880's were interesting times, particularly in terms of advancements in science and technology. The first hydroelectric plant began operating in Wisconsin in 1882, and the forerunner of the gasoline engine was invented in 1883. By 1884, Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch had proven the "germ theory" and had isolated the causative agent of cholera, Vibrio cholerae. This was 30 years after the British physician John Snow stated that cholera was caused by contaminated drinking water. The last major cholera outbreak in the United States was in 1877, but by that time a new killer was afoot – typhoid fever. By 1890, the typhoid death rate in some cities exceeded 100 per 100,000 people.

AWWA members were keeping pace with these developments and their effect on water supplies. The conference proceedings of the 1880's-1890's are replete with articles on the importance of source water protection and improved filtration to protect public health.

In 1892, the association issued a "Memorial to Congress Praying for a National Law to Restrict Pollution of Streams from Which Water Supplies of Cities are Drawn" – the association's first foray into the legislative process. In 1893, AWWA supported passage of the Interstate Quarantine Act for controlling the interstate transfer of communicable diseases.

AWWA gains an international presence

By the turn of the century, AWWA boasted 354 members and a budget of $2,380. Because its proceedings were in demand internationally, the association began selling them for a dollar apiece. In 1901, a paper on using ozone for disinfection was presented immediately after George Warren Fuller demonstrated how much lower the typhoid death rates were for cities that used groundwater or filtered surface water. The average human life span in North America was only 47 years of age, and the infant mortality rate was a tragic 140 per 1,000 live births—far higher than many other countries.

A prime reason for this was the continuing high death rate for typhoid fever, which had recently soared to 120 per 100,000 people in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

AWWA continued to provide information to its members and government officials on the importance of source water protection, proper water treatment, and the need for adequate state authority to protect public health.

From 1900 to 1913, the portion of the US population that was served with filtered water increased eightfold, and the typhoid death rate plummeted by 55%. In 1914, the U.S. Public Health Service adopted the first microbiological standards for drinking water to implement the Interstate Quarantine Act. AWWA urged its members to comply with the standard even though it only applied to water served aboard trains and vessels that crossed state lines.

The association continued to provide leadership, champion public health, and publish badly needed information. By 1907 there were enough Canadian members to justify having the annual convention in Toronto, Ontario. Another landmark occurred in May 1908 when AWWA adopted a set of "Standard Specifications for Cast Iron Water Pipes and Special Castings" (it took 22 years to develop).

In 1913, the Chemical and Bacteriological Division was formed to give a focus to the rapidly expanding areas of water analysis and treatment. In 1914, a new constitution was approved permitting the formation of geographic sections, which allowed for more local activities, emphasis on regional issues, and increased member participation. The New York Section was founded that same year, and in 1916 the Canada Section was formed to represent all Canadian members.

Quarterly journal replaces annual proceedings

The need for information continued to grow as chlorination and other treatment techniques were introduced. A quarterly version of the *Journal AWWA* was introduced in 1914 to replace the annual proceedings. Abel Wolman became editor in 1919 and made the *Journal* bimonthly, and then monthly in 1924. The Standardization Council was formed in 1920 and developed AWWA's first major publication. Titled Water Works Practice, it was a treasure trove of water knowledge collected from 324 experts (including Abel Wolman, who was the editor).

As member expectations grew and activities increased, it became evident that volunteers alone could not manage the workload. During the 1930s, AWWA staff members were hired, and a headquarters office was established in New York, New York, a city that housed most of the engineering and scientific societies at that time. Harry Jordan was the first executive director—a post he held for 22 years. At the end of his tenure, typhoid fever had disappeared from North America, thanks in large part to the activities of AWWA.

AWWA's headquarters moved to Denver, Colorado in 1974, and the association has continued to grow in term of members, budget, active volunteers, publications, standards, events, and almost anything else you can measure. We now have more than 57,000 members in 43 sections—and in 100 countries outside of North America. These members provide about 85% of the North American population with safe drinking water.

In tandem with this, AWWA now provides more timely, quality information to more water professionals than any other organization in the world. We are recognized as an effective voice by the U.S. Congress and others on issues dealing with water policy and public health. The association launched the AWWA Research Foundation (renamed in 2009 as the Water Research Foundation) to focus on much needed water supply and treatment issues and Water For People to help provide safe drinking water and sanitation to the poorest of the poor. Both are now successful, independent organizations.

The average life span in North America today is about 77 years of age, and the infant mortality rate is about six per 1,000 live births—far different from conditions in 1900. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention attribute much of the improvement to advances in water treatment and sanitation.

AWWA and its dedicated members can take pride in the role they have played. As we congratulate ourselves, let's not forget to pay homage to those 22 visionaries who started the association with little else but large amounts of enthusiasm and a common mission of protecting public health through continual improvement.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to those who followed — Fuller, Wolman, Jordan, and the countless others who saw to it that the mission was fulfilled.

AWWA has changed in the past 129 years, and the issues we face in the future will change as well. The one constant is our legacy — the mission of AWWA. Now, it's up to us to fulfill the mission.

Note: This story was written by Jack W. Hoffbuhr, former AWWA Executive Director, and excerpted from the March 2006 Journal AWWA.