We women of the baby-boom generation are unlike any generation before us. We were raised in one of the most affluent periods in human history and had great expectations for ourselves and what we could accomplish in this world. We were given the best education money could buy, and told to use it. With education came higher aspirations. Our parents taught us from childhood that we were smart and could be independent, that we could achieve more in life than housewives and mothers.

This idea was reinforced and amplified by the women's movement which came to flower in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the same time, the craft of ophthalmic photography was born. As women across the country began to see themselves differently, and men were freed from gender stereotypes, women's role expectations within technical and scientific fields broadened. The ideal of a strong woman who realized success through achievement in the world opened up employment possibilities; more women entered technical fields than ever before.

As we examine the history of the OPS and the contributions that women have made we see that the participation and visibility of women increases dramatically from 1969 to the present. This correlates with the changes within our culture. From 1960 to 1979 the proportion of women who worked outside the home almost doubled. The membership growth in the OPS reflects these changes. In 1971, there were 62 OPS members, 9 of whom were women—a total of 14.5 percent. Comparatively, in 1993 there were approximately 1200 members, approximately 480 women—a total of 40 percent and a leap of 276 percent!

Advancements in camera equipment design contributed to the ever growing population of women within the field. Prior to this time the photographic equipment was not particularly user-friendly—one had to have a significant amount of photographic expertise to operate it; expertise that was typically acquired by men in the armed services or as members of large teaching institutions. As the equipment became easier to operate, and women more accepted in technical roles, the whole definition of "who an ophthalmic photographer was" began to change.

A casual glance through the OPS archives would be misleading as to the important roles that women have played in the society's development. As we skip through the decades we see that the changing roles of women in the OPS have had a profound effect on it's evolution.

In 1969, Apollo Flights 10 & 11 reached the moon and Richard Nixon was inaugurated president. It was also the inaugural year of the OPS. Anna Wiley, who was working for Alice McPherson Associates in Houston at the time, recalls her first Academy meeting. While there were a series of chance encounters with the founding fathers, she attended a meeting held October 15, 1969 in Terry Tomer's room. This gathering has since become to be known as the birth of the society. Also present were Mary Manella and Yvonne Magli. The details of this now famous meeting are well documented in the archives. What is not so well known is that the society’s constitution was written by Yvonne and Anna. Yvonne also served as the chairman of the Constitution and Bylaws committee.
Marlene Fishman recalls Yvonne’s unique contribution as one of bringing credibility to women as ophthalmic photographers. “As the sole judge of photographic quality of ophthalmic images in the ETDRS study, Yvonne indirectly brought respect to the role of women as ophthalmic photographers.” (At the time, ETDRS was the most important ophthalmic photography study in the country and was headed by Mattie Davis at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.) Yvonne went on to serve as Vice President of the OPS from 1973-1974—a highly visible role.

Following that infamous meeting in 1969, Johnny Justice, who is recognized as the energy and inspiration of the OPS, returned to Miami and recruited his secretary, Pixie Eichrodt, and Carol Justice, his wife, to begin an intense program of correspondence and telephone communications. The results of their efforts was the first annual educational meeting being held the following year in Las Vegas. Johnny enthusiastically acknowledges the dedication and support of Pixie and Carol in helping him to realize the dream of an Ophthalmic Photographers’ Society. Many of the top female photographers in the country today benefited from their association and training with Johnny at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute and Baylor College.

The 1970s

The 1970s brought us the invasion of Cambodia, the acquittal of the Chicago 7 and Jon Voight made his mark in “Midnight Cowboy.” It was the decade for women to make their mark in the OPS as well. Increasingly, women became more visible in the production of educational programs. For example, Laura Jordan helped coordinate one of the society’s earliest workshops in Phoenix. Murial Laban with Don Wong co-produced with Zeiss one of the first ophthalmic photography workshops at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine. Mary Federico served on the Constitution and Bylaws Committee and was the force behind the formation of the Grievance Committee.

Diane Curtin recalls, “Mary had an aggressive personality which may have been due in part to her military background. She possessed technical expertise and challenged the prevailing attitudes at the time that ophthalmic photography was a craft beyond the capacities of women. Her outspoken style, backed by her knowledge, made the men sit up and take notice of the proficiency of women in this field.”

At this time, many women with college degrees and teaching credentials became active within the society. These women pioneered the concept of a more structured curriculum. Not content to simply deliver information, these educators required a more methodical approach to the delivery of ophthalmic photography education. This was a new direction from previous philosophy at the time.

Marlene Fishman recalls, “Diane Curtin, along with Barrett Walker, elevated the anterior segment workshops to a new level. Because of her background as an educator, she changed the manner in which the workshops were conducted. Specific educational goals, behavioral objectives and even workshop handouts were a direct result of her influence. Her natural talent at teaching was an inspiration to everyone.”

The 1980s

In the 1980s, Mt. St. Helen’s erupted and it was the first year for women graduates from the Armed Forces. This decade also witnessed the graduation of women from mentorship to stewardship. With the women of the 70s having proven that the technical and scientific aspects of ophthalmic photography were within their grasp, the women of the 80s went on to assume key leadership roles. More women served on boards and committees than ever before and assumed the most demanding tasks the society had to offer.

Marlene Fishman produced the first truly scientific forum, the “Light Toxicity Symposium” which wedded researchers, photographers and the commercial sector. Marlene’s strong background in scientific research and her education degree inspired her to create the Index of Ophthalmic Photography beginning in late 1979. It was this same meticulous attention to detail and scientific accuracy that served her so well in her role as managing editor of the Journal of Ophthalmic Photography from 1986-1992, where she brought greater depth and respect to this important publication.

Other women began asking themselves what they could do to contribute and turned their efforts to the creation of many significant projects which have since become institutions. Paula Morris and Bonnie Carlstrom teamed up to produce the highly successful first mid-year meeting at Park City, Utah in 1984. Marsha Wright’s background in graphic design resulted in the definition and subsequent trademarking of the current OPS logo. In 1987, Colleen Eardley Mulder took over the editorship of the Newsletter and gave it more warmth
and greater insight into photographers as people, rather than just a venue for printing the news.

The year 1987 was a watershed in that all three administrative bodies, the Board of Directors, Board of Certification and the Educational Committee (since reestablished as the Board of Education) simultaneously had women serving. Jamie Nicholl and Paula Morris were both appointed to the Educational Committee.

Paula recalls the apprehension of the other committee members at that time: "Both Jamie and I were told by several committee members of their concern over having two women serve on the same committee. Apparently, a fear of cat fights was quite prevalent at the time. Ironically, we have become the best of friends and quite instrumental in the sharing of information amongst the committee members in their respective positions."

Sandra Anderson, a member of the BOC adds, "In reality, the men were far more adversarial than the women, and looked to us as mediators in heated discussions." Sandra later went on to write the standing rules of the BOC, a direct result of sharing similar information with the current chairman of the BOE, Paula Morris.

Foremost among the changes of the 80s is the openness and candor within the ranks. This transformation came about once women became increasingly involved in the decision making processes of the society, with representation on all three boards. This synergy resulted in a legacy of sharing and communicating within what used to be a rather closed organization.

It seems a long way from 1972 when women were described in the newsletter as being "cute as a button" and relegated to minor support roles in the society. From that first educational program in 1970 when only nine members were women, to the present day power of representation of over 40%, the impact of women in the OPS will continue.

The 1990s

The 1990s offers a mind boggling display of technological advances, not only in the science of ophthalmic imaging but with every aspect of the world around us. As Scanning Laser Ophthalmoscopes, Digital Angiography and travel on the Internet razzle-dazzle us, the women of the OPS will continue to likewise break new ground and enter new frontiers in technical and organizational leadership.

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