

A Brief History of the Western States Communication Association

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In the early years of the twentieth century there was a virtual revolution in higher education. Colleges and universities moved from the British system of education, emphasizing a set curriculum of essential studies, to the German system where higher education was defined by disciplines, with doctoral degrees and expanded curriculum, as well as separate departments. Each discipline was expected to have scientific principles, literature in books and journals, and organizations that propagated the discipline. It was in this atmosphere that departments, journals, and organizations for history, literature, psychology, mathematics, economics, physics, political science, and many others were formed.

The discipline of speech was represented separately from the Modern Language Association; first by the Public Speaking Conference of the Eastern States (now the Eastern Communication Association), and then, in 1915, by the National Association of Teachers of Speech (now the National Communication Association). Regional organizations in the southern and central states followed. In the west, the need was more than professional. The national organization held its convention between Christmas and the New Year, meaning that to participate in a convention in Chicago, a westerner had to leave by rail on Christmas day. Consequently, the 1928 NATS convention had only thirteen westerners among the 350 registrants.

In April 1929, during a meeting of the Pacific Forensic League at the University of Idaho, W. Arthur Cable of the University of Arizona suggested a western regional association. The faculty attending the meeting agreed and appointed him the chair of a five-member organizing committee that included Earl Wells from Oregon State College as secretary, Frederick Orr from the University of Washington as treasurer, Lee Emerson Bassett of Stanford University, and Charles Marsh of the University of California at Los Angeles. Plans were drawn for an initial organizing meeting to be held for all western states speech professionals in San Francisco during the Thanksgiving holiday of 1929.

The theme for this first organizing meeting of the proposed Western Association of Teachers of Speech was "Cultural and Scientific Speech Education Today." The convention was held on the San Francisco State Teachers College campus. Cable was elected the Association's first president with Orr and Wells elected as vice president and secretary/treasurer. Minutes of that first convention reported that well over one hundred persons were in attendance. The record shows that eighty-seven people were officially registered. These delegates came from seven of the eleven Western States solicited. Approximately twenty-five persons were in attendance who did not register.

Although the program of the convention was designated especially for college teachers, and the large majority of those in attendance came from universities and colleges, many secondary school teachers attended—some coming from a great distance.

The second annual convention was held at the William Taylor Hotel in San Francisco from November 27-29, 1930. Minutes stated that "about 150 persons were in attendance, with 104 officially registered from nine states." The theme for this second convention was, "A Program of Speech Education in a Democracy." From the papers, speeches and proceedings of these first two

conventions, Cable compiled two books: *Cultural and Scientific Speech Education Today* (1929) and *A Program of Speech Education in a Democracy* (1930), both published by The Expression Company of Boston.

As the impact of the national depression began to take its toll, attendance at committee meetings and conventions decreased between 1933 and 1935. Despite the poor financial condition of the Association during this period, the regular printing of a Bulletin was started in February 1934 to keep membership informed of association developments. Three years later, the Executive Council declared that an "enthusiastic response has greeted the announcement by the Western Association of Teachers of Speech that the former mimeographed News-Bulletin is to be replaced by a regular quarterly publication in printed form." This new publication was started in March 1937 and was named *Western Speech* under the editorship of J. Richard Bietry of Los Angeles City College.

The articles were short (3-6 pages) and oriented to curriculum and speech activities. The early journals were twenty-six pages long: about equally divided between articles and reviews in the first half, and news of the field and the Association in the second. By contrast, the contemporary *Western Journal of Communication* has more than one hundred pages, all articles.

Until the 1941 convention held in Salt Lake City's Newhouse Hotel, eight of the thirteen annual conventions were hosted in California: four in San Francisco, and four in the Los Angeles area. Two were held in Salt Lake City and one each in Oregon, Washington, and Colorado. Because the 1928 constitution had not proposed a formal geographical allocation for future conventions, in 1941, when Charles F. Lindsley of Occidental College was President, the constitution was revised to allow for a more equitable geographical distribution around the thirteen western states of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Hawaii. The Association was divided into four sections with a rotation that still favored California where the most members resided, but guaranteed diversity. The sequence was to be 1942—Northern, 1943—Central, 1944—Southern, 1945—Central, 1946—Eastern, 1947—Central. The rotation remained until the constitution was amended to permit the 1972 convention to be held in Hawaii, out of the regular rotation.

The rotation was not implemented, however, until 1946. The 1942 convention was canceled after President T. Earl Pardoe of Brigham Young University was notified by the U.S. Commissioner of Education that ". . . no major convention or gathering should be undertaken that does not contribute directly to the war effort." As the nation suffered through some of its most difficult months of the war, the Association was almost brought to a standstill. Foreseeing that an annual convention would be impossible, Pardoe sent a mail-in ballot to all active members during the spring of 1943. Earl W. Wells was subsequently elected and assumed his duties as president in June. In 1944, membership fell to fewer than 100. In order to prevent a further membership decline in the face of severe travel restrictions, three sectional conventions were planned under the theme, "Speech in War and Reconstruction." Members in the Eastern Division met during February in Denver, while members in the Northwest Division convened during March in Salem, Oregon. Unfortunately, members in the Southwest Division, scheduled to meet May 4-6 in Los Angeles, were notified that the convention had to be canceled. Mail-in ballots were again sent to all active members. Horace G. Rahskopf of the University of Washington was elected president. Travel for any activity not related to the war effort was restricted in the final months of the war. Even the smaller divisional meetings instituted during the early months of 1945 had to be abandoned. Alan Nichols of the University of Southern California was elected by mail ballot in June 1945. As soon as the Commissioner of Education relaxed travel restrictions, two conventions were organized. The first was planned for Los Angeles in April with the second scheduled to convene the following November in San Francisco. In the

business meeting of the fourteenth Annual Convention held April 19, 1946, Mabel F. Gifford of the California State Department of Education was elected president. At that convention, Arthur Cable suggested that, since the National Association of Teachers of Speech had changed its name to the Speech Association of America, the Western Association of Teachers of Speech should change its name to the Western Speech Association and it was approved. The April 1946 convention brought together more than 200 speech professionals, with a membership total of 488. The membership crisis of the war years was over.

The 1947 convention in Salt Lake City was a joint convention of the Speech Association of America, American Educational Theater Association, American Speech Correction Association, and Western Speech Association. It represented the separation of speech correction and theater from forensics, speech, interpretation, and speech education. It was the end of one definition of the speech discipline and the beginning of a second. Indicative of the change taking place, the Western Speech Association established a Curriculum Committee, chaired by Joseph H. Baccus of the University of Redlands, to identify definitions, limitations, and the general scope of the speech field.

A significant post-war growth in higher education, partly due to the GI Bill for returning veterans, multiplied the numbers of state colleges and universities and caused the redefinition of disciplines.

None was more dramatic than the redefinition of speech. When the Western Association of Teachers of Speech was founded, speech teachers were dividing (mostly) from English departments, and the new Departments of Speech included people who taught forensics, public speaking, theater, oral interpretation, and speech correction. Frequently, the same persons taught courses in three or more of the areas. The tremendous expansion of higher education in the post-war years led to the separation of the disciplines of speech correction and theater into new departments of Speech Pathology and Audiology, and Theater. These new departments then began to form new organizations as well.

In 1948-1949, the association reached a new high in membership at 518 despite the movement of some members to more specialized professional organizations. The loss of membership by the departure of theater and speech correction faculty was made up by the growth of the faculty in the other areas and new members entering the emerging fields of mass communication and interpersonal communication. Therefore, the Association remained at approximately the same level of membership until the late 1970s.

Not all the members from speech correction and theater left the WSA. Kathleen Pendergast from the Seattle Public Schools and Ruth Jackson from the Palo Alto City Schools, both from speech correction, became presidents in 1957 and 1963 respectively. John Wright of Fresno State College from drama was president in 1962 and was active and influential in WSA for as long as he lived.

In 1958 Upton Palmer of the University of California, Santa Barbara, was elected president. His major contribution to that point was as executive secretary from 1952 to 1954. He and his wife, Frances, helped put WSA on a solid financial foundation. Utilizing the Palmer's financial procedures, John Wright of Fresno State College, Joe Wagner and Earl Cain, both of Long Beach State College, as executive secretaries from 1955 to 1963, were able to increase funds to more than \$28,000.

When John Wright became president in 1962, he established a General and Memorial Fund Committee chaired by Halbert Greaves of the University of Utah. While Greaves and others voiced a concern that they didn't know what they were expected to do with this project, John Wright pushed ahead with what eventually became known as the Founders Fund. Wright also made Fresno State the main contributor to the fund which was to be an endowment with only the interest spent each year. Wright hoped that the endowment would eventually be large enough to provide a salary for the

executive secretary. In the meantime, Palmer developed the policy that nominees for a leadership position would have to have the financial support of their institutions. This policy helped defray administrative expenses. That same year the IRS approved WSCA's exemption from federal income tax as a business league under section 501(c)6 of the Internal Revenue code. In 1995, when Dennis Alexander of the University of Utah was Executive Director, WSCA became a legally incorporated organization. At the same time the federal status of the organization was changed to a 501(c)3 not-for-profit educational/charitable organization permitting contributions to be wholly or partially tax deductible.

In 1963 former presidents Wright, Palmer, William McCoard of the University of Southern California, Wayne Eubank of the University of New Mexico, and Alonzo Morley of Brigham Young University organized the Executives Club for those having previously served as president, vice president, executive secretary, or editor. In 1975, the eligibility rule was modified to include any member who had served on the Executive Council. The Executives Club has a dinner meeting at the formal opening day of each convention and supports the Debut Award presented to a new scholar whose paper is judged the best of the convention.

The association's second attempt to switch their convention from the Thanksgiving period established in 1929 occurred in 1964, when President Joe Wagner held the San Francisco convention in March. Other than the war years, Oregon's August 1956 convention was the only previous attempt to schedule a more convenient time for the Association's meetings. In 1979, the association settled on a February date, usually over Presidents' Day weekend which is still the policy.

In 1967, another constitutional revision removed the section counselors from the Executive Council and created Interest Groups with officers elected by the Interest Groups who served as program coordinators for the convention programs of their individual interest groups. The initial interest groups were rhetoric and public address, oral interpretation, speech correction, speech education, drama, behavioral sciences, radio-television-film, junior college, secondary school, freedom of speech, organizational and interpersonal communication. Today (2003) drama and speech correction have been removed for lack of interest. Some have undergone name changes to represent contemporary understanding of the field. The Organization for Research on Women and Communication is an affiliate organization and is part of the program planning. Behavioral Science has been replaced by Communication Theory, Health Communication, Intercultural Communication, and Language and Social Interaction, all representing changes in the field. After a Legal Communication Interest Group was formed, it later was combined with Freedom of Speech to become Freedom of Expression and Legal Communication.

From 1929 to 1967, at least 10 percent of the convention programs were devoted to speech correction/voice science. On several occasions, that area was assigned as much as 30 percent. But at the 1968 convention, speech correction ceased to exist as a formal unit and shared only one program with the speech education group. As speech correction disappeared, oral interpretation increased in convention programs—from one program in 1929 to seven in 1970. As the theater area experienced a reduction in participation it was first merged with interpretation, then dropped as interpretation adopted the expanded title of Performance Studies. Forensics has always been a strong component of the Association. The Western Forensic Association now serves as the interest group for forensics in preparing the convention program. An annual tournament is sponsored by the Western States Communication Association and its Speech Activities Coordinator sits on the Executive Council.

In 1970, the general membership approved a change in name from Western Speech Association to Western Speech Communication Association by a mail-in vote of 221 to 67. This change occurred at the same time that the Speech Association of America changed its name to the Speech Communication Association. Such a change represented the expanding use of communication to represent the less traditional speech aspects of the profession and the broadening of interest beyond the study of the spoken word. So Speech, the discipline that had originally separated from English because of its emphasis on the spoken language rather than belle lettres, no longer limited itself. Speech Communication was a designation invented at the time to merge those in the discipline who still saw speech as the defining nature and those who chose communication.

Although a mimeographed News Bulletin was established in 1934, it was replaced in 1937 by the more formal journal Western Speech. The 24 to 34 page Western Speech continued to publish news of members programs and activities that had been one of the purposes of the Bulletin but added more scholarly articles. In 1975 its name was changed to Western Speech Communication, then in 1977 was changed again to Western Journal of Speech Communication. In 1992 it became the Western Journal of Communication. The dual purpose of Western Speech was continued until after the WSCA Newsletter was first printed in 1973. After that, Editor Walter Fisher of the University of Southern California removed the news and notes section of Western Speech and more space was provided for scholarly articles. Western Speech remained about the same size until volume 18 in 1964 when it expanded to between 50-70 pages. That has generally been the range of pages, although in recent years the size of the journal has increased frequently to well over 100 pages. Over its history, the content of Western Speech has changed, generally mirroring the changes previously noted in the convention programs.

Thomas R. Nilsen of the University of Washington, in his 1978 survey of the Journal, notes that "from 1937 through 1961—the year speech correction virtually disappeared from the pages of the Journal—more articles by far were published on speech correction." He goes on to note: Speech Correction, drama, and pedagogy [the three largest areas] were steady subjects, holding their proportions well from the beginning to about 1960. Oral Interpretation was less so, but fairly steady, until the sixties when it rapidly became stronger and out-paced, in numbers, drama and pedagogy for a decade. Rhetoric and public address did not figure in WS seriously until the fifties. From 1955 to the present [1978] it has been by far the dominant subject matter. In the sixties, communication theory (empirical, quantitative, behavioral, symbolic interaction studies) appeared, burgeoning in 1971 and now about equal to rhetoric and public address and bidding fair to exceed them in number of articles published (179).

In recent years the nature of the two categories (communication theory and rhetoric and public address) have become blurred by the inclusion of a variety of studies variously designated by areas like organizational communication, intercultural communication, argumentation, persuasion theory, feminist studies, and neo-colonial studies. Overall, the changes in the nature of journal articles reflect the same changes that can be seen in interest groups and convention programs. They reflect the shifting nature of the discipline over time.

At the 1974 Newport Beach, California convention, First Vice President Eldon Baker of the University of Montana initiated the hands-on concept of workshops which added a new dimension to the previous paper-reading format. Since that time the number of programs has increased, and Saturday has remained as a workshop day.

Members at the 1975 Executives Club banquet recommended that the Executive Council appoint a committee to plan the publication of a history of the Association. Accordingly, it was decided that the

Summer 1978 Issue of the Western Journal of Speech Communication should be dedicated to such a history on the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the association. Donald Cameron of California State University, Northridge, wrote on "Association Leadership;" Robert Kully of California State University, Los Angeles, and Fred McMahon of California State University, Northridge, discussed "Association Conventions;" Nilsen wrote about "WSCA Publication: A Retrospective View," and Wright listed the "Officers of the Western Speech Association 1929-1977." The Journal's fifty year history of WSCA was an effective prelude to the association's anniversary commemoration.

Ironically, 1978, the 50 anniversary year, had no annual convention preparatory to the 1979 permanent convention change from November to February. 1979 was the year that the Association first awarded the Distinguished Service Award to honor persons who had made important contributions. Thorrell Fest of the University of Colorado was the first to receive the award. Western States Communication Association also provides two publication awards. An award for the outstanding article in each year of the Western Journal of Communication is named the B. Aubrey Fisher Award. Fisher was an editor of the Journal, President of the Association, and Professor at the University of Utah. The award honored him after his death in 1985. Subsequently the Milton Dickens Award was designated to honor another former President and Professor at the University of Southern California. The Dickens Award goes to the best article in Communication Reports during an editor's term.

The growth of the Association placed increased responsibility on the volunteer position of Executive Secretary. Commencing with Palmer's presidency in 1958, the Executive Council suggested that all applicants for the Executive-Secretary position have sufficient secretarial support from their own institution. By the time Robert Hirsch of Arizona State University assumed office in 1979, this request had become a requirement. In the 1980's that requirement was supplemented by a dramatic increase in the budget of WSCA. It represented the increased complexity of that position and the financial strength of WSCA. In 1995 the name of this position was changed to Executive Director.

Three important events occurred during the 1980s for the Association. First was the introduction in 1988 of a new journal entitled Communication Reports for shorter data-based research articles. It was supported in part by an endowment by the Follert Trust. Joe Ayres of Washington State University was the first editor. That gave the Association three publications with the Newsletter. In 1996, when John Cagle of California State University, Fresno was the Newsletter editor he began a website that was formally approved the next year.

Secondly, the Association changed its name. On November 18, 1989, the Executive Council met to review the poll of Association members. Seventy-four percent voted to change the Association's name to Western States Communication Association. The name change was ratified by the Legislative Assembly in 1990. The name represented a belief in the broader interpretation of the discipline to include all communication. So, speech acts were a subset of communication though an emphasis on the spoken word was still strong. The name change was also a deliberate attempt to maintain the same acronym (WSCA). The organization would thus make it clear that western means the western states even though many of the members were from elsewhere, and officers from outside the western states were elected to office such as presidents Leslie Baxter of the University of Iowa and Dawn Braithwaite of the University of Nebraska. This name change came ten years before the Speech Communication Association changed its name to the National Communication Association. In both WSCA and NCA the change was not easy as many members held to the significance of the term speech as an important definition of the discipline.

The third important event was the decision to move the archives from the home of Gertrude Baccus of Redlands High School, who had kept and organized the archives, first collected by John Wright in

1974, to a formal storage site. At the 1989 Spokane convention, the Executive Council selected the Manuscripts Division of the University of Utah Marriott Library as the permanent repository to receive and house the Association's archives. Since the time, the archives of the National Communication Association, the Eastern Communication Association, the Southern Communication Association, and the American Forensic Association have also been moved to that site.

The Western States Communication Association has always tried to be active at all levels of education from grade school through university. But the bulk of the activities have been at the community college, college and university level. Seven people from the elementary and secondary school systems have served as president, the last (1979) being Carmendale Fernandes from Fremont High School in Sunnyvale, California. J. Richard Beitry (1940) from Los Angeles City College, Lynn K. Wells (1989) from Saddleback College, Pat Ganer (2012) Cypress College and Patty O'Keefe (2014) from College of Marin are the only Community College members to be president. Ninety percent of the presidents have come from colleges and universities. Men served forty-two terms and women seven until Carmendale Fernandes was elected. From then through 2004, women and men will have served an equal number of terms.

The Western States Communication Association is an organization founded by a group of faculty at a forensics tournament that represented people who were involved in speech correction, drama, oral interpretation, debate, and public speaking. Some interests have disappeared. Others constitute a smaller proportion of the articles and convention presentations as they constitute a smaller part of the field. Other designations, as noted, have entered the scene. All of these represent the way that WSCA has been and is representative of the discipline in the west.

Notes

1. Some of the material in this "Brief History" has been taken without attribution from the historical introduction to the "Register of the Western Speech Communication Association Records," written by Keith J. Morgan and published by the Manuscript Division of the University of Utah Libraries in Salt Lake City, Utah where those records are housed.
2. Malcolm O. Sillars was the 1987 WSCA President, served as Archivist, and was instrumental in locating WSCA's archives, as well as those of NCA and other associations, at the University of Utah Marriott Library.