THE YEAR THE OHS BEGAN: OPTOMETRY IN 1969

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doi: 10.14434/hindsight.v50i1.26586

Abstract

The year 1969 was a time of tremendous change in American society as well as in the profession of optometry. In the broader culture, academics, students and community activists organized grassroots campaigns to change institutions from the bottom up. For optometry, this movement began with the January 1968 "LaGuardia Meeting," when a small group of optometrists planned a campaign to transform the profession by agitating for the American Optometric Association (AOA) to advocate for the expansion of the scope of practice. Ripe for change, the AOA membership began to respond. In June of 1968, despite early opposition, OHS founder Henry W Hofstetter, O.D. was the first full-time academic to serve as president of the AOA. Only one year after La Guardia in February of 1969, the AOA held the Airlie House Conference which set a new course for the profession. When the movement to change optometry gained traction, the keepers of the culture began to recognize the need to document the past. In December of 1969, Hofstetter and AOA Librarian Maria Dablemont founded the OHS to ensure the history of optometry would not be lost. This first-person reminiscence by Irving Bennett, O.D. recounts his recollections of the individuals and events instrumental in the formation of the OHS.

Keywords

American Optometric Association; Optometric Historical Society; Henry Hofstetter; Airlie House; 1969; Reminiscence

HINDSIGHT: Journal of Optometry History

Figure 1: Students stage sit-in on the IU Bloomington Campus on April 30, 1969 to protest fee increases. IU News Bureau, "Owen Hall Rally Panorama," Indiana University Archives Exhibits, accessed January 13, 2019, <http://collections.libraries.indiana.edu/iubarchives/items/show/806.e>

The Year was 1969

A lot of things were going on in the world, in our country and, of course, in the profession of optometry in 1969. What was the world like 50 years ago, the year when the Optometric Historical Society (OHS) became a reality?

The major musical story that year was the last public performance of the Beatles. The saddest story was the brutal killing of actress Sharon Tate by the Manson Family. On the international scene, the very first Concorde airplane test flight was conducted in France. As if to answer this, the Boeing Company debuted its 747 jumbo jet. For the sports world, my former patient Joe Namath led the New York Jets to victory over the Baltimore Colts in the first post-season game to be called the "Super Bowl." In August of 1969, more than a half million men, women and children gathered in a small upstate New York town near Woodstock, NY for four days of rain, sex, drugs and rock and roll. Protests were common in 1969, (Figure 1 and there were many protests against President Richard M. Nixon and his "Vietnamization" of Southeast Asia.

For the profession of optometry there were two major events in the year 1969: The Airlie House Conference and the founding of OHS, both of which took place under the direction of Henry W Hofstetter, O.D.

The Legacy of Henry W Hofstetter

I got to know Dr. Hofstetter not too many years before the OHS was founded. At first, it was from a distance. Surprisingly to me and most everyone else, I was named editor of the *Journal of the American Optometric Association* in 1956, and that assignment took me to many meetings where optometry leaders were present. Earlier, Hofstetter had been the head of the Los Angeles College of Optometry (later known as the Southern California College of Optometry); he became better known after he was named director of the Division of Optometry at Indiana University. He had made national optometric history in being the influential force in forming the first National Board of Examiners in Optometry in 1951. I admired him for his direct and outspoken manner. There was never a doubt where Hank Hofstetter stood on the issues.

Bradford Woods

My first direct one-on-one contact with Henry Hofstetter came in the early 1960s when he invited me to Bradford Woods Manor, an old mansion owned by Indiana University. The site was used for University-related retreats. Henry and his colleague Dr. Bob Tubesing had invited 20 optometrists to a conference that was to be completely informal, without organizational representation and entirely at the personal expense of participants. The Bradford Woods Conferences had no agenda; no subject was taboo and no record of who said what were kept. It was an event in which a participant was encouraged to “roll up their sleeves” and say what they want about topics related to optometry. There was no loss for expression at Bradford Woods. I was impressed. Bradford Woods was no doubt the inspiration and motivation for the “La Guardia Meeting” some years later.

The American Optometric Association

The election of Henry Hofstetter to the American Optometric Association (AOA) Board of Trustees in 1962 was unusual. (Figure 2) As an academican, he was perceived by some to pose a threat. As a professional association, the AOA's largest constituency was optometrists in private practice. There was a concern that a full-time “academic” would not fully understand the needs and concerns of these practitioners. When Henry Hofstetter initially announced his candidacy for the Board of Trustees, he was not selected by the Nominating Committee. Bill Baldwin, O.D., also a faculty member at Indiana University, took up his campaign. I joined the chorus and we beat the odds and he was elected! It did not take long

Figure 2: Swearing in ceremony, Board of Trustees, 66th AOA Congress, 1963, Minneapolis, MN. Hofstetter is third from right. Original photograph by George Camballi. 2016.IMG.0851.2. Image courtesy The Archives & Museum of Optometry.

for Hofstetter to show he was a team player, a deep thinker and a visionary. His ascent up the ladder of leadership was steady; soon his colleagues on the AOA Board recognized his inventive views, his logic and his sincere dedication to the future of optometry.

In 1973, at the 76th annual AOA Congress in San Francisco, Dr. Hofstetter was honored with optometry's prestigious Apollo Award. At that same meeting an Apollo was also granted to Lucie Baines Johnson Nugent, the daughter of the former U.S. President Lyndon Johnson. I was on the stage with Hank Hofstetter that year as the recipient of the National Optometrist of the Year award. (Figure 3)

The Airlie House Conference

In 1968 Henry Hofstetter had become AOA's 47th President. No doubt about it—the most historic event that occurred during his administration was the Airlie House Conference. The Airlie House Conference was held in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Warrenton, Virginia in February 1969. It was a meeting thought by many optometrists as the most important conference ever held for the

profession.

The trigger for the Airlie House Conference was without a doubt the trailblazing, famous “LaGuardia Meeting.” Called by the late Norman Haffner, O.D. in 1968, LaGuardia was a meeting of optometric leaders who traveled to New York representing no one but themselves to discuss and evaluate changing optometry from a purely drugless profession to one that embraced a yet-to-be defined medical model. This off-the-record gathering debated not only if the profession needed to change its scope, but also how it could strategically legislate that change! The La Guardia attendees agreed to go back to their state affiliate associations and lobby for an official position on expanding the scope of optometry practice from organized optometry.

The Airlie House Conference was the AOA's response. At the time, many optometrists were unfamiliar with the Airlie House Conference since the meeting planners wanted and received little public exposure. Only 18 carefully selected optometrists participated in the three-day meeting that was sponsored by the AOA. The meeting set the goal for the profession we have today. It was perhaps this

recognition that the profession was on the brink of a transformation that would define the future that instigated an urgency to curate its past.

The Optometric Historical Society

In 1969 the OHS was born. Finally, an organization dedicated to preserving optometry's glorious history was created. The OHS was the brainchild of Maria Dablemont, AOA's first full-time librarian, and Henry Hofstetter, who had just finished his term as president of the AOA. Hank and Maria could not have done this without each other. Together it was a slam dunk!

Reminisce-In (Blast from the Past)

The OHS annual event, the "Reminisce-In" first took place in 1972 in St. Louis, MO. The event was named to recall the radical, consciousness raising "teach-ins" and "sit-ins" born of the Civil Rights Movement. Future events welcomed speakers from "outside" disciplines, including ophthalmology, and that policy continued yearly to the present. For example, in December 1989, the annual meeting included a program featuring ophthalmologist J. William Rosenthal, M.D. who had an extensive collection of eyewear. In 2018, the OHS event was a continuing education course on historic eyewear presented by David Fleishman, M.D. The title "Reminisce-In" was modernized to "The Blast from the Past" in October 2012 at the American Academy of Optometry (AAO) in Phoenix, AZ, where Dr. Morton Greenspoon presented on the history of costume contact lenses in the movie industry. Dr. Greenspoon went on to present this topic at Optometry's Meeting® the following June with great success.

The OHS' annual event was held more frequently in conjunction with the annual meetings of the AAO rather

than at the annual meeting of the AOA likely because Hofstetter felt that optometric history appealed more to academics, while the AOA reflected more the political side. At the time, an event modeled on a "teach-in" may have seemed to be a natural fit at a conference of academics. However, with the inauguration of the Blast from the Past as a continuing education course at Optometry's Meeting in 2018, this may be beginning to change. Perhaps in our current climate of change, younger optometrists are becoming aware once again of the importance of history when facing an uncertain and dynamic future.

Membership

The organization's membership never was large, occasionally exceeding 100 people. Many members were (and are) institutions,

like optometry college libraries. Surprisingly, former AOA and AAO presidents, all leaders who lived and breathed optometry in their leadership years, rarely joined OHS! Now as then, it will take a small "Band of Brothers" to gather, collate and communicate history as it is being made to each new generation of optometrists.

I was one of the relatively few who joined the OHS at its founding. Why? Probably because Hank asked me to do so and I had great respect for him. Also, I have always felt that history is an important component of education. I was on my city's board of education for 18 years and, in that capacity, promoted history education in public schools. As editor of the Journal of the American Optometric Association, I published many articles on the history of the profession. It is with these individual efforts, like those

Figure 3: AOA Award Winners, AOA Congress, San Francisco, CA, June 28, 1973. Pictured from left), Irving Bennett, O.D., national optometrist of the year: Henry W. Hofstetter, O.D., Ph.D. and Mrs. Luci Baines Johnson Nugent, Apollo Awards. AOA President J.C. Tumblin (right) presented the awards. 2016.IMG.2005. Image courtesy The Archives & Museum of Optometry.

who publish articles in Hindsight, that optometry's history will be preserved.

The Future of OHS

What does the future hold for OHS? In 2015, the OHS officially became a part of Optometry Cares – The AOA Foundation after a three-year trial period. The meetings are held in conjunction with Optometry's Meeting—the annual AOA Congress—and the Foundation staff includes a heritage services specialist to manage the activities of the OHS and the Archives & Museum of Optometry. The OHS has finally found a home. Henry Hofstetter and Maria Dablemont would be pleased.

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