

THE ORIGINS OF THE OPTOMETRIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY: A FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNT OF OHS FOUNDERS AND CONTEMPORARY EVENTS

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doi: 10.14434/hindsight.v50i1.26587

Abstract

This article is a first-person account of the historical development of the Optometric Historical Society (OHS) which includes a description of the pivotal roles played by co-founders Maria Dablemont, AOA Librarian, and Henry W Hofstetter, O.D., Ph.D., and the conditions that contributed to the need for a historical society. The author was a student, colleague and contemporary of Dr. Hofstetter and Ms. Dablemont during his education and employment in St. Louis, MO

Keywords

Optometric Historical Society; American Optometric Association; Maria Dablemont; Henry Hofstetter ILAMO; Indiana University; optometry education

During the second half of the 1960s, I was a student at the Indiana University (IU) Division of Optometry and an employee of the American Optometric Association (AOA). At IU, my mentor was Henry W Hofstetter, O.D., Ph.D., director of the Division of Optometry. At the AOA, I was employed in the library during the summer of 1967 under the direction of Head Librarian, Maria Dablemont. (Figure 1) Thereafter, I remained with the AOA part-time until my graduation in 1970. I continued at the AOA full-time for two more years as Director of Career Guidance following

my graduation. My association with Hofstetter and Dablemont continued during the 1970's, before, during and after the formation of The Optometric Historical Society (OHS).

The OHS was founded in late 1969 by Henry Hofstetter and Maria Dablemont. Hofstetter's writings¹ show they conferred back and forth for several years about starting a historical society. After Hofstetter had completed his term as president of the AOA, he was free organizationally to originate the OHS.

Dablemont's library started with a collection that existed before she came to AOA in 1964, and she accumulated others. The core of the AOA collection consisted of optometric journals and books published between 1900-1950, AOA organizational records compiled by Ernest H. Kiekenapp, O.D., during his tenure as AOA Secretary (1922-1957), and the materials collected by AOA Public Information and Relations Directors Walter Kimball and Elmer Soles.² The acquisition of the E. LeRoy Ryer Collection in 1965 was the kind of private assemblage of papers, books, artifacts and memorabilia that helped to give the repository significance outside of the AOA and its constituents. Ryer, an early leader in both the American Academy of Optometry and the AOA, represented the interests of both the practicing and academic optometrist.

Dablemont's stewardship of the archival and museum materials gave her a global view of optometric history which not only incorporated her AOA perspective, but also was inspired by



Figure 1: Maria Dablemont, 1978. 2017. FIC.3521. Image courtesy The Archives & Museum of Optometry

relationships with optometry schools and libraries, state associations, and the optical industry. She developed an almost religious passion for the history of individuals, events and organizations of optometry.¹ She recognized what others might consider optometry's "humble" beginnings as the foundation for what developed into a unique discipline that serves the visual needs of a diverse, technologically advanced society. Various motivations were important to a developing interest in optometric history specifically at that time:

- The changing role of national healthcare including within the military,
- More optometric manpower needed to advance national healthcare changes which included a primary-care optometry model,³

- An expanding scope of optometry,
- Attempts by ophthalmology and medicine to establish order in allied health professions and relegate optometry's role,
- With AOA's 75th year anniversary approaching, a more advanced stage of professional development for optometry was occurring and making its history more relevant, and
- Changing definitions of professions brought about by commercial advertising among professionals.

In the 1960's, the Medicare and Medicaid federal health insurance programs and health manpower shortages were defining the direction of nationalized eye care. Optometry's leaders became the resource that represented the majority of vision care providers. Delineating optometric care and its independent professional status to the government and public was partly influenced by its history. Organized medicine was proposing that ophthalmology absorb all aspects of vision care, and optometrists—like other health professionals, technology groups and public health organizers—be considered allied health care providers subservient to the medical physician.

Federal financing of health manpower and optometry schools emerged as the major elements of the government's plan to expand access to healthcare. All schools went through significant expansion in federal funding of facilities, clinics, libraries, and student scholarships and loans. The University of Alabama at Birmingham started a new optometry school as part of an existing health care educational system, and optometric education became co-

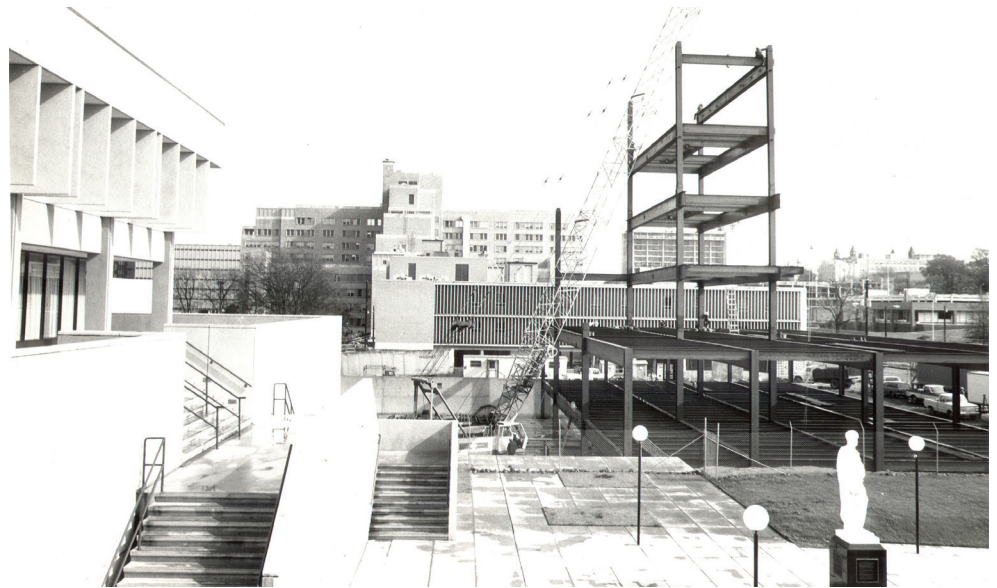


Figure 2: Construction of the UAB Optometry Building, 1974. Image courtesy of the UAB Archives, University of Alabama at Birmingham.

mingled with the basic medical courses of other disciplines. Most all optometry schools had substantial expansions, if not new buildings and clinics, during this time. (Figure 2)

Dablemont performed a number of co-ordinational functions with the optometry libraries, which had expanded significantly during this period. For example, optometric research published before 1960 was not well indexed in bibliographic databases such as *Index Medicus*—the predecessor to the National Library of Medicine's MEDLINE. This made research difficult not only in optometry history, but also in other areas crucial to vision care providers such as contact lenses, visual therapy, rehabilitation and clinical eye examination. At least two optometry school libraries, Southern College of Optometry and Illinois College of Optometry, started reference systems with Dablemont's support. Dablemont also worked with governmental sources and with optometric journals to satisfy criteria for inclusion. Eventually, this would lead to a federal grant award to the library in 1968 from the National Library of Medicine to

support expanding their collections and build the International Library, Archives & Museum of Optometry (ILAMO).

Expanding the scope of practice, specifically allowing optometrists to acquire privileges to prescribe and administer diagnostic and therapeutic drugs, became critical in developing a model of vision care that effectively positioned optometrists to serve as primary eye care providers. This model of eye care could then be compared with the other alternatives, such as one with the primary care physician doing much of the eye care—as in the United Kingdom's National Health Service at the time—or with optometrists as assistants to the ophthalmologist.

In the 50 years leading up to the founding of the OHS, optometry had shifted from a trade model to professional service model and optometry practices began to look more like medical offices, and less like storefronts. However, some "commercial practice" optometrists were slow to accept their new identity as healthcare providers and to relegate

more commercial functions which were, for many, their main source of income. Likewise, the “medical office” optometrists were ultrasensitive to references to their mercantile roots. Those who were promoting the study of optometry history and preservation of its heritage, like Hofstetter and Dablemont, were confronted with divergent views. These differing perspectives and the forces instigating professional change were considered by the OHS co-founders as justification for a greater historical awareness.

Hofstetter was a thoughtful and formal academic and more measured in his advocacy than Dablemont. He became her major advocate for the Optometric Historical Society and more broadly in the objectives that would lead to the future ILAMO. Starting in the mid-1960’s, Hofstetter was ascending the AOA leadership ladder, serving as a trustee and officer on the AOA board and, in 1968, becoming the first optometry school chief executive to be elected AOA President. Because of the prominence of optometry schools at the time, Hofstetter was a very effective communicator for the entire profession. Hofstetter was a constant user of Dablemont’s library, although paradoxically he considered history to be one of his weaker subjects in school. His book on optometry history *Optometry: Professional, Economic and Legal Aspects*,⁶ established his reputation as a historian.

Dr. Hofstetter, who was known for his collegiality, called those who were squeamish about optometry’s beginnings in the spectacle trade “nincompoops” in his explanation to Dablemont about why her historical research was poorly received by some.^{4,5} Maria was always intense in presenting optometric history in the most erudite way. Her concept

of a “profession” was of the “learned profession” (classically limited to medicine, law, theology or the doctorate in philosophy). Not only was this a difficult concept to relate to optometry, but professions starting with law were beginning to advertise to derive its patient or client population.

Because of their complementary abilities and perspectives, Dr. Hofstetter and Ms. Dablemont became an important duo in promoting interest in and the value of history of the profession to optometry leaders. This is manifest in their founding of the OHS. Of particular value was Hofstetter’s analysis of Dablemont in a memorial article.¹ Dablemont was a spirited romantic and intellectual born in Brazil who spoke often with a somewhat unintelligible accent, especially when she was excited. She was well educated in literature and in languages, often impatient, and used her global view to address problems. Maria’s intensity and dedication toward the OHS is best shown in her introduction in a letter to the charter members. “As the creation of AOA was a turning point in organized optometry, I have no doubts whatsoever, that the creation of the Optometric Historical Society will be equally important to the profession, if it is directed toward the fulfillment of the profession’s need for socio-historical studies, authorized documentation and availability to responsible researchers of historical resources.”⁷

At the 50 year anniversary of the Optometric Historical Society, we can look back at its beginnings to gain some insight to the OHS’ purpose, the forces contributing to its creation, and the roles of its founders Dablemont and Hofstetter. In the United States, the decade of the 1960’s was known

for its aggressive sociological change and upheavals. In no way was Henry Hofstetter or Maria Dablemont extreme in their undertakings, but they were nevertheless taking a progressive direction that resulted in a successful half century of the OHS. Over the course of the next 50 years, few can doubt the continuing progress of the OHS, when its cumulative history will be a touchstone for a maturing profession.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Kirsten Hébert from The Archives & Museum of Optometry, for her comments and editing of the manuscript.

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