

IN HER OWN WORDS: LIBBY I. SUKOFF, O.D.

Libby I. Sukoff, O.D.

Brooklyn, NY
sukoffle@gmail.com

Andrea P. Thau, O.D.

Past-President, American Optometric Association
 Diplomate, American Board of Optometry
 Associate Clinical Professor Emerita, SUNY Optometry
 New York, NY
drthauandassoc@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This memoir, written by Libby I. Sukoff, O.D. and edited by Andrea P. Thau, O.D., both of New York, chronicles Dr. Sukoff's life and more than six-decade career in optometry. Dr. Thau has included an introduction describing the personal and professional relationship she has with the author. This article has been annotated by Kirsten Hébert, contributing editor.

KEYWORDS

Andrea Thau; Libby Sukoff; Abraham Applebaum; Edward Sukoff; Columbia University; Optometric Center of New York; Cumberland Hospital; Harold Solan; optometry history; professionalization; history of medicine

INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to suggest a woman to be profiled in *Hindsight: Journal of Optometry History*, the first person who came to mind was Dr. Libby Sukoff. Libby is the original "Energizer Bunny." A five-foot-tall spitfire, she is a paramount professional, high energy, happy, and an athlete who exhibits true *joie de vivre*. I don't know many other O.D.'s who are still so excited to practice optometry after 63 years. Despite the fact that she was often the only woman in the room, Libby was treated respectfully by all who knew her, including her male colleagues. She did not expect any special treatment, but desired and earned the same respect and consideration afforded her male colleagues.



Andrea P. Thau, O.D., 2016. Image courtesy the AOA..

My late father, Dr. Edwin C. Thau, met Libby's husband Edward and later Libby at the Columbia University School of Optometry in the 1950's. Although they weren't classmates, they overlapped; Ed Sukoff graduated from Columbia in 1952, Ed Thau in 1954, and Libby Sukoff in Columbia's last class in 1956.¹ The two Eds were on the staff of the Brooklyn Cumberland hospital for many years. After my father passed away, Ed Sukoff continued at Cumberland and became the longest serving medical professional on the hospital staff.² All three of them worked at the Optometric Center of New York. My father was President of the Bronx County Optometric Society and Ed Sukoff was President of the Brooklyn Optometric Society,³ both local societies of the New York State Optometric Association (NYSOA). My father, like Libby, worked for Dr. Harold Solan⁴ at the beginning of his career and I was honored to be Dr. Solan's first second-generation student.

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The Sukoffs and my father built private professional practices, scheduling examinations by appointment only and their income was derived mainly by professional fees rather than material sales. This was an enormous change from providing eye examinations for free in order to "sell" glasses. They each conducted themselves as true professionals—they always dressed as medical professionals, treated their patients with the utmost respect, and provided the finest care. They were lifelong friends and they all helped elevate optometry at a time when it was transforming into a respected profession.

I recall as a child that the Sukoffs attended all of our family events. This was my first introduction into the American Optometric Association (AOA)/NYSOA family of optometry. Like my father, Libby loved the profession and the practice of optometry. Libby and I have much in common—we both had fathers whose love of optometry inspired us to become optometrists. We both love to dance and met our husbands dancing. During my interview of Libby for the article that follows, I learned that although Libby never dated a classmate, she did date my father!

I hope that you will be inspired by Dr. Libby Sukoff's professional life story and that you too will feel the need to pay it forward and thank the wonderful optometrists like Libby and Ed Sukoff and my father who helped advance the profession by volunteering your time and energy to your state association and the AOA to benefit future generations of optometrists and their patients.

LIBBY I. SUKOFF, O.D. (1933-)

I, Libby I. Sukoff, O.D., F.A.A.O., formerly Libby Applebaum, am in my 63rd year of lovingly practicing optometry. I am currently in solo practice in Brooklyn, NY, at the office of Dr. Leon Reich two days per week, generally spending one hour with each patient.

Thinking back to my childhood, my father Dr. Abraham Applebaum was an optometrist as were his brother and nephew.



Libby I. Sukoff, O.D., 1988

My Dad was born in Belarus and came to the United States at age 18. He completed his pre-optometry courses in high school in one year and then entered the Massachusetts College of Optometry, graduating in 1927. (P. 27, Fig. 1) At that time optometry was a two-year post-high school program. He loved his work and his patients and practiced until he was 80 years old. He practiced in a storefront in partnership with an optician. My father's love for optometry was an inspiration. He loved his work and helping patients. I wanted to become an optometrist, but I knew that I wanted to have my own private professional practice and not practice in a storefront. Optometry was advancing and becoming a recognized profession and I wanted to help.

As a child, I spent time in his office observing him examining patients and providing vision therapy which I greatly enjoyed. Many careers were not open to women at that time. Even if you completed a professional program in architecture or law for example, you could not find a job. I knew of several female doctors practicing in Brooklyn and knew that you could be self-employed in optometry. My father's love for his work motivated me to apply to Columbia University School of Optometry. I raced through Thomas Jefferson High School and Brooklyn College, taking as many courses each year as possible, graduating from college at age 20. My interview at Columbia for optometry school was with the dean, Professor Treleaven,⁵ and two staff optometrists. Professor Treleaven did not want women as students, even suggesting that my sole reason for planning to study optometry was a way to meet and marry a man. Ironically, I had already met the man who would later become my husband and soul mate, Dr. Edward Sukoff, but I had rejected his proposal because Ed did not want me to go to optometry school and nothing and no one was going to stop me from becoming an optometrist. I was only interested in a career, not marriage. Fortunately, the two staff doctors approved my application. Thus, I entered the three-year program wearing man-tailored suits and high heels as the only woman in the school. My classmates accepted me well. I was thrilled to attend classes and study every free moment except for a Saturday evening date (but never with any of my fellow classmates!!!) Our first exam was a surprise test in anatomy given by Dr. Sivak, M.D.⁶ Fortunately, I was well prepared and aced it, unlike my fellow classmates. At the end of the first year, one-third of my class flunked out, including some men with advanced degrees.

I was invited to join Omega Epsilon Phi,⁷ the national optometric fraternity, as its first female member. I was also invited to work with Dr. Harold Solan, O.D., M.A., F.A.A.O., F.C.O.V.D.⁴ a member of the staff in his developmental vision and vision therapy practice in the Bronx. On Saturday mornings, I would hop on the subway to the Bronx and spend the day aiding and learning from him. During this year, I accidentally re-met the wonderful optometrist I had given up for my career: Edward Sukoff. Edward was a veteran of World War II who had served as a lieutenant in hospital administration in Germany. He came back to the United States and attended New York University for pre-optometry. He graduated with a M.S. in optometry from Columbia University in 1952.

We first met when I was a Brooklyn College student and my sorority invited the Columbia University School of Optometry's fraternity to a party. It was just like in the movies. Our eyes locked from across the room and we danced the entire night. Regrettably, we broke up because he didn't want to marry a future optometrist;

he wanted a stay-at-home wife. We accidentally crossed paths a few years later when we were both standing in line at the same hotel, I to check out and he to check-in. This time, he accepted that I was to be an optometrist and I accepted his proposal of marriage. Our wedding was on May 29, 1955 several days after my finals. I was so happy I almost ran down the aisle to greet him! He had made all the plans while I studied. Our honeymoon was three weeks island hopping in the Caribbean—my first time on an airplane. The first stop was St. Thomas. The water was unbelievably blue and warm and calm—great for swimming and snorkeling. I considered practicing there until I found out that for children to get a good education, they were sent to school on the mainland in the United States at age 12.

The following year was filled with advanced courses or clinical practice, then studying for the New York State Board written and practical examinations and, later for the National Board which had been newly developed.⁸ We lived with my parents so that I could devote my full energies to studying. Ed worked in my father's office every day starting at 10:00 a.m. I left for school at 7:00 a.m., putting on my lipstick, kissing him in his sleep, leaving my mark. When my newly-divorced professor Dr. Alfred Lit⁹ heard that I was engaged, he offered marital advice only to me and not to any of my male classmates. He told me to talk a lot to the one that I love. My class—the Class of 1956—was the last graduating class from Columbia University. Only 22 of us completed the program. Columbia University shut down the optometry program under pressure from the M.D.'s.¹⁰ They were one of the last programs offering an M.S. in optometry rather than an O.D. degree and the M.D.'s would not allow an O.D. degree to be granted. Immediately after I graduated, Ed and I traveled to Boston to study at the Massachusetts College of Optometry for our Doctor of Optometry degrees. The program was summer and fall, followed by an original thesis. We enjoyed the Boston area and finished our joint thesis, along with Dr. Oberstein¹¹ on hard contact lenses in 1958 back in NY.

In 1957, we purchased a home with an office from an M.D. who was a general practitioner. This is what I dreamed of—combining home with office. Ed and I were true partners in life and in work. The front entrance opened into a large reception room which we filled with children's books and toys, including a large toy horse that children could ride on and puzzles. The next room was our consultation room, which had a large professional desk. Our two examination rooms had examination chairs and equipment; one was also for vision therapy, and the other for visual fields, contact lens and subnormal vision (later called low-vision) work. It was a truly professional office with examinations by appointment only. We only dispensed glasses to our own patients. No frames were on display. We kept them in the drawers of the same consultation desk that we used for case histories and took them out to show patients as needed. The first three months of practice together were challenging. Ed acted as the boss of the practice and treated me as a nurse and not as an equal. It took me three months to get up the courage to confront him about this. I was successful and we became lifelong equals and partners in work and in all aspects of our family life.

Since we were opening "cold," we needed extra support. Ed continued to work part-time with my father, and I at the Optometric Center of New York (the clinic that had served the Columbia University School of Optometry, would be kept running

by optometrists after Columbia closed and would later become the clinic for SUNY Optometry).¹ I worked with Dr. Harold Solan, at Dr. Taylor's Reading and Study Skills Center¹² in Greenwich Village, New York, and at the Optometric Center of New York. Ed and I each had different hours in our office to accommodate our patients.

We joined the Brooklyn Optometric Society, a local society of the New York State Optometric Association and Ed quickly became president. I celebrated his presidency with a large cocktail party in our home office for all the optometric members and their wives. He later went on to become president of the Vision Conservation Institute,¹³ an organization for the advancement of vision care. I wanted to acquaint women with what a great profession optometry was, and thus became chairman of an American Optometric Association committee to encourage people to enter the optometric profession. I lectured throughout New York state to young women in college urging them to consider a career in optometry, winning a national award for my work. When the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Optometry opened,¹ women started applying. Ed and I both joined the staff teaching clinical practice. We purposely taught on Wednesday mornings so that we could stay in Manhattan and attend Broadway matinees and concerts. (P. 27, Figs. 2 and 3)

Our practice grew and developed. The one problem I had as a woman, was calling a male M.D. for information or to discuss a problem. They treated me like a nurse, not a doctor. If Ed called, the attitude of the doctor was totally different, thus I had Ed call for many years. This now is not a problem.

My daughter was born in 1958, and I had my son in 1961. We had a full-time, live-in housekeeper/nanny. I could walk through the office door into our home. If ever there was a problem, I was available. Nursery school became a problem. Our daughter Marla insisted I stay with her for one month until she knew the name of every child in the class and had analyzed their personalities. Of course, we adjusted our appointments to accommodate the situation. Two years later my son, Neil, was just the opposite: "Do not come in. I'm okay." Dinner time was a family affair—no appointments for that hour. Then, one of us would return to the office and the other would tell the children a story and kiss them good night. It worked amazingly well. (Figure 1)

In 1964 we purchased a lakefront retreat on Upper Greenwood Lake, New Jersey, two hours from our home/office and near skiing. Between day camp counselors, nannies, grandparents, and a good station wagon, it enabled great family time. Ed and I were great athletes. We played tennis, swam (I was a lifeguard as a teenager), water and snow skied, walked 5.5 miles around our lake, boated on our five boats—motor, kayak, canoe, paddle and sail boat—ice skated on the lake in winter and bicycled on the Palisades in New Jersey and on Hilton Head. We danced every opportunity that we could and sought out restaurants that had dancing with dinner.

My parents had allowed me to go skiing with my friends but when Eddie (who learned to ski in the military) asked to take me skiing they gave permission. I only gave up skiing when I saw that Eddie wasn't skiing well at 86. I told him that I didn't want to ski anymore but it was out of concern for him. I now exercise 30-60 minutes every single morning (including on the days when I commute to work) and for 5 minutes every single night. I do a combination of yoga, Pilates, calisthenics, weight lifting, throwing

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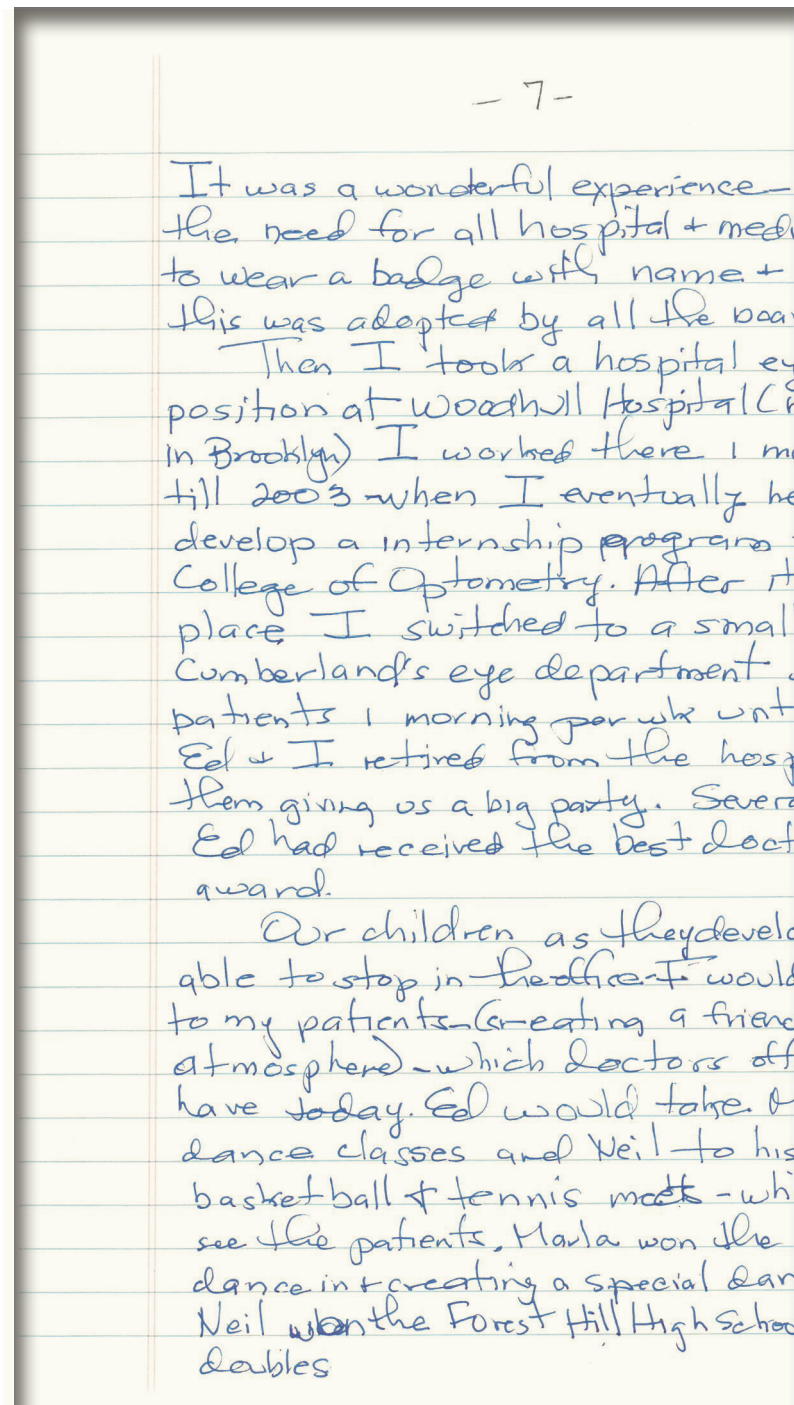


Figure 1. Libby Sukoff recounts her experience working at Cumberland Hospital and negotiating family life. Maintaining and growing a career while also raising children and accommodating the career of a spouse is a challenge faced by most women professionals at mid-century. Libby Sukoff memoir, page 7, August 2019.

and catching large and small balls, stretch bands and jumping. I still love to swim and spend my summers on the lake swimming, canoeing and kayaking. In the winter I work out at the spa. I am no longer five feet tall, but I am still size 2!

Ten years later, in 1974, I became the first female to be appointed to the New York State Board of Optometry, which only had five members. I was well-accepted by the male members of the board, though I occasionally differed in opinion on some of the malpractice cases that came before us. I wrote the Vision Therapy portion of the New York State licensing examination and appointed an optometric team to give the exam. Since we officiated the exam for doctors who graduated from all programs, I resigned from SUNY to avoid any conflicts of interests. After 10 years, I became Chair of the New York State Board of Optometry which expanded to 10 members and two consumer members. It was a wonderful experience. I introduced the need for all hospital and medical staff to wear a badge with their name and position, and this was adopted by all the boards and fields and is still the law in New York.

I then took a hospital position in the eye department of the newly opened Woodhull Hospital in Brooklyn.² I worked there one morning per week until 2003, when I eventually helped develop an internship program for the SUNY College of Optometry. After it was in place, I switched to a smaller hospital, Brooklyn-Cumberland's eye department, seeing patients one morning per week. Ed was awarded best doctor of the year from Cumberland Hospital; the first optometrist in the New York City hospital system to ever receive that honor. When Ed and I retired in 2012 from Brooklyn-Cumberland hospital they gave us a big party.

As our children developed, they were always able to stop in the office. I would introduce them to my patients, creating a friendly office atmosphere, which doctors' offices do not have today. Ed would take Marla to her art and dance classes, and Neil to his organ, basketball and tennis meets, while I would see the patients. It was important to both Ed and I that he develop a close relationship to our children. Marla won the New York City award for dance for creating a special dance performance. Neil won the Forest Hills High School tennis matches playing doubles.

The years flew by and Marla was off to Bowdoin College, and then Pomona College in California. She graduated from New York Medical College and is a M.D. Neil attended Middlebury College, spent his junior year at Tel Aviv University in Israel, attended Sterling University in Scotland and then went on to earn an M.B.A. at Duke University, with one year at the London School of Economics and Cardozo Law School. Both Marla and Neil married, and now I have 2 wonderful grandchildren: Zachary, 27, who earned a master's degree in mechanical engineering in aerodynamics, and Ari who is in his second year at Downstate Medical School. I often wonder if neither of our children went into optometry because we discussed it so much at home!

Later we practiced three days per week. We loved to travel. Our favorite place was Israel. In lieu of retiring we spent every December in Florida and every February in Mexico until Ed fell and broke his hip in Mexico, requiring immediate surgery and return to New York for rehabilitation. He eventually required a second operation but had a heart attack on our 62nd anniversary and left this world a week later at 90 years of age. I continue to practice but sold our home/office one year after Ed's death. I live at my lake

home, and moved my office in with Dr. Leon Reich, whom I knew from Columbia. Despite the two-hour commute each way, I still want to practice. I do it purely for the love of optometry.

Optometry has been a challenging, stimulating and rewarding career. It has changed greatly since I started 62 years ago. My husband and I and our contemporaries helped to advance the profession. My only regret is that I listened to my husband who did not want to achieve the last increase in our scope of license. I should have done it. May all the wonderful women entering the profession appreciate how far optometry has come in scope and recognition and strive to provide the best professional care and continue to help advance our wonderful profession, optometry.

Annotations

1. For more on the demise of the Columbia University optometry program, the Optometric Center of New York, and the SUNY optometry program see: Sunyopt.edu. Our Mission, Values and History [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2020 Jan 09]. Available from: <https://www.sunyopt.edu/about/history-and-mission>, and Goss DA. One hundred years ago: Start of the Optometry School at Columbia University. *Hindsight*. 2010 Oct;41(4):129-32.
2. Cumberland Hospital in Brooklyn, which began as the Brooklyn City Dispensary in 1847, served low-income communities in its vicinity for more than a century before agreeing to an affiliation with nearby Brooklyn Hospital in 1963. Cumberland was closed in 1983, moving staff and patients to nearby, modern Woodhull Hospital. Cumberland Brooklyn eventually became part of the Brooklyn Hospital Center in 1990. Brooklyn was also home to Brooklyn Eye and Ear, a charity hospital established in 1868 (closed in 1976). Dr. Ed Sukoff had interactions with staff of both Cumberland and Brooklyn Eye and Ear hospitals early in his career. For more on the history on the hospitals see: Sullivan R. A City Hospital in Fort Green will be Closed. *New York Times* [Internet]. 1983 Aug 11 [cited 2020 Jan 09]. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/08/11/nyregion/a-city-hospital-in-fort-greene-will-be-closed.html>; Brooklyn Historical Society. Guide to the Brooklyn Eye and Ear Hospital records 1985.005. [Internet]. 2011 Nov 18 [cited 2020 Jan 09]. Available from: http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/bhs/arms_1985_005_eye_ear_hospital/arms_1985_005_eye_ear_hospital.html; Spellen S. Past and Present: Decades of Change for Fort Green's Cumberland Street Hospital. *Brownstoner.com* [Internet]. 2015 Jul 14. [cited 2020 Jan 09]. Available from: <https://www.brownstoner.com/history/fort-greene-cumberland-street-hospital/>.
3. For more early history on the Bronx and Brooklyn County Optometric Society's, see the biography of Dr. Minvera Weinstein in this issue (Hebert K. Minerva H. Weinstein (1893-1982): The First Woman Licensed to Practice Optometry in New York City. *Hindsight* 2020;51(1).
4. Dr. Harold A. Solan was a lecturer at Columbia's school of optometry 1950-1956, subsequently served as a consultant at the Optometric Center of New York, and finally as faculty at the State University of New York College of Optometry. He also held positions as Director of Orthoptics at Harlem Eye and Ear Hospital from 1956-1960 and was a faculty member in Farleigh Dickinson University's education and psychology departments where he combined his education as an optometrist and his master's in remedial reading and developmental psychology to treat children with learning disabilities. To learn more about Dr. Solan, see: Goss DA. Biographical Note on Harold Solan (1921-2012), Optometrist and Learning Disabilities Researcher. *Hindsight* 2014;45: 62-4.
5. Clifford Leroy Treleaven received his B.A. (1914) and M.A. (1915) in physics in Toronto, Canada. He joined the faculty at Columbia University in 1922 as a professor in the Department of Physics. He

3. Women in Optometry Panel, SUNY, 1988. (L-R) Drs. Ellen Richter Ettinger, Libby Sukoff, Marcie Welsch, Madeline Romeu, and Monique Picard-Root. Image courtesy The Archives & Museum of Optometry.

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1. Stereograph made from family photo by Abraham Applebaum. Daughter Libby is an infant in her mother's arms, circa 1933. Image courtesy the author.

2

2. Dinner at the 1964 New York State Optometric Association meeting. Drs. Ed and Libby Sukoff seated at center. A young Dr. Alden N. Haffner in a white suit and bow tie is standing behind Dr. Libby Sukoff. Image courtesy the author.



- served as an instructor in the optometry program where he assisted Dr. James Southall in administration of the program throughout the 1930s, assuming the role of "supervisor" upon Southall's retirement in 1940. In 1945, outgoing University President Dr. Nicholas Butler established a professorship in the optometry program, granting Treleaven an Associate Professorship of Optometry. By 1947, Treleaven was the "executive officer" of the optometry program until it was abolished in 1957. Treleaven died in 1976. Columbia University. Catalogue of Columbia University. New York: Columbia University Press, 1922: 59. Available from: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044093629996&view=1up&seq=71>; . Blue Book of Optometrists 1954. Chicago, IL: Professional Press, 1954: 360 . Available from: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b4317784&view=1up&seq=366>; Editors. President Butler Retires. The Columbia Optometrist 1945;109(74):1. Goss DA. Biographical Notes on James P.C. Southall. Hindsight 2013 44(1) p. 8; Columbia University Archives. Finding Aid: Central Files. Located at: Columbia University Library Archival Collections [Internet]. [cited 2020 Jan 09]. Available from: https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-ua/ldpd_4080177/print; Necrology. J Opt Soc Am 1970;60: 153. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1364/JOSA.60.001537>
6. No record of Dr. Sivak could be found to provide biographical profile.
 7. Omega Epsilon Phi's Alpha Chapter was founded at Columbia University in 1919, the fourth oldest collegiate optometry fraternity in the country, growing to 11 chapters across the country by 1953. RG 547.3 Omega Epsilon Phi Fraternity, Box 1, Folder 1. Located at: The Archives & Museum of Optometry, St. Louis, MO.
 8. The NBEQ was organized in June 1951 in New Orleans, LA at the 42nd convention of the International Board of Boards, held in conjunction with the 54th American Optometric Congress. The first national exams were administered in 1952. Convention of the I.B.B. J Am Optom Assoc 1951;23(1): 57.
 9. Alfred Lit, O.D. (1914-2000) earned a Ph.D. in Psychology at Columbia University in 1948 specializing in visual sensation and perception. His research at Columbia focused on stereoscopic vision and the visual latent period. He was part of the optometry faculty at Columbia for a decade (1946-1956). Lit was active in organized optometry, serving as a member and officer in the NYSOA, ASCO, AAO and the AOA. In 1959, he took a position at the University of Michigan's Psychology Department and ended his career in 1983 as a Professor Emeritus at Southern Illinois University. For a complete biography see: Alfred Lit Obituary. The Pulfrich Effect. [Internet]. 2003 May 10. [cited 2020 Jan 10]. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University. Available from: https://pulfrich.siu.edu/Pulfrich_Pages/awards/LitObit.htm.
 10. Columbia announced it its remaining class of 22 students will be the last to graduate in June 1956. Columbia. Report from the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry. J Am Optom Assoc 1955;27(5): 271.
 11. Oberstein S, Sukoff E and Sukoff LI. An analysis of the various grid positions in dynamic cross cylinder testing. [master's thesis]. [Boston]: Massachusetts College of Optometry, 1957 Dec. Located at: New England College of Optometry Archives, Boston, MA.
 12. Dr. Earl A. Taylor was the Director of the Reading and Study Skills Center in New York, Amackassin, Blairstown, New Jersey. He published widely on education, reading and the relationship of eye movements to literacy. For more works see: Worldcat.org. [Internet]. Taylor, Earl A. Available at: <https://www.worldcat.org/wcidentities/lccn-no97067304#identitiesassociates>.
 13. The Vision Conservation Institutes were non-profit state organized entities that disseminated information on vision and eye care to the public in cooperation with the American Optometric Association. The VCI had a particular focus on children's vision and schools..