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FROM THE EDITOR: WOMEN IN ASCENT

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In the January issue of *Hindsight* and in this issue (as well as in some issues in recent years[1-3]), we present accounts of some remarkable and influential women in optometry. Another story that can be told is the significant increase in the number of women entering the optometric profession starting in the last quarter of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty first century. This trend is particularly evident to optometrists of my generation. There were no women in my optometry school class at Pacific University (Class of 1974), and only one woman in all three classes ahead of us. Each of the three classes entering after us had an increase in the number of women students.

That transition occurred at optometry schools throughout the United States. In 1970-71, my first year in optometry school, only 3.7 % of American first-year optometry students were women, while that percentage increased to 11.3% by 1973-74.[4] Women were applying (Table 1) and being accepted in increasing numbers. This increase in women students reflected similar trends in other health professions. In dentistry, the percentage of first-year students who were women increased from 2.1% in 1970-71 to 7.2% in 1973-74. In osteopathic medicine, the increase over that same time span was from 2.7% to 9.0%.[4]

That trend was just starting to gather momentum in the early 1970s, as can be seen from the data in Table 1. Over the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, the percentage of practicing optometrists who were women was quite low. For example, data from a 1944 American Optometric Association survey gave that percentage at 3%.[9] With the influx of women students starting in the 1970s, that percentage had increased to 19% by 1992, to 29% by 2009, and to 43% by 2016.[10,11] There are some indications that optometry was relatively more welcoming to women than many other professions in the early twentieth century,[3] but now in the twenty first century, there is no doubt that optometry is no longer the male-dominated profession it once was.

Edith Gallup, who was one of three women to lecture at the 1907 convention of the American Association of Opticians[12] (now American Optometric Association), wrote in 1912 that: "To women, as a class, the practice of optometry offers large opportunity for success."[13] Also writing in 1912, Gertrude Stanton, who was profiled in the January issue of *Hindsight*,[14] said that: "Optometry needs women, and women, in my opinion, who can make themselves successful in it, will find it a substantial and satisfying profession to follow."[15] The articles in the January issue of *Hindsight* and in this issue include some of the stories of the now many women optometrists who have been successful, innovative, and provided a positive influence as practitioners in a variety of modes of practice, as optometric leaders, as optometric educators, and as clinicians in optometric specialties. A highlight of this issue is Kirsten Hebert's examination of the life of Bess Coleman, which, more than our typical article, delves into the societal trends and forces which shaped her existence and career.

Table 1. *Percentages of women among optometry school applicants and entering students. Data for applicants were taken from Levine.[5] Data for entering students were compiled from reports in the Journal of Optometric Education and from the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry.[6-8]*

Year	% Women Applicants	% Women Students
1971	5	
1972	7	
1973	9	
1974	13	
1975	14	
1976	18	
1977	19	20
1978		20
1979		23
1980		25
1981		27
1982		29
1983		34
1984		35
1989		50
1990		51
1991		53
1992		55
2008		65
2010		64
2012		63
2014		68
2016		70
2018		68

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The "Wartime Congress" of 1945

The national media has made many comparisons between the American mobilization for World War II and measures taken to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus. Another parallel may be found in the AOA's cancellation of Optometry's Meeting in 2020. This is only the second time in history the convention has been called off in defense of the common good—the first time was 75 years ago in 1945.[1]

At the outset of the war, a new agency, the U.S. Office of Defense Transportation (ODT), was formed to "assure maximum utilisation of the domestic transportation facilities…for the successful prosecution of the war."[2] The ODT placed restrictions on "non-essential travel" so the roads would be clear for military vehicles and so resources such as gas and tire rubber were preserved for the war effort.

Then as now, the guidelines were voluntary, enforced mainly through a propoganda campaign, and they were not always well-received. The country was still recovering from the Great Depression, and many feared preventing leisure travel would cause the economy to backslide. Another complaint came from religious leaders who bristled at the government dictating the size of church gatherings.[3]

In January of 1945, the ODT's Committee on Conventions asked organizations to keep meeting attendance under 50.[4] The AOA was happy to do its patriotic duty and in May told members: "optometry…has again-as always-come through and gladly accepts these restrictions in true patriotic spirit."[1]

The 48th Annual AOA Congress Banquet, June 26, 1945 at the Hotel Gibson. Notice the arrangement of the tables in a "V" formation to recall the "V for Victory Campaign." The striped tablecloths and photographer's perspective technique accentuated effect. This image (2016. IMG.1048) is curated by The Archives & Museum of Optometry., St. Louis, MO

Thus the "Wartime Congress" of 1945 was born. The AOA Bylaws required that the House of Delegates meet each year, so the 48th Congress was held June 24-27, 1945 in Cincinnati, OH with 49 participants, many acting as proxies for state delegates. Ironically, the Americans won the last battle of the war on June 21, just days before the meeting. Perhaps by the end of June 2020, we too will be able to declare "victory" in the war against COVID-19, thanks to the willingness of all Americans to make similar sacrifices.

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