THREE EYE AND VISION CARE HISTORY ORGANIZATIONS: THEIR EMPHASES, ACTIVITIES, AND HOW TO GET INVOLVED

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes three organizations devoted to various aspects of the history of eye and vision care. The Optometric Historical Society, founded in 1969, strives to promote the study, documentation and appreciation of optometry history. The Ophthalmic Antiques International Collectors’ Club, founded in 1982, and the Ocular Heritage Society, founded in 1984, are societies of collectors of vision aids and other objects related to eye and vision care, and they work to promote the study of ophthalmic antiques.

KEYWORDS
Eye and vision care history, ophthalmic antiques, ophthalmic history, ophthalmology history, optometry history, vision aid collecting.

OPTOMETRIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Optometric Historical Society endeavors to research and document the history of optometry and to promote its historical legacy. It was founded as an independent organization in 1969 by Dr. Henry Hofstetter, director of the optometry school at Indiana University and past president of the American Optometric Association, and Maria Dablemont, head librarian for the American Optometric Association. Thirty-three founding members paid their $5 dues for 1970.

In January 1970, the first issue of the quarterly Newsletter of the Optometric Historical Society was published. It sought to be “a documentary record of every possible detail of optometrically related history, a record to bring together the scattered and piecemeal bits of information that defy gathering otherwise.” Further, it would inform optometrists of optometry’s centuries-long existence and emergence from a prestigious and sophisticated handicraft to its present academic stature, a truly proud history.

In 1992, starting with volume 23, the title of the newsletter was changed to Hindsight. Then in 2007, beginning with volume 38, the publication assumed a journal format with more formal articles, and the title was changed to Hindsight: Journal of Optometry History. Hindsight is now one of the IUScholarWorks online journals. The current issue plus the more than 3,700 pages of the full run of volumes 1 through 53 are available open access on the journal website. Print copies of issues can be purchased through the online American Optometric Association Marketplace. Occasionally Hindsight publishes issues emphasizing a particular topic, with the American Optometric Student Association, women in optometry, military optometry, optometric education and soft contact lenses being some of the themes of issues in recent years.

The Optometric Historical Society has frequently held meetings at the annual congresses of either the American Academy of Optometry or the American Optometric Association. Usually an invited speaker gave a talk on a topic of historical interest, but sometimes the meetings were open discussions where attendees...
The first OAICC newsletter appeared in September 1982. The April 2023 issue of Ophthalmic Antiques marked the 163rd issue of the club’s periodical. Back issues from 1982 through 2014 are available open access on the club website. The club has also published a 48-page booklet on how to restore ophthalmic antiques.

Club members frequently network online or at optical meetings and are often called upon to answer inquiries from the public concerning identification, family history or dispersal of small family collections. The club website has a “how-to” page with advice on how to document a collection and how to decode various marks on antique spectacle frames. Information on how to join the club can also be found through that page.

OCULAR HERITAGE SOCIETY

The Ocular Heritage Society, centered in the U.S., is a group dedicated to the study of objects relating to ophthalmic history. It was founded in 1984 by Audrey Davis, curator of medical sciences at the Smithsonian Institute, along with a few enthusiastic eye care professionals turned collectors. Since its inception, membership has always been open to anyone with an interest in ocular history regardless of professional affiliations or training.

The mission statement for the Ocular Heritage Society says that it “brings together people from different backgrounds who share a common interest in preserving ocular heritage.” To that end, members have included ophthalmologists, optometrists and opticians, as well as collectors who share an interest in all things vision or eye related.

The Ocular Heritage Society has held an annual meeting since 1984. Host cities are generally home to a member, a collection, or a location that holds an attraction of optical interest. Past meetings have been held in 23 different cities in 17 U.S. states, with four meetings having been held outside the U.S.

Annual meetings provide a forum for members to socialize while they share their common interests and discuss their collections and recent acquisitions. Attendees are welcome to present a short lecture on any eye-related topic. Topics of past lectures have ranged from historical aspects of eyeglasses to surgically themed topics to the whimsical. A compendium of past lectures is available to members.

Topics of past lectures parallel subjects of publications by members, some of which include peer-reviewed articles in professional journals, as well as books that have become reference sources on the history of the American ophthalmic industry, the history of spectacles and vision aids, the details of American spectacle makers and patents and ophthalmic themes on coins and medals. Ocular Heritage Society members seek to spread information and interest in ophthalmic history. Information on how to join can be found on the society’s website.

OPHTHALMIC ANTIQUES INTERNATIONAL COLLECTORS’ CLUB

The Ophthalmic Antiques Collectors’ Club was founded in 1982 by Derek C. Davidson as an organization for all who are interested in collecting the material evidence for our optical past. The word international was added to the name of the club in 1985.

The stated purposes of the Ophthalmic Antiques International Collectors’ Club are to “promote international cultural and social contact between members and with other organizations, establish expertise in the field of ophthalmic antiques, assist and encourage new collectors and provide an infrastructure for the dissemination of knowledge.” The club welcomes all collectors and covers anything remotely associated with ophthalmics, including for example history, vision aids, surgical, pharmaceutical, instruments, quackery, ex votos, signs, manufacturing, images and ephemera. Members have included optometrists, ophthalmologists, opticians, university professors, museum curators, librarians, auctioneers, antiques dealers and persons in theatre, fashion and the media.

The club is centered in the United Kingdom, with about 150 members. In addition to the UK, members are from Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, South Africa and the United States. The club has annual meetings to visit museums and collections throughout Europe.

In recent years, these meetings have been titled Blast from the Past, and starting at the 2022 American Optometric Association meeting, they became a competition of optometry students for cash prizes. Students can submit a paper, video, or poster on an optometry history subject, and the best three or four entries are invited to present at the Blast from the Past event.

Optometric Historical Society committee members contribute Throwback Thursday posts on the Optometry Cares-The AOA Foundation Facebook page. These posts have included photos of antique equipment and various historical tidbits. The society has provided online links to various optometry history resources, including a bibliography.

In 2015, the Optometric Historical Society became a program under Optometry Cares-The American Optometric Association Foundation. The membership structure of the society has been discontinued and anyone interested in any aspect of optometry history can participate in its activities. The society is guided by the nine-member volunteer Optometric Historical Society Committee and staff members of Optometry Cares and the American Optometric Association. Anyone curious about or fascinated by optometry history can get involved in the Optometric Historical Society by reading Hindsight, submitting articles to it, attending the Blast from the Past event, or volunteering to serve on the Optometric Historical Society Committee.

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