

## A History of RSA in 10 Minutes

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The RSA 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary planners have invented multiple ways to observe and celebrate our history. There are conference sessions: two by the RSA Fellows in which they recollect the first and second 25 years, a Supersession on Re-inventing RSA's History, and others on the history and future of many aspects of rhetoric itself. There's also a special anniversary issue of *RSQ* that includes an "anecdotal history" (Halloran).<sup>1</sup> My task here at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary reception is to give you a 10-minute overview of our history. As I am neither a founder nor an historian, I offer this in a spirit of epideictic amateurism.

We date RSA to that significant year, 1968—when I graduated from Penn State with my MA in English, when some of you were serving in Vietnam or trying to get a draft deferment, and when many of you were not yet born. In that year—when MLK and RFK were assassinated; when LBJ signed the Civil Rights Act; when student demonstrations and worker strikes paralyzed France; when the Viet Cong launched the Tet offensive; when protests and violence disrupted the Chicago Democratic convention; when a manned spacecraft, Apollo 8, orbited the moon for the first time when the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* premiered, the Broadway musical *Hair* opened, and the Beatles' "Hey Jude" was the top single—in that same year a small group of faculty met at the CCCC here in Minneapolis. Among them were people whose names you'll recognize: Wayne Booth, Donald Bryant, Edward P. J. Corbett, Henry Johnstone, Richard Larson, Janice Lauer, Ross Winterowd, George Yoos, and Richard Young ("Board of Directors"). They determined to form a rhetoric society.

The first issue of their *Newsletter*, December 1968, summarized the agreements of the group: "The first purpose of the Rhetoric Society," they said, "is to promote communication among those who are concerned with rhetoric. The Rhetoric Society invites to full participation all those concerned with rhetoric . . . : rhetoricians, linguists,

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to this and the other sources cited here, see Goggin (84–90).

literary theorists, literary critics, psychologists, sociologists, teachers of English composition, and English editors from textbook publishing houses.”

“The Rhetoric Society's second purpose,” they went on, “will be to disseminate knowledge of rhetoric and the powers of rhetoric to those who have been previously unaware of it. In addition, the Rhetoric Society will be prepared to stand sponsor to seminars in the Modern Language Association, panels and workshops in the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and to sponsor and provide participants for lectures and panels in the National Council of Teachers of English and for all other occasions. Membership in the Rhetoric Society will imply a commitment to aid in all possible ways the dissemination of the knowledge and understanding of rhetoric” (“Outline of Principles and Purposes” 1).

But there is also in the accounts of these early meetings an air of beleaguered apprehension. As newly elected Chairman of the Board Edward Corbett wrote in 1972, “Many of us have few, if any, colleagues with whom we can share our interest and enthusiasm. It is an exciting rhetorical age that we live in, but unless we can keep our own interest in rhetoric active, we are not likely to have much of an impact on the academy and the larger world.” He also lamented the diminished state of the treasury but indicated that there was a waiting list of people who wanted to join and expressed confidence “that we will have no difficulty getting enough members to sustain the activities of the Society. In fact,” he went on, “we worry more about growing so large that we lose the spirit of intimacy and camaraderie that have always characterized the relationships of those who share a common interest in rhetoric” (3).

As the first Constitution was being drafted in 1969, Richard Young wrote to Ross Winterowd, “The models of the society which I have in mind are the bull-session, the informed conversation, the letter of inquiry or advice, rather than the CCCC, NCTE, or MLA” (quoted in Young 327).

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How did we get from there to here? You can find many dates and names in the History section of the RSA website, but here are some major milestones:

- 1968, First issue of the *Newsletter of the Rhetoric Society of America* published, 2 pages; annual membership dues listed as \$5.00 ("Outline of Principles and Purposes")
- 1969, Membership is 180, over half with affiliations outside English ("Board Report").
- 1971, First constitution adopted (Corbett); it provided explicitly for disciplinary diversity on the Board of Directors ("Constitution of the Rhetoric Society of America")
- 1976, *Newsletter of the RSA* became *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*
- 1984, First biennial conference held at University of Texas–Arlington
- 1989, Death of Charles Kneupper, instigator and organizer of the first four conferences, all at UT–Arlington
- 1991, First *RSQ* issue that was not typewritten and mimeographed on 8.5 x 11-inch paper, but typeset and printed in a standard 6 x 9-inch journal format
- 1992, First conference away from UT–Arlington, here in Minneapolis (the fifth conference, though the program cover announced it as the fourth, proving that rhetoricians are not mathematicians)
- 1992, The Kneupper Award for best *RSQ* article inaugurated
- 2000, George Yoos Distinguished Service Award first given
- 2000, RSA abandoned its all-volunteer status by contracting with an association management organization (the redoubtable Kathie Cesa); membership was about 600
- 2004, Student chapters authorized by the Board

2004, Awards program expanded to include a dissertation award, a book award, and the Gerard A. Hauser Award for outstanding student conference paper, as well as the recognition of influential members as RSA Fellows.

2005, *RSQ* moved from editor's academic institution to a commercial publisher, Taylor & Francis

2005, First Summer Institute, held at Kent State University

2007, RSA became a 501(c)3, non-profit organization for tax purposes; membership about 1000

2008, RSA admitted to ACLS, a sign of full scholarly recognition

2010, Death of RSA President Michael Leff, only a month into his term; conference attendance that year was 1100

2011, Development Council established, to encourage fund-raising in support of RSA goals and activities

2012, Book series in Transdisciplinary Rhetoric established at Penn State University Press

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I want to end by circling back to the beginning, to one of the very early newsletters, from July 1969 (the second one, though identified as Vol. 1, No. 1, proving that rhetoricians are not archivists). There, we find a summary of the discussions of the preliminary board of directors, under the title "What Is a 'Rhetoric Society'?"

Two of the normal activities of a professional association are holding meetings at which exchanges of information among the membership can take place and issuing a journal presenting articles which accomplish this same kind of exchange of information. The members of the provisional board of directors . . . have twice expressed reluctance to see the Society engage in either of these two activities. They point out, quite accurately, that there are more professional meetings than any of us can attend. And that a number of people are already beginning to wonder if they

really contribute anything to the profession. Similarly, it is a cliché that there are already too many journals. Here there is a two-fold objection. Not only are there more journals than one can easily, or even with difficulty, follow, but also there are more journals than there are publishable articles. Yet, somehow, these journals are being filled. Against this background comes the question that your preliminary board of directors has been informally wrestling with: what is a "rhetoric society?" ("What Is a 'Rhetoric Society'?")

RSA has answered the question raised by its founders by rejecting their opposition to meetings and journals. It has come a long way from the bull-session and the newsletter, an outcome that some may celebrate but some may regret. But most will agree that despite, or even because of, our growth, we have retained the "intimacy and camaraderie" of those early days.

### References

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