

Interviewee: S. Michael Halloran [H]
Interviewer: Brittany Knutson [K]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
Date: 31 May 2018

Transcript

K: I'm Brittany Knutson, and I'm here with Michael Halloran. When did you first join RSA?

H: Let's see. It would have been sometime in the 1980s, I believe. There's actually something funny about that. I had written to George Yoos who was then, you know, sort of being everything and got no response from him. And then I met him at a 4Cs¹ conference and I said, sort of diffidently, "Professor Yoos, did you get my letter about joining RSA?" He said, "Halloran, Halloran. Didn't I send you some books to review?" So, George was not the most organized person in the world.

K: [laughs]

H: But he's a wonderful guy. And I've been—since then I've been a member.

K: Were you a graduate student then?

H: No, actually I became a graduate student right around the time that RSA was founded: 1967. I started the graduate program at RPI.²

K: How did you first learn about the organization?

H: That's a good question, which as we all know, means I don't know the answer to it.

K: [laughs]

H: I really can't remember how I first learned of it. I may have seen a copy of the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. I was going regularly to the 4Cs back then, and it may just have been in conversation with somebody at the Cs that I learned about RSA.

K: How would you describe the organization when you first joined it?

H: Small. Not highly organized. [chuckles] My story about George thinking that he sent me some books to review attests to that. It was Richard Young in exchange with Rich Enos—I think it was he who described it as originally sort of a circle of friends who just had this mutual interest, and that's how it grew, and it has continued to grow quite phenomenally.

¹ Conference on College Composition and Communication.

² Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

K: Yeah, it's funny to think of it as small now, watching all the people come through today.

H: Yeah.

K: Who are some of the key people you remember meeting or working with during your early years as part of RSA?

H: Well, George, certainly. Richard Young I got to meet at some point. Who else? I went to at least one, maybe two, of the conferences that were out of Arlington, Texas. And I got to know the late Charles Kneupper—not really well—before he died. Victor Vitanza. Rex Veeder, who sort of took over from George as editor of the journal. Incidentally, I got to see Rex last summer. He's not in good health, but he's still, you know, mentally he's very sharp—he's fine. I'll see if there are other people I think of who—Jim Corder. I don't know whether Jim was involved in RSA or not, but he was at Texas Christian [University]. I got to be very friendly with Jim, mainly through the 4Cs. Ross Winterowd, I think I mentioned him already. [laughs] I had a funny experience with Ross. I had published, someplace, an article—oh no, I was giving a talk, I think it was at the 4Cs, and I was critical of something that Ross had published, and he was in the audience. And he did not take it kindly.

[05:39]

K: [laughs]

H: Afterwards, we introduced ourselves, and he said something about, "Well, you quoted me out of context outrageously." Which was not true.

[both laugh]

H: But Ross was a very crusty guy. And he was really one of the key people in the very beginning. [chuckles] I remember we had had this rather unpleasant exchange at the 4Cs, and somehow—I don't think it was through Ross, I think it was through somebody else at USC³—I got invited to go there and give a talk. And I accepted the invitation, fully expecting to be beaten about the head and shoulders by Ross, but I accepted because my son was, at the time, a student at Occidental College in Los Angeles, and I thought, "Well, I get my fair pay and I get to visit John, and I'll have to suffer a bit of humiliation."

K: [laughs]

H: But in fact, Ross was as kind and hospitable a host—I was astounded. He was very, very nice. But he had this very mercurial personality. He was always full of energy and it kind of burst out in different directions. [chuckles]

³ University of Southern California.

K: [laughs]

H: I remember seeing him at an early 4Cs meeting giving a talk, and he was making reference to the ill repute in which rhetoric as a field was held in departments of English at the time. And he referred to himself, as this kind of featured speaker at the 4Cs—he said he thought of himself as the cream of the scum. [laughs]

K: Do you think that's still the case? That English departments—

H: I think things have changed. I think that—I used to be an active member of MLA.⁴ I was on a couple of committees there. And Phyllis Franklin, who was the executive director back then, she really wanted to see the organization broaden its scope and become more hospitable to a field such as rhetoric and composition. But it was a hard slog. But I think that things *have* changed some now. You know, the MLA is such a huge organization. It's like one of these gargantuan ocean liners. If you want to make a ten-degree turn to the left, you've got to plan ahead about ten miles of events. It just doesn't respond very quickly.

K: Mmhm. Interesting. What was RSA doing when you first joined? What were its major projects and goals?

[09:20]

H: Well I think the journal was one thing, which was evolving and growing. Initially, it was called the “newsletter,” the *RSA Newsletter*, and then it became the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. There were five issues of the *Newsletter*, and the first issue of the *Quarterly* is number five because there were at least four quarterly issues before. I don't know whether it's five or six, but anyway. That was important. Dick Young had become head of the English department at Carnegie Mellon. He got a grant for—an NEH⁵ grant for—I don't know whether it was a summer institute or whatever, some kind of a seminar. And it was really kind of spreading interest in and knowledge of rhetoric, mainly focused on the field of English, although it was interdisciplinary from the start. Somebody was speculating today whether Henry Johnstone was one of the original founders, from philosophy from Penn State, and I'm not sure whether he was or not. But Dick Young recalls that Donald Bryant was one who, early on, was drawn into being a member. Richard Ohmann from—he was a big MLA guy. Owen Thomas, who was a linguist. Others, but I can't remember who they were. But it was kind of bringing together a—I would say their major project was bringing together a coherent and yet not restrictive, an intellectually substantial field of study. Interdisciplinary. And I think it's been highly successful with that. When you look around here and there are people from quite a variety of disciplines, I would say that was its major project. It has also—and I'm not sure how conscious this was at the start—RSA has been an organization that's very welcoming to young scholars and has, I think, more than any other academic society that I'm familiar with, has developed real substantial projects to assist people coming

⁴ Modern Language Association.

⁵ National Endowment for the Humanities.

into the field, and then advancing in the field. I think of it as a field, some people think of it as a discipline. I see it as an interdisciplinary field still. I don't know that it makes a whole hell of a lot of difference, but that has been something that we have occasionally talked about. I'm sort of antidisciplinary people, maybe because I'm just undisciplined as a person.

K: [laughs]

H: And I think that's been one of the hallmarks of RSA. And when Cheryl Geisler, who was my colleague at RPI for some years, when she had this idea for a midcareer seminar or whatever it's called for faculty, it was RSA that took that—that gave her room to make that happen. I think that's been one of the great things that the society has done. So, yeah. I don't know whether that answers your question or not.

K: Yeah. That was great. What are your most important or prominent memories related to RSA?

[14:50]

H: Memories related to RSA. [laughs] Well, that initial exchange with George Yoos. And see, the interesting thing about that was I had read a review that George did of a book by a speech communication scholar who shall remain nameless, and my impression of the review was it was *savage*. And I had this image of George Yoos as this really severe, you know, sort of like the Thomas Aquinas philosopher of this ferocious variety. And then when I met him—

K: [laughs]

H: —he's just totally different. And George and I got so that we would always, at any conference we went, we would always get together for a drink or dinner or something. Friendship with George Yoos was one of the things that was a wonderful memory. Another very strong memory was I became, I was elected president—of RSA, not of the United States—around 1990 or something like that. And so I planned—I was in charge of planning the conference which was the first conference that we had outside of Arlington, Texas. I was very apprehensive about it, and it came off as quite a success. Now, a success back then—I think we had about 180 people attend. That was great! That was—that's a very strong memory. The first board retreat, which Gerry Hauser conducted at an airport hotel in Chicago. That's a very strong memory for me, and it was a key event in the history of RSA. It was Gerry who I think everybody—a lot of people had understood from some years before that RSA had outgrown the all-volunteer labor model that we were using. But Gerry was the one who kind of said, "Okay, we are gonna get more professional." He was the one who found Kathie Cesa and hired her company to do some of, you know, the business work of the society. He was the one who recognized that the society, and I remember he's quoted in this piece

that's coming out in *RSQ*,⁶ that the value that the society was able to provide to its members would justify significantly higher dues. And, I mean, that's a hard step to take—to increase dues—because if you've been charging, I don't know what it was, ten bucks a year or twenty bucks a year and you're going to all of a sudden say, "Okay, hey, the dues are now \$75 a year," or whatever, the fear is people are gonna, you know, "Ugh! To hell with this!" And Hauser was the one who had the courage to take that step. And I don't know that people have recognized that as an act of courage, as well as of business acumen. He understood that the society was providing value to its members that would justify—and he was right. And that retreat was a big turning point for the society. And the—I *think* that the idea for the summer institute came out of that first retreat. At that was—Jack Selzer refers to that as our greatest invention. I would argue that Cheryl Geisler's midcareer seminar, or whatever it is, is at least a close contender for our best invention. You know, other conferences—I remember there was a wonderful one in Tucson which is a great venue for a conference. It's a lot of fun. The conference has always been *fun*. This has been—RSA is always the conference that I enjoy more than any other, and I suppose a lot of it is that I know more people here than at other conferences that I go to. I would say those are the strongest memories that I have, and they were all good ones. I don't think I have any really bad memories. One potentially bad memory. [laughs] When we were planning the conference, I think it was in '92, here in Minneapolis, I had this recurring dream that, you know, we had signed this contract with the hotel, and in my dream nobody showed up for the conference. And I'm sitting in a conference room with a few other board members and people from the hotel, and they are all saying, "Well, what are we going to do about this? We've got this contract with the hotel and we owe all this money to them."

[both laugh]

[22:19]

H: And then somebody says, "Whose signature is on the contract anyway?" And all eyes turned in my direction. And that's the point at which I would wake up sweating.

K: [laughs] I bet, I bet! So the conference planning is the bad memory?

H: Yeah. Well, it was just that fear. But it was a big success. I think everybody felt really good about the way the conference went.

K: How has the organization changed throughout the time that you've been part of it?

H: Oh, it's become much more professional. It has gotten a whole hell of a lot bigger, of course. The journal has progressed from being first a newsletter then a quarterly, but so mimeographed typescript stapled together to a highly reputable peer-reviewed journal with four regular issues a year and now a special issue each year. And the quality of the scholarship is very high. In fact, I understand that when the society applied for

⁶ I.e., Halloran's "The Growth of the Rhetoric Society of America: An Anecdotal History," published in volume 48.3 of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

membership in the, what, ACLS—American Council of Learned Societies—that they recognized the quality of the journal as one of the strong arguments for membership. It has—if anything, it has strengthened its commitment to supporting young scholars and scholars who are rising, which I think is one of, to me, one of the really good things about RSA. So I think—sometimes I worry that in growing as much as we have that we run the risk of turning into a clone of National Communication Association. I can remember, it was back in the 1970s, that I went to, for the first time, the national conference of what was then SCA,⁷ and why I ever came back is a mystery to me. It was a very alienating experience. It was lonesome as hell. There was no—the society did nothing that I was aware of to make young scholars feel at home. RSA I think does that. And I hope that we *always* do that.

[26:05]

K: Yeah, that's a great contrast sort of there.

H: Yep.

K: What do you think RSA will change in the years to come?

H: *Will* change? I don't know. My guess is that it will continue to grow in numbers. Something I would like to see the society do is take a stronger interest in pre-college education. If it's true, and I think it is true, that civic participation is at the heart of rhetoric as a field, practice, and study, then we ought to be concerned with elementary and high school education because if students don't learn to be responsible citizens there, they're not going to learn.

K: Mmhmm.

H: And just as a matter of history, you look at one of the central figures in the history of rhetoric, Quintilian: he begins with the hopes that a prospective father should have for his son—not his daughter, of course, back then. But his son. He talks about the kind of toys that should be given to him, you know, these ivory letters. I mean, Quintilian's is a cradle-to-grave curriculum, and I would like to see RSA take more of an interest in pre-college education. How that would be, what specific programmatic expressions of that interest would be, I'm not in a position to say. But I think that there are serious problems with elementary and high school education that RSA would include the expertise to say something useful about.

K: Yeah, that's great. This question probably leads you back to that answer, but what are your hopes for the organization's future?

H: Well, I think I've covered this. I hope that it never loses the focus on welcoming young scholars and offering programs to assist young people to rise in the profession. I hope that it does take this broader interest in pre-college education, and I know I'm

⁷ Speech Communication Association.

certainly not the only person who feels this way, and there are probably people who would be a lot smarter about developing real programs to address that interest. Hopes for RSA? I hope it—in general, I hope it continues to thrive. I hope it never turns into a clone of NCA or, God help us, MLA.

[30:00]

K: [laughs] That's all I have for you. Anything else?

H: Okay, that's great.