Sixty Four Years
of
Idealism, Dedication, and Service

Just a little more than 60 years ago—not just a single impulse, but varying situations and conditions provoked men's thinking and the exchange of thoughts that smoldered and sparked and finally fanned into flames of action—the beginning of the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping (ACSM).

Perhaps the most important factor in the formation of this society was the great national depression of the early 1930s. With the big "crash" and subsequent "moratorium" came unemployment of disastrous proportions. ...Private-practice groups of engineers and surveyors were broken up by the closing of firms or retrenchment back to owner and minimum staff. Surveyors and engineers were shifted about from place to place, often at great distances, to perform the few available projects. ...Lack of funds caused students to leave colleges and universities in great numbers. Those just graduated faced guaranteed unemployment. Such events quickly affect the manufacturer; the instrument maker was no exception. Everyone, the instrument manufacturer, the (now professional) engineer or surveyor, the professor, the university, and the student, were seriously concerned.

Government—federal, state, county, municipal—also became concerned and called on the professionals for solutions. Agencies were formed—civil works (CWA), public works (PWA), works progress (WPA), federal emergency relief (FERA), and watershed development, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). These great life-saving work projects required advance surveying and mapping, as well as programmed survey projects.

The wide disparity in standards and quality of early surveys was cause for concern. ...Monitoring qualifications in the days before state registration of engineers and surveyors made alertness the watchword for all those interested in high standards in surveying and mapping. Professionals with interest in ASCE's Manual 10, City Survey Standards, and those with an interest in federal mapping and surveying specifications, would compare notes with those attempting to plan surveying programs and to recruit for this work.

Educators were equally concerned. The college summer survey camp became a meeting ground for discussing the times and trends and needs. From such association came realization that engineers and surveyors and educators could learn much from each other. They also recognized that much should be taught to develop and upgrade techniques and standards of practice. The sense of need for continued association grew stronger, leading to a perception of the opportunity for leaders in these fields to form an organization devoted to the problems of surveying and mapping.

It was at such a surveying camp—the Summer Surveying Camp at Rainy Lake, Minnesota, the 1938 summer camp of Professor Jack Dodds of Iowa State College—that ideas crystallized into movement to form a national congress on surveying and mapping. This meeting, attended by professors from ASEE's Committee VIII, by officials from federal and state mapping and surveying organizations, and by private practitioners, was the significant point from which ACSM emerged.

The birth of ACSM was envisioned by two men in a rowboat on Rainy Lake during the camp meeting. These men were a surveying professor from a Kentucky school and a WPA official from Washington, D.C., formerly with the Randall Engineers of Toledo, Ohio, a firm disbanded due to the national depression. They were Professor George Harding and Murray Y. Polling. Among others at the summer meeting who influenced the ACSM conception were Jack Dodds, who would become ACSM's second president; Brother Leo of Manhattan College; Prof. Paul P. Rice of Rutgers; and H.M Dilbert of the W.&L.E. Gurley Co. instrument makers.

A year later, at the Surveying Camp of the Speed Scientific School in Kentucky, formation of a congress was weighted with a sense of urgency. A committee was formed with George Harding as chairman, and by 1940, plans for the formation of a “national congress” on “surveying and mapping” were well underway. Manufacturers of surveying and engineering instruments were very active at this time too. Instrument makers pledged funds to get things started and to defray early expenses of publishing a bulletin.

In June 1941, a three-day conference was convened at the Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C. to “discuss” the formation of a congress; but the enthusiasm of the 163 attendees was infectious, so much so that the congress was organized as a permanent entity at this meeting.

Named originally the National Congress on Surveying and Mapping (NCSM), the organization’s name was changed at a later date to the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping to encompass members from Canada and South America.

Robert Henry Randall, elected as the first president of the fledgling organization, presided at the inaugural meeting of the ACSM on June 16-18, 1941. George H. Harding became the first executive director.

Randall was authorized to appoint a committee on constitution to draft a permanent constitution for ACSM. In the next few months, the committee prepared detailed “Notes on a Constitution” which were presented to the membership in Bulletin No. 2, November 1941, for review and comments.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attached Pearl Harbor, plunging the United States into war. Born on the brink of World War II, nurturing and managing the infant ACSM was a precarious, many times heartbreaking task. Members and officers left for military service in considerable number; those remaining were mainly in strategic surveying and mapping positions fulfilling the needs of the military. Nuclear forces of ACSM played an influential role in U.S. strategic mapping programs.

Much credit must be given to the early leaders of ACSM for their courageous and indomitable spirit and strong belief in the importance of their chosen professional field and the organization formed to shape it into a stronger force at the national and international level.

Walter S. Dix
Recollections of the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping - 1941-1991