



BEGINNINGS OF THE WESTERN SNOW CONFERENCE

Committee on Snow of the American Geophysical Union – 1931

As with all good things, the Western Snow Conference began as an activity of another group, the American Geophysical Union. In the Section of Hydrology of the AGU, a permanent committee was formed on Hydrology of Snow. Of course this committee was formed as a recommendation by one of the members of the Section of Hydrology, Dr. James E. Church. Dr. Church was established as the Chair of that committee and remained in that position through 1944. Dr. Church along with a number of his colleagues, involved in snow surveys, found the AGU Section of Hydrology the perfect forum to share information on snow surveys, snow science and uses of snow survey information. Of course, water supply forecasting was a big part of the technology shared in the early sessions.

It is through the annual reports of the Section of Hydrology and activities of the Committee on Snow, as published in the Proceedings of the American Geophysical Union, that snow surveyors can trace much that is of importance, not only to the history of snow surveying, but to all phases of snow research, including early reports of experimentation at Soda Springs at and near the current site of the Central Sierra Snow Laboratory. A sidelight to these activities is the involvement of railroads. Railroads played a big part in transportation and a need for information on snow for operation of the railroads, and so the involvement at Soda Springs.

In 1932 Dr. Church, as chairman of the Committee on Hydrology of Snow, recommended that a Conference be held to highlight the advances associated with snow surveys, snow hydrology and water supply forecasting. The first conference was held in Reno, Nevada and was sponsored by the Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station. Dr. S. G. Doten, Director of the Experiment Station, opened the meeting as the host of the first Western Interstate Snow Survey Conference. Between 1932 and 1936 there were three Conferences associated with snow. These Conferences were the Western Interstate Snow Survey Conference, the Continental Snow Survey Conference and the Eastern Snow Survey Conference. The Western and Eastern Snow Conferences remain.

Western Interstate Snow Survey Conference – 1933

In the second annual report of the Committee on Snow, Section of Hydrology, American Geophysical Union, the report for the year 1932-33, you can find an

account of the first meeting of the Western Interstate Snow Survey Conference, forerunner of the present Western Snow Conference.

In the words of Dr. Church: "Through the enthusiasm of Professor George D. Clyde, eastern Great Basin representative on the Committee, and quite contrary to the tendency set by the depression, a personal conference on research problems expanded into an Interstate Conference on snow surveying embracing all of the central and northern states from the Great Divide westward to the coast. The response was eager and the interests unexpectedly wide. Personal representatives from Utah, California, and Nevada met at the Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station, the pioneer in western snow surveying, on February 18, 1933, as guests of the University of Nevada. There was a registration of 30 from Nevada, 8 from California, and 2 from Utah. Representatives from southern California were blocked from attending by snow."

As presented by Chairman Fred Paget, "At the conclusion, it was voted that the Conference should be made an annual meeting to be designated as the Western Interstate Snow Survey Conference and that future conference arrangements and publication of proceedings should be in the hands of an Executive Committee of five, elected each year. It was desired that the representation on the Executive Committee should be as wide as possible and the following were elected for the first year: Harlowe M. Stafford, Chairman, Snow Supervisor, Division of Water Resources, California State Department of Public Works; J. E. Church, Meteorologist, Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station; George D. Clyde, Professor of Irrigation and Drainage Engineering, Utah Agricultural College; W. C. Lowdermilk, Senior Silviculturist, U. S. Forest Experiment Station, Berkeley, California; and V. H. Greisser, Chief Engineer, Washington Water Power Company." An interesting sidelight of the notes for the meeting was the listing of Dr. J. E. Church as a Meteorologist, an honor given to him by the University of Nevada in recognition of his extensive work in snow hydrology and meteorology.

In 1937 the Western Interstate Snow Conference (shortened name) was designated as a part of the Section of Hydrology, but would hold its conferences and meetings separately from the Section of Hydrology in the American Geophysical Union. Publication and associated activities would still be a joint activity of the Section of Hydrology, AGU. The Conference had discussed separation from the AGU at this meeting, but because of prompting and discussion with the AGU's executives, who believed this was an extremely important activity of the Section of Hydrology, remained an activity of this Section. The fact that Dr. J. E. Church was now the Head of the "International Commission on Snow" was a convincing factor that helped the AGU decide to retain this Conference. In addition, the record indicates a continuing dissatisfaction with the fact that the Western Interstate Snow Conference was paying for the publication of all of the Section of Hydrology proceedings so that the Conference proceedings would be printed.

The Western Interstate Snow Conference continued through 1942 but was shortened to the Western Snow Conference in 1943 by vote of the executive committee. The Western Snow Conference operated as a function of the AGU through 1946. In 1947 the Western Snow Conference separated from the AGU and the Section of Hydrology and began publishing separate proceedings.

The Conference operated in this manner through 1953, when the conference had finally grown to the point that a set of detailed By-Laws was needed to manage the elections and conference business. Dues through 1948 for the Conference had

remained \$1.00. They remained \$1.00 until 1954 when the dues were raised to \$2.00. The printing of the proceeding cost \$280.00 for 200 plus copies in 1948. Dues and printing cost did not accelerate appreciably until the late 1960's when the dues were raised to \$7.00.

Area Designation within the Western Snow Conference

The Western Snow Conference is broken into four areas. These areas are the North Pacific, South Pacific, North Continental and the South Continental.

The original areas for the Western Snow Conference evolved from the Regions of the Section of Hydrology of the American Geophysical Union. These Regions were North Pacific, South Pacific, North Continental Divide and the South Continental areas, each with a board of Directors and executives. The North Continental Divide Conference included only the portion that was west of the Continental Divide. The South Continental Area included areas on the east side of the Continental Divide and eventually evolved to include all other members of the Conference that were outside of the States covered by the Western Interstate Snow Survey Conference.

The Western Snow Conference Traditions

Area Recognition within the Western Snow Conference

At the 27th (1959) Annual Meeting of the Western Snow conference and in celebration of the 50th Year of Official Western Snow Surveys, the South Pacific Area instituted the use of colored string, snow flake bolo ties to recognize the different areas of the conference. This is the first year that colors were designated for each of the areas, with the North Pacific adopting emerald green, the North Continental adopting navy blue, the South Continental adopting red and the South Pacific adopting gold. The bolo tie has continued and the annual ritual of the cutting of the ties, removing standard ties from those not donning the bolo, is repeated at each banquet.

El Farsante Award

The high, or low point, from the recipient's point of view, of any meeting of the Western Snow conference is the presentation of the El Farsante award. The award was originally designated in 1953 by George A. Lewis to go to the individual who made the biggest forecasting error, but evolved quickly to include all of the mistakes people make during a year that are involved in the business of snow surveys. This award is best summed up by a paragraph by Bob Miller in the 1964 Forum of the Western Snow Conference.

"Pappy" Lewis, who started the whole thing, has referred to the El Farsante as "that bit of painted pottery presented annually to some poor cluck who goofed". Actually, it is this, but it is more... much more. The El Farsante and its presentation are all things to all men; or at least all snow men. In a ridiculous, dignified, terrifying ceremony which usually involves a Hitchcock-type ending, this grotesque glob of painted plaster is presented to the best, or the worst, or the worst of the best of our organization. There is no defense, no recourse, and no appeal. The stunned recipient leaves the scene an anguished, embarrassed, humbled mass of humanity – to treasure always the highest award the conference bestows.

The award is bestowed each year at the banquet of the Western Snow Conference and is without a doubt the highlight of the conference and a great tradition that endures.

Oh, by the way, in a fickle turn of events George A. Lewis was the first recipient of El Farsante because he was foolish enough to design El Farsante and tried to award it to someone else.



Jim Marron
Hydrologist
Portland, Oregon