

When were you first involved with MAA? Was this before you were active in EPADEL?

I joined both the AMS and MAA in 1959 as a Cornell departmental nominee. While at Cornell, as a graduate student, I was intrigued by the so called ruler function which is discontinuous at the rationals and continuous at the irrationals. I wondered where, if anywhere, was it differentiable. This was a good problem for a new graduate student to solve and, when I did, I wrote it up and submitted it as a Classroom Note to the Monthly. It appeared in Volume 69 of the Monthly in 1962. This was my first "publication" and the first of four Classroom Notes that I published over the years.

On the wall next to my desk at home is the following quote from Kundera's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being."

"An individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence,, into a motif, which then assumes a permanent position in the compositions of the individual's life"

That is the story of my involvement with the MAA. As an Assistant Professor at Penn, I was asked to teach a topology course at Swarthmore which did not at that time have a topologist on their faculty. The person who asked me was David Rosen who also happened to be the Governor representing the (then) Philadelphia Section (later EPADEL) of the MAA. That was the fortuitous occurrence that, in many ways, changed my life. Rosen invited me to become involved with the MAA. From 1975 to 1978, I served on the section's executive committee.



David Rosen at EPADEL's 75th Anniversary Celebration - 2001

Without the invitation to teach at Swarthmore I doubt that I would have become active in the MAA. For better or worse, at that time the AMS was “the organization of choice” for the research universities while the MAA was focused on four year colleges. It is interesting to note that this was a change from the period before the mid 1950’s (see: Zitarelli: EPADEL, A Semisesquicentennial History, 1926-2000).

Tell me about your experiences in EPADEL.

During my term on the Executive Committee, Doris Schattschneider was elected Chairman. Under her leadership the Section Bylaws were revised, the name of the section was changed to the Eastern Pennsylvania and Delaware Section (EPADEL) and the title “Chairman” was replaced with “President.”

In 1979, I organized and spoke at an EPADEL meeting, held at Penn, on “Computer Graphics and Undergraduate Mathematics Instruction.” Jerry King from Lehigh was the MAA Governor and at the conclusion of his term I was nominated and elected to succeed him. His advice to me was to “keep a sharp eye on the national office”. My term as Governor was from 1980 to 1983. As Governor, I continued as an ex-officio member of the Executive Committee, a practice that was continued during all my years as a national officer of the MAA (Finance Committee/Treasurer). Over the years, I served on many nominating committees and program committees for the section. This includes organizing the Spring 1989 and 1998 meetings at Penn and helping with the 1993 Meeting at Villanova. These meetings were all focused on the use of computing in teaching undergraduate mathematics. In addition, I spoke at these and several other meetings. According to Zitarelli’s EPADEL history, I gave a talk in 1980 on “The Future of the MAA.” Fortunately, neither I nor anyone else has a record of what I said, so my reputation as a prognosticator is unblemished by facts.

In 2000 I became the EPADEL webmaster and continued in that position for four or five years.

In general, I believe that sectional activity is a sine qua non for all MAA national officers. MAA policies need to reflect the needs of the individual MAA member and there is no better way of understanding the needs of MAA members than being involved in the activities of a section.

It is easy to see how your interest in teaching, especially with computers, led you to the MAA. How did you get the interest and expertise that led to your MAA contributions in finance, ending up with being Treasurer (1992-2001)?

Actually the first committee that I was asked to serve on (and chair) was an ad hoc committee called, CRAMP – The Committee to Review Annual Meeting Programs. This was in the early 1980's. At that time, the AMS portion of the annual meeting began a day before the MAA portion and the MAA portion continued for a day after the AMS portion. Our committee recommended that the programs be concurrent and simultaneous and that is the way it is today. In addition, our committee recommended that the MAA have contributed paper sessions. Both of these recommendations were approved by the Board of Governors.

I wrote above about the fact that faculty members at research universities were expected to be active as AMS members and not as MAA members. The opposite was also true as there was a certain amount of “distrust” of research mathematicians involved in the MAA as illustrated by the following anecdote. I remember having a meeting of CRAMP in the San Francisco Hilton during a break in a Board of Governors meeting. President Dorothy Bernstein saw the meeting and came over and, looking me up and down, demanded to know “How long have you been an MAA member, Porter?” It was obvious that she was afraid that research types were going to sully the MAA. I was, frankly, taken aback but quickly calculated and announced: “twenty years.” That was the end of the discussion.

I was on the Program Committee for the 1982 summer meeting in Toronto and served on the Committee on Meetings from 1986 to 1991 including being the chair in 1991.

Let me get back to your question about finances and such. I was always interested in investing and paid attention to the reports of the Investment Committee at the Board of Governors. As we all know, the easiest way to silence a person who asks too many questions is to put him (or her) on the Committee. (I think this is a case, as Gilbert and Sullivan put it, of letting “*the punishment fit the crime.*”) As my term as EPADEL Governor was coming to a close, Len Gillman asked me to join the Investment Committee. It was an interesting committee. I don't remember all the

members but certainly Henry Alder and Harley Flanders were two of the other members. Anyone who knew Henry and Harley knew that neither of them was a “shrinking violet.” The committee meetings could be a bit contentious but there was never any doubt that the goal of the committee was to preserve and increase the MAA’s endowment. I served on the Investment Committee from 1983 to 2002 and chaired it from 1986 on.

Gillman was both a good friend and an MAA mentor to me as he had been to others.



Len and me at the 2002 annual meeting in San Diego

In 1984 I was asked to be a candidate for the MAA Audit and Budget Committee. I didn’t know who my opponent was but learned it was a woman by the name of Lida Barrett. I had no idea who she was and was disappointed when I discovered that she had been elected. The next position on the committee opened in 1986 when Gillman was elected President and Don Kreider became Treasurer. I was again nominated and this time was elected. Lida, Don and I worked well together and we made a point of attending as many committee meetings at the national meetings as was possible. Lida remains a good friend today and I count myself lucky to have worked with her.



Lida Barrett at MathFest 2001

It was often the case that when Lida and I would come to Washington for meetings, the finance staff at MAA was unprepared and we would spend a day or more trying to get things straightened out. The Finance Office at the MAA is today a professional operation. In general, previous Finance Directors at the MAA were not up to the job and much responsibility evolved on the Finance Committee. I hope that my efforts helped the MAA get to the point where we are today.

What accomplishments in the MAA are you especially proud of?

Well, first of all, as I mentioned above, I am proud of the fact that Lida, Don, and I as well as others helped the MAA thrive and become financially well managed and stable.

But there are also many other things that I am proud that I helped accomplish. None of these are things that I can take full credit for. It was always the case that a small number of thoughtful committed individuals helped move the MAA in these directions. It is with this caveat that I mention the following:

I'm proud that I helped get the first African-American on the Board. That was Gloria Gilmer. The MAA has made an important commitment to diversity. SUMMA was an indication of this but we also worked hard to diversify our committees and leadership. A few years ago Jackie Giles wrote an op ed for the Houston Jewish newspaper in which she credited me as being an important mentor for her in the MAA. I was humbled by her praise but equally appreciative.



Jackie Giles in 2002

The MAA believed we had to lead with our actions as well as our words. One step in this direction in which I was involved was the decision of the MAA to divest of its South African stocks. There were some Board members who believed that the MAA should not take political stands. It has always been my opinion that not taking a political stand **is** a political stand. As Elie Wiesel said in his Noble prize acceptance speech: *“We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”*

Over the years, I have consistently pressed for greater MAA use of the internet. I have served on several committees that dealt with that issue. In particular I pushed for the first MAA Gopher and I believe that I am responsible for naming: “MAA Online.” More recently I brought together a group of people who helped contribute to the Math DL project which was the successor to NSF grants that David Smith, Lang Moore and I had. Math DL lives on these days as LOCI (another name that I suggested).

While Al Wilcox was the MAA Executive director there was a suggestion that we abandon our DuPont Circle Buildings and move to a location in Arlington. I was not alone in thinking that the Arlington location lacked the charm and location that we had in DC. Instead of moving to Arlington, we decided to renovate the Washington Buildings. John Kenelly led a Building Fund Drive and we maintained our Washington Headquarters. Today with the renovation of the Carriage House to a conference center we can look

back at the wisdom of our decision; however at the time, the financial exigencies were significant.

In 1996 when the AMS made the decision to stop meeting with the MAA during the summers, the MAA had to decide whether or not to continue with summer meetings. This was a difficult decision for the MAA since we had little experience in running meetings and we faced a significant financial short fall if our summer meeting was not successful. I worked with Don Van Osdol, who was the Associate Secretary at the time, to help plan the first MathFest. Today MathFest is a major MAA activity but we knew we were taking a chance with the 1997 meeting.

As you've probably noticed a leit-motif of computing is present in most parts of my career. I've already mentioned the MAA's expansion onto the web and my service as EPADEL webmaster. In 1983, Lynn Steen, who was then the MAA President asked me to chair a new committee, the Committee on Computers in Mathematics Instruction – CCIME. Those were the days when microcomputers were first being introduced. I was active in this area as the Associate Dean for Computing in Penn's School of Arts and Sciences and the MAA committee was a natural extension of this. In those days, CCIME's focus was on mini-courses and panel discussions about computing that were held at our national meetings. At one point, the MAA was approached by IBM to run a national program showing faculty how to use computer algebra systems in mathematics instruction. This was consistent with the movement toward "discovery based learning." In particular, an interactive text using a computer algebra system (Maple, Mathematica, or MathCad) would provide the tools with which a student could explore mathematics. Learning would be an active experience rather than the passive experience of the lecture hall.

My background as chair of CCIME, MAA Treasurer, and Associate Dean at Penn positioned me as an ideal person to take a leadership role in this endeavor. Jim White and I received the IBM grant together with several NSF grants for the Interactive Mathematics Text Project (IMTP). During the course of the grant, we established four computer labs throughout the country and ran twenty or so workshops for each of five years. The workshops taught people about active learning and gave them the skills they needed to author interactive texts. Several of our "students" have gone on to assume leadership roles in this area. My recollection is that the MAA received about \$3 million dollars to support this program.



Jim White in 2001

The IMTP was a professional development activity. I noticed that the MAA had a Committee on Professional Development but that Committee did little more than say that Professional Development was a good thing and people should do it. In 1995, I became the chair of this committee and moved it in a new direction; namely, to develop MAA professional development programs. Bill Haver, Jon Scott and Tina Straley were very active in helping formulate the ideas for the MAA Prep program and the workshop for departmental chairs. In addition, Barbara Osofsky helped develop the MAA short courses that we have today. We have made tremendous progress in building these resources for our members. However, I am disappointed that many who would have benefited most from these programs are unable to participate. We needed, and still need, distance learning programs for those unable to travel to workshops.

Another disappointment involved our efforts to get graduate students to become members of MAA. Today's graduate students are the faculty of tomorrow and it is important that the MAA make them aware of the Associations and the benefits of Association membership while they are still in graduate school. This is difficult to do because, as I noted earlier, the AMS is viewed as the organization of choice by most faculty at research universities. As an indication of the problem we face, in 1997, at the Atlanta meeting, we decided to randomly contact mathematics departments for lists of graduate students to whom we could give free MAA memberships. We contacted a number of departments but received no response. This is an important issue on which we must continue to work.

I mentioned above that I served on the membership committee from 1994 until recently. I also served on the strategic planning task force on membership. Hopefully the recommendations of those groups will be adopted and will help the MAA as it nears its centennial. In particular, two recommendations of those groups were (1) electronic delivery of journals and (2) a greater international presence. (Of course these are coupled in an obvious way.)

I am pleased that my wife Judy and I are able to sponsor public lectures, starting with one at the 2010 annual meeting in San Francisco. Outreach is an important mission of the MAA and we hope that the public lecture will help the MAA reach the community in the major metropolitan areas where we meet each January.

What is your best memory of your work in the MAA? your worst?

Best: The most important thing to me has been the number of good friends that I developed over the years through the MAA. I still attend national meetings but not for the mathematics as much as for the opportunity to see old and dear friends. I dare not list them all here since I will surely leave someone out but they know who they are. In a broad sense the MAA is my extended family. Whatever efforts I have expended over the years have been paid back many times over by these friendships.

Worse: As Treasurer, I had to work closely with the MAA Finance Office. At various times this office became dysfunctional. This made it extremely difficult for me to do my work as Treasurer

What personalities have stood out in the mathematical community, both in the MAA and in the community at large?

As a member of the Board of Governors and as Treasurer, I have had the opportunity to work closely with a number of MAA Presidents including: Lynn Steen, Len Gillman, Lida Barrett, Don Kreider, Debby Haimo, Jerry Alexanderson, Ken Ross, Tom Banchoff and Ann Watkins. Each of these "governed" in their own way but each was absolutely dedicated to advancing the goals of the MAA. A similar statement is true of the Executive Directors, I have worked with: Al Wilcox, Marcia Sward and Tina Straley. As I think about it, I realize that I can easily add another twenty or thirty people to this list and even then will have forgotten some. So let me

end the list by mentioning Martha Siegel and John Kenelly both of whom have been tireless in their efforts for the MAA.

I mentioned above the great value I have gotten from the MAA through the friendships I developed. I would like to add that I have also benefitted enormously by having my horizon significantly broadened, from Penn and EPADEL to the national scene.

Thanks, Jerry, for a very pleasant conversation. Your trajectory through the MAA world is very interesting.