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The Transportation Research Board's Annual Meeting on the Move

Reflecting on the History of an Extraordinary Event

THOMAS B. DEEN AND ALAN E. PISARSKI

*The authors are members of the TRB History Committee. Deen, a transportation consultant in Stevensville, Maryland, and a member of the National Academy of Engineering, served as TRB's eighth Executive Director from 1980 until his retirement in 1994; TRB's Distinguished Lectureship was named for him in 2002, and he received the Frank Turner Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Transportation in 2006. Pisarski, a transportation consultant in Falls Church, Virginia, is author of the *Commuting in America* series and recipient of TRB's Distinguished Lectureship and the W. N. Carey, Jr., Distinguished Service Award.*

On a cold January day in New York City in 1922, the executive director of the Highway Research Board (HRB) rose to speak to a small group of policy and technical experts assembled from around the country. Professor W. K. Hatt had dressed in his best striped pants and cutaway coat for this important occasion. This began a series of annual meetings that gradually morphed into the premier event hosted by the Transportation Research Board (TRB) and attended by tens of thousands over the years.

Hatt had been appointed to his post the previous July. His predecessor Alfred D. Flynn had access to space in the Engineering Societies Building in New York City, where he had maintained the offices of the Board during his two-year stint as executive director. Hatt used this same space to stage the first Annual Meeting.

(Top photo:) For nearly 60 years, transportation professionals have networked and shared research at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel during the TRB Annual Meeting. The Omni Shoreham and the Washington Hilton supplemented for most of that span.



W. K. Hatt, the second Executive Director of TRB (then the Highway Research Board), presided over its inaugural Annual Meeting in 1922.



PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
DIGITAL COLLECTION

Road construction in Washington State in the 1920s. Highway research, fledgling at the time, responded to the need for better technology and construction methods.

The meeting had to be held during cold weather to avoid conflicts with the construction season—many of the attendees were engineers engaged in building the nation's road system. The 30 participants at the first meeting included 17 members of the Executive Committee. Five technical and two administrative committees had been appointed, papers were presented on ways to improve the design and construction of pavements, and discussions were held about HRB's role in coordinating and advising federal and state agencies on highway research.

Survey of Research

The participants agreed to undertake a survey of ongoing research projects. A few months later, results showed that 479 highway research projects were under way at 132 institutions, public and private. None of the projects could have been large, because the combined spending totaled only \$300,000 per year (approximately \$4 million in today's dollars), or an average of \$625 per year per project (\$8,500 in today's dollars).

Nonetheless, this level of research activity demonstrated that the agencies charged with building the new roads were seeking improvements in technology and methods. The survey also showed the need for a clearinghouse to help researchers avoid duplication, build on each other's work, share results, and facilitate the transfer of promising outcomes from the laboratory to field practice.

HRB and its Annual Meeting were tools for ful-

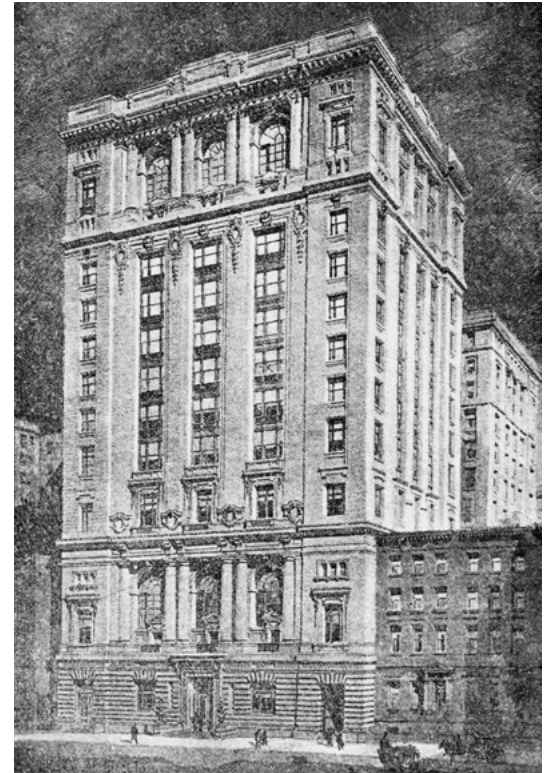


IMAGE: POPULAR SCIENCE MONTHLY, VOL. 68

The Engineering Sciences building, on West 39th Street in New York City, was the site of the first Annual Meeting.

filling this mission. Research successes and failures could be peer reviewed, published, presented, and discussed.



With an attendance of 1,700 in 1956, the HRB Annual Meeting moved to the Sheraton Park Hotel, Washington, D.C.; the hotel later was renamed the Marriott Wardman Park.

Although they had high hopes, those 30 attendees could not have known that they were setting in motion an annual event that would continue through the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, several smaller wars, and countless other national tragedies and triumphs, growing steadily, and that almost a century later would attract nearly 12,000 from dozens of countries to explore transportation technology in all modes.

Momentum of Growth

Although expanding the Annual Meeting was not an explicit objective, growth began immediately. By the fifth meeting in December 1925, attendance had increased to 293, and the Executive Committee, concerned about overcrowding, considered limiting the meeting to 300 attendees, but after a brief discussion, the members dismissed the idea. This was the first of several attempts over the years by members of the Executive Committee to rein in the growth of the Board and of the Annual Meeting.

For example, Thomas D. Larson,* who chaired the Executive Committee in 1981, believed that too many technical committees were sponsoring too many sessions at the Annual Meeting and sought policies to constrain growth. For a while, any request for a new committee required an accompanying recommendation for eliminating a committee or merging committees to limit the total.

When restraints were in effect at other times, program planners created a workaround—the so-called “boxed sessions,” which were not numbered. This permitted the actual sessions to increase even as the numbered sessions remained in check.

These periodic restraints, however, encountered an inexorable expansion of the issues facing transportation and a commensurate demand for more committees to address the issues. Initially, the main concern was the improvement of pavements, materials, drainage, right-of-way, bridges, and vehicle weight standards on highways. But other modes became part of the Board’s portfolio—including public transit, railroads, aviation, and marine transport. All of these faced an ever-increasing array of issues such as environmental impacts, finance, social justice, economic development, safety, and the reconciliation of private and public interests.

* Thomas D. Larson (1929–2006) was Federal Highway Administrator, 1989–1993; Pennsylvania’s Secretary of Transportation, 1979–1987; and a longtime researcher, civil engineering professor, and administrator at Pennsylvania State University, now home of the Thomas D. Larson Pennsylvania Transportation Institute. He was the 2003 recipient of the Frank Turner Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Transportation.

PERSONAL HISTORY 1956

A Sense of Awe and Wonder

My first Annual Meeting in 1956 was the biggest meeting I had yet attended. It produced a sense of awe and wonder at the variety of presentations. I was seeing and hearing in person many respected professional leaders addressing a cascade of issues related to the building of the just-authorized, gigantic Interstate Highway System. I was a student, bused to the meeting with my entire class at Yale University’s Bureau of Highway Traffic—the Annual Meeting was part of the curriculum. One of the enduring virtues of the Annual Meeting has been to introduce career-minded students to the array of opportunities within the fields of transportation.

—Thomas B. Deen



PHOTO COURTESY THOMAS B. DEEN

Thomas B. Deen directed the Nashville Metropolitan Area Transportation Study in 1958.

Meeting Sites

Growth therefore was inevitable and from time to time has required moving the Annual Meeting and using multiple locations to accommodate the presentations, committee meetings, and displays that deliver the valued content.

From 1924 through 1955, the Annual Meeting was held at the brand new National Academy of Sciences (NAS) building, which opened in 1924 on Constitution Avenue, NW. Within a few years, however, the burgeoning sessions required the use of

PERSONAL HISTORY 1964

A Gold Mine of Research Materials

My introduction to the Annual Meeting came in 1964 via the treasure trove of papers that returning attendees brought back from something called the HRB. I was a college student working on travel surveys for the Tri-State Commission, an enormous planning project for the New York City region. One Monday morning I arrived at work and found that the entire senior staff had disappeared—they had gone to Washington for HRB. When they returned later that week, they brought along a gold mine of research materials.

—Alan E. Pisarski

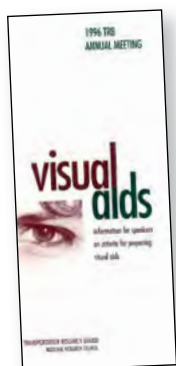


PHOTO COURTESY ALAN E. PISARSKI

Alan E. Pisarski (seated right) and his home interview survey staff at the New York Metro Area Tri-State Transportation Commission in 1964.



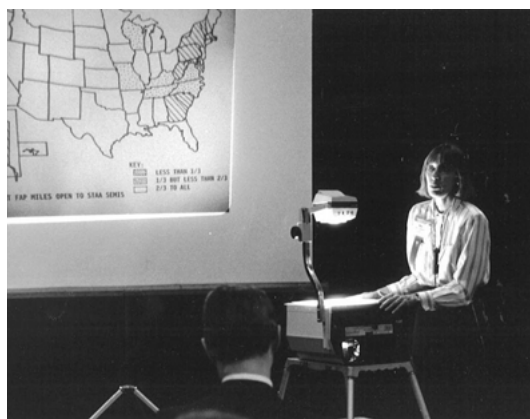
TRB staff members check slides at the 1988 Annual Meeting. Strict standards were set to improve the quality of visual aids and were outlined in brochures for meeting attendees.



other buildings in the vicinity, including the buildings owned by the Red Cross, the Bureau of Public Roads, and the Department of the Navy. The program for the 1955 meeting showed that accommodating the many sessions and the 1,520 registrants required space from the State Department, the Department of the Interior, the Red Cross, and the General Services Administration, in addition to the NAS headquarters.

Washington, D.C., has been the site for all of the Annual Meetings but the first in New York and then during World War II, when hotel space in the crowded capital was limited. The meeting moved to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1941; St. Louis, Missouri, in 1942; Chicago, Illinois, in 1943; and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1945. The 1944 meeting was planned for Cincinnati, Ohio, but was canceled at the request of the Office of Defense Transportation because of the war's demands on the national transportation system—the one gap in the succession of 94 transportation conclaves, ironically, was the result of a shortage of transportation.

In 1956, the meeting moved to the Sheraton Park Hotel, off Connecticut Avenue, NW, near Rock Creek Park; the venue offered plenty of sleeping rooms for out-of-town attendees and a large number of meeting rooms. Attendance reached 1,700.



The overhead projector supplanted slide projectors as an aid to presenting papers; today, presenters use PowerPoint and upload their visual media to a shared database.

Setting Standards

The growing program, however, received criticism for the poor quality of the slides used by presenters. Attendees at the back of some of the larger rooms could not see the technical details projected. To remedy the problem, TRB developed strict standards that required presenters to submit slides for review beforehand. Although the quality of the slides improved, controversies arose, especially when an eager speaker who missed the deadline for slide submission and who had traveled a long distance to make a presentation discovered that the slides could not be used.

On one occasion, a speaker in a standing-room-only session in the Blue Room of the Shoreham received a waiver and began the presentation by explaining that the slides had not been reviewed and that some might be unreadable. The audience booed. The slide review policy remained in effect for more than a decade, with supporters outnumbering detractors, but eventually the process proved too time consuming and was discontinued.

Disseminating Papers

From the 1970s into the 1990s, authors whose papers were approved for publication through the peer-review process were required to submit 100 copies for distribution at the Annual Meeting. A large room was reserved with long tables to display the hundreds of stacks of papers. “Early birds” who arrived when the doors opened would patrol the rows of tables and pick up copies of the papers of interest. Registrants could choose four free papers and could purchase additional papers for a modest fee. Papers with a wide audience disappeared quickly, to the disappointment of those who arrived later.

But technology eliminated need for the prepublication papers, the big room, and the long rows of tables. In the early 1990s, all papers were digitized and distributed on CD-ROMs, so that all registrants could receive all the papers. More recently, the papers have been made available on computer memory sticks or flash drives and online.

Changes in the media of communication employed by participants provide one way to trace the history of TRB Annual Meeting. Media have progressed from typewritten and photocopied research papers to 35-mm slides; to overhead projectors and folders thick with transparencies; to the mixed blessings of PowerPoint. Not long ago, a speakers’ dais lined with three or more laptops dangling wires connected to powerstrips became a common sight; add today’s thumb drives and file uploads to a shared database.

Adding Hotels

Although the move to the Sheraton Park Hotel in 1956 brought the meeting once again under one roof, within a few years, continuing growth required additional space in the neighboring Shoreham across Calvert Street and later in the Hilton Hotel on Connecticut Avenue.

In many ways, the architectural design made the Sheraton Park, with its long, elegant lobby, the perfect tool for human interaction. In only one or two trips up and down that capacious hall, a participant could meet everyone he or she wanted to see and could enjoy a dozen serendipitous meetings. A stroll along the connecting corridor between the Marriott and its Wardman Tower at any recent meeting could capture a similar ambience.

In the past few years, the TRB Annual Meeting has required a half-dozen or more additional hotels for overnight accommodations, with an extensive shuttle bus system between the various venues. In 2014, the meeting attracted more than 11,000 attendees to 750 workshops and sessions, featuring more than 3,300 presentations and scores of poster sessions, 500 committee meetings, more than 150 other meetings, and nearly 200 exhibitors. The five-day program offered more than 1,600 events.

A Heterogeneous Mix

The TRB Annual Meeting is unique, a professional gathering of people from the government, commercial, academic, and independent sectors involved in all aspects and all modes of transportation, address-



ing policy, administration, finance, engineering, the environment, and the social sciences. This heterogeneous mix provides unparalleled opportunities to network in an atmosphere where information is king.

In an ever-shrinking world, the Annual Meeting has become a place for international networking, as well. More than 1,800 experts from 70 foreign countries attended the 2014 event.

In addition, other national transportation organizations piggyback some of their committee or other meetings immediately before or after the TRB Annual Meeting, with so many of their members in town. Scores of these associated group meetings convene each year.

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, attendees could browse and pick up copies of peer-reviewed papers that had been presented at the Annual Meeting.



With the development of the Compendium of Papers—first on a CD, then on a flash drive, then online—meeting attendees have access to all the papers presented.



A unique, signature headliner session at the 2012 TRB Annual Meeting brought together six former U.S. transportation secretaries to discuss past challenges and future research opportunities.



PHOTO: RISSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Annual Meeting attendees can use a mobile application and online program as well as the traditional printed program to navigate the event.

Scope and Complexity

Conducting a meeting of such scope and complexity requires the dedicated and timely services of a highly trained and motivated staff, along with the help of hundreds of volunteers who peer-review the papers, organize and preside over the sessions, and ensure that the thousands of tasks related to the meeting are completed on time and within the limits of available funds.

The printed program—in recent years, a hefty 300-plus-page, 8-1/2-by-11-inch book—is gradually being augmented through an interactive web version and an app for mobile devices. Participants can

follow events via social media, including LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. The meeting's unique and signature headliner sessions—for example, one featuring six former U.S. Transportation Secretaries addressing current issues—provide ample opportunities and content for coverage in all media.

Tracing the roots of present-day technical standing committees also offers insights into the growth of the TRB Annual Meeting. As mature subjects identify new concerns in an increasingly specialized world, those new concerns quickly gather adherents and raise calls for new committees. The Data and Information Systems Section, for example, traces back to what was called the O-D, or origin–destination, committee, which addressed and discussed just about everything a young planner needed to know; that eventually spun off the Data Committee; and now 17 entities have proliferated to form the section.

Promoting Synergies

The scattering of this activity over several hotels, however, has restricted the spontaneous contacts between modes and interests that often is the foundation for innovation. The multiple venues also have experienced overcrowded sessions, congested corridors, slowly moving shuttle buses between hotels, restrictions on exhibit space, limits to growth, and complaints from registrants. Moreover, the Marriott is converting many of the rooms in the Wardman Tower, scene of countless TRB events for more than six decades, into permanent residential apartments. Something had to give.

Construction of the new Marriott Marquis Hotel will be completed by May 2014. In combination with the adjacent Walter E. Washington Convention Center, the new hotel offers considerably expanded facilities that will enable the TRB Annual Meeting once again to convene under one roof. The connected venues offer ample space for the hundreds of meeting events, as well as virtually unlimited exhibit space.

This new location will promote the synergies of intermodal contacts, reduced crowding, and increased exhibits. Although more than half of attendees commute to the meeting from their homes in greater Washington, D.C., or arrange accommodations on their own, TRB has contracted with the Marriott Marquis and other hotels in the vicinity for an adequate supply of guest rooms.

The original purpose of the TRB Annual Meeting continues: to facilitate the exchange of information through a variety of planned events, as well as informal contacts. The move of the meeting to a new venue in January 2015 once again will maximize this potential.



As the Annual Meeting has grown, so has the physical size—and shape—of the Final Program. In 1972, the printed program was 54 pages, at 5.5 × 8.5 in.; in 1982, in a 4 × 9 vest pocket format, 126 pages, bulking to 222 pages in 1992; by 2002, in an 8.5 × 11 format, it was 216 pages, and reached 360 pages in 2014.