History of the Western Orthopaedic Association

The written history of the WOA was first recorded by Thomas Taber, M.D. from Phoenix Arizona (President–1976). In Dr. Taber’s notes from 1994, he abstracted information from 2 previous presidents: Steele Stewart, M.D. (Honolulu: President–1934) and Merrill Mensor, M.D. (San Francisco: President–1948). Drs. Stewart and Mensor delivered an address on the past history at the annual meeting in 1967 and 1974 respectively.

The WOA was officially incorporated in 1932; however orthopaedic surgeons in Los Angeles and San Francisco were meeting as early as 1922. The Los Angeles Orthopaedic Club was organized in 1922 and in 1923 there was a joint meeting of the orthopaedists from San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Some of the early names in the Los Angeles Orthopaedic Club were Charles Leroy Lowman (President–1936), Ellis W. Jones Sr, Halbert Chancel, Alfred Gallant (President–1947), Steele Stewart (President–1934), John Dunlap (President–1939) and John Wilson Sr.


In the lecture given by Dr. Steele Stewart in 1967, he indicated that he and Howard Markel talked of the possibility of a Western Orthopaedic Association while they were on the SS Maui as it sailed toward the Golden Gate. Concerning the early history of orthopaedic surgery there were no organized training programs and as such preceptorships were common. Board certification did not occur until the formation of the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery in 1933. The Western Orthopaedic Association became the first Orthopaedic Society west of the Mississippi River. The initial meetings were rotated between San Francisco and Los Angeles and later included a meeting in Yosemite in 1951. The meeting sites continue as a rotation between California, Hawaii and a venue in one of the other fourteen member states.

In the formation of the WOA, the initial proposal in 1929 was between the clubs of Los Angeles and San Francisco to form an association; and the constitutional committee was appointed consisting of Drs. Howard Markel, Thomas Stoddard, Charles Lowman and Steele Stewart. The constitution was ready by the fall of 1930 and originally provided for 3 sections geographically:

1). Northern to include British Columbia, Washington and Oregon;
2). Central to include Northern California, Nevada and Utah;
3). Southern including Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico and Hawaii.

It was decided to hold the meetings in rotation and James Watkins of San Francisco became the President at the first meeting held in San Francisco in 1933. The initial efforts were for further membership and additional chapters. Seattle became the next chapter in 1937 and Roger Anderson was elected president. The chapters included Arizona (1945), Gulf Coast (1967), Hawaii (1952), Idaho (1953), Los Angeles (1932), Los Padres (1974), Montana (1954), Nevada (1987), New Mexico (1955), Northern California (1932), North Texas (1956), Orange County (1975), Oregon (1949), Panhandle HiPlanes ((1956), Puget Sound ((1937), Rocky Mountain (1953), Sacramento Valley (1969), San Diego (1952), Sequoia (1981), South Texas (1956); Spokane (1952–1986), Utah (1949), Western Slope (1990), Wyoming (1980). Most chapters have evolved into State Orthopaedic organizations; however some of the chapters remain active (examples San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle). These chapters function as entities independent of the WOA.

The meeting format initially was that of a combination of a scientific program combined with social functions and t has remained consistent throughout our history to date.

Some highlights of the early presidential line included:
Dr. Watkins (President–1933) studied orthopaedic surgery in various European centers for 3 years working with Drs. Hoffa, Lange and Lorenz. He married Eleanor Fairman Preston from Virginia, who herself was a recent medical graduate. He was the city health officer in San Francisco from 1907-1910.

The second president of the WOA (1934) was Steele Stewart, M.D. from Honolulu. He was the Chief Surgeon at Shriners Hospital until 1946. He was involved in a controversy over fee scheduling for doctors on the island of Oahu. The state of California heard about this endeavor and became the first state to utilize a relative value scale. Hawaii followed thereafter.

Charles Lowman, M.D. (fourth President–1936) and was the founder of the Orthopaedic Hospital in Los Angeles. He was a recipient of the nation’s highest civilian honor—the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He died at the Orthopaedic Hospital at the age of 97. At one time he was the only orthopaedist between San Francisco and New Orleans. He published in *JBJS* (1924) on Rotary Subluxation of the Knee and in 1931 “the Double Leaf Shelf Operation for Congenital Dislocation of the Hip.”

Warren White, M.D. from Honolulu (Shriners Hospital) was President in 1955 and published a paper in JB JS 1953 (37-A)–“The Development of Orthopaedics in the Far West” featuring the WOA.

Although the Presidents of the WOA have come from essentially every member state, there is a significant contribution from the Hawaii Chapter. Presidents from Hawaii included Steele Stewart (1934), Warren White (1955), Ivar Larsen (1967), William Gullede (1974), John Smith (1980), Donald Jones (1988), Thomas Grollman (1996) and Linda Rasmussen (2009).

There had been three female orthopaedists who have served as President: Drs. Linda Rasmussen (2009), Ellen Raney (2013) and Valerae Lewis (2014).

The WOA was inactive from 1944-46 due to World War II. In 1942 there were 89 members. Alfred E. Gallant was elected President in 1947 and the WOA resumed meeting with the 12th annual meeting held at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles. This was the first meeting where a commercial exhibit was presented and reportedly with great success. This fact enhanced the treasury and the organization achieved financial stability. The chapters and the membership steadily increased; by 1960 there were 16 chapters in all 14 western states. In 1948 there were 198 members and by 1958 there were 698 members. Guest speakers became part of the program in 1954. Junior members (under the age of 42) became part of the board in 1971.

In 1955, the organization was incorporated as a “not for profit organization” under the presidency of Warren White, M.D. (Honolulu). The aim of the group included scientific, educational and charitable purposes for the advancement of the art and science of orthopedic surgery.

In 1954, the organization hired Vi Matheson as the full-time secretary and in 1956 the permanent central office was established with Ms. Matheson as the first Executive Secretary. Jacqueline Martin was hired as the assistant Executive Secretary in July 1972 and took over the full-time position in October 1972 when Vi Matheson retired because of illness. Jackie Martin continued as the Executive Secretary until her retirement in the late 1990s. She passed away in 2013. The central office remained in the San Francisco area until Jackie’s retirement and then moved to Napa, California until 2005.

In 1957, a proposal was approved to give the outgoing president a gift of a Presidential medallion and a bronze paper weight were prepared for all past presidents. This presentation continued until 1980 when the medallion was incorporated into the Presidential Plaque. This tradition of the presentation of a presidential medallion to the outgoing president was reestablished during the presidency of Dr. Ramon Jimenez in 2008.

In 1960, the *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* became the official journal of the WOA and for some years the meeting abstracts were incorporated into *JBJS*.

The residency award programs of the WOA:

1): Vernon Thompson Award
The initial WOA resident orthopaedic surgery program was started through the efforts of Vernon P. Thompson, M.D. He was keenly interested in the teaching and education of young physicians and felt residents and fellows should be recognized by allowing them time to present at the WOA annual meeting. He was elected president in 1952 and his primary interest which was that of establishing a competitive presentation by resident surgeons. Each year there are resident awards dedicated to Dr. Thompson’s efforts on behalf of resident education. He received his premedical training at Stanford University and developed an interest in orthopaedic surgery. In 1917, he spent a year at officers training in the U.S. Army in Georgia. He went to Harvard Medical School graduating in 1923 and returned to Stanford for his internship. He maintained an interest in orthopaedic surgery and returned to Boston for training at the Massachusetts General Hospital and Children’s Hospital. He commented that residents and attending surgeons best papers are founded on the complete series of observations of actual patients followed over a period of years. These observations are due to the hard work and persistent effort of a critically minded resident who often can see things a little more objectively than the man who was already acquired his clinical impressions and has more or less subconsciously arrived at a prior conclusion. Dr Thompson passed away in 1961.

2): The Lloyd Taylor Award
Lloyd Taylor was President of the WOA in 1977. After he passed away, an award in his honor was established by Richard Welch M.D. (President–2001) who stated that Dr. Taylor’s passion was resident education. In 1949, while at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Dr. Taylor established a formal Armed Forces Orthopaedic Residency training program. He ended his military career as Chief of the training program at Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco. Following his distinguished military career, Dr. Taylor was the Director of the San Francisco Orthopaedic Residency Training program.

3): The Sanford and Darlene Anzel Award
The Sanford and Darlene Anzel resident award was established in memory of Dr. Sanford Anzel (President–1989). Dr. Anzel completed his residency at the Mayo Clinic and after serving in the USAF, practiced in Orange County. He was one of the founders of the residency program in Orange County and was the Clinical Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at University of California, Irvine as well being the Chief of Orthopaedics at the VAMC in Long Beach, California. He also served as President of the California Orthopaedic Association. He passed away in February, 2008. His wife, Darlene, continues to attend the annual meeting to present the Anzel award.

4): The Harold and Nancy Willingham Award
The Harold and Nancy Willingham award was established as an endowment fund for resident education. Dr. Willingham has been a member of the WOA since 1966 and was President in 1991. Dr. Willingham practiced in Tucson Arizona and was one of the principals in the establishment of Tucson Orthopaedic Institute. His Presidential address in 1991 was on “Malpractice—what is it, where did it come from, where is at now, where is it going and finally, what should be done about it.” Harold and Nancy Willingham continue to attend the annual meeting to present the Willingham award.

As part of the resident education program, the WOA has a Resident Liaison position and Jennifer Van Warmerdam MD (San Francisco) is the current chair.

At each annual meeting, the Howard H. Steel Lecture is given as a non-orthopaedic topic of interest to the membership. This was an endowment from Dr. Steel who also was one of the founders of the Eastern Orthopaedic Association. He has a reputation as an excellent clinician, teacher and researcher particularly in the area of pediatric orthopaedics. He has endowed lectureships on non-orthopaedic topics at the annual meetings of several orthopaedic associations including the WOA.

In 1989, Rodney Beals M.D. (President–1981) initiated the Travelling Professor program which continued for several years and was well received by the chapters and membership. The Travelling Professorship program continued through 2000. The awardees included David Hamblen PhD, FRCS – Glasgow, Scotland (’89); Thomas Taylor, FRCS – Sydney, Australia (’90); Professor Rene Marti – Amsterdam, The Netherlands (’91); Ian Learmouth FRCS – Capetown, South Africa (’92); Christian Gerber MD – Fribourg, Switzerland (’93); Ian Kelly, FRCS – Glasgow, Scotland (’94); Ross Nicholson FRCS –Auckland, New Zealand (’95); John Leong MD – Hong Kong (’96); Anthony Pohl MD – Adelaide, Australia (’97); Lars Engebretsen MD – Oslo, Norway (’98); Donald Howie MBBS – Adelaide, Australia (’99); Lennart Hovelius – Gavle, Sweden (’2000); Klaus Parsch – Stuttgart, Germany (2002).
The organization has developed a self-assessment exam (SAE) program offering 10 credits hours each year. This is beneficial to the membership concerning Maintenance of Certification with the ABOS. The 2016 chair is Omer Ilahi, M.D.

Following Robert Eilert’s Presidency in 2002, the WOA added the ex-officio position of Managing Director, who serves in an advisory capacity to the board. Dr. Eilert served as the first Managing Director from 2004-2010 followed by Lawrence Housman (2008-2016).

The current Board of Directors includes President John Tongue, M.D., first Vice President, Robert Slater, M.D., second Vice President Bryan Jewett, M.D., Secretary - Basil Besh, M.D., Past President - Paul Collins M.D., Treasurer - Nitin Bhatia, M.D., Members at Large: Jay Lieberman, M.D., Milton “Chip” Routt M.D., Patrick Halpin M.D; Junior board members: Jonathan Bravman, M.D.; David Chafey, M.D.; Jeffrey Krygier, M.D.; James Van den Bogaerde, M.D.; AAOS Board of Councilors Representative Bryan Moon, M.D.; Managing Director - Lawrence Housman, M.D.; Lay Member - William Best. The 2016 program chair is Robert Hart, M.D.

From 2003 to the present, WOA has contracted with Data Trace Management Services to provide the financial and logistical expertise to the organization. Chuck Freitag is the Executive Director and Cynthia Lichtefeld is the Director of Operations. Blair Filler (President 2004) and Robert Eilert (President 2002) were instrumental in managing this transition to Data Trace which allowed the WOA to regain and maintain a firm financial footing.

The WOA continues to be the premier regional organization very involved in Resident, Fellow and Junior Faculty participation furthering the art and science of orthopaedic surgery. The annual meeting CME credits are now 22 hours.

The 2016 membership chair is Cynthia Kelly, M.D. The membership as of December 2015 was 1128.

The organization also has developed an Allied Health program with an outreach to orthopaedic physician assistants, nurse practitioners and other related providers including a specific program at the annual meeting focused on their educational needs. The current chair is Jason Salden, P.A.

In 2016, the WOA voted to form a 501C (3) foundation (Western Orthopaedic Foundation). This is a tax exempt foundation allowing contributions to further the mission of improving orthopaedic education.

As the organization prepares for the 80th annual meeting in Indian Wells California, there is continued enthusiasm for an organization which maintains the balance between the scientific and social formats and is beneficial to all concerned.

Larry Housman MD - Managing Director – WOA: August 2016