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THE CHALLENGE OF OUR HERITAGE

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For as long as I have been a member of the Board of Government of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers, I have heard and participated in much discussion about the declining attendance at Society meetings. Is declining attendance really a fact, or is our memory of the "good old days" somewhat faulty? Is it somewhat like our memories of childhood winters that we commonly remember as having brought us much more snow than present-day winters, although some weather men have said this isn't so?

To answer this question, a look at the record seems in order. I propose, therefore, to address my remarks to this subject and to several closely related matters of society membership, journal papers, quarters, and relations with other societies. I do this in the belief that self-analysis is good for the soul and in the hope that it will help to point a course for us to follow.

This is not a new and original subject for a presidential address to this Society. Nevertheless, it is a timely subject for us to consider, and important to the future of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers.

Membership

Before considering the matter of attendance at meetings, let us first have a look at the membership situation. The total membership in recent years (say about the last ten) has been very stable, and substantially the same as it was around 1930, numbering between 1,000 and 1,100. It declined sharply in the late thirties, reaching a low of less than 700 in 1939. This low point in our membership lagged behind the depth of the depression by a few years and immediately preceded the sharp rise in economic recovery.

Membership remained fairly stationary thereafter until 1947. After 1947, it increased steadily except in one year and reached a peak of 1,123 in 1959. Today, as you have already heard, the membership is 1,053.

We find then that declining membership is not particularly a problem, in spite of the ever-growing number of organizations, engineering and otherwise, and the increasing competition for one's time. Nevertheless, we should not take too much comfort from this fact because our membership was nearly 1,000 as long ago as 1915, and there are now many more potential members than there were 53 years ago. On the contrary, we should be asking ourselves "Are we doing all we should be doing as a Society to merit continued interest and support and attract more interest and support?"

Attendance

An analysis of meeting attendance records since 1930 shows, in the first place, that attendance has been very erratic through the years.

Because many meetings have been joint meetings of the Main Society and one or more of the Sections, the total attendance at Society and Section meetings is perhaps more meaningful than either one alone. The following remarks, therefore, refer to this total attendance.

Regretably, the record does show that attendance at meetings has declined. This is exemplified by the fact that the average total attendance per year in the 10 years 1958-67 was 28 percent less than in the preceding 10 years, and about 10 percent less than in the 1938-47 period. But what was happening to our membership meantime? The average membership for the 10-year period ending in 1967 was 17 percent greater than during 1948-57 and 34 percent greater than during a like period ending in 1947. Therefore, we should consider meeting attendance in terms of its relation to our membership. On this basis, average total attendance for 1958-67 as compared with 1948-57 declined, not the 28 percent already mentioned, but 40 percent. The relation of the 1958-67 period to 1938-47 was the same 40 percent decline.

What are the reasons for the decline in attendance? Many reasons have been advanced: too many societies, too many meetings, everyone is so busy that he wants to spend an evening at home when he can, attraction of television, and growing lack of convenient public transportation, with increasing dependence on car pools. Without question, each of these is a factor. Nevertheless, are they collectively the whole reason for the meeting attendance problem? I am inclined to think not. If they were, one should expect to find attendance consistently poor. But the fact is that, even in very recent years, total attendance has declined as much as 38 percent and increased as much as 90 percent from one year to the next.

To me this means that, in spite of all the valid reasons for poor attendance, our members and their friends will still attend meetings if we present sufficiently attractive programs and do an adequate job of attendance promotion. The reasons cited for poor attendance simply mean that we have to do a better job of making programs attractive and in giving them good publicity.

If this means fewer and better meetings, let us by all means emphasize quality and limit the quantity if necessary.

Lecture Series

What has been the effect of the various lecture series that we have had

from time to time? Have they helped or hurt our membership and attendance at meetings? I think there is little doubt that they have brought into BSCE some new members that we might not otherwise have attracted. As far as their effect on meeting attendance is concerned, there is some indication, although not fully conclusive, that attendance at regular meetings of the Society and Sections may have suffered slightly in years in which a lecture series was conducted.

Total attendance at a lecture series, however, has generally approached or even exceeded the total attendance for a year at Society and Section meetings. For example, the lectures on Soil Mechanics and Foundation Engineering given two years ago drew a registration of 275 and attendance varying from 175 to 225 at the 10 lectures. The Society has just completed a Computer Lecture Series of 14 lectures, which has likewise been highly successful. A series of Sanitary Engineering lectures is being planned for next year.

The popularity and appeal of these lecture series are further dramatic evidence of the point made earlier that an attractive program will draw a good attendance in spite of the various adverse influences. They also indicate clearly that, in conducting such lectures, the Boston Society of Civil Engineers is performing a useful service to its members and the engineering community at large. Rather than for us to be concerned about an adverse effect on attendance at regular meetings, one might even suggest that a Section holding a lecture series should reduce the number of regular Section meetings during that year.

Journal Papers

From its inception in 1914 to 1932, the Journal of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers was published in ten issues each year. There were nine issues in 1933, and since 1934 there have been only four issues. The number of papers published annually in the Journal has varied widely through the years, from a maximum of 26 to as few as 8. No particular trend is apparent from the long-time record. The number has moved up and down for no readily identifiable reason, and, as recently as the 1960 fiscal year, 23 papers were published. It is a fact, however, that the average number of papers published annually when there were 10 issues was 25 percent greater than the corresponding number since we have had only four issues.

In very recent years, the number of papers submitted for publication has been so small that at times the Journal editor has been hard pressed to have available an adequate number of papers of suitable quality for producing a

good issue of the Journal. One problem is that increasing numbers of speakers who address the Society or its Sections make presentations with slides or other visual aids without preparing a formal written paper that can be used for publication. This frequently makes a more interesting presentation, but the result is that it then becomes extremely difficult to obtain a written paper after the oral presentation has been made.

I am not pleading for more papers and larger journals for the sake of volume. There are far too many publications now, and reading matter has become so voluminous that most of us are practically buried in it. What I am pleading for is to restore the Journal of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers to the high place it long enjoyed as a source of advanced, authoritative, engineering knowledge. I am seeking quality, not volume, except to the extent that it is necessary to have an adequate volume in order to be able to choose a suitable number of good papers and permit greater selectivity for publication.

It is truly inspiring to browse through some of the older volumes of the Journal, as I have done in recent months, and see the high caliber of many of the papers, a large proportion of them written by the leading authorities in their respective fields. The names of these authors are a veritable "Who's Who" of eminent engineers. To anyone who wishes to be inspired, I recommend an examination of older volumes of the Journal as a highly rewarding exercise.

Certainly many of the subjects that were of keen interest to engineers in times past would not attract much attention today because they dealt with developments in engineering knowledge and practice that were news at the time. There have been vast changes in engineering education and, whether because of these changes or in spite of them, new developments in engineering are continuing to take place. Engineers still have much to share with their fellow engineers that needs to be told. Let us not forget that Boston is a center of engineering education and of considerable engineering activity, and that two of the objects of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers are: the professional improvement of its members, and the advancement of engineering. We should not leave it solely to the educators to promote these objectives. Practicing engineers have information not possessed by others that is of interest to other engineers. Each one of us must ask himself "Have I something worthwhile to tell my fellow members of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers?" and "Whom do I know or know about who should be asked to address the BSCE or one of the Sections?" When you have answered these questions, give the answers to a member of the Program Committee or Publications Committee, or to both.

With all of the present-day emphasis on advanced education, there is a more fertile field than ever for BSCE's role of helping to spread engineering knowledge.

Quarters

I would have you know that the Board of Government is not happy with its present quarters and is studying what is the best course to follow in achieving improvements.

A move is now underway by the Engineering Societies of New England to establish common office facilities and secretarial services to be shared by all member societies that wish to participate in this venture. For many societies, this appears to be a desirable forward step toward the ultimate goal of a New England Engineering Center. For BSCE it would have several distinct disadvantages as presently proposed. While it is planned to provide facilities for small meetings, the space proposed would not accommodate meetings of the size we so frequently hold in our present quarters. What to do about our library would also be a major question. The Board of Government has withheld any commitment to participate in this venture.

Relations with ASCE

I have not tried to develop any statistical conclusions as to the impact upon BSCE of the formation in 1921 of what later became the present-day Massachusetts Section, American Society of Civil Engineers. There is little doubt, however, that the existence of these two organizations does create competition for the time, attention, interest, and support of civil engineers in the Boston and New England area. I understand that approximately one-half of the members of BSCE are also members of the Massachusetts Section, ASCE.

There are many who consider it most unfortunate that two such worthwhile organizations exist in the same city, with resultant dispersion of effort. Loyal members of both organizations have sought for many years to find some reasonable basis on which the two groups could be effectively combined. Much discussion in this regard has taken place. So far, no one has produced a magic formula to achieve a union.

As might be expected, in view of the large common membership, there has been an excellent spirit of cooperation between the two organizations. Joint meetings are held each year, the most outstanding of which is the annual Student Night. Joint committees are also active on behalf of the engineering profession. Officers of both organizations have expressed a desire to conduct more joint activities in the future. To this end, the Board of Government of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers has recently

indicated not only its willingness but desire to have the Massachusetts Section, ASCE co-sponsor with BSCE a Sanitary Engineering Seminar Series being planned for the fall of 1968, as was done for a previous Sanitary Engineering Lecture Series in 1957. All this is good. If we must remain two organizations, let us try earnestly to direct our respective efforts in directions what will complement rather than compete with each other's activities.

By design or otherwise, the presentation of technical papers has been a predominant part of the BSCE activities, while the Massachusetts Section, ASCE has devoted its primary attention to papers that are perhaps less technical and of more general interest, and to somewhat greater social activity that the Boston Society of Civil Engineers.

I have been deeply concerned recently as a result of having heard that consideration is now being given to the institution of technical divisions within the Massachusetts Section. For many local sections of ASCE, such a move may have great merit. In Boston to establish such groups in direct competition with the long-established technical sections of BSCE would be a most regrettable step and would seriously fragment their joint interests. With many of the same people involved in the activities of both organizations, it would be particularly unfortunate to divide their energies and interests between two organizations carrying out the same type of programs.

A most constructive suggestion on the subject of closer cooperation and complementary effort by the two societies was made less than two weeks ago in a letter from one of our hard-working members. He called attention to the fact that on one recent occasion an ASCE meeting and a BSCE Section meeting were held on the same day, and more recently an ASCE meeting and a BSCE Section meeting were held on the same evening. He believes that there must be many people like him who wanted to attend both meetings but were unable to do so because of these unfortunate conflicts in scheduling. As a remedy, he suggested that many of the ASCE and BSCE committees, including the Program Committee, function as joint committees. I think this is an excellent suggestion for the Program Committee especially, and I believe it has merit for some other committees that are not already functioning as joint committees. If we are to continue to receive the support of those members of both ASCE and BSCE who gladly contribute their time and energy to helping both societies to serve the civil engineering profession, we certainly owe it to them to establish policies that will permit both societies to be of maximum service to the profession.

The Challenge

It is clear from what I have said that we have two particularly important problems that need re-emphasis. Attendance at meetings has declined markedly, in spite of membership growth. The quality of the Journal has deteriorated, in spite of valiant efforts on the part of the Journal editor to obtain a better supply of good papers for publication.

Do we dismiss these problems as merely a natural evolution of changing times? I think that the heritage handed down to us by those engineers who made the Boston Society of Civil Engineers a world-renowned institution challenges us to find answers to these problems. I am confident that we can, and that BSCE, by meeting new situations and new opportunities, can have a future in keeping with its illustrious past.