

Western Trauma Association
Past President Interview
R. Christie Wray, Jr., MD interviewing Bob Voltz, MD
February 25, 2000

Wray: Tell us how the Western Trauma Association got started.

Voltz: Well, it really relates to my friendship with Peter Teal. Peter Teal and I more or less grew up in Nebraska. He was from Omaha and I was from Lincoln, and when we were quite young, we were sent off to camp together and our friendship began then. Subsequently, we both interned in Denver, Colorado, the same year and renewed our friendship after a long period. Then we both went into private practice. I stayed in Denver and Peter went on to Billings after his residency in Minneapolis. Just quite by coincidence I was thinking of organizing a medical society that would have the values of enjoying the outdoors skiing, a good didactic program, and a very sociable interchange with the members. About this time, apparently Peter Teal had this on his mind because he called. He really was the person who initiated getting this thing going forward. This must have been – I think- in about 1970 or '69. We began to discuss what we hoped for in a sense of how this organization would come together. In addition to the values that I have outlined, you know, as fine of a scholarly paper as we could put together. We decided that this would not be an “old boy’s club” and therefore we wanted to represent the different geographical areas of the United States and not make this just a Montana and Colorado ski club. We would also have a diverse membership as far as specialties. I think those were some of the distinguishing characteristics from the Rocky Mountain Trauma Society which met every year in Aspen. So after we had discussed this for a while over the phone and also exchanged letters – I am sorry, those letters are somewhere in this house, I just can’t put my finger on them – we decided that we would each solicit three board members. To the best of my recollection, we would thus have a board composition of I think six or eight people. Each board member would be required to bring in five members for the first initial meeting which was held in Vail, Colorado. That is pretty much how the organization initially was put together.

Wray: The idea of a multispecialty organization persists in discussion of the organization even as we speak in 2000 and I am sure it will be discussed at this year’s meeting. Did anyone make initial objections to the multispecialty organization or were most people supportive of that concept?

Voltz: Well, I think most people were supportive, Chris, but the problem was in getting some of these other subspecialties – because here we had two orthopedists who were the initial founders and to try to solicit, for instance, people from Internal Medicine, particularly, and something like OB/GYN who would be interested in “trauma” made the task a bit more difficult. You realize, of course, in the early 1970’s we really didn’t have emergency room specialists. The specialty of trauma was very thin at that time so that most orthopedists were considered to be traumatologists, so-to-speak, and we covered whatever came in the emergency room before all

of this subspecialization. So, I think the greatest difficulty was sticking to the Bylaws, which dictated that only a certain percentage could be orthopedic surgeons, etc.

Wray: Describe some of the initial programs as far as you remember them – not specific papers but what sorts of subjects were presented and how much difficulty you had or didn't have in obtaining a sufficient number of scientific presentations.

Voltz: Well that really was a problem. There are a lot of people who like to come to ski. There are a lot of individuals who enjoy the social aspect. But to actually put together a paper which had any true academic intellectual merit was pretty thin. But we had to go forward. Our first meeting was held in a motel in Vail, Colorado, which has now been replaced by an exquisite new building. I think we had, at best, 30 members there and perhaps we were able to fill three more at best. As I recall, the meeting only ran for something like two or three days. There were general papers such as "Fractures of the Ankles," which was still a type of injury you would occasionally see from skiing. We had only one chap, McQuire, who was in the military, who gave some type of military paper – I can't specifically recall and perhaps you have access to that information better than what I can recollect over nearly thirty years. But I think we all came away with a certain degree of camaraderie. I would say that was the most important element that came out of the first meeting—that we enjoyed each other and we enjoyed the venue at Vail, which at that time was pretty simple. There was a lot of hope that this would go forward the next year. By then, of course, we had bylaws which were ratified at that first meeting, and those were written up by a friend of mine who did a lot of defense for doctors, Joe Judan, and he did it for nothing because I think he wanted the exposure and the scientific papers and perhaps also the names of some qualified capable physicians. So that was pretty much the tenor of the first meeting.

Wray: Do you recall any reasons why you particularly selected Vail; obviously there are a lot of ski resorts?

Voltz: We thought Vail would be a great draw and selfishly I had a place there at the time, and it was easy for me to drive up and make arrangements and try to make this as nice a venue as possible. I should also say that the coffers were pretty thin at that time. I think the dues were no more than \$25 or \$30 and you can see with only 30 members that is not a great deal of money to go forward from there.

Wray: Describe if you can or just recollect as best as possible the initial social program. Did we have the sort of dinner dance right from the beginning or anything you remember from the first few meetings?

Voltz: Yes, we did. We wanted to bring the wives into this and create an important social interchange so that they would establish friendships which were to act as a binding, so-to-speak, among the members. I cannot remember the exact venue, but yes, we had a dinner dance. I can't remember if it was a dance, but certainly we had a banquet so-to-speak with all of those who were in attendance.

Wray: As we speak in 2000, children and spouses frequently attend, and it has been, in my opinion, one of the strengths of the organization. How did you encourage children and spouses, or did it just naturally happen?

Voltz: I don't recall that there were any children present at the first or second meeting, but certainly it was something that evolved in the very first few years, because most of us were young. We couldn't afford a lot of vacation time and we wanted to bring our children along. Once again, I think it helped to create a very unique, friendly atmosphere for this organization.

Wray: Certainly the presence of children is extremely unusual in any scientific organization that I belong to.

Wray: How did Peter Teal and you decide who would be the first president?

Voltz: I can't really recall. I don't know whether it was a flip of the coin or what. I think there was ratification of the bylaws and election of officers, and perhaps because of my proximity to some marvelous ski areas, I was elected President and Peter was first Vice-President. Of course, the next year we had the meeting in Vail again because everyone seemed to like that venue.

Wray: Do you remember any particular controversies or difficulties the organization had in its earlier years?

Voltz: Well, the biggest difficulty was getting the membership up to 100. As I recall, this took years and years because of the attrition you have with a small organization like this. I also have to tell you that in the first two or three years it was really touch or go as to whether the organization was going to make it because of financial problems. We just didn't have much in the way of cash flow.

Wray: What turned around this cash-flow problem or made the organizations more viable, as you remember?

Voltz: Well, I think it was the addition of members who were truly traumatologists, and I have to tip my hat to the Moore brothers who were at Denver General Hospital, which was a huge trauma factory in the Rocky Mountain area. They brought their residents along, and they presented some excellent scholarly papers, in my judgment, and I think that was really one of the turning points. We finally had true traumatologists focusing on what had been the initial intent of the organization.

Wray: Do you recall any particularly memorable skiing episodes involving accidents, injuries or whatever?

Voltz: At one of our Vail meetings we had a delightful relay race in which there were two teams chosen. You could volunteer for this if you wished. We would have Team A and Team B, and the baton was an inflated rubber inner tube which you would pass to your next team member. You would then open an envelope and it would tell you something silly to do, like carry a raw egg in

your hand while you are skiing, or blow up a balloon. Well, this really created all sorts of humor! Even the ski patrol would follow us down to see what this was leading to. I can remember that as one of the fondest memories I have. It is a great way to get wives, kids and husbands together. This idea of trying to get the inner tube around your waist and hold it while you are using two ski poles is absolutely hilarious!

Wray: Sounds like something we ought to reinstitute—I will certainly pass the word along to future officers!

Somewhat aside from the Western Trauma Association but something that has your name still—it was a total wrist prosthesis. How did that evolve and what was your thinking when you developed it?

Voltz: Well I don't think it came from anything I acquired from Western Trauma, but rather due to the fact that I had relocated my practice to the medical school in Tucson, Arizona, which happens to be not only in the Sunbelt but also the Arthritic Belt. This was in 1974 when I encountered a patient with a terrible fracture dislocation of the wrist who was a pianist and had declined an arthrodesis. Having just spent some time with John Charnly, I was a bit overenthusiastic and felt we could design an artificial wrist, which we did. He sat still and a year later we planted it. He did return to his profession and died about seven years after the implant. In the first case we really didn't know how long it would last. Certainly time has proven that was not a sound prosthesis or to put it another way, one shouldn't use metal and cement at the wrist.

Wray: Is there anything you wish to tell or pass on to potential future members of the Western Trauma Association?

Voltz: No, my hope and advice is that the organization continues to grow; that is, to bring in young, attractive and very intelligent, capable people in diverse specialties to present the highest quality scientific papers at the meetings and that we also continue with this marvelous camaraderie and social event which is such an important aspect for the organization.

Wray: Thank you. I think there is a number of past officers of the organization and potential future officers of the organization who couldn't agree with you more.

Wray: Back with Bob Voltz at another time. At this interview, he is discussing the Articles of Incorporation and some "newsworthy news" that the organization made at the time of its first or second meeting.

Voltz: Well, we had a document which was passed from year to year in which the minutes of the various meetings were typed and recorded, and this was all with the original Articles of Incorporation. But at our first meeting at Vail, I approached what was then the Vail Train and they came and did an article. I think it was on the front page about this new organization and the officers were photographed. That was in 1971. We will have to search further. I am

unaware of who might have Articles of Incorporation. There have been a number of presidents who might have had them and who are no longer active. I will certainly search diligently.