

**(Printed in the Program for the WLTA's Golden Jubilee Convention)**

**THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS  
ARE THE HARDEST**

– Howard J. Burnham –

The weekly Vancouver Columbian for July 20, 1905, carried this item:

“The abstractors of 32 counties in Washington were in session in Vancouver yesterday in the Court room at the County Court House. This is the first state meeting of the abstractors in Washington and it is largely due to the efforts of C. C. Gridley of this city that these men have gathered here to discuss business methods and profit by comparing experiences.”

With no more fanfare than that the Washington Abstracters' Association – later to become the Washington Land Title Association – was born. No other papers carried the story and the world was little interested in the fact that, drawn together by a visit to the Lewis and Clark Exposition, seven abstractors from Washington organized for the advancement of their chosen line of endeavor.

C. C. Gridley, Vancouver abstractor and host; Millard Lemon, manager of Capitol City Abstract Co. of Olympia; John B. Bell, abstractor from Asotin; Lawrence S. Booth, manager of BoothWhittlesey-Hanford Abstract Co., Seattle; Enoch W. Wood, trustee of Washington Abstract & Guaranty Co., Seattle; Edward P. Tremper, second vice president of Osborne Tremper & Co., Inc., Seattle; and H. L. Oldfield of the Snohomish Abstract Co. of Everett gathered and perfected the organization, with Ed Tremper as the first president. Here it was “ordered that members of the association, be requested to favor other members of the association in exchange of patronage and other business matters.”

Membership, Judiciary and Executive committees were formed and an assessment of one dollar per month membership fee was levied. The Executive committee was ordered to prepare a complete roster of abstractors and abstract companies in the state, designating members of the association. This committee was also “authorized to expend any funds collected by it until the next meeting of the association.”

Because the weekly paper had probably gone to press while the seven organizers were in session, there had been no chance to ascertain how many of the “32 counties” were represented. Furthermore, since that ugly word, “profit,” had been mentioned, it was necessary in the following week's Columbian to assure the public that camaraderie, not business, was the *raison d'être* of the association. And here's what was said:

“At the meeting of the Abstractors of Washington held at Vancouver last week a State Organization was formed under the name of ‘Washington Abstracters Association’ with E. P. Tremper of Seattle as President and C. C. Gridley of Vancouver as Secretary. The purposes of the organization are largely fraternal. The next meeting will be held at Seattle in December next.”

Twenty-two abstractors were present at the Hotel Butler in Seattle on December 7. Here the Constitution and By-Laws were adopted and the proceedings wound up with a banquet which, according to the minutes, “was indeed a feast of good things edible and literary.”

At Tacoma. on December 8, 1906, the Judiciary Committee urged “the abstracters to put themselves upon such terms with their several representatives that they would act in our interest at the next session of the Legislature, to secure new members to the Association, to collect data and ideas with which to combat a County tract index system or Torrens Law and to get the ideas of the abstracters relative to a bill for the bonding of legitimate abstract firms.” The matters voiced in this resolution have echoed and reechoed down the years. Also, at this meeting a committee was appointed to study the matter of uniform abstract rates, “same to be advisory.”

One year later, a committee on Uniform Abstract Certificates was appointed, but the principal topic at this Spokane convention was the Torrens Law. Here, too, A. T. Hastings. of Spokane’s Fidelity Abstract Co., reported upon his attendance at the formation of the National Association at the Palmer House in Chicago on August 8, 1907. The delegates voted to remit dues of \$1.00 per member to the newly formed group. Then they officially changed the organization’s name to The Washington Association of Title Men.

Minutes of the 1908 convention mentioned the old standby topics for discussion: County Tract Indexes, Torrens Legislation, and Rates. A. T. Hastings reported on the American Association of Title Men convention in Des Moines, Iowa, and, at the conclusion of his remarks, was reminded that he “had neglected to mention the compliment to our Washington Association bestowed by the American Association in electing Mr. Hastings as their President.”

The 1909 conclave was held in conjunction with the American Association’s convention. lured to Seattle by the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition and the active, aggressive work of the lusty young state association.

The Executive Committee reported that the association had been instrumental in defeating the Tract Index bill at the last legislative session.

Lest the idea get around that the group was omnipotent, please note that another portion of the program was the reading of reports from various counties “showing what progress (if any) had been made by the Torrens System since its passage by the Legislature.”

The committee on Abstract Certificate Forms, after two years study, submitted forms which were adopted.

The dark cloud around the silver lining appeared at the 1910 meeting when a letter of resignation was read and “a committee was appointed by the President to confer with the Snohomish County members and see if a better feeling could not be brought about between those companies.”

In 1912 this committee reported that it had been hopeful that the rate war would burn itself out “but the struggle having now continued for nearly three .years with no promise of an early termination in sight and its evil effects during all of this time permeating other counties,” it was recommended that a committee notify the three Snohomish County abstracters that, regardless of the original cause, any continuance of the rate war would be charged to the offending party.

In 1913, the committee reported that Messrs. H. L. Oldfield and Frank J. Woodward were willing to “play ball” according to the rule book, but that Theodore Anderson was evasive, indefinite and uncooperative, and found “the Anderson Guarantee Abstract Company to be entirely to blame for the further continuance of the rate war.

The only further mention of price cutting appeared in the minutes for November 20, 1920, wherein it was stated that “destructive rote wars between abstracters are in full swing in at least three counties in this state.” This was the convention at which a Code of Ethics was adopted.

At the 1910 meeting “title insurance and certificate legislation was fully discussed.” Little time was given, during the 1911 conclave, to the recently enacted Insurance Code, for this affected only title insurance and guaranteed certificates. At this same session, a bill regulating abstract rates was defeated.

In that year’s Executive committee report was the following naive bit of complacency:

“We now feel that the abstracters of the State are, owing to their organization, strong enough, not only to prevent the passage of adverse legislation, but also to obtain favorable consideration of measures deemed to their interest.”

Four years later the Executive committee reported “that members of the legislature seem to regard with suspicion any bill an abstracter attempts to get passed, seemingly thinking it impossible for an abstracter to be working for the good of the community instead of for his own selfish interests.”

The truth has always lain between these two extremes. And sometimes, the association had trouble finding the truth. The matter of licensing and bonding abstracters provides a case in point.

In 1911 a proposed bill to license abstracters was referred to the Judiciary committee. In 1912 a motion to introduce an Abstracter’s Deposit bill was hotly debated and the motion lost. Whereupon a motion to oppose any bonding bill carried. In 1913 the group voted for introduction of an Abstracters’ Deposit bill at the next legislative session, but a year later voted not to introduce the bill unless forced to do so by the introduction of some other bill.”

The delegates to the 1912 meeting were told that Oregon had a law providing a method of withdrawing land from Torrens registration, and moved that a similar bill be drawn and introduced at the forthcoming session of the legislature. Two years later the Association voted to have ready for introduction a bill providing for withdrawal of lands registered under the Torrens law.

The conventioners in 1921 mulled over the fact that, although a bill providing for compulsory Torrens registration had not passed, fifteen senators had voted against its indefinite postponement.

Compulsory Torrens registration provided the Association with its most longstanding headache and was introduced, or threatened to be introduced at each convening of the Legislature until the Executive Committee in 1946 not only termed it the Big Threat to Association members, but also decided to do something about it.

Although a Public Relations committee had been appointed each year since 1925, the 1946 Executive Committee established the post of Public Relations Director and succeeded in inducing Arthur A. Anderson of Everett to take “sabbatical leave” from his business and assume the position. From May of that year until adjournment of the 1947 Legislature, Art spent his time and efforts in the hotbeds of pro-Torrens agitation. His disarming friendliness, often with a Swedish accent, broke down the hostility of those groups which had been duped into believing that Torrens was a combination of the Fountain of Youth and the Holy Grail.

The act did not pass but the Association in 1947 secured a fulltime Executive Secretary whose major efforts were directed to public relations .work wherever Torrens propoganda might raise its ugly head. This position was continued until the emergency had passed, since which time the office of Secretary-Treasurer has been adequately filled by a member of the Association.

The dues structure of the Association, set up at its founding, continued until 1913 when the organization adopted this suggestion in the Executive Committee's report:

“Believing that the regular dues will give us more money than necessary for the purposes of the organization for the ensuing year, we recommend that one half of the dues for the ensuing year be remitted.”

But at the 1915 convention, the Secretary reported that “out of a membership of 53, only 32 paid dues during the year.”

The roaring 'twenties found the members once more current in the paying of dues. Then, when the bottom dropped out of this old world of ours, a moratorium on dues was declared. The condition of member companies at this time is reflected in the Code of Fair Competition which was adopted in 1933. As to minimum wages it provided:

“On and after the effective date, no employee shall be paid \*\*\*less than \$14.00 per week in any city between 2,500 and 250,000 population or in the immediate trade area of such city” (\$15.00 was the minimum in cities of over 500,000); “and in towns of less than 2,500 population, all wages shall be increased by not less than 20 per cent, provided that this shall not require wages in excess of \$12.00 per week; except that in each instance, the wages of office boys or girls, learners and casual employees shall be not less than 65 % of the above minimum wages.”

When problems, such as Torrens, confronted the group, increases in dues and special assessments were paid without complaint. The members have come to realize the essential nature of their organization.

The earlier convention programs were largely composed of group discussions wherein each member had a voice. Of late years, however, addresses and panel discussions have taken precedence, leaving the determination of policy and the administration of the Association to the Executive committee.

At the 1918 meeting, a resolution was addressed to the American Association of Title Men recommending the establishment of a permanent central office, the employment of a paid secretary, and the publication of bulletins and papers.

In 1924 new By-Laws were adopted and the organization's name was changed to Washington Title Association. Then, in 1947, a further change was made to Washington Land Title Association.

Through good times and bad, the ties of members to the Association have held, and, as the WLTA reaches maturity, each member can look with justifiable pride to fifty years of progress.