

A chapter from

## **A Meeting Place**

# **The History of The American Association for Public Opinion Research**

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ISBN: 0-89089-479-5

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## *The Culture of AAPOR*

Richard Baxter

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*Wherein are related a thousand trifling matters as inconsequential as they are necessary to the proper understanding of this great history.*

Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, preamble to Chapter 9, Volume 2

AAPOR has a “culture” all its own. It’s an organization of people whose professional lives are spent asking other people questions. In its early days it took pride in being something of a “marching and chowder society,” but it has always had a serious purpose and its programs have seriously addressed that purpose.

AAPOR brings together a mix of individuals from many and varying disciplines, with the intellectual stimulation that this implies. Its members come from academia, business, government, and nonprofit institutions, representing a wide spectrum of research needs and applications. Among its perhaps many identities, AAPOR can be considered a social science association. But an extraordinary attribute of the organization is its blend of members from commercial and from non-profit affiliations. This sets it apart from other associations.

The annual AAPOR conference is the major focus of this culture, and renews it from year to year. At this conference, the “newer members” get to meet the “well-knowns”—AAPOR’s public figures in opinion and market research—to everyone’s advantage. Songfests, room parties, cardplaying (sometimes characterized as “late evening probability seminars”), and visits to points of interest are all on unofficial conference agendas. Members’ families are welcome and constitute a highly visible and valuable percentage of conference attendees.

But despite the social revelry, opportunities to chat with old friends, and the magnetism of tennis courts, pools, and nature paths at conference sites, conference sessions are well-attended, even on Sunday mornings.

## The Annual Conference—Exemplar of The Culture

“When is AAPOR?” has been a traditional query of members since AAPOR’s founding in 1947. For many years, before regional chapters existed, before the organization’s newsletter kept members in touch, and before AAPOR was involved with other like-minded groups in pursuing common causes, the annual conference virtually *was* “AAPOR.”

AAPOR’s antecedent was a meeting held after Harry Field’s call to users and practitioners of opinion research in 1946 to attend a meeting in the Colorado mountains at Central City. It was the first of the annual conferences. The following year, the constitution of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, adopted at Williamstown, Massachusetts, on September 4, called for the establishment of a Conference Committee that “shall be responsible for planning and organizing the Annual Conference of the Association.” Thus, as members began to look ahead on their calendars, “When is AAPOR?” became an important date to mark down.

A long-time and significant feature of AAPOR conference is the scheduling of joint meetings with WAPOR, the World Association for Public Opinion Research. WAPOR also was founded at the 1947 Williamstown meeting (as the “World Congress of Public Opinion Research.” It shared with AAPOR the next year’s conference at Eagles Mere, and the every-other-year joint meeting has been continuous since that time.

This symbiotic relationship clearly has been mutually fruitful for members of the organizations, many of whom are members of both. WAPOR’s own program sessions have been integrated with AAPOR’s and appear in the joint printed program, providing a broader-scope series of papers and discussions than would have been the case in separate conferences. Not only have international contacts benefitted attendees, but the greater political sciences thrust of WAPOR sessions have enhanced the total shared-conference programs.

During the Association’s early years, criteria for the selection of a site for the annual conference began to appear in Executive Council minutes. One of the earliest mentions of these criteria appears in the minutes of June 1951: “Some considerations in making the site selection: Meetings should not be held too often in the same geographic area (unfair to members living in other geographical regions); meetings should not be held in big-city hotels where participants are subjected to

a host of distractions; meetings should be held at college campuses (summer resorts too expensive for many members); meetings should be held at a campus which offers dormitories and dining places large enough to accommodate all participants. (This offers greater opportunities for informal discussion.)”

## Geographical Location of AAPOR Conferences

The first criterion named in these 1951 Council minutes dealt with geographical location. An ongoing problem has been the “East-West” or “California-East” or “Midwest-East” pushes and pulls in deciding where conferences should be held. For example, the September 1949 Council minutes open with a discussion of Lake Forest College (in the Chicago suburb) as a possible 1950 location. “The location fits into the policy of holding annual meetings in the Midwest every other year.” However, there was to be some slippage from this policy of alternate year scheduling of Midwestern conferences: by 1954, the Council “agreed to recommend to the incoming Council that the 1955 conference be held in the Midwest, since the last four have been in the eastern area.”

A review of the 1960s and 1970s reveals countless discussions of the pros and cons of holding conferences in various geographical regions. Beliefs were expressed that a *national* organization must meet in the Far West, as well as in the Midwest and East. But such “moral commitments” to all segments of a (nominally) national membership were offset by pressures to meet near where most members actually lived.

For example, in October 1965, the Council discussed the 1967 conference “which by tradition would be held in the West. [The vice president] urged that the tradition be abandoned because only a small proportion of AAPOR members, who are predominantly in the East, are able to attend Western meetings.” A locale in Wisconsin was suggested “as a compromise between the East and the West Coast. Attention was called to a letter from the Pacific Chapter expressing the view that a tri-annual West Coast meeting is a simple obligation of AAPOR to its members in that part of the country.” At this October 1965 Council session, a motion carried for a West Coast site for 1967.

In January of the next year, 1966, the Council “reaffirmed its desire to meet in the Far West in 1967 if a suitable site can be found.” This decision was short-lived, however, because at a meeting two months

later, there was “much discussion of various places to meet, one or two in the Far West, more in the Midwest. It was finally moved and voted that the Site Committee should feel completely free to make the best recommendation that it saw fit regardless of past conditions or traditions of geographical preference.” (Lake George, New York became the 1967 site, but Santa Barbara in California achieved AAPOR stardom in 1968.) Clearly there has been much Council ambivalence about site selection over the years.

At a 1971 Council meeting the complaint of some Midwestern members was noted that AAPOR “hadn’t met in their area for ten years.”<sup>1</sup> In view of this criticism, the Chicago and neighboring area was considered: “Choices have boiled down to the Playboy Club in Geneva, Wisconsin and Arlington Park, site of a race track near Chicago.” A spoilsport Council member felt “the Playboy Club rooms were dark and the bunny atmosphere depressing during the daylight hours,” and it was dropped from further consideration, thus happily preventing perhaps the development of yet another AAPOR “tradition.”

The “California policy” apparently was abandoned in the mid-1970s. Council was informed in its September 1976 meeting by the vice president (and member of the Site Selection Committee) that “. . . because of poor attendance even by West Coast members, there is no longer a policy to hold every ‘nth’ meeting on the West Coast.” In fact, AAPOR did not meet west of the Mississippi between 1971 and 1991.

Twenty-seven of the forty annual conferences held from 1948 through 1989 were in Eastern locales, seven in the Midwest, three in California, and five in the South (defined as south of Washington, D.C.).

## Selection of Conference Dates

The Central City conference was held in midsummer; the founding conference at Williamstown in September. The 1948 conference at Eagles Mere in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania also took place in September. The absence of many members on summer vacations, coupled with intense heat at many otherwise desirable locations in the days before universal air conditioning, led successive conference committees

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1. Actually this wasn’t true, as the 1964 conference was held in Excelsior Springs, Missouri. Perhaps this was a case of selective forgetting because of members’ grumbling about its inaccessibility.

to avoid scheduling in July and August. September was also avoided after 1948 because of conflicts with other professional meetings and the demands of school openings and post-Labor Day business activities. Winter months were subject to travel difficulties, while April-May were busy weeks for those in academic settings.

The sum of all these various pressures led to a general practice of scheduling the annual AAPOR conference in late May or early June, and this gradually became "traditional." The practice was confirmed by the results of a membership poll conducted in 1962. In response to a question about the preferred month of meeting, the survey found that "if the 'No Preference' group is excluded, exactly half the membership prefers May to any other month. June is second, so that May-June together amount to 53 percent of the total vote and two-thirds of those with any preference in the matter. No other month received more than 4 percent of the vote."

The survey report went on to say: "May is almost equally popular with commercial and academic members. Forty-four percent of the business group and 38 percent of the university group name it as their choice. If May-June are considered together, these two months account for 57 percent of the commercial group and 55 percent of the academic group. About a third of those preferring May mention the weather at that time of year as the main reason for their choice. The next most frequent reasons are: it doesn't conflict with other meetings, it doesn't conflict with vacations, it's a slack time in the office or teaching."

As AAPOR's larger membership increased the need for advance site selection and conference planning, it became customary to seek reservations for the conference to be held during the week preceding the Memorial Day weekend.

## Selection of Conference Sites

Selection of the first two conference sites was largely fortuitous. Harry Field selected Central City, Colorado (1946), because of its proximity to his own Denver location, its isolation from commercial distractions, and its picturesque ambience. AAPOR's founding conference took place at Williams College (1947) largely because of the active interest of its president, James Baxter, who was a friend of Elmo Roper and of the profession of opinion research. The factors governing the selection of a resort hotel in Eagles Mere, Pennsylvania, for the 1948 conference, AAPOR's first, are undocumented, but the next four confer-

ences (1949-1952) all took place on college campuses at Cornell in New York, Lake Forest in Illinois, Princeton in New Jersey, and Vassar in New York.

The preference for college campuses in those years derived in part from the desire of AAPOR members to avoid big city hotels and to meet communally in a quiet location. Perhaps even more importantly, it reflected the wish for inexpensive accommodations, in contrast to those offered by resort hotels. It may also be supposed that various influential AAPOR members, such as Julian Woodward (then at Elmo Roper but formerly of Cornell) and Hadley Cantril (Princeton), persuaded their universities to offer facilities. Finally, the size of the gatherings, usually not much more than 100, made them appropriate for a college or university to host.

Certainly the campus sites were inexpensive. The letter of invitation to the 1947 Williamstown conference noted that "Comfortable accommodations in the dormitories of Williams College are still available . . . Prices, including both room and meals, will run about \$7 a day per person." The 1949 notice of the conference at Cornell stated that "The rates per person are \$2 a day for the room; meals at cafeteria prices." Even in those days resort hotels were charging \$25 a day or more. It may not be supposed, however, that all AAPOR members took advantage of these low rates. Most of AAPOR's leaders and all members with more liberal expense accounts usually opted for the air-conditioned comfort of rooms at a nearby inn or hotel and dinners at a good restaurant, rather than the dormitory room and cafeteria line. Such arrangements of course conflicted with the goal of AAPOR unity and seemed to encourage a two-tier membership.

This development, along with the increasing attendance at AAPOR conventions, led to abandonment of the campus as a conference site. Except for 1957 and 1958, when AAPOR met successively at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington and the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago, almost all conventions since 1952 have been held at resort hotels, usually remote from big cities but sometimes in smaller metropolitan areas such as Madison, Wisconsin, Atlantic City and Asbury Park, New Jersey, Roanoke, Virginia and Santa Barbara, California.

Members' preferences for resort hotels were expressed in the same survey cited earlier regarding preferred dates of meeting. In total, half the membership (49 percent) voted for a resort hotel and 21 percent for a big city hotel. Only 12 percent preferred a university setting, while the remainder had no preference or gave another answer. Although about one-fourth of the business or commercial members of AAPOR voted

for a big city hotel and the same proportion of university, nonprofit, and government members voted for a university setting, sizable majorities of both groups with a preference opted for a resort hotel. (For a complete list of conference sites see appendix E.)

## Picking a Resort Hotel

In response to the survey, members cited a variety of advantages to the choice of a resort hotel. Most frequently mentioned was the *gemütlich* setting: friendly, relaxed, informal; and, in most cases, the exclusive occupancy of the site—in sharp contrast to the bustle and crowds of a big-city hotel. In a similar vein were references to the lack of competing big-city attractions that distract members from convention activities, and the increased feelings of unity that developed in a more isolated place. A third big attraction of resorts was that they are a place to bring the family for recreation and relaxation.

But while “resort hotel” is a good generic description of the type of place required for an AAPOR conference, selection of an actual site has often in fact been quite difficult because of AAPOR’s other demands. The dates in May, for example, tend to rule out many northern resorts that do not open until June. Exclusive glamorous resorts are ruled out because of cost. The site should be reasonably accessible; it should not require a three- or four-hour bus ride or drive. It should be large enough to accommodate the AAPOR attendance comfortably (with single rooms available for those who prefer them), but not so large that AAPOR members are lost among vacationers or other conventions. The food should be decent, if not epicurean, and the dining hall should be large enough to accommodate the Saturday night banquet and to serve all in one sitting. There must be enough meeting rooms for concurrent sessions, and suitable lounges or other public areas where members may congregate to talk.

AAPOR’s successive site selection committees were presided over for some twenty years by the beloved Joe Klapper, usually assisted by his wife Hope. While the task of checking out resort hotels and being entertained as a potential client may seem like something of a plum, no one can count the number of bad meals and wasted weekends that Joe and Hope endured in their eternal quest for the perfect AAPOR site. As one of the earliest members of AAPOR, a former president, long-time Council member, and active participant in and organizer of the Association’s activities, Joe was ever mindful of his constituency’s interests.



He drove a hard bargain in his negotiations with hotel management, and always maintained his sharp wit and warm humor. In recent years, Joe's role has fallen to Charles (Chuck) Cowan, who gives every sign of continuing the AAPOR tradition.

For many years AAPOR seemed to have found a "home" at the Sagamore Inn, Lake George, New York. Starting in 1959, and until 1974, AAPOR conventions were held at that site on seven occasions. It was hard to get to. It was either a long drive from New York City, or a charter bus ride, or the Albany airport. But it had charm: a rambling inn set right on the sparkling lake. AAPOR was always the first tenant of the summer season. A new staff was being broken in. The plumbing was antiquated, and the heating unreliable or nonexistent on cold evenings (one distinguished speaker in 1959 addressed her audience wearing a fur coat for warmth). But both management and staff were extremely eager to please and no reasonable request was denied. Management provided on-the-house late evening "weenie roasts" and "Chinese smorgasbords." An annual highlight was the parade of the kitchen staff through the dining room at the Saturday night banquet, carrying American flags to the strains of a band playing the "Stars and Stripes Forever," while AAPOR members loudly applauded their efforts.

The Buck Hill Falls resort in the Pennsylvania Poconos was also "home" for a while, following the closing of the Sagamore. AAPOR had met there in 1956 at a time when it was a Quaker "temperance hotel," thus creating great inconvenience to a majority of AAPOR members. Starting in 1977, however, AAPOR met there four times in seven years. Though it too was somewhat out of the way, it was a lovely location and provided excellent service and facilities.

Problems of accessibility are, of course, a necessary consequence of the desire of AAPOR members for a resort hotel that can provide largely exclusive occupancy, far away from urban distractions. Such facilities are not usually found at airports or at convenient bus stops. There were regular complaints about the need for long drives in order to reach Lake George or the Poconos, and scarcely any other site was immune from similar criticism. The Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina, which hosted two AAPOR conferences in the 1970s, was widely criticized because it was four hours by car from Raleigh-Durham and at that time only two flights a day were landing in Asheville. And as noted earlier, travel to facilities in other parts of the country, outside of the New England and Mid-Atlantic areas, was often seen as

a burden on the great majority of the membership, which was located in just those regions.

It is more than nostalgia, however, that has made such attractive resorts as the Sagamore and Buck Hill Falls, so ideally suited to AAPOR, increasingly hard to find in recent years. The Sagamore remained closed for some years and only recently (1987) was remodeled by a large chain as a luxury resort. Buck Hill Falls added condominiums and developed its property in a similar direction. Even in 1977, Klapper reported to the AAPOR Council that “the type of location traditionally considered suitable is increasingly rare, as new construction tends to be of the massive hotel-type.”

The needs of AAPOR have of course also changed over the years. Most notably, during the last twenty years, conference attendance has increased from 200 or so to about 500 at recent conventions, so the cozy little inns are no longer suitable. Costs have so increased that poor food and poor service are not tolerated and more and more special facilities are needed. But AAPOR members retain their desire for exclusive occupancy where possible, in a country setting with all the amenities, and with all attendees sheltered under one roof, so the search goes on. The Don CeSar hotel in St. Petersburg (used in 1986 and 1989) seems to have quickly gained an affection that is analogous to the feeling evoked by the Sagamore in the breasts of AAPOR members.

## Attracting Younger Members to Conferences

The founders of AAPOR, who were individually invited to attend a conference on public opinion research in Colorado, and who met subsequently at Williamstown to adopt a constitution and establish an organization, consisted largely of leaders of the field. Almost all of them had their own businesses, had taught or conducted research at universities, or had occupied important positions in government or corporate activities. But AAPOR was not designed as an old boys club. Membership has been open to anyone interested in public opinion research and, from the outset, efforts were made to reach out to new and younger members, women and men.

AAPOR dues have generally been modest; but for many years, before the emergence of local and regional chapters and before regular publi-

cation of a newsletter, the annual conference was almost the only opportunity AAPOR members had to meet and talk with their peers, and attending it could be expensive.

A special subgroup that AAPOR has tried to attract to its conferences are the graduate students. Student memberships, with reduced annual dues, were introduced during the 1950s in order to encourage interest in the field, and successive Councils have endeavored to make it easier for them to attend the annual conference. Criticisms are voiced almost every year that the cost or lack of accessibility of the conference site makes it difficult for students to attend. In 1976, almost thirty years after AAPOR's founding and in spite of Council's best efforts, the Nominations and Membership chairman complained that "the annual conference, the dues and travel expenses are too costly to attract students or beginning professionals, except on a one-time (attendance) basis for residents of towns and cities near the conference host site." The May 1983 Council minutes stress the desirability of "student discount rates and special family rates" in choosing the 1986 facility.

The introduction of a Student Awards competition and its subsequent vigorous promotion by a succession of influential academic members have attracted a small but respectable number of entries each year and have increased AAPOR's visibility among students of public opinion research. Award winners are invited to the conference as guests of AAPOR, and other students, made aware of the conference, may respond to the opportunity to meet a wide representation of the profession among the AAPOR membership. One of the reasons given for the selection of Swampscott, Massachusetts as the site for the 1966 conference was its proximity to the large number of educational institutions in the Greater Boston area, but no records exist of how many students responded to this opportunity. [A list of student award winners appears in appendix D.]

## Resisting Discriminatory Practices

As social scientists and researchers, AAPOR members have generally tended to favor "liberal" causes and to protest against prejudice and discrimination. From the beginning, the AAPOR constitution encouraged membership "without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin." Gender was not mentioned in this list, but in a profession that has been hospitable to them, women have always constituted a large proportion of the AAPOR membership and have been well represented on the Executive Council and among the officers.

One of the early criteria for conference site selection was the rule, "All members of AAPOR must be welcome." This was adopted in an era when it was quite common for certain resort hotels and for other facilities in particular cities, states, or regions to discriminate against minority groups and/or unescorted women. Happily, this criterion has less relevance today than it did in the early years. In a 1952 discussion, the minutes show that "the Council felt that the South should be eliminated (as a 1953 locale), since holding the meeting there might cause discomfort to Negro members of the organization." At the actual 1953 conference in the Pennsylvania Poconos, it is recalled that until a room was suddenly "found" for a black member whose reservation had been denied, the hotel management was notified by AAPOR that the conference would be canceled. Only in 1976, more than twenty years later, did the chairman of Nominations and Membership report to Council that "since discrimination against Blacks is presumably no longer a problem, Florida should be considered (as a conference site)."

A related concern was voiced at a 1978 Council meeting when it was agreed "that Council instruct the Site Selection Committee not to schedule meetings in non-ERA states, and that when investigating possible hotels the Committee ask the hotel management the position of the state." The Site chairman noted that he would write to a candidate state's Chamber of Commerce, asking for recommendations for hotels, and that AAPOR policy would be stated in the letter. This policy barred reuse of the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, which was on other grounds a prototypical AAPOR conference site.

## Maintaining an Open Conference

Assuming some degree of success in attracting younger members, less affluent members, and minority group members to the annual conference, a further question arises: How can AAPOR make them feel comfortable there? Growing as it did from a small band of "pioneers" and early adherents to a new profession of public opinion research, AAPOR in its early years was inevitably marked by a certain clannishness. With conference attendances not much over 100 persons and a preponderance of familiar faces, it was only natural for old friends and colleagues to gravitate together and for newcomers to find it difficult to achieve the status of an "in-group" member. An early membership survey that drew 146 mailed responses found that the biggest criticism of the conferences was that "long-term members tend to be too cliquish,"

and that new members did not feel welcome unless they had an attentive sponsor to introduce them around.

Though this was recognized as a potential problem for many years, it was not until 1971 that Council took specific steps to welcome newcomers and help them feel at home. At the conference in Pasadena that year, AAPOR inaugurated an annual reception for new members and first-time participants. Council members, wearing marked badges, joined with other long-time AAPOR members in mixing with the newcomers at this reception, answering their questions and providing any help or advice requested. The newcomers were also provided with badges bearing a stripe to mark their status, so that they could easily be recognized in the course of the conference and special efforts made to assure them of a welcome.

Another innovation at this same 1971 conference further helped to reduce the atmosphere of the conference as the gathering of a private clique. This was extension of the "President's Party" to an AAPOR "open house." Private parties, hosted by research companies or by groups from a particular city or region, had long been part of the AAPOR scene, and the president's party following the annual banquet on Saturday night represented the culmination of this activity. Paid for by the president (or more usually, the president's employer), this was an invitational affair that was normally restricted to the president's colleagues and friends. Although "party-crashing" was the AAPOR rule rather than the exception ("What's the room number tonight?"), newcomers were deterred not only by the in-group atmosphere but by the extremely limited size of the president's hotel room or suite.

In Pasadena, the president invited all conference attendees to his party, and two years later in 1973 Council voted to make this an open party, held in a public area of the hotel and paid for by AAPOR funds. This largesse followed the institution of a conference registration fee in 1972, which lessened pressure on the AAPOR treasury. The result, however, provided another occasion in which newcomers could mix socially with old-time members and, combined with the reception for first-time participants, helped further to dispel the impression that the AAPOR conference was run by a tight group of insiders. The spirit of inclusiveness has led other members to make a special effort, at meals, in meetings, or corridors and bars, to integrate new members into the culture.