

President's Letter

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I'd like to begin with a big "Thank you!" and "Congratulations!" to Beverly Perkins for completing her successful term as President of WAAC and for arranging such an interesting and enjoyable annual meeting in Cody, WY. I'm not sure I can think of another conference I've attended recently with such uniformly interesting and well-presented talks. For that, we must recognize all those who presented their work in Cody. Thanks are also due to the Buffalo Bill Historical Center which so generously shared its lovely facilities and staff with us.

The meeting in Cody was barely completed when Hurricane Katrina made landfall, and our *Newsletter* Editor Carolyn Tallent immediately sprang to action. The September *Newsletter* was

about to go to press, but she quickly reformatted it to reprint Betty Walsh's "Salvage Operations for Water Damaged Archival Collections: A Second Glance" article with a new preface and the Salvage at a Glance chart, as well as new and very valuable information contributed by Chris Stavroudis, Jennifer Koerner, Hillary Kaplan, and others. The process of getting that issue of the *Newsletter* out was unusual in that it included much email discussion amongst the Board, especially concerning the decision to send that issue by first class mail for timely delivery, and the decision to put it in pdf format, freely available on the CoOL website until January 15, 2006. I've heard many spontaneous compliments about the September issue, which has made me even more proud of Carolyn and the efforts of the WAAC Board. We can only hope that the information in the September *Newsletter* reaches people who need it, either in the Gulf region or in other emergency situations; to this end WAAC has donated 25 print copies to relief efforts in Louisiana cultural institutions.

My original intention for this letter had been to discuss this year's election and what is involved in the Board positions, as it became clear to me in the course of building the slate of candidates that WAAC Board responsibilities are not necessarily clear to the membership. In the interest of not droning on too long—and saving something for the next issue—I have decided to put in a few words here about the election itself, and discuss the Board positions in a future letter.

Running the election each year is one of the duties of the Vice President of WAAC, a position which itself is elected each year. Thus, I ran the election in 2005 as VP; Camilla Van Vooren will do the task in 2006. Now, the VP does not act alone in this: she or he assembles a Nominating Committee, with Board approval, of at least two other WAAC members. The Nominating Committee brainstorms good candidates for office and puts together the election slate. Once the ballots have been mailed to the membership, the VP is responsible for receiving and tallying them, with help from other Board members as needed and available.

I have to say that I found this process of getting the slate together—particularly to find candidates for Vice President—to be surprisingly difficult. I sympathize with those members who refused to vote for VP this year because the position was unopposed. I can only say that the Nominating Committee members did our honest best to find candidates, and were relieved when our one candidate, Camilla Van Vooren, could be persuaded to run unopposed. I sincerely hope the situation will be different next year.

I think the problem of filling the slate was compounded by several factors. Of the elected positions, the VP has the most responsibility and time commitment. There are specific tasks to do the first year as VP, and the VP becomes President the next year, which involves arranging the Annual Meeting (among other things). Naturally, there are fewer people who have the time, interest, or resources to make this commitment.

Another factor, which the Board is well aware of, is that for various reasons it has been a number of years since WAAC held a meeting in California. WAAC has always worked hard to maintain a geographical distribution of meeting sites

Contents

President's Letter	1
Annual Meeting Notes	3
Regional News	4
Technical Exchange	11
Health & Safety	12
Q & A with Appraiser Nancy Escher	14
Creating Long-lasting Inkjet Prints <i>by Monique C. Fischer</i>	16
Annual Meeting Presentation Summaries	19
Jobs	23
Membership	24
AYMHM	25

President's letter, continued

(and board members), while respecting the fact that about three fourths of the members are in California. It appears that lately the balance has been off, and active membership in the form of attending the annual meeting or participating on the Board has been declining. This has tended to become self-fulfilling, as it means that more non-Californians such as myself do participate, tending to keep the meetings in other locales. (Hint: in 2006 the Nominating Committee will likely be targeting Californians.)

Geography aside, I believe there are other, more troubling, trends at work. In my conversations with several people who I thought would be excellent candidates, but who declined to run at least for the moment, I heard a couple of things over and over again. One, usually from conservators working in institutions, was along the lines of "I'd have to do that on my own time, and I just can't afford it." The other, almost exclusively from women, was "I have young children, and I just don't have time." This seemed very understandable until I thought back to my intern days, when I worked with several women who had young children and either were, or had recently been, WAAC VP's and Presidents. How was it that they had the time and 10+ years later new mothers do not?

The answer, I think, explains both of the responses—I suspect a trend where institutions that once encouraged employees to participate in professional organizations such as WAAC, are now discouraging such participation, or at least are discouraging the use of work time for such purposes. Thus conservators find themselves forced to use their own time for professional activities—and if the average salary-earner cannot justify this incursion on his or her private life, then the mother of young children certainly will not be able to.

Ironically, many WAAC officers (and *Newsletter* column editors and contributors, *Ed.*) have been coming from the ranks of private conservators, parents or not. As a private conservator myself, I can say that the nature of private work tends to be such that the line between professional and personal time gets eroded, perhaps making it easier to commit some of either (or both) to an organization such as WAAC. Certainly in my past life as a salaried employee of an institution, I was much more jealous of my time away from work.

If I'm right about this trend, it has larger implications than just whether WAAC has a hard time filling its election slate. Conservation as a field has struggled, in some ways still struggles, with its status as a profession. Part of being a professional — and being recognized as such — is participation in professional organizations such as WAAC. If our employers are tending to downplay the importance of this participation — even if their attitude is something like "yeah, it's important, but it's not a priority within this institution, so it's not something I'm going to recognize, encourage, or reward" then, slowly, our overall professionalism will be eroded.

I remain committed to our profession and to WAAC—an organization that must continue to serve its members and that needs the service of its members. I strongly encourage all WAAC members to consider running for office, and I equally encourage all supervisors to recognize the professional importance of contributions of time and energy to organizations such as WAAC—in turn, I hope they will encourage their employees to participate as well.
