

○ THE BEGINNING (1938–1940)

The First 24 Hours

The excerpt below is taken from the book *As We Remember It* by George W. Jeffers, NABT's First Vice President and President (1941) and Jerry P. Lightner, the first Executive Director.

On the morning of 1 July 1938 eighteen enthusiastic biologists came together in New York City with the avowed purpose of setting up a national association. Rarely had the sun come up over that city's skyline with greater brilliance and with more determination to establish a record high temperature. Since such creature comforts as air conditioning were still in the future, the atmosphere within the conference room of the Hotel New Yorker matched the blistering heat outdoors. Only a transitory respite was possible with shedding of coats and ties, loosening of collars, and ingestion of ice water. However, matching the heat of the day was the enthusiasm with which the delegates welcomed the many-sided problem that confronted them.

After customary introductions and the accreditation of delegates, Dr. Riddle proceeded to brief the assembly as to the background of the Committee on Biological Science Teaching, its procedures and accomplishments up to that point. In summary, it was the Committee's hope that the assembled delegates would (a) establish a national organization devoted to the teaching of biology, and (b) such organization would develop a magazine (Journal) for biology teachers.

More specifically, the new society would be under the control of high school teachers of biology and embrace a goodly proportion of the country's secondary school biology teachers. The Committee thought only in this way could the proposed new society become effective. In retrospect, the assignment given the delegates appears staggering. The delegates succeeded in setting up a new organization that was national in scope; they hammered out a passable Constitution and Bylaws; they established guidelines for a brand new magazine, the first number scheduled to appear in ninety days. And that's precisely what occurred!

How was this accomplished? And in such a short time?

To effect a division of labor, the delegates broke up into groups, some to work on the magazine, others to wrestle with the Constitution, and the like. At intervals a committee of the whole would be convened to amend, to refine, and to ratify what had been accomplished up to that point. The process was then repeated.

There were no overt clashes of personalities, no acrimonious arguments but neither was the atmosphere one of "advise and consent." Here was a group of

individuals – initially strangers to one another – but all of one mind and that was to get the job done.

Following a spirited discussion period, the following charter officers were elected:

President: Myrl C. Lichtenwalter
 President-Elect: Malcolm D. Campbell
 First Vice President: George W. Jeffers
 Second Vice President: Lucy Orenstein
 Secretary-Treasurer: P. K. Houdek
 Editor, *The American Biology Teacher*: Alex Herskowitz
 Managing Editor, *The American Biology Teacher*: John Mitchell

It's interesting to note that friendships developed between delegates that hot July day in New York City were lasting; they contributed in no small degree to holding the NABT together during the Association's tenuous first years of existence.

The National Association of Biology Teachers thus materialized and, to all intents and purposes, became a functional organization in a single day. The eighteen people who brought it into being had earned a night's rest, but they looked forward to the following day when the Executive Board would meet for the first time.

The prevailing atmosphere of self-approbation and anticipation can better be imagined than described. It was at this precise moment—when good feeling was at its highest—that the subject of economics reared its ugly head. Delegates asked, "Can we make good on such grandiose promises?" "Will we attract several thousand members within the first year or two?" "If we fail, can we count on the Carnegie (Institute) for additional support?"

To this Dr. Riddle answered, "Not one penny." He then emphatically said, "From here on, whatever obligations are undertaken will be the personal responsibility of you...and you...and you..." and pointed a finger at each delegate in turn.

The National Association of Biology Teachers did not arrive unheralded. From all sections of the country came expressions of interest, of enthusiasm, or reassurance. They came from individuals and from professional groups. *The New York Times* was first to announce the event in a brief news item 2 July 1938. Soon after *Turtlex News* and the *Virginia Journal of Education* carried accounts on the formation of the new society. (Jeffers & Lightner, 2001)

Growing the Organization

The First Annual Association Meeting in Richmond, Virginia, was part of the AAAS meeting. The Board met on 27 December 1938, and the membership meetings were on 28 December. NABT had a joint

dinner with The Committee on Biological Science Teaching of the Union of American Biological Societies. During the Board meeting, 12 local biology teacher organizations petitioned the NABT Board for affiliation. These early affiliates included the Kansas Association of Biology Teachers and the New York Association of Biology Teachers, which are still active today (Jeffers & Lightner, 2001).

This new organization's goal was to enroll every biology teacher in the United States. At the time, there were 20,000 biology teachers. Dues were set at \$1.00 per year. By June 1939, NABT had a membership of 1600 (Jeffers & Lightner, 2001). The January 1940 issue of *ABT* published the first financial statement of NABT. With annual dues at \$1.00, the membership fees for 1938–1939 totaled \$1607; for 1939–1940 they were \$342. So, in the first 2 years of NABT, there were 1949 members. Advertising brought in \$728 (Houdek, 1940). The only advertisements in the first issue of *ABT* were from four companies: on the inside of the cover is the Clay-Adams Co. – maker of “American Made” dissecting instruments – and the back cover has McGraw-Hill Book Company, D.C. Heath and Company, and Ward's Natural Science Establishment, Inc. These early volumes of *ABT* were smaller (6" × 10") than the current issues (8.5" × 11") and averaged 238 pages per volume. The Table of Contents was on the cover instead of the images seen today.

A look at the initial article in the first volume of *ABT* (October 1938) – entitled “Biology teachers begin to pull together,” written by Oscar Riddle and reprinted in the September 1988 *ABT* (vol. 50) – reveals the driving force in forming NABT:

In many places throughout the United States the high school curriculum is being subjected to extensive revision, with social studies claiming a place as a core subject and displacing some of the biology that was formerly taught. In many places too, the bit of hygiene and physiology which are taught are being torn from their normal life-science connections and taught under physical education.... Very adverse also is the impression widespread in many smaller schools that biology can be taught satisfactorily by someone who has had little or no training in biological science. (Riddle, 1938)

As the members of NABT look back over the past seven decades, we should also be looking to the future for biology education. It appears that NABT is needed now just as it was at its founding: to provide support and encouragement for biology educators as they develop valuable learning experiences for their students.

Beginning with the February 2013 *ABT* and for each of the remaining issues this year, we will be reprinting two classic *ABT* articles. In the February evolution issue, you will see Theodosius Dobzhansky's famous article from 1971, “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution,” and Oscar Riddle's 1938 article “Biology teachers begin to pull together.” March will be represented by articles from the 1940s, April by the 1950s, May the 1960s, August the 1970s, September the 1980s, October the 1990s, and the November/December issue the 2000s. In addition, there will be a new department, A History of NABT's 75 Years of Supporting Excellence in Biology Education, in each remaining issue this year that will feature the NABT activities of each decade.

References

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BUNNY JASKOT (bunnyj19@aol.com) and PAT WALLER (wallerfp@enter.net) are both retired exemplary high school biology teachers and NABT Past Presidents. They are the current Co-Chairs of the NABT History Committee.

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