

Western Trauma Association
Past President Interview
R. Christie Wray, Jr., MD interviewing George Pierce, MD
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Steamboat Springs, Colorado

Dr. Wray: George, tell us a little bit about your educational background starting about when you were in college or before if you wish.

Dr. Pierce: I graduated from the University of Wyoming and then sort of in a round-about way found my way into medicine. I started out as a math and physics major. Thought I wanted to be a biophysicist. I went to Hopkins to graduate school there and during that year I really decided that medicine was what I wanted to do rather than spend all my life in the laboratory. So, I went to medical school and then I think the most influential person in my career as a medical student was Alfred Blalock. He had quite a spell over a lot of people and I thought that was what I wanted to do – go into surgery. So that's what I did.

Dr. Wray: Tell us something about how you initially became interested in the Western Trauma Association.

Dr. Pierce: Well, I think it was through Lin Ketchum who was a plastic surgeon/hand surgeon in Kansas City at the University of Kansas at the time and he told me about this organization. He knew that I liked to ski and he said this was a good group. He said that I understood it all the time that the genesis of this organization centered on people, sort of organized by people who wanted to get to the Rocky Mountain Trauma Association. That was an organization that Ben Eisman and Hank Bronson were in but it was not really wide open to younger guys, new people. There were a group of people, I think, in Denver, Omaha and in the Midwest, Minneapolis and also some from California. I don't know exactly how all these folks got to know each other and decided that they wanted to form this organization but at any rate it started to be a ski club. I don't know why trauma was picked as the focus other than that was the way the rocky mountain started out. I think they just sort of took that time and in those early meetings almost any topic would do. It didn't seem to have to be focused on trauma at all and a number of the members then had very little interest in trauma, very little to do with trauma. I remember Kevin Ryan was one of the early presidents and he was a radiologist, I believe, from Woodland, California where also Bob Yamagucci was a nephrologist and Bob Edmonson, an oncologist. They were all members at the time I joined the organization. The people who really spearheaded it were Bob Bowles and Bill Hams. Of course, Earl Young, I believe he was one of the original people. Several people from Minneapolis and Denver and Omaha. At any rate, I got interested through Lin Ketchum and went to the meeting and liked it. I think my earliest memory of the Western

Trauma was the family orientation and the friendliness of the organization. I remember that Carolyn and I arrived and we didn't know anybody except Lin Ketchum. That week Kevin Ryan and Yamagucci invited us over to the condominium to have dinner and we got to know them and their family, their kids. It's the same thing so many people cherish about the Western Trauma today.

Dr. Wray: You mentioned briefly about the scientific program – was it scientific papers or case reports or panels; what was the nature of the program in the first years you were attending?

Dr. Pierce: Well, a little bit of everything. Certainly, case reports were very popular. There were not a lot of folks in the organization at that time who had strong academic interests or appointments. In fact, the majority I think were non-university people. Then the character of the organization started to change slowly. People like Bob Rutherford joined. The quality of the meeting gradually improved. I think that was one of the most fortunate things that happened. Because I think just a club of friends would not have survived all this time. I'm almost certain it wouldn't have because people have come and gone. It would have been very hard to keep this organization going if it hadn't been for the entry of some folks who were really serious about trauma. I think that Gene Moore and the Denver General group, Gene's many residents and the people who followed him and the people he trained were probably more responsible for the long term success and survival of the organization than anyone else. Many other people subsequently have been involved. Certainly Dave Feliciano very early on joined and brought a tremendous influence on the organization for the good. One of the really great things about their contributions I think was that they didn't push aside this other element; in fact, they embraced the element of the friendliness of the organization and the family orientation and the joy of just skiing together. It wasn't taken over and changed in a bad way. It added an element that was desperately needed for long term survival and success. Of course, many other people such as yourself contributed greatly to the meeting. I don't mean to exclude but if I look back and think of the people who really had the greatest influence it was the Denver General group, the Moore brothers and the people who followed them.

Dr. Wray: How did you get involved in the sort of executive branch or becoming an officer? How did that get started?

Dr. Pierce: Eric Ratzer who has long been a friend of mine asked me to be his program chairman the year he was president. This was the year we met in Vail. Our first three meetings were in Vail and then we only had one subsequent meeting in Vail and that was the year Eric was President. I remember that because we thought we would have trouble filling the program with abstracts and in fact that had been the pattern in the past. But that year for some reason was one of the first years that we had more than we could easily

accommodate. I don't believe we turned down any papers. We tried to squeeze them all in.

Dr. Wray: You have mentioned some people that have been important to you – are there any particular controversies that you remember that came up over the years?

Dr. Pierce: I suppose the biggest controversy is the membership issue – the restrictions on general surgeons. The goal to keep this a multi-specialty organization, to keep orthopedic surgeons and others involved as members. I think this has been a very worthy goal. I think we probably have to be realistic though. During the 30 years that I have been involved with the organization there has been a real change in the specialty of trauma. It has developed as a specialty during that time. Twenty-five years ago there weren't many people who considered themselves just trauma surgeons. They were vascular surgeons, general surgeons who were interested in trauma. People like Ben Eisman. That was just one of many things they did. I remember when I was President in 1991 I gave a talk which really dated me because I was trying to make a plea for all surgeons to maintain an interest in trauma and to consider themselves trauma surgeons. That is of course fighting an uphill battle and a losing battle. I don't think that it was particularly a battle. I think the things that have happened with the development of trauma as a specialty have been for the good of medicine in general and the good for our patients. I was just mistaken. This is a long winded way of getting around to saying I think the organization today is primarily an organization for trauma surgeons and although I think it is nice to try to keep some orthopedic surgeons and people such as myself, a vascular surgeon, I think that the organization is going to continue to change and to be primarily an organization for trauma surgeons.

Dr. Wray: Along with the science there must have been some particular skiing experiences that you might recall. Are there any you can think of?

Dr. Pierce: Well, I can think of some that have to do with you. Those have been some of the more interesting. I think those were the more dramatic moments when someone was injured and that wasn't really fun at all. I think there have been a lot of great times spent skiing with you and with many others, Barry Esrig, Harold Sherman and more recently with Harvey Sugerman and many enjoyable days skiing with not only them but with their kids. That has been a great way to get to know their kids and their families.

Dr. Wray: Is there anything you would like to tell the future members of the Western Trauma Association?

Dr. Pierce: I think that regardless of the changes that are inevitable in the composition of the membership and the nature of the scientific aspects of the meeting; I think by the way we are definitely headed in the right direction. I think it is something we can all be proud of. It is a tremendous accomplishment – the upgrading of the papers and the fact that over 200 of the papers have been published in the Journal of Trauma. Thanks to

the efforts of Steve Shackford as well as Dave Felicano, Gene Moore, yourself and more recently Harvey Sugeran and others. Regardless of the progress of the organization in that direction I hope it continues and I hope it becomes a long term organization that will be around 20, 30 or 40 years from now. In addition to that I hope that the friendliness of the organization, the emphasis on other aspects than just the science of trauma surgery and so forth will be maintained and I do hope that even the non-pure trauma surgeons will be welcomed at this meeting and will continue to be a meeting which people such as you, myself and many others, Tom Cugbill aren't professional, full-time trauma surgeons will be welcome.