

Interview With Fred Chang, MD
6th WTA President, 1976-77
2/6/2019

Mark Metzdorff: How did you come to be involved with the WTA?

Fred Chang: Peter Teal and I were classmates at Dartmouth and Harvard Medical School, and when they decided to form the Western Trauma, I think that a number of them who had trained together partially in Denver, partially in Minnesota, got a little upset at the other organization that had previously been formed. Have you heard about the Rocky Mountain Trauma Society?

M: Yes I have, but I'm very interested to hear your take. Everyone has a slightly different view of that one.

C: I was told that they were rejected in some way, so they said the hell with you, we'll form our own trauma society, so that was how it began. I think the people who were most involved were Peter, Bob Volz, Lynn Ketchum and some of those people that were together in Minnesota, I think that was the context. So, I think there were half a dozen of them, and they were each assigned to get five or six other members to join. Peter Teal called me, I was on the faculty at the University of Utah and I said, OK I'll join, and that's basically it.

M: What do you recall about the early meetings?

C: I went to the first meeting in '71 and if you look back at the programs most meetings were in the Denver area. They were at Vail, Vail, Vail and Aspen, and then when Art McGuire was President he asked me to be the Program Director and somehow we persuaded the membership to try something new. It wasn't easy to do but we fought it through and finally got to go somewhere else, I think in '75 we went to Sun Valley and we had a great time there. I think that broke the ice and made the membership realize it would be fun to go to different areas rather than go to Vail and Aspen all the time. Now, the early meetings were what I consider primitive. We were a very small group, usually 30-40, and we were lucky to get a room somewhere where we could get 30-40 people in. Some of these places we had the meeting in were fairly rustic. Most of the presentations were kind of low-level compared to what we're used to now. We used transparencies for several years and projected them onto a wall, and later on we got cassettes and moved up to slides.

My meeting as President was in '77 and was an absolute disaster. I had moved to the University of Kansas, but since I had lived in Salt Lake City for so many years I really wanted to take everyone back to Park City. So, in 1977 we went to Park City and I was really excited because I thought it would be a really fun place. Unfortunately we had a big thaw that winter and the snow conditions were marginal at best. A lot of people pulled out. By then we had 50-60 members and probably half of those who had signed up decided they didn't want to go. The other half said well, let's just make the best of it; and I can remember saying hey, let's just bring our tennis racquets, let's just play tennis. Fortunately, after we got there it started snowing, and actually for the 25-30 people who

showed up we had a wonderful time, because there was enough snow to cover the mountain and we were able to ski most of the runs. I still remember that meeting because we were in a bunch of condo-type apartments and the meeting room was just horrible, there were pillars all over the place and, even for the 25 or so people we had there it was hard to get everyone seated. I remember some of the discussion we had was, at that time we had the requirement that every three years you had to attend at least one meeting, and because of the snow conditions, we decided that we wouldn't count that as a year. So that was a big Board of Directors decision at that time!

M: Interesting. I think there was also a requirement that you had to submit an abstract every three years at that time, isn't that correct?

C: I think that came about later, because early on I'm not sure there was any requirement like that. If you look at the early presidents, most of them were orthopedic surgeons and so we had quite a few orthopedic presentations, and I remember one: Peter Teal presented something about fractures and his daughter drew the diagrams on transparencies and that's what he used for his presentation.

M: That's wonderful, thank you! How did you end up becoming President?

C: Peter Teal invited me to come, and then Art McGuire and I, he was from Wyoming, and for some reason we hit it off and had a good time. He wanted to go to Sun Valley and I wanted to go to Park City and that was the start of it. And you know that when you get asked to be Program Director that in a year or two you're going to be the President. In addition, I think I was very active in presenting. In my early years I think I presented every other year at least. In that way, I got known.

M: Was there a Program Director every year? Someone who put together the program?

C: I don't know about the early ones, I wasn't on the Board for the first two or three years. I think Bob Volz pretty much ran things for the first few years. I do remember presenting in those early years and I think he just asked for people to send topics in that they would like to talk about. It wasn't like now, there was no selection; if you wanted to present something you presented something.

M: Was your family in attendance at the meetings?

C: In the early days because we were small, most of us brought our wives along, a lot of the time we brought our kids along. The kids got to know one another and really looked forward to skiing with each other. With the members and their wives we always had a great time, we would have dinners together and a lot of the time we would ski together. The entire time I attended the WTA I looked forward to meeting my friends; I had friends from California, UC-Davis, Minnesota, we were close to Peter Teal, so it was a very social affair.

M: Family participation and collegiality are foundational principles of this group, which is one of the things that makes it special.

C: Can I give you my perspective on how the WTA changed over the years?

M: Absolutely, anything you want to say is fine.

C: I would say that one of the biggest changes that occurred was when the Denver group that included Gene Moore and his brothers joined. Prior to that we had academicians on board, but there weren't highly critical presentations. Gene came aboard, I think it was in the early '80s, and he brought a whole group of his Denver people, people who had trained under him, and after that the presentations became much more scientific. There were large studies presented, because all of a sudden we had people from trauma centers presenting their data of hundreds of cases of this and that, and I think as things went along papers gradually changed their tone. Many were still clinical, but then we started to have a lot of basic science papers presented. I haven't seen a program for the last few years, but it seemed like after a while about a third of the papers were involved with cellular biology and things like that, so that raised the standard. All of a sudden the Western Trauma became a very respectable, well-known organization, presentations were carefully screened and then became published. With that I think we gradually lost some of the other specialties. I think the original intent with Bob Volz was that this would be a multi-specialty organization. We had radiologists, we had plastic surgeons, like I said we had orthopedic surgeons, cardiothoracic surgeons. Gradually it changed and all of a sudden we had more and more "trauma surgeons." I remember in one of the meetings we had to change the classification system for specialty representation in the membership. I don't know if it's still in the bylaws now, but we didn't want to enlarge to more than 125 members, and then to encourage people from different specialties to join we had a requirement that there couldn't be more than 40 people from one specialty. Then things changed because they started calling themselves different names; they were still basically trauma surgeons but they called themselves critical care specialists.

M: These aspects are pretty well documented in our evolution, but I appreciate your perspective. We continue to struggle with that. I think the original vision of a multispecialty organization was another thing that was unique about the Western Trauma that has changed over the years, and we struggle with how to deal with that. Specialists also drifted away because there are so many competing meetings and people want to get the most relevant CME to their practice. But thank you for that.

Can you tell me anything more about the first few meetings; details or perspective of some of the people involved:?

C: I remember thinking that Vail was a very blah ski area, flat with mostly green and blue cruising runs, they didn't have any bumps at all, but gradually Vail changed a lot. I think we went to Vail because a lot of members had condos there and so they wanted to go back.

M: Do you recall any social events?

C: After a while we started to have NASTAR races and that was kind of fun. Has anyone talked about Earl Young?

M: I'd be very interested to hear what you might have to say about Earl.

C: You know, he died at the meeting in Snowmass.

M: Yes, we're very aware of that and there will be a lot about Earl in the upcoming book. Any memories about his participation in meetings?

C: He was a very modest and quiet person. I didn't even know that he was a member of a Japanese-American battalion in WWII that was the most decorated battalion in all of the European theater. They didn't trust the Japanese-Americans at home, but when they allowed them to join the Army they put them all in one unit and it was one of the bravest and most heroic battalions in all of the European theater. But this all came out later, Earl never talked about his service.

M: That's a new one to me, I never heard about that.

C: He was a very young soldier.

M: He would have to have been.

M: Did you give a presidential address? Do you recall whether people gave presidential addresses in the early years?

C: I don't think there were presidential addresses until Gene Moore or Feliciano got to be president. I think it may have started when Gene became president.

M: Do you recall anything about the process for submitting and processing abstracts? I think you stated that in the early days all comers got to present.

C: I think this probably in about the late '70s also, we had a program director but almost always we had to solicit papers, there wasn't a lot of critical screening that went on.

M: Your last meeting was at Lake Louise. What led to your declining participation in the meetings?

C: That's the last program book I have. A few years later I broke my clavicle biking and after that skiing became a lot more difficult. Also, around 2000 I think a lot of our good friends stopped going, so all of a sudden you had a younger generation about 20 years younger than we were. A lot of the friends that joined with us in the '70s stopped going to the meetings. I think the social aspect was very important, and then when we moved to Kansas it became much more convenient to go to the Denver area to ski or go to places we really liked. My favorite mountain is Steamboat, I just love Steamboat.

M: I think the whole organization does, it's one of the places we go most frequently.

C: Glen Nelson was the first president to take us to Steamboat, but after that we went quite a few times.

M: I wanted to ask you about some of the early presidents who are no longer with us. What can you recall about them? Bill Hamsa, you mentioned Art Mcquire?

C: I didn't know Bill Hamsa, but I did know Art McGuire pretty well. He was a general surgeon in practice in Wyoming; after a few times we met, we hit it off quite well. After a while he kind of disappeared; he joined, or re-joined, the Army. He was stationed in Germany and came back once in a while, and after he served in the Army he came back to practice in Cody, Wyoming, and then after a while he just dropped out. Lynn Ketchum you probably caught up with; he was a plastic surgeon at the University of Kansas in Kansas City. I remember he gave a great talk on doing plastic surgery at the leper colony in Louisiana.

M: I've been in touch with Lynn. He has a web site that implies he may still be in practice. He sent me a very nice email with some information but seems like he may be reluctant to talk for whatever reason.

C: Did Jerry Nelson answer your emails? He is a plastic surgeon in Wichita; we're good friends and we worked together a lot. He has a place in Steamboat and I think he spends his time between Steamboat and Wichita; he's fully retired now.

M: That sounds like a good opportunity to glean some more information.

C: Kevin Ryan was a classmate of mine, he's a radiologist from Davis. He brought a group of Davis guys to join, in fact they were mainly the non-surgeons. There was a hematologist, Bob Edmondson, there was a Japanese-American nephrologist named Hish, and they gradually dropped out. Kevin is retired in California now.

M: You skipped over Glen Nelson. Do recall anything about him?

C: I didn't know Glen really well. He was a cardiothoracic surgeon in Minneapolis, and later worked for Medtronic Corporation.

M: Actually, I believe he was a general surgeon who later became Vice-Chairman of Medtronic, so had quite a career with them and did have a lot to do with cardiac medical products.

C: He and his wife, they were really, really nice people. But I'll tell you, every time they came skiing they had the best equipment, the newest of clothing, if there were some new bindings they would have them, the best skis. They were a grand, well-dressed couple and they were good skiers, too.

M: I appreciate your giving me so much of your time; hopefully you'll get to the golf course this afternoon

C: Well, it's colder than hell here today! I do have a record of playing golf every month year-round since we moved here to Wichita, so we do play in cold weather but not if it's below 42 degrees. I'll tell you something, when you reach your 80's travel is a pain in the ass...Send my regards, I still know a number of people, but 90-95% of the members I don't know.

M: Well, they will know you because we are making a point of bringing our history to the attention of this group. You could send a congratulatory note, we could make it a part of the program. We will be soliciting what we call "WTA Moments", funny or poignant anecdotes that have to do with membership in this organization; everyone's got one or two.

C: Alright, I'll tell you one that I wasn't going to tell you. I can't remember, but I think it was soon after the Moore brothers joined. I don't know if you knew them when they were younger, but they were pretty active members and they liked to party.

M: Many WTA members have Moore brothers stories, particularly those around in the earlier years of the Moores' participation!

C: We had a Japanese-American girl who was the wife of a member from Davis. This tiny little girl could chug, chug-a-lug beer, and they used to have parties in the evenings. And the rumor was that this little girl drank the Moore brothers under the table.

M: That's the kind of anecdote that fits right in, but you wouldn't want to identify anyone by name! That's probably a good way to conclude our interview, I appreciate your bringing it up...I'm glad to talk to you again and we'll be in touch.