

Interview With William R. Hamsa, Jr., MD
3rd WTA President, 1973-74
4/30/2019

Mark Metzdorff: Perhaps you'd like to start by giving me your recollections of the early years of the WTA.

Bill Hamsa: I'll give you a little about the start of it, but as for later years, well as you get a little older you stop skiing, and I eventually dropped out. Originally Bob Volz and I were down at Brooke Army Medical Center on Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. We were taking a mass casualty course, learning about ballistic wounds in gelatin blocks and live animals and the like. One evening we were in the bar talking and we realized we both liked to ski, we should consider starting a medical education group focused on trauma that met at a ski resort. We said, alright let's give it a try. We kind of put it together, Peter Teal was in there as well. We decided that we wanted to have equal representation of a broad spectrum of medical specialists with an interest in trauma, from across the country so no one specialty or area of the country could dominate. Although the trauma course was the initial spark for the idea, what really drove the process of putting together a group was that we were all from Omaha. It then started to grow. We chose Vail for the first meeting and I think the second one, because we wanted a location that was convenient and that people could drive to. For a meeting room we just rented a space from the hotel. We had the meeting in the morning and skied in the afternoon. Eventually it grew quite a bit, but I didn't participate once I quit skiing.

M: Where do you live now?

B: I was married for 61 years, and after my wife developed Alzheimer's and sadly passed away, I was lucky enough to cross tracks with a young lady who likes antiques, which is people like me, and I live in Kearny, Nebraska. I'm as happy a guy as you could ever be, I'm 85 and I've got no complaints about anything.

M: That's fantastic. You were an orthopedic surgeon, is that right?

B: Right.

M: Can you tell me a little bit about your career?

B: I grew up in an orthopedic family, my father was a professor at the University of Nebraska. I took my general surgery training at the University of Nebraska, then went down to Memphis to the Campbell Clinic for orthopedic training. When the Berry Plan put me in the Air Force I was the orthopedic surgeon for a number of bases around the Southwest, including Edwards AFB which was very interesting and gave me a strong inclination towards aviation. In 1963 I returned to Omaha to join my father's group and was in practice there until I retired. I was in private practice but also taught at the University for about 20 years. Several of us started the orthopedic residency there. Although the major residencies--general surgery, internal medicine--had full time faculty, the

rest of the specialties were staffed by part time people. I think there were 12 orthopods in Omaha when I first came back there, in about 1964-5. Now there's so many you can't count them, though interestingly enough, the population is about the same. I taught for 20 years, then practiced there until I was 70, then went on from there with my life. Each day's an adventure and something to be happy about, to be here.

M: As historian, I'm still very active in the WTA, still ski a lot and go to the meetings, and am taking a role in the celebration in the 50th Anniversary celebration next year. I've told you I've spoken with Bob Volz and Peter Teal. Were you friends with Peter as well?

B: We went to high school together. Benson High School, Omaha. The world was flat and there was no penicillin.

M: There are a lot of boyhood connections in this whole WTA founding.

B: Actually Volz was also in Omaha earlier. As we put the initial organization together, there was a general surgeon from Cody, Wyoming and there was also a plastic surgeon from Kansas that we added in. But as I mentioned, we didn't want any specialty or region to monopolize it. I don't know how it's gone on since then, but we had divided up the country, drew lines, you can't have a whole bunch of OB-GYNs here and not any somewhere else. You had to give a paper, once a year. Did they mention a guy by the name of Bill Karrer? Bill kind of fit in, he was also from Nebraska. But the idea was to keep it diversified, and you had to be boarded. I don't know what they've done with that.

M: What was Bill's role?

B: He was a WTA member. His son was one of the best students I ever had. He's a liver transplant surgeon at the University of Colorado, Denver.

M: Was his name Fred or Fritz Karrer?

B: That's him.

M: He's a current member of the WTA. I'm interested to hear more about how you contributed to the initial organization of the WTA. We're trying to memorialize this as best we can before it's completely lost. Unfortunately, many of the early presidents are no longer with us, but at five of the first six are and so I wanted to get you on the record.

B: Well, it was basically built around, you might not want to publish this, but it was designed to allow some continuing education with skiing so that expenses could be written off.

M: Well, that goes without saying. People are still writing off their expenses, but it has evolved into a very academic organization, with 35 papers published each year in the Journal of Trauma, and so it's legitimate.

B: For the first two or three meetings, I solicited and collected the presentations, put the program together and my wife helped prepare the handouts for the meeting. It was always a dogfight to get people to send in papers. Just send in something! I think the program was for about three days. I can't recall any of the original papers, but it was always pretty good. And of course, everybody was eager to get done and then get out to go skiing.

M: Well that still holds true today. Do you remember anything more about the first few meetings, what was done, the program, the social program?

B: There couldn't have been more than 20 of us at the first meeting in Vail. Everybody that came presented a paper, as I recall. Our meeting process was very informal, compared with where you all are now. Presentations were mostly personal experience, and many were conservative treatment. Kent Peterson presented a paper on closed treatment of Achilles tendon tear. Nobody would do that now, but we sometimes did it and it worked. He also presented a paper on a personal series of 2 or 3 patients who died of pulmonary embolism. I kept a record of the program as a back-up in case we ever got challenged by the IRS, of course we never got challenged. There wasn't much of a social program. The social part of the group was that we were all together; we coordinated who was going to carry the knapsack with all the wine bottles for our gathering on the hill at lunchtime!

M: Were there any organized activities on the slopes?

B: There was Nastar. It wasn't an organized thing but we just got together and did it.

M: How did you become president?

B: Default. Everybody kind of fit in. I was active in it probably 10,15 years but that goes pretty fast.

M: Your meeting in 1974 was at Aspen.

B: I think we were in Snowmass. It was a lot of fun at the time.

M: Why did you choose Aspen?

B: I chose Snowmass for a change; it was close and a lot of the people were still driving to the meeting..

M: In 1975 the meeting was at Sun Valley, which is where we'll be for the 50th Anniversary.

B: I remember that place--there was a run on the north side of that valley called Green Lantern or something like that, down underneath the lift that was a nightmare.

M: Did you do the program at your meeting, or any other highlights that you recall from your meeting?

B: No, just had to make sure everyone was happy. We made a point, when we started out, everyone had to present a paper. We had to turn the screws to get the papers in. If you didn't give it, you weren't going to be a member.

M: Was your family in attendance?

B: My wife skied with me; my kids were always way too small. Family and children were not a big part of the first few years, we were all young, just getting our practices started. Spouses were there of course.

M: Did you give a presidential address?

B: Back then I think that would have seemed a lot like elitism, a little bit of BS. We did have guest speakers present topics of interest. One was a plastic or maxillofacial surgeon, who presented a program on Apert's syndrome, about the surgical procedures the patients went through with all the specialties involved; it took a day or a day and a half to do the surgery, change the skull and bring the eyes closer together. I remember, he started the presentation by saying he was so happy to be there and present his topic but wanted to put things in perspective. He said his ancestors were all Inca, and 2000 years ago they had an alphabet, a calendar, understood the movements of the stars and planets; and he pointed out that up in the north our ancestors were running around with loincloths and spears! I remember in his talk he said that one of their big problems in these long procedures was keeping track of blood loss and fluid replacement. I was quite astounded by the problems they ran into and how they had to handle them.

M: That's interesting. The tradition of presentations by special speakers continues in the WTA today, and the multi-specialty nature of the corrective surgery for Apert's syndrome reflects the concept of the multispecialty nature of the WTA. Do you remember anything else about putting the program together?

B: We were always pleading for papers. You were generally looking for a friend or colleague to pitch in. I brought in one of my friends, now a retired orthopedic surgeon from Washington, DC, Kent Peterson.

M: That's how I became involved.

B: Still, we were really small for a number of years, and I can't remember a lot of details. Bob Volz hung on for a long time, I think.

M: He's continued to be involved through the years, was at the last Vail meeting, endowed a lecture that brings in a basic scientist to speak to us every year. He's very interested in this 50th Anniversary celebration and he and Peter are still frequently in touch. Do you recall when you stopped being involved with the WTA?

B: Honestly no, but after skiing was no longer in the picture, I drifted into a love that I had since childhood and that was aircraft. I built one, had it in the living room for a number of years because

that was the only room large enough for the project. It was an aerobatic aircraft called a Christen Eagle. Later I also got into soaring, sailplaning and that just devoured me for about 20 years.

M: Congratulations on surviving all that--you must have been a good pilot and a safe one.

B: In the current WTA, you said you have about 300 members?

M: I believe around 300 all in, and we get around 600 attendees at the annual meeting including non-members, spouses and families. The tradition of family involvement is strong. My son grew up in the WTA and cherishes the memories over the years, still comes to ski with us at age 27.

B: Originally, that really wasn't part of our concept, we never really thought of it. Our concern was having a meeting nearby, picking Colorado because it was within driving distance of the center of the country. No one had any objections to family coming, but if later you turned it around and encouraged families, that was certainly kind of nice.

M: And, I think a few early members may have had condos at Vail, that helped too.

B: Well, they didn't then. I'll tell you a little story about Vail. When we first were there, for \$10,000 you could get two lifetime lift tickets and an acre of land at the base of the lift at Lionshead. All that was there was Pepi's Grammshamer Gasthaus and the clock tower and that was about it. For 10 grand I said to my wife this would be great, but she said Bill, we have 3 daughters to educate. Ships in the night!

M: Well, there are many things we might wish we had done differently, but life turns out the way it does.

B: I have no complaints in my life, none. I've enjoyed my life.

M: Well, I think I've taken enough of your time, so thanks for speaking with me.

B: You're welcome, and thanks for taking an interest. Say hello to Bob and Peter when you see them.

M: I will, I'm sure I'll be in touch with them as the year progresses.