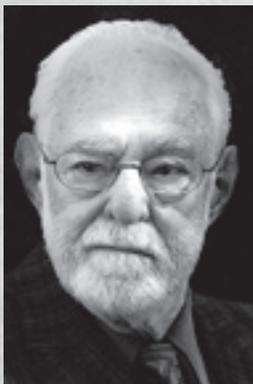


## Celebrating 75 Years of PSA

Dedicated to the memory of longtime  
PSA Historian, Tony Patti, Hon PSA, FPSA



Dr. Ralph E. Venk,  
Hon. FPSA

## The Move from Philadelphia to Oklahoma City (A first-hand account)

Dr. Ralph E. Venk, Hon. FPSA

First some personal background: I retired in 1985 after 35 years of dental practice in Oklahoma City. Although my interest in photography started when I was 12 years old, it wasn't until several years after starting my dentist practice that I became a member of the Oklahoma Camera Club and the Photographic Society of America (PSA) in 1959. After holding several PSA committee positions, I served on the Executive Committee (ExCom) as Conventions Vice President for eight years until 1981. Generally the ExCom met twice a year; once at the yearly Convention (now called a Conference) and the other at various locations around the country. One of these meeting places was in a hotel located some distance from PSA Headquarters in Philadelphia. **Dr. Owen Berg, FPSA**, and I walked at lunchtime to the Walnut Street building, which was a converted 4 story townhouse and had a quick tour of the office area and met a few of the employees.

In 1986, a year after retiring from my dental practice, PSA President **Dr Paul Luebke, FPSA**, asked me to consider filling the position of Executive Vice President: a position that has traditionally been the stepping-stone to the Presidency. **Earnie Wells, FPSA**, the then Executive VP, for personal reasons did not wish to assume that responsibility. After a day or so of family discussion, I became PSA's Executive VP.

That meant that during the next year, Paul and I spent a lot of time in Philadelphia working on a great deal of unfinished business and trying to bring PSA into the computer generation, which we did in spite of a lot of resistance from the employees. Since the Walnut Street address was on the edge of the downtown area, there were no reasonably priced hotels or parking lots nearby. For several of the nights we spent in Philadelphia, Paul slept on a cot and I had an air mattress on the

floor of the main office area of the building. We spent long days with dinner being a beer and a Philly Cheese Steak just before the closing time (12PM) of the tavern around the corner. There were several of these sojourns to headquarters with Paul. There was a lot to be desired at the office of PSA: the building was sadly in need of better maintenance and a lot of the records were in disarray. We met on one occasion with a recommended real estate broker wondering about a possible location change in Philadelphia and came away discouraged about the prospects.

The building was a townhouse, formerly a residence and possibly built by John Wannamaker, the founder of the first American department store, which is still in existence today in Philadelphia. It was less than 20 feet wide, but very long from front to back with four stories and a basement. The first and second floors were the office area, with the remaining areas mostly unmaintained and used for storage and there was a LOT of that as very little of anything was ever thrown away. The back area of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor had broken windows and there were pigeons nesting and leaving droppings in that room.

I became president of PSA at the Convention in Long Beach, California in Sept 1987. There were again trips to Philly and on occasion, my wife Georgia shared the air mattress on the office floor. There were long days of trying to make sense of the disaster. One of the worst things I inherited was the realization that the auditor had been closing each year's financial report for a number of years, with the statement, "The Society was in danger of not being able to continue as a going concern."

Following the Long Beach Convention we had a weeklong meeting of the finance committee at headquarters. The finance committee was composed of the Executive VP, **Edwin Erickson**,



PSA Headquarters,  
Philadelphia

**FPSA**; the Secretary, **Nita Clark, APSA**; the Treasurer, **Jean Thomson, APSA**; and myself. We were together for a number of long days and we were becoming very discouraged about a lot of things. It culminated with my having to make a decision: “Do we stay with a sinking ship, or do we do something drastic?” I chose drastic. That night I contacted almost all of the members of the ExCom to inform them of the situation. **The response was uniform—“Let’s save PSA.”** The decision was made and PSA was on its way to Oklahoma City.

It was a lot of work but PSAers literally came out of the woodwork to help. The last day of the Philadelphia operation was in late January and within a few days, we had a functioning headquarters in Oklahoma City. A moving van was filled to capacity, and making several trips with a truck got all that was important to the new location. Just to mention a few of the names besides the members of the finance committee: **George Bebout, Larry Gray, Tony Patti** and about a dozen of the *Oklahoma Camera Club* (OCC) members spent countless hours unloading, arranging, repairing and just generally doing whatever was needed. I remember on my next to last trip to Philly I brought the computer in the back seat of my car, wrapped in a sleeping bag and a blanket and seat belted to protect the valuable membership records. I drove very carefully to avoid sudden shocks to the hard drive! Once in Oklahoma City, there was a VAST amount of cleaning of literally everything brought from Philly. Georgia literally spent hours just getting one year’s worth of accumulated grime off of the computer and keyboard.

The Permanent Print Collection had been stored in a closet in Philly on the third floor. All the prints were in a large print shipping cases—the kind that could hold about 50 mounted prints. The cases were stacked one atop the others and although there was a catalogue, if you wanted to select a specific print, it meant moving and going through the cases one at a time.

After the move to Oklahoma we got the go-ahead from Jean Thomson to build a number of vertical print storage cases and today the prints are all stored vertically, easily accessible and catalogued thanks to the help of OCC members. Just recently all the prints have been copied digitally and the collection is now catalogued on 7 CDs and there have been several programs

developed by the Pictorial Print Division and shown at the annual conferences.

So, it was a major effort with a lot of dedicated helpers to make the move, and the best part of all was the next annual report from the new auditors in Oklahoma City no longer mentioned that “going concern” in the yearly report. PSA had been saved.

After the move, at the first ExCom meeting in the new facility in OKC, I made the strong plea that the ExCom meet each year at the headquarters facility. That has happened every year since 1982 and now we can be proud of our headquarters operation. ■

## Historical Vignette: *Some Things Never Change...*

### **Creative pictures:**

“For the first time, there was an opportunity for individual expression...Of course, the mania for “doctored” pictures went far and beyond the intentions of the original advocates until pictorially a good picture came to be one that looked the least like a photograph of technical excellence.”

*Hillary Bailey, PSA Journal June 1934*

In a 1940 *Journal*, Dr. Max Thorek wrote “Insanity in Art,” decrying tastelessness in art and photography and received a stinging rebuke from the Librarian of the New York Museum for Modern Art, who rebuked Dr. Thorek’s, “hasty judgment and intolerance.”

*Mary Ellen Brucker, FPSA, PSA Journal 1994*

### **Judging:**

In a long letter in 1940 to the *Journal* editor Stanley Katcher asked, “Why should there be judges in photography?” The only test is “Would the maker hang a print in his living room.”

*Mary Ellen Brucker, FPSA, PSA Journal 1994*

“**The Journal has been late** the past few months – as a great many members have written to tell us.”

*PSA Journal 1969.*

### **Yes Indeed, Some Things Never Change...**

*Elena McTighe  
Publications Vice President*