When and Where to Meet and Now How to Meet: A Constant Subject of PBA Debate

For the first time in its history, the Pennsylvania Bar Association held no face-to-face events for its 2020 Annual Meeting. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its many health and safety concerns, the Board of Governors and the House of Delegates meetings were held online. The vast majority of associated meetings also were held virtually, postponed or canceled.

All this is a huge departure from the PBA tradition of Annual Meetings incorporating spirited social events, dignified award presentations and often elaborate dinner meals and dances.

The Pennsylvania Bar Association has a long association with the Bedford Springs Hotel, now known as the Omni Bedford Springs Resort.

The association’s first meeting was held there on July 10 and 11, 1895. For the next 50 years, two-thirds of the PBA Annual Meetings were held at Bedford Springs. Other early locations in the mix included Cresson, Delaware Water Gap and Cambridge Springs.

Historian Henry Thomas Dolan noted these and other additional sites were selected but not without considerable debate and sometimes sarcastic remarks. Dolan wrote, “On site selection of early Annual Meetings: Hopes were audibly breathed that if the choice were to be Reading, the proceedings would be conducted in English, not German.” Of other suggested meeting locations, “Decent drinking water was apparently a stout claim to fame” for Reading and Wilkes-Barre but “caustic comments were uttered and faithfully transcribed as to how few of the membership drank much water.”

The balance of business and social aspects of association meetings were much deliberated.

In 1900 and every year thereafter, “the ladies of the members were invited to attend,” Dolan wrote. Recreational activities and meals were meant to impress. The 10th Annual Banquet held June 30, 1904, at the Hotel Stockton in Cape May, New Jersey, included oysters, green turtle soup, filet of sole, roast tenderloin of beef with mushrooms, sweetbreads, cakes, fruits and more.

In 1908, the Annual Meeting made another stop in New Jersey. “The rates at the Hotel Cape May were $3 per person per day, with all meals included, even the banquet. Champagne wines were not to exceed $3.50 per quart bottle. But Champagne wines and all such waters of life vanished from the scene” during Prohibition, which stretched from 1920 to 1933.

“The 1914 Annual Meeting was held at Erie, with the attractions of the lake for recreation. Members and their ladies were offered the choice of a cruise on the water or an automobile ride. They provided not inconsiderable diversions; the meeting was the only one in which complaints were loud and clear of the work on the floor being neglected by large numbers of the junketing brethren.”

“The timing, locations and purposes of the Annual Meeting and the Midyear Meeting were changed and changed again throughout the decades. Dolan wrote concentrated thought was given the proper balance of the business vs. social aspects of PBA meetings in the late 1940s. “What was the right relationship of the mid-winter meeting to the annual meeting, and what was the annual meeting, and what was to be the location of the mid-winter meeting? Hard study had been given by a 1949 committee to the idea of different months of the year for each meeting, May or July for the annual pilgrimage, November for the interim gathering, but January and June had proved the practical and enduring choices. Still what one meeting should be to the other had to be determined, because the Association was athrob with life … (and the PBA’s) concerns and activities was tumbling its plenty out in ever greater measure.”

Dolan says the “suitability of Bedford Springs as a location for the Annual Meeting was made a question frankly faced and thoroughly debated in 1952. That year’s annual meeting was at the Essex and Sussex Hotel, Spring Lake, New Jersey, an establishment and location with which the Association was to have eventually a love affair rivalling the earlier one with Bedford Springs.”

“In 1955, the Association voted to move its annual meeting to mid-winter, hold elections and decide on plans for the year’s work at that time, and convene this gathering in successive years at Philadelphia, Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. The summer meeting was to be of secondary importance … (with) recreation provided in liberal measure,” Dolan wrote.

This approach was eventually abandoned. The current scheduling of the Annual Meeting in May and the Midyear Meeting being held in January has been in practice for at least several decades. The Annual Meeting generally includes CLE sessions and meetings of both the Board of Governors and the House of Delegates. The Midyear Meeting in late January generally includes CLE sessions and a Board meeting. The shifting of locations for the Annual Meeting generally follows this pattern: a meeting in the central region of the state, a meeting in the western region, back to a meeting in the central region, a meeting in the eastern region and then a repeat of the pattern. The location of the Midyear Meeting changes often, but warm and tropical locales have been the prevailing preference.

More time will be needed to tell whether there will be long-term impacts on the future of the PBA’s face-to-face meetings because of lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis.