



Benefits That Keep on Giving

Reminiscing after 50 years of membership

BY JERRY L. HIGGINS, SR/WA (RETIRED)

In 2015, I was recognized as a 50-year member of IRWA Carolinas Chapter 31. Reflecting back, I've noticed a few things have changed. When I joined the Association in 1965, there were no female members (Carolinas Chapter 31 did have a women's auxiliary), and there were just a few minority members. Relocation assistance was not even a component of the profession. But change was on the way. Through shared interests and a desire for growth, the American Right of Way Association became the International Right of Way Association. There was no looking back.

When I graduated from college in 1965, I was hired as a Right of Way Agent by the North Carolina State Highway Commission (now the Department of Transportation). My initial training was tagging along with a seasoned agent for about six weeks. There was no formal training program for right of way agents with the agency, so the late Hilton Eades decided to start one. Hilton advised me to join the Association because it would benefit

my career. So I joined, and he was quite correct. I soon earned my SR/WA designation, and in 1974, I was named Chapter 31's Right of Way Professional of the Year.

In those early years, right of way was a small part of the budget for most public works projects. Project managers considered right of way acquisition a necessary nuisance in order to get to the glory work of building the interstate highway or constructing towering transmission lines. However, as time passed, landowners became more aware of the value of their property rights and more sophisticated in dealing with the acquiring authority. As land acquisition became more expensive, it not only became a larger part of the project budget, it also became much more difficult. If right of way could not be acquired in a timely fashion, projects could be delayed. The challenges increased if condemnation became necessary. Acquisition agents soon became much more integral to a project's success.

When I retired in 2001, I decided to retain my membership status, and I've kept informed via Right of Way Magazine. All those years as a member really did help me. The major benefits are obvious, like being an SR/WA and having access to continuing education. But there are also the more subtle experiences of social networking and having a forum to discuss right of way issues of mutual interest with other members.

I came out of retirement a few years ago to do a small project near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The pipeline utility informed my friend Monty, who owns a right of way consulting company, that they needed an agent who had to be an IRWA member and available promptly. When he couldn't find an agent who was readily available and a member, Monty called me and I took the job. There were no condemnations. Monty was happy. Christmas was good that year. And applying my years of experience was pretty gratifying.

Fortunately, some things have not changed. Today, acquisition agents are still likely to be the first person a property owner meets, and they need to put their best foot forward. Most landowners have a skeptical frame of mind about any property acquisition, however, this can be placated if a professional agent is involved. Obviously professionalism is the key. How do you get professional right of way land agents? IRWA! Need I say more? 🌟



Jerry Higgins has been an IRWA since 1965. He started his career with the North Carolina Department of Transportation, and retired in 2001 following 30 years with Carolina Power & Light Company. He is a longstanding member of Carolinas Chapter 31.