



THE LONE STAR OF IR “DUBYA” A

BY MARY ANNE MODINA

For 2002-2003 International President Albert Allen, SR/WA, a typical day after the morning's cup of coffee with wife, Debbie, can range from reviewing appraisal reports, inspecting property, to meeting with attorneys, giving testimony, and returning e-mails and phone calls on IRWA business. He also devotes as much as 90 days out of the year traveling to promote the Association. For 30 years, Allen has been an active member of the IRWA. During his tenure with the International Executive Committee, Allen has always recognized and embraced change in our Association and the Right of Way profession – in the way we do business, and in the increased demand for right of way professionals and access to rights of way. Today, most of Allen's energy is spent on increasing the Association's involvement in the marketplace.

Even with fulfilling his commitments with the IRWA and with Allen, Williford & Seale, Inc., a real estate appraisal firm where he has served as principal since 1977 – it's hard to believe Allen still has the time to work out at the gym, or call each of his three children twice a week. “I have to say I reject the notion that an individual in the right of way profession can't have a balanced life in every respect,” Allen says. He takes a right of way moment and shares his viewpoints, his vision and his goals from various perspectives – as the IRWA president, the real estate appraiser, the husband and the father.

How did you get involved in the right of way profession?

A: After I graduated from Texas A&M University, I joined the Army as a second lieutenant and was assigned to the Corps of Engineers (my degree was agriculture economics, the engineers were assigned to the infantry). The Corps of Engineers has a world-wide real estate mission and I was assigned to be a real estate officer in South Vietnam and also in Tulsa, Oklahoma and gained a great deal of right of way experience in both locations. I found the field fascinating and decided to make it a career.

What was the first position you held?

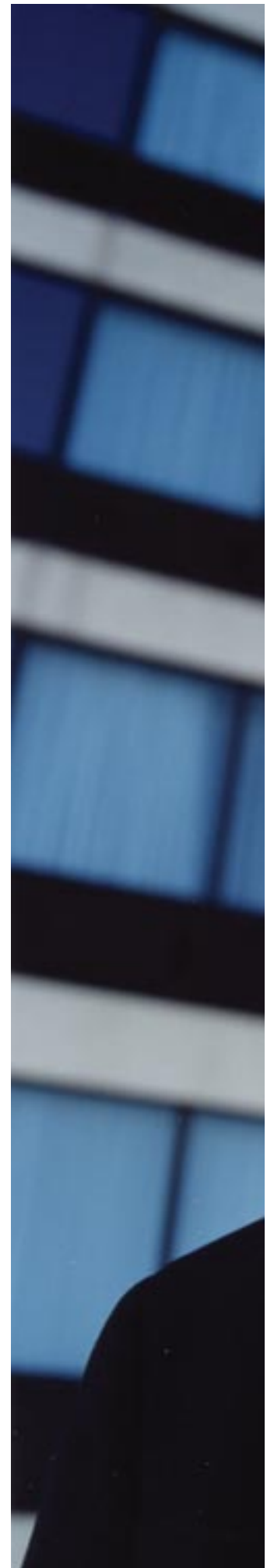
A: When I got out of the Army, I worked for a real estate appraiser in Houston who had developed a significant eminent domain litigation practice and was able to gain a good deal of experience there. My first job in the IRWA was education chairman for Chapter 8 in Houston. Ed Peck had been the chairman for several years and he saw me coming.

What was your most challenging experience as a right of way professional?

A: Testifying in trial. Appraising right of way for eminent domain is an integral part of the job. Just about every time I sit on the witness stand at a trial and offer expert testimony is pretty challenging.

Right of way professionals are often required to relocate to a different city, in a different state, away from their families. How important is “quality time” with family? Do you think this is a major concern in the industry?

A: Of course an individual's family is important and right of way professionals are no different from anyone else in that respect. However, mobility may not be as much of a concern to us as it is to someone outside the profession. John Coates runs an ad that shows an open road somewhere out west from the windshield of a vehicle. The caption reads, “Some people don't want to work in cubicles.” That pretty much sums it up for me and I think I am fairly



Photographs by Margaret M. Sison



Shot on location at Holiday Inn, Torrance, Calif.

typical of the person in right of way. My partner Connie Williford likes to say most of us were “born under a wandering star.” Being cooped up in an office all day doing the same thing over and over would drive me crazy.

How do you propose companies should support personnel with family?

A: I’m not sure that is necessarily the responsibility of any employer. I know of very few right of way professionals who expect the company, or the client, to provide that. Most right of way folks are fairly independent and take care of themselves. Right of way work is a lifestyle and we don’t look for someone to provide the extras that you see in the corporate world.

How have you managed being away from your wife and children? What has helped you overcome the challenges of being apart from your family for a long period of time?

A: My wife is an exceptional person. I can’t imagine anyone being more supportive than she has been. She expects me to be a good husband and father, and if work gets in the way or if I need to be home, she tells me. She doesn’t tell me often but when she does, I listen. I have almost always been at our children’s functions even if I had to fly home from a project.

What would you say to a right of way professional of your company who wants time off to be with family, in the middle of a project?

A: I would say “Make sure the appraisals are done right and get turned in on time and you can pretty much come and go as you want.” Right of way projects are very much an ad hoc type of activity and the 40-hour week is the exception rather than the rule. When you do project work you finish the job and then take a break. One of the things I like best about right of way work is that it isn’t tied to the five-day a week routine. When you think about it, the right of way person often has a more flexible lifestyle than the typical employee.

What led you to join the IRWA?

A: I attended some luncheon meetings at Chapter 8 and liked the people. John Nicholson, a stalwart in our local chapter, encouraged me to take some classes. He also drove me up to College Station to a Region 2 meeting and that made me feel very welcome. That was around 1978 and we had around 40 people at the meeting. Region 2 now has a four-day forum with 300 folks in attendance.

Why did you decide to run for office?

A: I was intrigued by the potential of personal leadership development. As it turned out that has been a great part of the job. I would encourage anyone to become active if for no other reason than that.

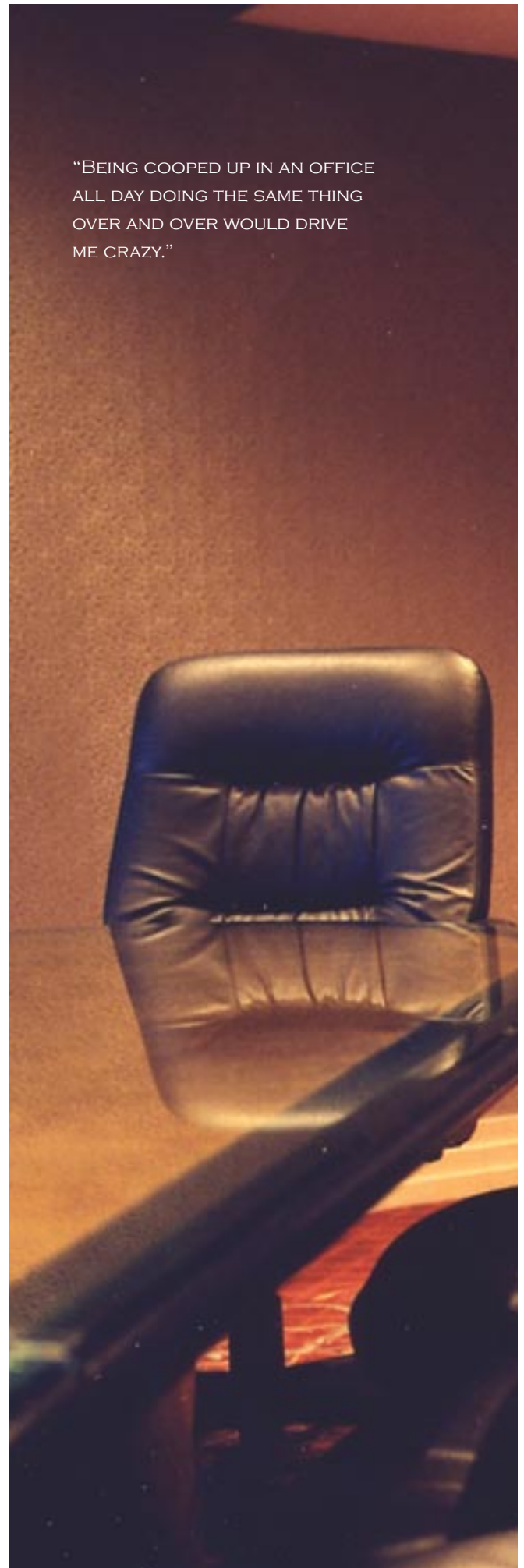
How do you think your term, as 2002-2003 president, will differ from your predecessors?

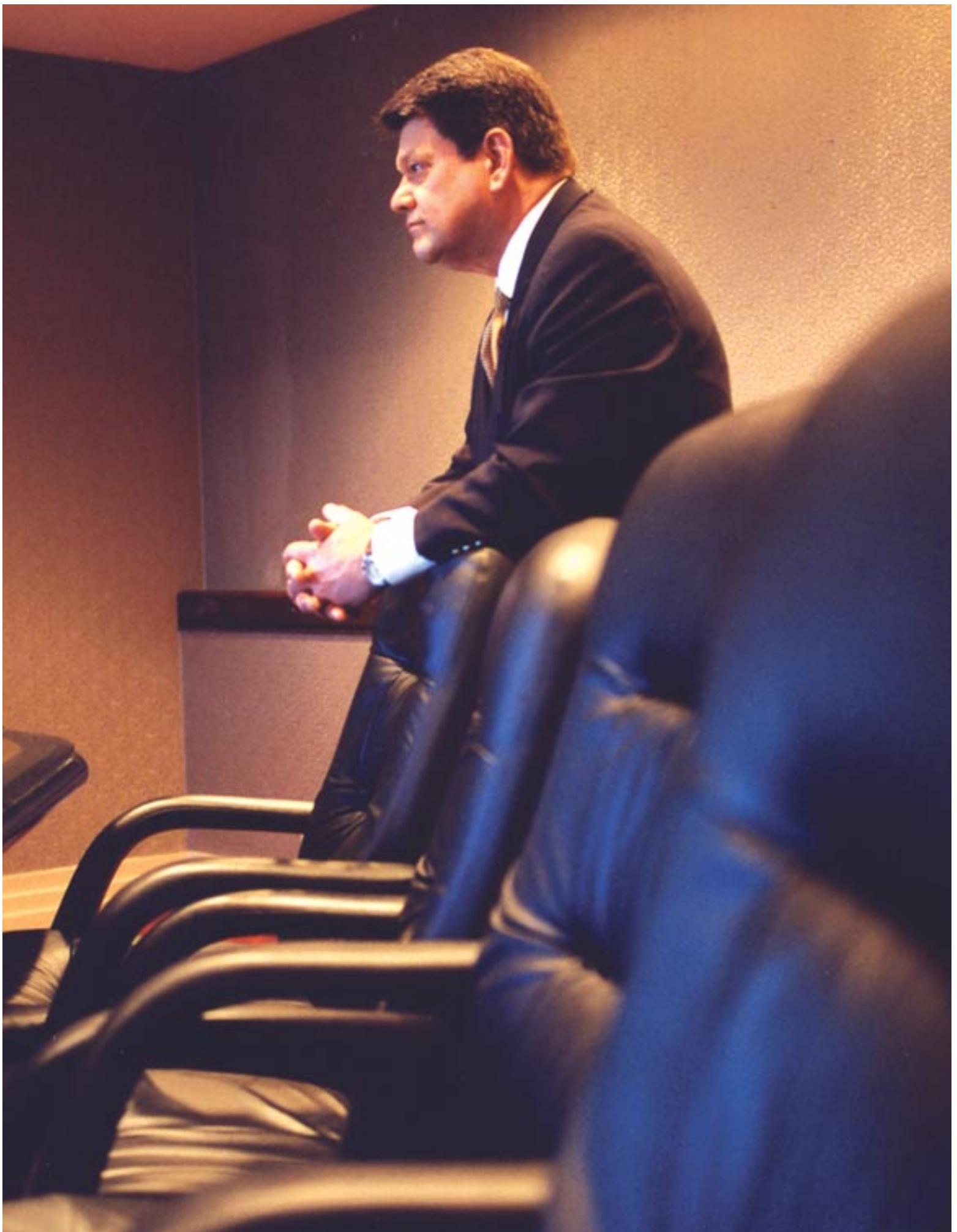
A: I will end up spending more time than past presidents actively marketing the IRWA to other groups, government agencies and corporations. This won’t be unique to me though because I see that as a trend for future presidents as well. Everyone on the IEC today is generally agreed that outreach is probably a better use of our time than administration.

What is your primary role as principal of Allen, Williford & Seale, Inc.? What do you enjoy most about your profession?

A: I am a real estate appraiser by profession and my specialty is eminent domain litigation. Most of my time at AWS is spent on court preparation and testimony. I enjoy the variety in my work. There is always something different. I like to travel, I enjoy inspecting property, and presentation of my value opinions is always a challenge. But the thing I enjoy most is being around our staff. We hire directly out of college and it is great to work with young enthusiastic people.

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You manage a staff of about 30 employees, yet you also volunteer as president of an Association of over 10,000 members. How do you manage both? What are some of the challenges you face both in your profession and in your obligations to the Association?

A: I am fortunate in that my partners, Connie Williford and Randy Seale, have been very understanding. Both of these men are long-time leaders in the Association and are very supportive. It would be physically (and fiscally) impossible for me to serve as president of the IRWA without them giving me some relief of my duties at AWS.

What do you think is the Association's untapped resource(s)?

A: There are an awful lot of people involved in right of way that are not members of the IRWA. Most of their bosses aren't either. I would like to see a structured, focused effort on our part to catalog the major right of way organizations in North America and then contact their managers regarding the great opportunities our Association offers. We have never launched a serious, comprehensive marketing program to attract these people.

If you had the opportunity, what single position at headquarters would you initiate or change?

A: I would establish a position that deals exclusively with chapters and regions. This individual would receive all phone calls regarding governance questions. They would keep copies of all charters, bylaws, etc. They would help organize regional forums. This person would be mobile and available to travel to a chapter. Finally, they could coordinate membership questions.

The Association's demographics indicate that the Right of Way profession is getting younger. How will the leadership appeal to these "young" potential leaders?

A: I'm not sure about that demographic. In any event we probably don't know how to appeal to them. We need young people to tell us how to evolve. We really need to seek out young people for our profession; they are not going to just join up on their own. The folks we are looking for are probably not members. We should locate bright young people anywhere in the infrastructure industry and invite them to special forums featuring other people their own age. I think we made a mistake when we changed the name of the Young Leadership Council to the Leadership Development Council. The point of the original group was to attract young people. Kerry Stackpole has turned me onto some literature regarding young people and their opinions about association membership. Associations are really a community and young people want different things from a community than the generations preceding them.

Based on a recent survey we conducted, the right of way profession is mostly a male-dominated industry. How can we attract more women to enter this profession?


A: I honestly don't think this is a problem in our profession. I checked with our membership department and they tell me that more than 35 percent of our members are women. With each passing year I notice more women in our ranks. I suspect the same things that attract men; a chance to develop professionally, leadership opportunities and the potential to make a good living attract women. Our Association offers these opportunities to anyone. I guess that is the pitch I would make to women, if you believe you need an edge, then the IRWA is the place to get it.

As you look ahead to the future of the profession and the Association, what strategic initiatives do we need to take?

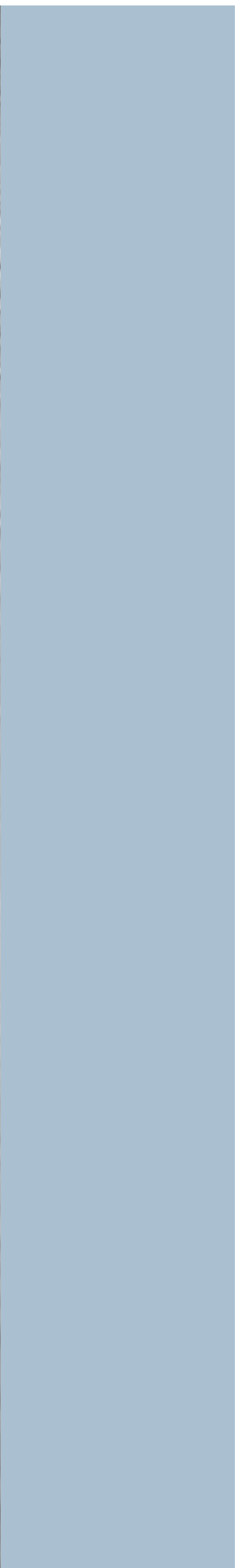
A: We have already begun that initiative. It is the development of relationships with the various federal (both American and Canadian) agencies that have a right of way function. We have made significant strides forward in this area in the last two years. Ideally, we will have formal agreements with these parties spelling out very specific education and membership relationships. We can best implement these relationships with IEC and ILC members establishing personal contacts and then dedicating a staff person to the follow-up and administration.

The IEC has talked about the Association becoming a clearinghouse of information to our members. What steps do you think we need to take to accomplish this?

A: The leadership for this clearly belongs to the International Liaison Committee. The ILC is made up of representatives from each industry committee and this is the logical place for the information to come from. Additionally, I would like to see a staff person dedicated to the clearinghouse function and to act as the focal point for the various committees to channel information through. We will need to market this capacity to the outside world. In order to do this, we have to be able to store electronically any document that's out there. That sounds mundane but we're not there yet.



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How can the Association best serve its members?

A: Better education. We should provide more courses and information, on more topics, in more ways than we have in the past. In the final analysis we sell education. I would like to see more training for our instructors. I would also like to continuously look for new instructors. Both our material and our delivery need to be fresh in order to be relevant.

If you had to recommend one class to any right of way professional, which would it be? Why?

A: The pipeline course we have on CD. It's easy to watch, you don't have to travel to a location to take it, and there is an enormous amount of basic content packed into it. While I'm on that topic, let me say that that course would never have been developed without the efforts of David Sinclair, SR/WA. He conceived it, found the financing for it and pushed it through. It was a significant achievement.

You have volunteered a lot of your time to the Association over the years, what has been most rewarding for you as a long-term leader of the Association?

A: That's easy. Some of the best times of my life have been teaching right of way courses. I have made some life-long friends at classes across the United States and Canada.

What do you think the future of rights of way and the right of way profession will be?

A: There is going to be increasing demand for right of way. It will be harder to put together new rights of way because of various environmental and political concerns and accordingly existing rights of way will be under more pressure. I think we will see rights of way become very real assets as opposed to an operations problem. Reasons for eminent domain will increase. We already see local government using that power to acquire land for redevelopment and ultimately an increase in the tax base. At some point we will see resistance from the public for using eminent domain for social and political purposes.

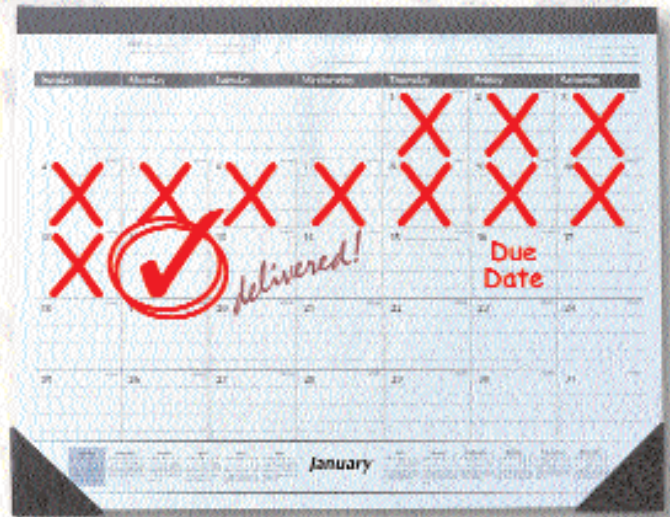
What will life be like after being president of the IRWA? What are your plans after June 2003?

A: Last year the IEC reorganized the ILC and the immediate past president chairs that committee. I think that is a good way to ease out of service. Teaching is great and I hope to do that as long I can. I enjoy appraising and really don't expect to ever completely retire from it. And all of that is really code for my wife won't let me stay around the house.

AND, the clincher ...

What do you do with your old issues of the magazine?

A: We (at AWS) put them in three ring binders and keep them in our library. They are used constantly by our appraisers for reference. We have just about every issue over the last 25 years but somehow the one with Alan Wurtz's picture on the cover got lost. I don't know what happened to that one. ♦



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