

# A History of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association

## Based on the Writings of Bernie Spilka, Ludy Benjamin, and Rick Miller

### The Early Years: 1930 - 1940

The Rocky Mountain Psychological Association developed from a core group of behavioral psychologists who affiliated with the American Psychological Association in 1930. The Rocky Mountain Branch (RMB) of APA was one of the first two regional associations to be established. The first president of RMB was Lawrence W. Cole, chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Colorado. Members of the organization were oriented toward scientific objectivity, focusing on measurement and classical learning research. Notable psychologists in the organization included:

- Thomas Garth of University of Denver—cross-cultural research
- Karl Muenzinger of University of Colorado—classical learning theory

The first meeting, held in 1930 featured 15 papers with participation from faculty the University of Colorado, Colorado Agricultural College (now CSU), University of Wyoming, University of Denver, and Colorado State Teachers College (now University of Northern Colorado). In 1934 faculty from Colorado College began to participate and in 1936, papers from outside the region were first presented including presentations from Western Reserve, Ohio State, University of Cincinnati, Columbia, and the University of Minnesota.

In the early years, association and convention expenses were minimal. Meetings were held in Denver or Boulder, with occasional gatherings in Greeley or Fort Collins. Meetings were held at the University infrequently, since the pavement ended at Fort Collins, leaving about sixty-five miles of gravel and dirt to reach Laramie. Early in the organization, graduate students were brought into the conventions to encourage intellectual stimulation and professional socialization.

In 1938 members of the organization sent a resolution to the International Congress of Psychology. RMB requested that the meeting of the congress be moved from Vienna, which had been taken over by Hitler, “to some other city where academic freedom is still a reality.

### 1940 - 1960

Through WWII, RMB remained small and confined to Colorado and Wyoming. No meetings were held from November 1941 to October 1944 due to “wartime stringency and restrictions on travel.” In 1941, the association had reached its highest membership of thirty-three but by 1944 was down to fifteen members. The treasury varied from about \$1.00 to a high of \$10.00 in 1945.

By 1947, membership climbed to forty-nine with an increase in participation from Wyoming and a new member from New Mexico. Lillian Portenier, University of Wyoming, became President in 1948. In 1949, three representatives from New Mexico presented papers. In 1950 the usual program of five to ten papers expanded to eighteen, attendance reached 102, including psychologists from New Mexico, Utah and Montana. In 1953, Ralph Norman, the first president of the association from outside Colorado or Wyoming, held the annual meeting at his institution the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

The twenty-fifth anniversary meeting of RMPA in 1955 was held in Boulder and included a stellar lineup of speakers: Jerome Bruner, Leon Festinger, Fritz Heider, Charles Osgood and David Rapaport. By this time, the organization was officially designated as the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association.

Twenty-four papers and nine symposia were delivered at the 1956 conference held at Grand Teton National Park, with Arthur Melton as the featured speaker. The one hundred attendees represented almost every western state. Membership reached 177 and the treasury held \$300. Over the next four years presentations at conferences increased to fifty papers; membership grew to 300; and the treasury reached \$300. Conferences were held in Salt Lake City, Utah, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Sun Valley, Idaho, Butte, Montana, and Cody, Wyoming.

### 1960 – 1990

By 1965, RMPA had grown considerably. At the conference in Denver, presentations included seventy-nine papers, eleven symposia, forty-one other presentations, and a Professional Development Institute. More than 550 psychologists attended and 135 of those were from outside the Rocky Mountain region. Dr. Harold Hildreth of the National Institute of Mental Health was the featured speaker.

The increase in interest and attendance at RMPA was directly related to the fast growth of universities and colleges in the region and in the increased number of jobs for psychologists. RMPA program chairs were also reaching outside the region for participation in the conferences. From 1964 to 1972, RMPA membership and attendance at the conferences, that rotated among Denver, Salt Lake City, and Albuquerque, grew significantly. In 1967 Bernie Spilka was elected President and presided over the 1968 convention held at the Brown Palace in Denver. Among the participants was Ross Loomis, who later became President of RMPA and Wayne Viney, who was President in 2001. A highlight was the party hosted by Coors.

In early 1970, in response to the trends in society toward social concerns and civil rights, RMPA formally established a committee to deal with groups under-represented in Psychology and funds were provided to minority students wishing to participate in the meetings. By the late 1970s, the role of women in psychology became a focus of the organization. RMPA conference presentations touched on world issues such as rape, abuse, poverty, discrimination, and nuclear war.

In 1974, Nevada and Arizona, formerly members of the Western Psychological Association, were incorporated into the membership of RMPA. The annual conference was held in Las Vegas in 1973, 1979, and in 1984. The annual conference was held in Phoenix in 1976 and in Tucson in 1980 and 1985. The first President from Nevada was Harrie Hess, elected in 1978. The first President from Arizona was Terry Daniel, elected in 1982.

### 1990 – 2015

In 1994, attendance at RMPA doubled from what it had been in the early 1990s, as did the number of invited speakers. The program became more and more populated with student presentations along with distinguished lectures by leaders in the field.

In 1993 and again in 1998, RMPA and WPA held joint conferences, both in the newly added states to RMPA’s territory: Arizona and New Mexico.

In addition to the Distinguished Service Award that was created in 1978, two new awards were added to the list, one for Early Career Achievement and one for Mentoring Student Research. Also, RMPA began to present awards for outstanding student research.

In 2005 the conference changed from its traditional Friday-Sunday format to a Thursday-Saturday format with Thursday afternoon devoted to the newly created Portenier-Wertheimer Teaching Conference as well as a student pre-conference.

Beginning in the new century, RMPA became a venue for interviewing distinguished psychologists. APS held several video-taped interviews with such luminaries as Eliot Aronson and Elizabeth Loftus. Over the years, undergraduate students also conducted interviews that were published in the Journal of Psychological Science with Albert Bandura, Roy Baumeister, Brad Bushman, Daniel Schacter, and Tom Pyszczynski.

In 2005, RMPA celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with displays on the history of the association, and the writings of our early Presidents, a slide show of students who had presented their work at RMPA and now were pursuing careers in psychology, the RMPA Follies, a humorous review of our history, and a past-Presidents tell all panel discussion.

To promote RMPA, the Executive Committee created a list of Institutional Representatives in 2010 that has grown to 60 individuals, representing 54 colleges and universities in 18 States and one Canadian Province.