

Ralph P. Boas, received a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1937, as a student of D. V. Widder. After serving as editor of Mathematical Reviews, he went to Northwestern University in 1950. He has done extensive research in classical analysis and is the author of several books, including Entire Functions and A Primer of Real Functions. He was a recent editor of the American Mathematical Monthly.

Memories of Bygone Meetings

R. P. BOAS

I joined the AMS in 1936 while I was still a student. (My father, who was a professor of English, said that it was a good idea to join one's professional society young and start accumulating its journals. I have long since had to abandon the latter aim.) The Society was remarkably small in comparison with its present size: there were fewer than 2000 members when I joined. The meetings were usually arranged linearly, so that you could attend all the 10 minute talks if you wanted to. Not only that, but many of the most distinguished mathematicians not only went to meetings, but listened to the talks. The *Bulletin* published the names of all the members who had attended each meeting.

The AMS of those days was less tightly organized than it is today. I remember registering at one meeting and overhearing the staff wondering what to do about Norbert Wiener, who hadn't made a room reservation. They decided that they had better hold a room for him; and, sure enough, presently Wiener ambled in.

There are several meetings that I recall vividly, but not because of any exciting mathematics that was announced. It's the amusing happenings that stick in my mind. I was not a really serious mathematician, and I am afraid that I have never really grown up. Many years after the times I am speaking of, I gave a lecture after which someone came up to me and said, "You make mathematics seem like so much fun." I was inspired to reply, "If it isn't fun, why do it?" This is, of course, too quixotic a principle to be tenable today. I recall that once, at a Harvard colloquium, a speaker commented that he had not been very interested in his topic, "but sometimes one has to do some

research.” You could see a collective shudder go through the audience. Times have changed.

I remember a meeting at which P. A. Smith was scheduled to give the after-dinner speech at the banquet. When he was called on, he and his wife got up and played a recorder duet.

I think it was at the Columbus meeting in 1940 that, over lunch, Wiener and Aurel Wintner amused themselves (and me) by inventing titles for articles in a journal to be called *Trivia Mathematica*. Wiener was enormously amused by the results, and insisted on showing them to Tibor Radó, who was well known to have no sense of humor, and was not amused.

The AMS held its fiftieth anniversary meeting in the Fall of 1938. G. D. Birkhoff gave an address on “Fifty years of American mathematics,” and named names. A large segment of the audience sat on the edges of their seats to see if they were going to be mentioned.

There was another meeting in Columbus in 1948. It was very hot in the building. Besicovitch, who remembered me from Cambridge in 1938–1939, approached me and asked anxiously, in his strong Russian accent, “It is all right to take off coat?” I assured him that it was a free country, and of course he could remove his coat if he wished. What I had forgotten was that Besicovitch was there to give an invited address. He did remove his coat, and he had bright red suspenders underneath. I doubt whether anyone would notice that nowadays, but it must have caused a mild sensation. After all, at about the same epoch a now well-known mathematician was rebuked by his chairman for not having shined his shoes.

One reason for going to meetings was that photocopying hadn’t been invented; it was at meetings that one found out what was going on. Not only was there not the modern flow of preprints, but there weren’t as many secretaries in mathematics departments. Somebody must have written the letters when I was young, but I was never aware of the existence of a department secretary anywhere until I reached Northwestern in 1950. If you wanted a manuscript typed you typed it yourself, or paid someone to type it, or got your spouse to type it (if you had a spouse).

*Announcement of the Revival
of a Distinguished Journal*

TRIVIA MATHEMATICA

Founded by Norbert Wiener and Aurel Wintner
in 1939

"Everything is trivial once you know the proof." — D. V. Widder

The first issue of *Trivium Mathematica (Old Series)* was never published. *Trivium Mathematica (New Series)* will be issued continuously in unbounded parts. Contributions may be written in Basic English, English BASIC, Poldavian, Peanese, and/or Ish, and should be directed to the Editors at the Department of Metamathematics, University of the Bad Lands. Contributions will be neither acknowledged, returned, nor published.

The first issue will be dedicated to N. Bourbaki, John Rainwater, Adam Riese, O. P. Lossers, A. C. Zitronenbaum, Anon, and to the memory of T. Radó, who was not amused. It is expected to include the following papers.

On the well-ordering of finite sets.

A Jordan curve passing through no point of any plane.

Fermat's last theorem. I: The case of even primes.

Fermat's last theorem. II: A proof assuming no responsibility.

On the topology im Kleinen of the null circle.

On prime round numbers.

The asymptotic behavior of the coefficients of a polynomial.

The product of large consecutive integers is never a prime.

Certain invariant characterizations of the empty set.

The random walk on one-sided streets.

The statistical independence of the zeros of the exponential function.

Fixed points in theorem space.

On the tritangent planes of the ternary antiseptic.

On the asymptotic distribution of gaps in the proofs of theorems in harmonic analysis.

Proof that every inequation has an unroot.

Sur un continu d'hypothèses qui équivalent à l'hypothèse du continu.

On unprintable propositions.

A momentous problem for monotonous functions.

On the kernels of mathematical nuts.

The impossibility of the proof of the impossibility of a proof.

A sweeping-out process for inexhaustible mathematicians.

On transformations without sense.

The normal distribution of abnormal mathematicians.

The method of steepest descents on weakly bounding bicycles.

Elephantine analysis and Giraffical representation.

The twice-Born approximation.

Pseudoproblems for pseudodifferential operators.

The Editors are pleased to announce that because of a timely subvention from the National Silence Foundation, the first issue will not appear.



Group at the First International Topology Conference
Moscow, September 4–10, 1935