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Society News: Member News

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Eleanor McElwee (1924-2008)

CONTRIBUTED BY ED MALONE

Eleanor McElwee, the woman who founded PCS in 1957, died of cancer on Dec. 11, 2008. She was 84. Before her death, I had the opportunity to correspond with her about her career and the early years of PGEWS. I would like to share some of that information with you now.



Eleanor McElwee as a young woman

After graduating from a private women's college in 1944, with a degree in English, McElwee went to work as a junior engineering assistant at Western Electric in New York City. "There was such a shortage of qualified employees in 1944," McElwee wrote, "that companies were hiring any fairly intelligent live bodies, even women, who might be trainable. I joined two other women there who also had the same title.... our job was to check tube specifications and test data, and generally be go-fers for the engineers."

To strengthen her qualifications for the day job, she took night courses in engineering at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of the Sciences and Arts. "You asked what it was like to be the only woman among a bunch of men. Cooper Union was the only place that I was conscious of being different and out of place. And I could tell the men there felt the same way." She quit after the first year.

Rather than move to Pennsylvania with Western Electric in 1947, McElwee applied for a job at Sylvania in Kew Gardens, New York, and was hired as an engineer. Her job at Sylvania was to determine the reliability of sub-miniature tubes, which were used as

fuses in missiles. She and her colleagues developed an innovative protocol for testing the life expectancy of 5,000-hour tubes in only 500 hours.

In March 1950, McElwee presented a paper about this subject at the National IRE Convention in New York City. That paper, "Statistical Evaluation of Life Expectancy of Vacuum Tubes Designed for Long-Life Operation," was later published in the *Sylvania Technologist* (April 1950) and republished in the *Proceedings of the IRE* (February 1951). It led to her membership in IRE (April 1951) and a transfer to the Sylvania department in charge of writing and editing government contract reports.

When Sylvania announced it was moving to California, McElwee went on the job market again. She saw a newspaper ad for technical editors at Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in Harrison, New Jersey. Ads during this period were divided into male and female sections, and the RCA ad was in the "Help Wanted - Male" section.

"By that time, late 1951, electronics companies had access to a larger pool of employees," McElwee told me, "and were prone to consider women only for clerical positions." Nevertheless, she applied and managed to get an interview. She was offered the job on the basis of her work experience, the paper in the IRE Proceedings, and a letter of recommendation from an IRE Fellow.

At the time, the Commercial Engineering Department at RCA's Harrison plant included two technical writers who specialized in data sheets, and several production people. The only other technical editor was Charles Meyer. At first, McElwee assisted engineers with their papers and application notes and edited the *RCA Receiving Tube Manual*, which had to be updated annually. In later decades, she moved into management, supervising the writing and editing group at the Harrison plant and eventually, the entire Commercial Engineering Department of RCA's Solid State Division in Somerville, New Jersey.

In early 1957, by then a senior member of IRE, McElwee organized a group of her colleagues to discuss the formation of an IRE professional group devoted to engineering communication.

"Too many of us had seen audiences leave in despair before the end of presentations at IRE Conventions because they could neither follow the sense of the speaker's presentation nor read the information on his slides. Most of the 'founders' were involved in some way with the communication of engineering information. Some were technical writers or editors at engineering companies. Others were editors of magazines such as *Electronic Design* or even the *IRE Proceedings*. Few were 'working engineers' at the time, but most had been. What they all had in common was the desire to help engineers, and IRE members in particular, to do a better job of communicating their particular accomplishments to other engineers who wanted to know about them...."

"There were probably 8 to 10 people at the earliest meetings. My boss [Charles Meyer] at RCA was one of the founders, which meant that I had great leeway in using company resources to keep in touch with people, set up meetings, etc. Remember, this was mid-1950s. We had no computers, no e-mail, no cell phones. Inter-personal communication was slower and more complicated then."

Herbert Michaelson, a charter member of the IRE Professional Group on Engineering Writing and Speech (PGEWS), which later became IEEE-PCS, once wrote that PGEWS "was organized mainly by Eleanor McElwee." Likewise, Charles Meyer, also a charter member of PGEWS, identified McElwee as "the prime mover in the organization effort."

PGEWS was officially formed in May 1957. At the first meeting of the Administrative Committee, McElwee acted as temporary chairman until a permanent chairman could be elected. That man, Daniel J. McNamara, appointed McElwee as Secretary -- an office she held until 1964 and again from 1968 to 1969. She also served as PGEWS Treasurer from 1960 to 1962 and was a frequent member of the Administrative Committee between 1957 and the early 1970s.

McElwee allowed her IEEE membership to expire on Dec. 31, 1975, which ironically was the day before Emily K. Schlesinger's term as PCS President began. According to Rudy Joenk, Schlesinger was "the first female president of an IEEE Society."

I asked McElwee why she never wanted to be chairman of the group she had helped to start. She was nominated for Chairman in 1959, but declined the nomination.

"The early years of PGEWS were marked by a different time and culture. Women were just beginning to be accepted in other than clerical roles in the engineering field, in much the same way as technical writing and speaking were beginning to be acknowledged as valuable professional skills for engineers. I felt that some potential members might be

more likely to consider joining PGEWS if the chairman was a male, preferably with some sort of managerial title. Besides, as secretary I had a lot more influence on meeting places, agendas, and the like than chairmen who served for a limited time."

Although she never married, McElwee was surrounded by family members in Oregon, where she had moved after leaving RCA in 1979. She worked for another nine years as a technical editor at Tektronix in Portland. "I truly retired almost 20 years ago," she told me, "and I never looked back until I got your letter [in 2007]. Now, looking back, I realize how fortunate I have been. I enjoyed my work, I kept learning new skills, I met interesting and delightful people, and I even got paid well! I wouldn't change a thing."

Henrich S. Lantsberg (1922-2009)



Henrich Lantsberg holding his PCS Schlesinger Award at IPCC 2000 in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Our guide and mentor for PCS outreach and activities in eastern Europe died 20 January 2009 in Moscow. Henrich Lantsberg was born in Moscow 2 July 1922, and was 86 when he succumbed after a long illness.

Henrich became a Member of the IEEE on 1 August 1990 and advanced to Senior Member on 1 November 1993; he became a Life Senior Member on 1 January 2007. He joined the Professional Communication Society in 1994. Additionally, he was a member of the Communications Society for several years and frequently worked with the Broadcast Technology Society. At IPCC 2000 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was presented PCS's Emily K. Schlesinger award for service to the society. Earlier that year, the IEEE had presented him a Third Millennium Medal.

At home, Henrich was on the central board of the A. S. Popov Society, in which he also held honorary membership, and was head of its Professional Communication Section, which he founded in 1967. He was a founder and vice-chair (1974-1978) of the committee on informatics of the All-Union Council of Scientific-Technical Societies, and had been a member of the governing board of the Association of Information Workers of Russia since its founding in 1990.

He was vice-chair of the IEEE Russia Section, and chair of its PCS Chapter, which he helped found in 1994 (this was the first IEEE chapter in the Section). All told, he founded or assisted in the founding of 14 chapters in the Russia Section. He was involved in agreements for cooperation and sharing of scientific information between the Popov Society and the IEEE. In 2001, he received a Regional Activities Board award in recognition of dedicated and longstanding service to the work of the IEEE in Region 8 and the Russia Section.

Henrich sought out PCS in New York City in April 1990 on one of his visits to the U.S.; he wanted to "test the waters" for potential cooperation between his PCS and the IEEE PCS. He quickly arranged for four PCS officers to visit Moscow and to accompany him to a conference in Kableshovo, Estonia (with a visit to Tallinn), that fall. In 1991, he arranged for 10 of us to attend a Moscow colloquium on information technology and to visit St. Petersburg. Later that year, we brought Henrich and a colleague, Yuri Gornostaev, to our conference (IPCC 91) in Orlando, Florida, to present a keynote address and later to visit some U.S. technology firms.

In 1992, Henrich invited three of us to a Popov Society meeting and to run professional communication workshops in Moscow and Tallinn. In 1993, PCS and the PC Section of the Popov Society signed an agreement of cooperation. In 1994, Henrich sponsored a group of Russian-authored papers in our *PCS Transactions*. The next year, he arranged the reciprocal publication of a group of PCS papers in the Russian journal *Scientific and Technical Information*. In 2001, we arranged a joint PCS-Popov Society symposium in

Suzdal, Russia, in which 10 members participated, and our joint agreement was extended.

Henrich was a decorated army veteran of the World War II era. Afterward he was sent to the Moscow Military Institute of Foreign Languages, which led to assignment as an interpreter in the Russian Far East.

In 1954, Henrich joined the Institute of Radio-engineering and Electronics of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow where, from 1955, he headed the Science Information Department. He wrote nearly 100 technical papers that were widely published in many journals.

Henrich Lantsberg was an indefatigable organizer and chair of international and Russian conferences, workshops, and symposia—many involving the IEEE—and was host, guide, and interpreter for many foreign visitors. A remarkable and unforgettable man; we will miss him.

Nominations now open for 2009 Alfred N. Goldsmith Award

BY MURIEL ZIMMERMAN, PCS AWARDS CHAIR

Nominations are now open for 2009 Alfred N. Goldsmith Award for Distinguished Contributions to Engineering Communication.

Members of the technical communication community are invited to submit nominations for the 2009 Alfred N. Goldsmith Award for Distinguished Contributions to Engineering Communication. A nomination form, with links to information about criteria for the award and a list of previous winners, is available online at <http://ewh.ieee.org/soc/pcs/index.php?q=node/164>.

Nominations are open until March 1, 2009.

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