

**Pacific Northwest Council for Languages
1949 - 1999¹**

Pacific Northwest Conference of Foreign Language Teachers: 1949-1962

The PNCFL was created in 1949 by the Oregon chapter of the AATSP and the Washington chapter of the AATF. The principal founders were Howard Lee Nostrand, the University of Washington, and David M. Dougherty, the University of Oregon. Others involved in the first conference, held at the University of Washington in February 1950, included University of Washington faculty Lurline Simpson, Howard Altman, Lester McKim (both of whom would subsequently serve as presidents of ACTFL), and Manuel Jato Macías (then of Lewis & Clark College), and Herbert L. Baird, Jr. (Western Washington University).

The purpose of the association, as spelled out in the first newsletter, edited by Lurline Simpson, was twofold: 1) to pool AAT chapter forces in order to stage a conference *closer to home* than the national AAT conferences which younger teachers in particular could not afford to attend; and 2) to provide opportunities for dialogue both vertically (K-16) and horizontally (between languages and across state boundaries). About 175 teachers from Oregon, Washington, Montana, Utah, Hawaii, and British Columbia attended the first two-day conference.

From 1950 until the mid-1960s, PNCFL conferences focused on the concerns of K-12 and "early undergraduate level" language teachers. Sessions on culture (including literature) by university faculty were the responsibility of the AAT chapters, beginning with a guest speaker at the language-specific luncheons on Saturday and continuing to about 3 p.m. Early PNCFL records referred to these sessions as both the "conference dessert" and the "frosting on the cake."

Participation by college and university "literature" teachers was encouraged both to facilitate a dialogue between teachers at all levels and to ensure that institutions of higher education would underwrite the major costs both of the annual conference and the publication of the annual Proceedings. From 1950 until 1973, colleges and universities routinely covered 80-100% of PNCFL's annual operating costs. Dues, established at \$2.50 in 1950 (which covered conference registration as well) were not raised until 1974 -- to \$4.50 (which also covered conference registration).

Early membership records suggest about 70% of the members taught at the K-12 level, and the Board of Directors was similarly composed.

PNCFL served as the model for the Barnard College Conferences on Foreign Languages (1951, 1952), which led to the creation of the Northeast Conference (1953), and also as the model for ACTFL as originally conceived. As noted above, two of PNCFL's early members also served as early presidents of ACTFL.

¹ Prepared by Dr. Ray A. Verzasconi, PNCFL Executive Director (1978-1999), with the assistance of Dr. Howard Nostrand, as part of PNCFL's 50th anniversary celebration in 1999.

Much of the germinal research in applied linguistics, second language teaching, testing, standards, articulation, the use of technology in the classroom, and public advocacy was published by PNCFL in this period, the work of "working committees" who communicated by mail during the year and had a 1-2 hour working session at the conference. These "position papers" were occasionally published separately from the Proceedings, including a rather substantial tome published by Lewis & Clark College in 1955. Unfortunately, none was widely circulated and, to my knowledge, there are only two extant collections of all of PNCFL publications, one at the University of Washington and one at Harvard. An almost complete collection also exists at Oregon State University.

However, anyone who wants to learn about the origins of the proficiency movement, of the establishment of agreed upon assessments to evaluate proficiency K-16, of the need for K-16 articulation, of the need to learn to use technology effectively, the need for research on effective methods of teaching and learning languages, and the even greater need for language teachers to become involved in public advocacy would need look no further. The terminology and jargon wasn't yet developed, and one finds false starts and conclusions since rejected, but it is very clear from these documents that the founders and members of PNCFL in this period recognized that the Latin-grammar model would not serve teachers or students of modern languages, that there was a need for the profession to develop a consensus on what students (at all levels) should know and be able to do in all five language skills (including culture), and that there also a need to develop uniform testing instruments that could be readily interpreted by anyone both vertically (K-16) and horizontally (from one school district or college/university to another and across state and national boundaries).

Membership in this period ranged from 175 to 275.

Pacific Northwest Conference on Foreign Languages: 1962-1973

The increase in the foreign language teacher population led to the creation of a more formal organization, with a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. But that language teacher population increase would usher in an era in which K-12 teachers would disassociate themselves from PNCFL, and faculty in literature and applied linguistics in higher education would come to control the association.

What happened? First, WAFLT and COFLT (then OAFLT) were created (1968 and 1969, respectively), providing K-12 teachers in the two most populous states in the region with a conference even *closer to home* than the PNCFL conference. Between 1968 and 1969, K-12 teachers in Oregon and Washington deserted PNCFL en masse. Concurrently, enrollments in higher education began to increase dramatically in the region in the 1960s. More than a dozen state colleges in the region became state universities. In the period between 1965 and 1969, more than two dozen new undergraduate programs in French, German, Russian, and Spanish were created in the region, and more than 100 new Ph.D.s were hired--all of whom had scholarly research requirements if they hoped to be granted tenure.

A triple whammy. K-12 teachers in Oregon and Washington stopped joining PNCFL or attending conferences; faculty at second tier universities, at least in terms of the liberal arts

(OSU, WWU, CWU, WSU, EWU, UI) joined PNCFL en masse; those at the then primary research institutions (in the liberal arts--UW, UO, UA, UBC), held to more stringent scholarly research demands, disassociated themselves. The first indication that PNCFL had become a *college/university* conference is found in the Minutes of the 1969 meeting of the Board of Directors when the then president of WAFLT sharply criticized the board for ignoring the needs of K-12 teachers. It was inevitable. As noted above, colleges and universities had been providing PNCFL with 80-90% of its annual operating costs; K-12 teachers stopped joining. The structure of a regional association already existed; there was no need for faculty in literature and applied linguistics to create another association.

Despite the increase in the foreign language teacher population, membership in this period remained in the 250-275 range.

Pacific Northwest Council on Foreign Languages: Phase 1. 1974-1980

In response to criticism from K-12 teachers, in 1973 the Board appointed a constitutional committee that would draft PNCFL's first Constitution and Bylaws. In an effort to bring K-12 teachers back, the Constitution provided that the president of each state and provincial language association in the region would have a vote on the Board of Directors. In addition, conference keynote speakers and workshop directors once again focused on concerns of K-12 and early undergraduate level language teachers.

Still, the K-12 teachers did not return, and likely for several reasons. First, even when the state and provincial association presidents could attend the annual board meeting, they were at a disadvantage in effecting real change in the conference for the simple fact that they attended only one meeting -- while elected board members (now almost exclusively from higher education) served for three years.

Second, all teachers in the region had essentially been spoiled. Not only had institutions of higher education long funded PNCFL, they had also begun contributing significantly to the state associations. All of that changed with the oil embargo of 1973-74. The PNCFL Board, unfortunately, was not prepared to adapt to the change. Minutes of the Board of Directors make clear that most Board members assumed that budgetary restraints imposed upon higher education after the embargo were temporary. Between 1974 and 1981, the Board depleted what in 1999 dollars was a reserve of more than \$30,000. Most board meetings were devoted to endless debates, e.g., whether to increase dues by 50¢ or \$1.00; whether to establish a conference registration fee; whether or not to stop publishing everything, etc. As a college/university association, the Proceedings slowly starved the conference budget. By 1978, PNCFL was spending three times as much on the Proceedings than it was on the conference. The proposal to limit what was published in the Proceedings was first made by then editor David P. Benseler in 1974, a motion that was soundly rejected by a majority of Board members who warned that there would be a mass exodus of college and university faculty. The decision to abandon the Proceedings, substituting instead Selecta, a journal of refereed articles, was finally made in 1979 when the Board faced a sea of red ink and, for the first time, no college or university was willing to cough up extra money.ⁱ Membership set a record of 305 in 1978 in Portland.

Phase 2. 1980 -

In 1979, PNCFL and ACTFL both conducted surveys of members and potential members. Both surveys found that *professional unity* was a top priority of most respondents. In the PNCFL survey, it was the first priority of 94% of the respondents; it was the first priority of 93% of the respondents to the ACTFL survey. As a result, PNCFL challenged ACTFL and the other three regionals (SWCOLT did not yet exist) to engage in a serious discussion about unity. The first meeting was held in New York City in October 1980, and was sponsored by the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NEC) – which underwrote the costs of the other regional delegates to that meeting. Four additional meetings were held over the next two years. As a result of those meetings: 1) ACTFL and the four existing regionals helped create SWCOLT; 2) ACTFL agreed to seat a delegate from each of the regionals on its Executive Council (board of directors); 3) ACTFL and the regionals agreed to participate in the Joint National Committee for Languages [which had been created by the Modern Language Association and the AATs], both to strengthen the JNCL and to ensure that language teachers would have a voice in the creation of national policy; 4) ACTFL and the regionals began to share information [which they had never been willing to do before], on everything from *how to negotiate a hotel contract* to *how to influence public opinion*. Out of those initial meetings also came the idea of a joint Central States Conference, PNCFL, and SWCOLT conference, which was finally held in Denver in 1995.

Since I participated in all five “unity” meetings, I can vividly remember my frustrations. First, trying to convince NEC to drop the “the oldest foreign language association in the U.S.” on their letterhead and publicity, even after providing them with proof that the Barnard College Foreign Language Conference in 1952, at which NEC was created, had been organized by a Barnard College faculty member who had been a Visiting Professor at the University of Washington in 1949-50, had attended the first PNCFL conference, and went back to his institution determined to establish a similar regional association in the northeast. Second, trying to convince delegates from ACTFL, NEC, CSC, and SCOLT that PNCFL had not been created to be a “literature” conference and that the 1980 Board, in giving me *carte blanche* to negotiate had, in fact and in deed, made it clear that the Board was, in fact, also seeking help to get PNCFL “back to its roots.” Finally, the fact that the ACTFL and NEC delegates were micro-managed by their respective Boards. It took five meetings (two in New York, two in Boston, one in Washington D.C.) over a period of 4 years to accomplish what we could have in two meetings – except that ACTFL and NEC delegates had not been delegated any authority.

What made the *unity* idea possible was the reversal of fortunes. By the 1970s, most of the FLES programs created in the 1960s had been eliminated, and both secondary and post-secondary programs were on the chopping block. Indeed, most of the middle school programs had been eliminated.

For PNCFL, the first step toward change was suggested by WAFLT President Rosanne Royer at the 1978 conference in Portland. She pointed out that the Constitutional provision that the state association president would have a vote on the PNCFL board was a limitation in that presidents usually served only one year. As a result, the PNCFL Constitution was revised in 1980, allowing state and provincial associations to elect or appoint a delegate as they saw fit, to

serve at the discretion of the state or provincial association, but with a recommendation that the person so appointed would not serve more than two consecutive terms of either three or four years.

With continuity on the board, the state associations began to effect change. It was the COFLT delegate (Roberto Villa) who, working with Magdalena Ladd helped convince the COFLT Board to meet jointly with PNCFL in Eugene in 1983. It was PNCFL's first joint conference.

Membership increased from 298 in 1982 to 383 in 1983, to 573 in 1985, to 718 in 1992 -- with all of the increase coming from K-12 teachers.

Pacific Northwest Council for Languages: 1995-

The name change was first proposed after PNCFL met in Alberta in 1982, after French language teachers in Canada boycotted the conference because of the word "foreign" in the title. In a petition presented to ACTFL at the 1984 ACTFL conference in Denver, PNCFL also asked ACTFL to consider kicking the "f" out of its title. Ironically, opposition to the name change came from both the COFLT and WAFLT Board of Directors – both of which have since dropped “foreign” from their names.

New challenges. Membership (now roughly 83%, K-12; 17%, post-secondary) dropped from 718 in 1991 to 540 in 1997--a ten-year low. Discussion at the JNCL-NCLIS Delegate Assembly in April 1997 suggested this was a national trend, and that there are several principal causes.

1. The higher than average retirement rate of K-16 language teachers, which began in 1989 and was expected to continue until 2003.

After all, the 1960s was the first "boom" era for foreign languages, and most of us who were first hired to teach in the 1960s or early 1970s have retired or soon will.

2. A continuing problem with major research universities, which produce a majority of future language teachers, in that faculty do little or nothing to encourage para-professionals to join professional associations.

In 1982-84, the ACTFL/PNCFL Task Force on Public Awareness conducted a random survey of teacher certification professors throughout the U.S. Of some sixty who responded, less than a third indicated that they provided para-professionals with information about ACTFL, the regional association, or the state association. Even fewer indicated that they were members of these associations. Worse yet, the ACTFL/PNCFL Task Force on Public Awareness conducted a random survey of para-professionals in our region. Although the Task Force received responses from only six students, five stated that their professors advised them **not** to bother joining ACTFL, PNCFL or their state association.

So while the language teacher population has increased and will continue to do so (despite

budget cuts and larger classes), not enough younger/newer teachers are joining to make up the deficit created by retirements.

3. A dramatic shift in hiring practices in higher education. In 1980, roughly 80% of the faculty in higher education were either tenured or on tenure-track, and only 20% (including graduate teaching assistants) were part-timers or adjuncts, with no job security. By the mid-1980s, however, the nationwide trend (in virtually all disciplines, but particularly the arts and sciences) was to replace retiring tenured faculty with "fixed-term" faculty.

Fixed-term or adjunct faculty (often called "nomads") receive extremely low wages, often receive no benefits, and have no job security. In most major research universities, the rule of thumb is still "six years and you're out." Even in Spanish, with increasing enrollments, tenure-track positions are extremely difficult to secure. The 1995 MLA Survey of Ph.D.s found that more than 50% of the new Ph.D.s in French and German, and more than 25% of those in Spanish, had not been able to secure a tenure-track position a year after receiving their degree. So we have an increasing number of post-secondary faculty who must often work at 2-3 jobs simply to make ends meet, and who must spend a lot of time and money continually job hunting. Many simply do not have the funds to join, let alone to attend conferences.

4. Changes in society.

While women began to make inroads in language departments in higher education during World War II, until a decade or so ago, the vast majority were married--so there were two bread earners in the family. Until the unionization of K-12 teachers in the 1960s and until Affirmative Action really took hold in higher education in the 1980s, women were indeed paid less than men in the teaching profession at all levels. After all, the argument went, they also had a husband earning a salary, and the husband was still considered the principal bread winner.

Today, not only do women constitute the majority in most language departments (and not just at the K-12 level), an increasing number are single or divorced, often with children, and they are also often the sole bread-winners. And since 1950, we know, as an average, faculty salaries have dropped dramatically in comparison to other professional fields (not so K-12 salaries). So again, we have an increasing number of colleagues who have difficulty paying dues and attending conferences.

Note

¹. Board Minutes from 1950 to 1978 make it clear that deficits were often made up, post-conference, by one or more colleges and universities. On several occasions, during a meeting break, one or more Board members would call their department chair or dean and report back that they had secured another \$500 or \$1,000!