

Building the Future

for the Past 75 Years

BY KATE SHIRLEY

PART IV

1980s

By 1980, there were approximately 10,000 American and Canadian members of IRWA. After the member vote which resulted in the Association name change, the Articles of Incorporation had to be amended to reflect the true international nature of IRWA's membership in the bylaws and resolutions, as well as the seal and emblem. The increasing number of Canadian members, along with a boom in the meetings and courses taking place in Canada, helped encourage this move, which had previously been stymied due to variances in the international law and policies. The change was accepted by the Secretary of State in California in April 1980, officially registering the Association name that still holds to this day.

In the early '80s, the United States Congress was beginning to acknowledge the deterioration of, and the need to improve, repair and upgrade the nation's public infrastructure. Highways, public transit, water supply, wastewater treatment plants, airports were all strained, particularly in their ability to support future growth, and they all needed updating. The only thing missing was the funding to do it. The economy had taken a downturn, the United States was in a recession, and federal budgets cuts were being made across the board. In 1984, infrastructure spending in the U.S. fell to just 8.4% of the total government expenditures. This low level of investment was barely adequate to fulfill the infrastructure needs of the country at the time, let alone enough to support the future needs of the nation's public works.

CHALLENGES FACING EMPLOYERS

As a result, the decade began with a focus on simple maintenance and repair of existing projects, with priority given to the large-scale projects that served a major federal purpose, such as the highway system, rather than smaller, local projects. Overall, the slowdown led to the release of personnel by numerous right of way employers. Struggling to make ends meet, companies were offering early retirement packages in an attempt to reduce overhead. Many employers were also faced with eliminating their financial support for their employees involved with IRWA. Now more than ever, the Association had to prove its worth, in order to motivate and retain the scores of members who had previously relied on their employers' assistance to defray the costs associated with membership.

The Association's membership rolls were holding steady, at least temporarily. When you consider that this was a time when most other professional and non-profit association membership was suffering, it speaks volumes about the importance and relevance of IRWA. This could be attributed in one sense to the true diversity of membership that IRWA still enjoys today. In the '80s, when funds focused on maintenance of existing infrastructure, right of way acquisition may have slowed, but property and land management positions surged, resulting in a balance of employment.

This good fortune did not last, although IRWA leadership tried to remain optimistic, continuing to increase educational opportunities and courses. Eventually membership, course attendance, and investment income all dropped. As a result, for a few years in the early '80s, Association expenses were greatly reduced and leadership was forced to pretty much halt the hiring of needed personnel. Fewer funds were available to help finance the committees, regions, chapters and the executive committee. In hopes of rectifying the financial squeeze, a dues increase was put into effect for both regular and junior members.



As part of their training program in the '80s, Caltrans enrolled new agents in IRWA Course 101.

SHIFT IN STRATEGY

In an attempt to further diversify membership and bolster its ranks, IRWA concentrated on attracting a new kind of right of way professional. This included a shift in how services were provided and involved “taking the association to the member.” Leadership began encouraging feedback, listening more and soliciting help from all levels of leadership, responding directly to specific needs. IRWA focused on launching new chapters and affiliates, and conducting more meetings, in hopes of reviving interest in IRWA.

Although now the undisputed cornerstone of IRWA’s educational offerings, interest in the Senior designation (SR/WA) program was fairly static in the early ‘80s. While numerous members had made the educational commitment to the program, there were others who were apathetic about the opportunities it offered. This resulted in fewer SR/WA applicants, and more significantly, fewer new candidates making the commitment to education. Achieving the designation exhibited the commitment of a member likely to stay involved for the long haul - volunteering, donating, and participating in advancing the Association’s mission and goals. IRWA relied heavily on the income generated by the courses, and sought out ways to expand and improve the educational offerings, hoping to attract new candidates in the process.

SURGE IN STATUS

IRWA focused on improving both the diversity of courses, and the number of presentations increased. In the mid ‘80s, a mandatory designation recertification program was instituted to bolster the relevance of the SR/WA designation. This move compelled members to keep their skills fresh, and also to maintain their alliance to the association. Taking this step added credence to the program, and by elevating its status, IRWA was able to increase SR/WA candidates by 50 percent in a relatively short period of time, eventually increasing by 133 percent within a few years. By the middle of the decade, roughly 11 percent of members had earned their SR/WA designation.

The need for education was most acute when considering the technological advancements of the decade. Technology in the ‘80s was advancing rapidly, and the need to learn new methods became increasingly crucial in the struggle to remain relevant in the modern workplace. Expectations for right of way professionals were changing as well, in a sense reverting back to when the right of way professional was considered a “jack of all trades.” The demand on agents all across North America was no longer for specific knowledge on a limited range of topics, or even the same broad general knowledge base which typified right of way agents in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Now, those two different ideals were joined,

Chapter Timeline 1980 – 1999

May 1982 Fairbanks Chapter 71	May 1985 Austin Chapter 74	November 1991 Florida Chapter 77
October 1982 Dakotas Chapter 72	January 1986 Shreveport Chapter 75	December 1992 North Platte Chapter 78
July 1983 Saguaro Chapter 73	November 1990 Florida Chapter 76	February 1998 Regina Chapter 79

and right of way agents were expected to be multi-disciplined experts in order to keep up with this new age of expanding technology and information.

Along this vein, in August 1987 a dialogue began among Association leadership regarding the need to expand the designation program to include industry specialties. A concern existed that there was a lack of options and that specific areas of focus or expertise were not being recognized under the current program. Leadership planned to increase the status of the multi-disciplined SR/WA designation by instituting specific course requirements. By doing this, IRWA also hoped to motivate members to try some of the newer courses under development.

In terms of professional development, much time was spent developing more advanced continuing education courses, to address every facet of the profession. Professionals now seeking to diversify their employment skills and knowledge base, along with SR/WAs fulfilling the new recertification courses, were newly motivated to sign up for courses. By the mid-80’s, one new course was being developed every six months. Furthermore, it became evident that it was time to “Canadianize” the courses, making them relevant and useful in the context of specific Canadian practices and laws.

More instructor clinics were also being scheduled. Not only did this facilitate better dialogue between students and instructors, now more trained instructors were available to serve more chapters in more areas of the country. For the chapters and regions, this meant that not only was a skilled instructor readily available, but that the instructor would be familiar with the local regulations, and could specifically address the needs of each community. This also helped to minimize costs associated with presenting courses.

All in all, the ‘80s proved to be a challenging decade for the Association and the profession, but right of way professionals have always had a knack for overcoming obstacles. Relying on the ingenuity, knowledge, and enthusiasm of the membership base helped sustain the organization even through those difficult times, which unfortunately, were not quite over.

1990s

The last decade of the 20th century was one of massive technological growth. Personal computers and widespread internet accessibility quickly

became indispensable tools, facilitating an unprecedented ease of communication and business. In the rapidly changing world, all professionals, right of way included, faced tremendous challenges on a daily basis. To meet the evolving changes in the marketplace, agents required new skills and the ability to navigate the manifold resources available. The widespread technology boom also resulted in an influx of wealth into the United States and Canada, and productivity expectations rose precipitously in a very short period of time, demanding sophisticated technological knowledge from professionals in all fields. IRWA leadership was determined to bring its members into the new millennium on a strong footing.

IRWA was experiencing growth, and by mid-1991, membership had increased by more than 800 members from the same time the previous year. In the same time frame, more than 100 members earned their Senior designation, and the number of new SR/WA candidates increased by over 83 percent. Another particularly proud achievement for IRWA came in 1994 with the election of Donna Crosby, SR/WA as the Association’s first female President. Donna was a worthy trailblazer, having served in all elected Chapter offices as well as on many committees in her twenty years of IRWA membership.

Of course, education remained the cornerstone of IRWA’s purpose and mission in serving its membership base. The Association continued to stress not just the myriad in-house educational opportunities it provided, but encouraged higher learning from all types of institutions. In 1993, thanks to a generous donation from the now-defunct State Association of Real Property Agents (SARPA), IRWA instituted the SARPA Scholarship fund, which is still awarded to those seeking higher education related to right of way work. The first scholarship recipient was Darlene Kinney, a CalTrans employee studying for a Master’s in Public Administration, when the agency was forced to reduce their tuition reimbursement policy. This was a common issue among dedicated professionals, and the SARPA scholarship has provided welcome financial relief to many over the years.

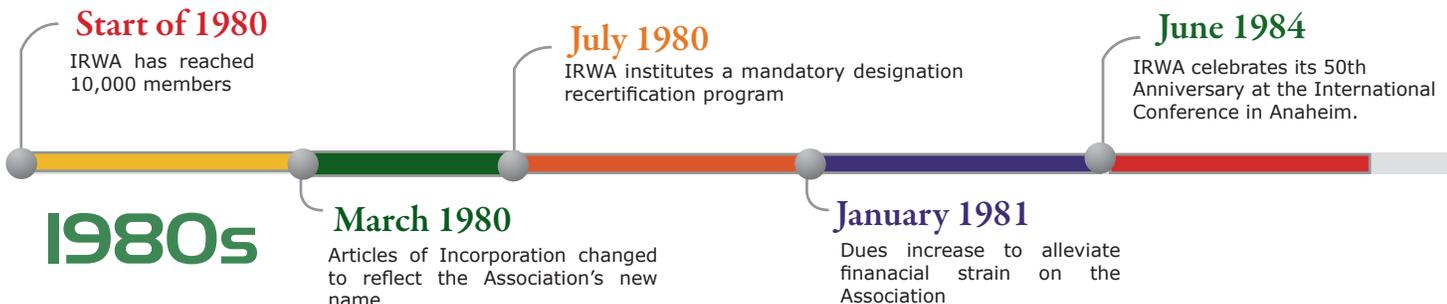
In 1994, the Education Department and the Right of Way Education Foundation instituted the “Renaissance Project,” which had the ambitious goal of updating not just all course topics, but all ancillary materials as well. A comprehensive manuscript review process required an in-depth analysis of the technical content of all textbooks and materials, ensuring that all students were receiving the most up-to-date information possible. The Executive Committee made another inspired decision when they recruited the International Committees to help review and edit course materials. This further ensured the accuracy and relevancy of the topics being presented, from the foremost experts in the field. A pilot presentation of the new revised courses was met with resounding approval from all attendees, and the success of the Renaissance Project could be seen almost immediately. By the middle of the decade, more than 8,000 students were attending courses each year.

THE BIRTH OF CERTIFICATION

Despite strong class attendance, major changes were needed in the designation program. In response to grumbling that the SR/WA was not widely recognized as a symbol of excellence, IRWA instituted a “declaration of specialty” program. At the time, only 17 percent of membership held the SR/WA designation. Adding the ability to declare a specialty and focus on an area of expertise enhanced the credibility of the SR/WA. The educational requirements for declaring a specialty were structured to ensure that certain courses were mastered. This was the precursor to today’s Right of Way Certification Program, which was launched two years later in 1996. It was seen as a “path to SR/WA,” and gave more specific guidance to members wishing to show their expertise in one of the five specialties.



Also, in 1994, the Association took an important step toward gaining mainstream recognition in the general public by hiring its first Marketing Director and developing IRWA’s first promotional membership recruitment video to bolster enrollment. At that time, the annual number of courses had grown to over 275, with



the income from those courses exceeding \$600,000 annually. IRWA became more responsive to member needs and implemented a long range strategic plan based on surveys conducted with current and former members. Advertising efforts were ramped up, and membership tools were made more accessible. Also around this time, IRWA started developing professional relationships with Federal partners, and creating various marketing tools to enhance membership recruitment.

Despite these efforts, by the middle of the decade, the Association began experiencing some member attrition, resulting in a budget shortfall. In 1995, Association leadership once again faced the dilemma of either raising dues or cutting services. Not willing to compromise the quality of membership, they voted to raise dues by twenty-five dollars and redoubled efforts to improve and position itself as an indispensable asset for all right of way professionals.

In 1997, the Association launched its online presence, offering information, educational schedules, a member database, magazine archives, chapter information and networking resources available 24/7 with a simple click of a mouse. The tech-savvy Association also prepared to offer online course and seminar registration, as well as access to an IRWA merchandise store.

AN INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE

IRWA also took steps to further cement its new name and international reputation. In 1997, the Annual Conference in Minneapolis welcomed delegates from the Japanese Ministry of Construction, as well as Bobby Richardson from Eksom Transmission's Land and Rights Section in South Africa. In 1998, then-International President Woodrow Pemberton travelled to Japan to visit the Ministry, thereby starting the relationship between IRWA and the Japan Consultation Consultant Association (JCCA). That same year, the JCCA attended their first Annual Conference, and IRWA members graciously coordinated a special program in honor of these important guests, as well as a luncheon that included a ceremonial exchanging of gifts. Since then, the JCCA has sent delegates to each Annual Conference and continues to be an important partner. Also in 1998, IRWA welcomed a five person

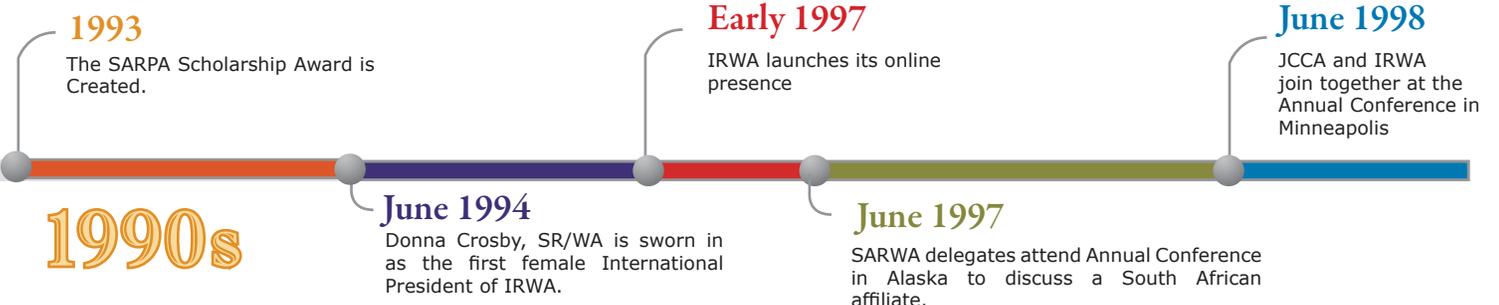


In 1998, IRWA was pleased to welcome the Japan Compensation Consultant Association and the newly created South African Right of Way Association to its International Education Conference.

delegation from South Africa, who came to discuss with the IEC the possibility of affiliating the newly created South African Right of Way Association (SARWA) with IRWA. That was the beginning of a long term relationship, and SARWA representatives have attended every IRWA Annual Conference since.

By the end of the decade, Association leadership was positioning the IRWA for a payoff in the new millennium. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the partnership IRWA developed with the Federal Highway Administration, strengthening the relationship between the two organizations. Together, the partners initiated a task force which included representatives from IRWA, FHWA, the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials and the National Highway Institute, in order to address the needs of the considerable number of right of way professionals whose work crossed over these organizations.

Leading up to the millennium, IRWA recognized its potential for growth and started working strategically in hopes of becoming the Association it is today. The '90s was an introspective decade where the Association began considering a range of new ideas, implementing changes that would launch the 21st century on a strong and confident foundation. ✦



1990s