

Peter Schieferdecker's Remarks at RMA's 60 Anniversary Celebration: October 8, 2014

A Brief History of the Last 20 Years

I have sad news for you..... I missed the first forty years. I can only tell you about the past twenty years because I joined around 1995.

When I first reported for duty at the Y, a grumpy man at the reception desk told me to go downstairs to what was called with a flourish...the RENDEZVOUS ROOM. Expecting a nice sort of reception area with potted palms, easy chairs and maybe a small string quartet in the corner, I descended along a steep old gloomy stairway and found a large, hollow, industrial- like basement with peeling vinyl tiles on the floor, rows of steel chairs, and adjacent... a men's room worthy of a third world train station. That was the "rendezvous room."

But the atmosphere was fantastic! The room was filled with nice older men who said they were soon going to hold a meeting. They had a meeting every Wednesday they said. They started with the pledge of allegiance and then they began a singing repertoire that amazed me. Now almost twenty years later they are STILL singing the same songs ... all out of the thirties. Apparently nothing worthwhile has been composed since then. "Carolina in the morning;" I don't remember how many of these mornings I suffered through. At least a hundred. "If you know Suzy;" NOOOO I don't know her and I don't care. I have fought a losing battle against this singing syndrome. Now we even have an RMA marching song! That takes the place of the haunting plaint "Bring me back, bring me back to the Greenwich RMA" that we used to sing. That song must have been about a guy stuck in an adult living center in Florida.

There appeared to be a fixed routine for these meetings and that drill has NOT changed. Believe it or not twenty years ago Chuck Standard was already handing out calendars. At an average of five a week he has handed out more than 5,000 calendars! That is a stack of about 52 feet high!!!

They recite the hundreds of hours spent on volunteer work. Some members work round the clock and do not sleep. Impressive! Sports scores are reported. Nothing has changed there either. When I was a new member I was astonished to hear that among sports reports there was a squash competition. Every week they reported on that competition with numbers that were as meaningless to me as the bridge scores. Were these old geezers agile enough to play squash? Then.... the winner was announced and he proudly showed the huge squash he had grown in his backyard. Know what he did?

He put a big stone out in the sun all day and every evening he would shove it under his squash so it had central heating and grew to enormous proportions.

All kinds of wonderful day trips were and are being organized. Many trips are superb as I can testify. One was very special. Let me give you a brief review of our trip to West Point to watch the cadets marching on parade and play a football game.

We left St. Catherine's in a bus. The bus was a little old, but the price was right and the driver was a pretty young woman. After she closed the doors the driver asked "does anyone know where West Point is?" Remember GPS did not yet exist and there were no iPhones. We gave directions and trundled over the Tappan Zee Bridge. Arriving at West Point, we searched for the bus parking lot and were wrongly directed elsewhere....off we drove deep into the countryside. Up a long steep hill we went. The bus began to labor because of the climbing and the engine started to smoke. It seemed to be on fire. The interior of the bus filled with smoke, so we stopped and we all went outside; started to wander in the fields. The engine cooled off and we returned to West Point. We found the parking lot and discovered we had missed the parade. After that, West Point lost the game, of course. We left for a restaurant near Poughkeepsie. There was a traffic jam the entire distance. Everybody living in Poughkeepsie and environs was out on the road on a nice Saturday afternoon and the bus crawled to our destination. We had dinner at 8 PM and drove back home where worried women with visions of widowhood were waiting. We were back at St. Catherine's at about 11 PM.

There always is a coffee break after the meeting and many men used to file outside to smoke. Yes there were still people who smoked in those days.

After the break, there is a speaker often of outstanding quality - so good that I use it as a major lure for new members; I'd tell them to "forget about the singing. Focus on the speakers. They are great!" In the old days speakers were often members. One was our own former president and friend Dom Coglaindro who was going to tell us about his trip to Italy and show slides. Does everybody remember what a slide is and what I mean by "slide projector?" Dom did not handle the carousel very smartly and all his slides spilled over the floor. Willing helpers filled the carousel for him. But then they were all out of order and the leaning tower of Pisa was horizontal and St. Peter's square was upside down. Another speaker was the new president of the Y. He gave us a glowing report of the changes he had made since he came to the Y when he found what he called "a gym for old men." He had increased membership tenfold and had started a renewal project. The project would include a new and better auditorium for the RMA

on the second floor with an elevator. WOW! But we had to be patient. First he would build an Olympic size swimming pool next to the old building. He needed 20 million for the entire project and had 10 in hand. The rest would easily be raised by professional fund raisers. Noooo sweat. That announcement marked the beginning of the end of RMA's relationship with the Y.

As construction started without the Y having the necessary funds on hand we were shuffled out of the rendezvous room. In the process the construction crew stole the TV sets we used for VCR presentations. Remember VCR's ?

We were sent to an old gym upstairs. We had to enter the gym through the men's locker room and edge along the water of the new pool to reach the gym. That pool became the biggest white elephant in town. It was built for big swimming meets, but the Town said "you can't have meets with spectators on stands there because you have not enough parking spaces." Oops. Nobody had thought about that. Anyway, the old gym was ice cold in winter and steaming hot in summer. Our speakers were regularly interrupted by pneumatic drills and hammering. Then suddenly one day the hammering and drilling stopped.....the Y had run out of money and the situation really began to deteriorate. The president of the Y disappeared and the new RMA auditorium turned out to be a mirage. We moved across the street to the meeting room of the Methodist church. And finally we arrived in this beautiful place. We became an independent legal entity. We cut the umbilical cord with the Y and we lived happily ever after. We all have been told by our parents how hard they worked and how they struggled to raise us. Now you know how hard the old RMA people worked and struggled to get you where we are now.

Some years ago, we were still in the rendezvous room. I was Corresponding Secretary which meant I stood here every week immediately after the singing stopped to tell about the dwindling incoming mail. So I would give a little spiel about what happened in the meeting of the past week.

This is my perspective on what happened in the past twenty years.