



*100 Years of Optometry  
in Nebraska*

*Celebrating A Century Of Vision Care*

# *Fifty Years of Optometry In Nebraska*

## **The First Fifty Years**

***Compiled for the NOA Golden  
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During the winter of 1904 and 1905 a man, who later established and published the Western Optical World in Los Angeles, solicited subscriptions to an optometric magazine throughout Nebraska. He emphasized the importance of a state organization at every place he called, with the result that the Nebraska Association of Jewelers and Optometrists was organized at a meeting in the Lincoln Hotel, Lincoln, Nebraska in the spring of 1905. There were too few exclusive optometrists, as we called them then, to form a group large enough to be effective.

Among the very few who were not in jewelry stores or drug stores was James Huteson of Omaha, Dr. Wurn (the father of Paul and Glen Wurn), Ed Flitton of Omaha, C. H. Hukill of Lincoln, C. E. Masters of Chadron and perhaps a few more. There were approximately 200 who enrolled as members. Not all of them were Optometrists. It was a dynamic group that worked well together, forming a very effective organization as shown by the fact that we secured the passage of the first law regulating the practice of Optometry in Nebraska at the next meeting of the legislature. Many jewelers who were not optometrists worked side by side with the jeweler-optometrists and exclusive optometrists to promote the passage of the bill.

A few years later it was decided to have two separate organizations, although it was realized that with the reduced membership we

would not be so strong in the political field or in the legislature. We could see enough benefits from a separate organization to compensate for this lack of strength. It was then that the Nebraska Optometric Association was formed, memberships being restricted to practicing optometrists regardless of whether they were in jewelry stores, drug stores, or exclusive optometric offices. Unfortunately, the early records have disappeared so we do not have a list of the officers at that time; neither do we have a record of the activities.

Our first law required 1,000 hours of attendance at a recognized school of Optometry to qualify to appear before the State Board of Examiners for licensure. This was later amended to require graduation from a school of Optometry approved by the I. B. B. and the A. O. A. This amendment insured the educational requirements would be kept up to the national level and would be automatically raised should the national requirements be raised. In 1943, an amendment was passed by the legislature regulating advertising and defining professional conduct.

Some of the early colorful figures politically active in their time were C.

H. Hukill of Lincoln, J. C. Huteson of Omaha, Fritz Hofer of Aurora, C. C. McLeese of Davenport, Frank Hannis of York (whose two sons practiced in Tulsa, Oklahoma), and Dr. Wurn of Omaha (whose two sons practiced in Omaha). The first Board of Examiners appointed by Governor Sheldon was Dr. C. C. McLeese of Davenport, Dr. J. C. Huteson of Omaha and Dr. Max J. Egge of Grand Island.

The first graduate study group was organized by Dr. Clarence Carlson of Lincoln in 1929. In 1931 a graduate study group was organized in Grand Island by Dr. George A. Parkins. Shortly after, graduate study groups were organized in seven different sections of the State. All of this in order that Optometrists in practice would be insured of keeping in step with the advances of optometric knowledge.

In 1935 the Nebraska Optometric Association established a department of research under the direction of Dr. George A. Parkins to study visual functioning at near in terms of reading and comprehension. This made the Nebraska Optometric Association the first in the United States to create a department of research, and the first optometric organization in the United States to attempt to separate the different visual skills required in reading and if possible develop ways and means of improving those skills where found defective. This attracted the attention of Optometrists in other states so that in 1936 it was deemed advisable to discontinue the research department of the Nebraska Association and form a national organization known as the American Research Council of Optometry which was financially supported by Optometrists throughout the United States and Canada. This organization conducted controlled research in the Teachers

College at the University of Nebraska, at Claremont College, Claremont, California and at the University of Colorado and Boulder Public Schools at Boulder, Colorado.

These investigations clearly define the different visual skills required in reading and demonstrated, under controlled conditions, that these skills could be improved to such an extent as to materially improve the reading and comprehension. The Nebraska Optometric Association should take great pride in being the pioneer of Optometry in the field of reading.

## OPTOMETRIC EDUCATION IN NEBRASKA

The Lincoln Medical College, operating as a department of Cotner University with W. S. Latta, M. D., as dean and M. B. Ketchum, M. D., as instructor of Optometry, conducted classes in optometry in the early 1890's. They issued a diploma in Optometry in December, 1896 to T. J. Wilkinson, of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. This department has since been discontinued.

From 1907 to 1912 a private school of optometry was conducted in Omaha by Tarbox and Gordon.

Although the University of Nebraska has expressed an interest at various times in establishing a school of optometry, there has been no organized effort or noticeable interest in the establishment of such a school. It would seem wise for the Nebraska Association to consider a long range plan of establishing a school of optometry in the University of Nebraska.

# *The Nebraska Optometric Association*

## **The Second Fifty Years**

In 1896, Lincoln's Cotner University, through its Medical College, issued its first diploma in optometry 11 years before enactment of the Nebraska law that recognized optometry as a profession. This example of educational milestones preceding legal ones would be repeated again in 1978 when a large number of Nebraska optometrists completed course work in the use of topical drugs for diagnostic purposes prior to the legislation that would allow the use of diagnostic drugs. And again, additional education courses were presented to already-practicing optometrists before enactment of therapeutic drug legislation in 1986. This time, even more course work was required after enactment of the law and before the State of Nebraska issued certificates that gave the authority to prescribe drugs for treating eye disease.

Preceding these accomplishments, the members of the Nebraska Optometric Association worked on numerous fronts to build a firm foundation for optometry with the general public and their elected representatives. These efforts, and the conduct of individual optometrists in their communities, led to the acceptance of optometry as a profession that had made significant contributions to the well-being of ordinary citizens, and was capable of taking on a broader scope.

The NOA Journal carried stories with the same or very similar themes that repeat over the years, with numerous different people in leadership positions, who dealt with issues and events such as:

- Preparations for the annual convention
- Dinners for new graduate ODs
- Uniform yellow page entries (they were "entries" before they became ads)
- Programs to increase public knowledge and awareness of the profession
- Changes in membership dues
- Reports to the membership of national meetings
- Vision and optometry booths at the state fair, teacher conventions and various other venues
- Changes made by the AOA in the official definition of optometry
- News of Auxiliary fund raising and public relations activities
- Sporadic educational articles on practice management and contact lenses by Nebraska OD's
- Golf
- Dr. Gary Pedersen et. al. VOSH trips
- Vision USA
- Nebraska Foundation for Children's Vision
- Save Your Vision Week/Month
- See to Learn
- Special Olympics
- NOA-PAC
- Optometrist of the Year and other awards
- Paraoptometric activities and awards
- Member profiles

Dr. Robert Lookabaugh opened Central Laboratories in Lincoln in 1958. It became a leading manufacturer of PMMA contact lenses and was merged into Warner Lambert's American Optical division in 1973. In 1961, the American Optometric Association Congress advanced a Premise that included opposition to legislation that

would  
give  
optometrists  
“certain medical  
privileges”.

In 1964, the Association office was moved from the Clarke Hotel in Hastings to the Association Building that was owned by then-executive director Bob Gary. The year saw the introduction of the “Eyes on Nebraska Award”, which was given monthly to recognize prominent Nebraskans who were newsmakers. The first award was to Earl Harris, the historian at the Scottsbluff National Monument, and Dr. Pat Ford of Scottsbluff was awarded the first Optometrist of the Year award. NOA’s annual fall two-day education meetings began. LB 428 was introduced to change the education requirements for licensure from 2 to 5 years of college, require 16 hours per year of continuing education, and allow the Board of Examiners to issue rules and regulations. A licensing law for Nebraska opticians was also introduced that year. The United States Library of Congress began allowing ODs to certify persons legally blind and thus make them eligible for the Talking Books program and the US Congress passed a bill to provide government loans to OD, MD and DO students

NOA Board of Directors dealt with sales tax proposals, vision exams for driver licensing and the opticians bill. The Markay-Marg electronic scleral tonometer was introduced to the nation, developed by optometrists for optometrists who then could not use anesthetic drops.

1965 brought the above-mentioned flood to Hastings that caused the loss of pre-1964 NOA records, with water reaching the ceiling of the basement room that housed them. Ironically, that year the Journal also carried an article on how to deal with civil disasters. LB 428 was passed and signed by the governor. (The only

provision mentioned that passed was the 16-hour per year CE requirement). The NOA board set a goal of 90% membership, established a “surveillance” committee to look into unprofessional conduct, and set up a speakers panel. A Journal article reported the cost for the first 18 years of a child’s life was \$12,000 in a “modest” family and \$20,000 in a “fairly well to do” family.

Seven and one half hours of education were offered at the 1966 NOA convention, then held in the spring, which was attended by 77 OD members and 64 wives and 24 non-members. American Medical Association resolutions surfaced that outlined acceptable relations for organized medicine toward optometry. They included opposition to authorizing ODs to diagnose or treat eye disease or injury, but would allow ODs to “observe” them and refer to an MD. MDs could teach ODs if the topic was in the legitimate scope of optometric practice. Medicare included optometrists as providers of service and materials for aphakes, but only if they were authorized by a MD or DO. Pre-optometry and optometry students were deferred from the draft, but after graduation, optometrists were drafted into the military as first lieutenants and the army authorized them to use any instrument and drug to take IOP readings.

Nebraska’s population in 1966 was 1,411,330 and there were 186 ODs and 21 ophthalmologists for ratios of 1/7,588 and 1/45,527 respectively. Jim Frasz, an immigrant from post WW II Russia, was honored with an Eyes on Nebraska award for writing the Nebraska state song “Beautiful Nebraska”. Nebraska’s attorney general ruled that “laymen cannot fit contact lenses”. No violations to this rule were ever mentioned in subsequent Journal articles.

In 1969, OD income their first year after graduating was reported to be \$9,300 with a range from \$7,350 to \$12,750 and the national OD population was around 17,000. An optometrist was seated

for the first time on the Nebraska State Board of Health and the professional corporation law was enacted. In 1970, the Nebraska Attorney General issued new Rules and Regulations on the scope of optometry that used the U.S. Department of Health definition and he also decided that ODs may engage in the practice of orthoptics.

Bausch & Lomb introduced the first soft contact lens in 1971, claiming it to be a “potential boon to vision care”. ODs then were fitting 70% of the nation’s contact lenses. The AOA endorsed the use of the metric system “as it relates to optometry” and an Indiana OD was found guilty of misdiagnosing a case of uveitis and for not referring the patient to a physician. The New York College of Optometry enrolled its first class in the fall.

In 1972 President Nixon signed into law the bill that began the HMO movement and the AOA continued fighting for freedom of choice in social security programs. Permission for optometrists to certify legal blindness for Vocational Rehabilitation programs began, and the military service academies dropped the entrance requirement for cycloplegic eye exams. The Nebraska State Penitentiary saw its first optometrist in the person of Dr. Richard Powell. Dr. Harold Riggert (ICO 33) reminisced in an article about the 1930s and ‘40s when general practice MDs would refract and dispense eyeglasses for an office call fee and the cost of the materials.

Mid Plains Vocational Technical College in North Platte graduated the first class from its optometric assistant program in May of 1973 and Darryl Detlefsen joined Bob Gary as administrative assistant for the NOA. The NOA Auxiliary was awarded the National Safety Council’s “Award of Honor” for their Be Safe, Be Seen pedestrian safety program. A Journal article on manpower noted the ratio of ODs to the Nebraska population had changed and was 1/ 9,436 in 1972 and the “ideal” ratio was 1/7,000, so we were short of the ideal by 56 ODs. The 2005 Nebraska population was projected to be 2.2 million so 314 optometrists

would be needed. These numbers were used to convince legislators to pass LB 911, a bill to subsidize optometry students with contracts with certain optometry colleges and schools. Governor Exon signed it in 1974.

A mandate from the U.S. Congress created the Director of Optometry position in the Veterans Hospital System and the price controls imposed by the federal government for optometrists and opticians that had been in force were lifted, but they remained on physicians during 1973. The NOA Board developed a 5-step plan to enforce the NOA code of ethics, membership reached 117 optometrists (up from only 56 in 1964), and a NOA committee developed Standards & Guidelines for safety eyeglasses and the Nebraska State Department of Health distributed 1,732 copies. The guidelines were also endorsed by the Nebraska Academy of Ophthalmology.

The first “Big Red Conference” for NOA committees was held in Kearney in 1974. Dr. John Butler of Hebron received 20,000 pair of eyeglasses from Nebraska Lions Clubs to be used on the first Nebraska VOSH trip to Honduras. Mr. Detlefsen left the NOA associate director position. Pennsylvania and Tennessee passed diagnostic drug legislation, becoming the second and third states, after Rhode Island, to enact a diagnostic drug laws. The Veterans Hospital in Kansas City began the first residency program for optometrists.

Dr. Roger Dietz of Bellevue contributed optometric artifacts to be included in a 1976 Bicentennial concrete time capsule to be opened in 2076. Dr. Bill Higgins became the first (and so far, only) optometrist elected chair of the Nebraska State Board of Health (Three years later he was re-elected). Dave Kunz joined the NOA staff as associate director, the

Government Relations Conference replaced the Big Red Conference, and the NOA endorsed a salary proposal for state senator to increase it from \$400 to \$675 a month. In December the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles, with input from the NOA, updated its Statement of Vision form by replacing the word “physician” with “optometrist or ophthalmologist”. The Nebraska Heart Association asked ODs to do blood pressure measurements in their offices, and the NOA Journal published an article describing, “The Pen ...M. D. is the Major Difference”. The Pen was a publication used by a group of ophthalmologists at the time, to influence the public about the undesirability of changing optometry laws to permit the use or prescribing of any type of drug.

During 1977, Pennsylvania College of Optometry faculty came to Lincoln to begin the first of numerous sessions of a 110-hour course in pharmacology. As part of an AOA publicity campaign, Nebraska was the first state to see Seymour Safely on ½ gallon milk cartons. The attorney general determined that state money could not be paid to non-public institutions and thereby prevented the state from making contracts with private optometry colleges to support Nebraska students. LB 595, the first “eye drop” bill was heard in legislative committee where it died with the end of that year’s session.

In 1978, Nebraska’s attorney general joined 5 other states and the AOA to file suit against the Federal Trade Commission to challenge their rule-making authority. After many weekend sessions, the PCO pharmacology course was finished, thus establishing one of the foundations for the introduction of LB 9, to allow for the use of “diagnostic pharmaceutical agents”, (DPAs), in the 1979 unicameral session. Its passage was the first major revision of the optometry statute since 1943. Later in 1979, Bob Gary stepped down as NOA Executive Director and Dave Kunz took his place.

Unrest in the Middle East forced up gasoline prices and caused shortages and in response, government began making plans to ration gas. ODs were encouraged to document the amount of gas they used to enable them to operate their practices so they could provide this information to rationing authorities. The rationing was never put into place. Emerging from the annual convention of the Disabled American Veterans was a resolution that urged the Veterans Administration to limit ODs to prescribing eyeglasses.

A new school of optometry opened at the U. of Missouri in St. Louis in the fall of 1980. Dr. Ed Schneider began one of his consulting relationships with Nebraska Medicaid, and also became chair of the Medicaid Medical Advisory Committee. In 1981, LB 449, the Optometry Sunset Bill was heard in legislative committee and Medicare law was amended to allow optometrists to prescribe lenses for aphakia independently, without the authorization of an MD or DO. Dr. Steve Gradowski became the first Nebraska OD consultant to Medicare. Nebraska’s three representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives voted to support a House Resolution to put a moratorium on the Federal Trade Commission’s efforts to regulate any profession that was already regulated by state laws. Smoking was a topic for an AOA pamphlet published that year.

In 1982, Drs. Bernie Mullen and Bob Todd chaired the recently-established NOA-PAC, the NOA office moved to Kearney, and a survey showed that 80% of the NOA membership favored changing the optometry law to provide prescribing authority for treatment drugs (TPAs). A Journal article describes a report issued by the U.S. House of Representatives that claimed that up to “two billion dollars are squandered” each year on unnecessary cataract surgery. “Health and medical experts” estimated that between 23 to 36% of the cataract surgeries are performed when there is no functional impairment present. An article quotes AOA’s president stating that the FTC proposed Eyeglass II rule could

make ODs into “pawns of mass merchandisers”. Scratch resistance coating for CR-39 lenses was introduced.

LB 418 to require state licensing of opticians, and LB 561 to give optometrists TPA prescribing rights, were introduced. Dr. Ed Schneider appeared before the legislative committee that heard both bills, and adroitly explained why one group needed new legislation and the other did not. The optician bill failed, and after passage of the TPA bill, Governor Thone vetoed it. That June Pennsylvania College of Optometry offered a TPA course on their campus that some Nebraskans attended and the first part of a 37-hour course was offered at NOA’s fall education meeting.

A new TPA bill was introduced in January of 1985 and that summer a referral center for optometry patients was opened in Omaha under the guidance of Dr. Bob Vandervort and several other optometrists who invested money in it through Midwest Eye Care Associates (MECA). It was part of Omni, which was a national corporation that was operating similar centers in other states. NOA membership reached 160. Drs. Brad Williams and Jim Devine launched a new marketing company called Williams Marketing. In October 1985, University of Nebraska Medical College hosted its first (and so far only) continuing education day for Nebraska optometrists.

Governor Bob Kerry signed LB 131, the Optometry TPA bill, in March of 1986 and still another TPA course was offered at Nebraska’s fall education meeting. That fall, while speaking to a NOA prayer breakfast, historian Robert Manley noted that “terrorist groups are planting bombs”. The AOA issued “The Eye Care Book for Computer Users” in October and AOA president David Farris declared that “the greatest legislative achievement in the history of optometry” occurred with the passage of Barbara Mikulskia’s (D-MD) bill that gave ODs parity with MDs and DOs, for payment of vision care services under Medicare.

A 44-hour CE course on therapeutic drugs was held in Omaha during the summer of 1989 and LB 323 was passed. It required newly licensed ODs to qualify for the highest level of license. Also passed was the bill that required the Department of Motor Vehicles to license drivers with subnormal vision if they met vision standards by using bioptic telescopes, and by September of the next year there were 17 such persons licensed to drive in Nebraska. That fall, Dave Kunz left the NOA executive director post to assume a similar position with the North Central States Optometric Council.

In late 1989, Dave McBride was hired as NOA executive director and he found himself immersed in a legislative battle over LB503, a bill to allow ODs to treat glaucoma and prescribe oral medication. The bill was amended to require the Board of Medicine to supervise its implementation and it was carried over into the next year’s legislative session where, with the agreement of the NOA, it died. In August of 1990, a U.S. Court of Appeals struck down the Federal Trade Commission Eyeglass II rule. The Impaired Professionals bill, LB 456 was introduced.

After the unsuccessful effort to pass LB 503 and following the death of NOA lobbyist Jim Ryan, the NOA hired professional lobbyists Walt Radcliffe and Ron Jensen in the fall of 1991. In the spring of 1992, the American Academy of Ophthalmology changed its Code of Ethics to allow surgeons to delegate postoperative care to ODs.

NOA-backed legislation met failure and success in 1993. Governor Ben Nelson signed into law LB 429, which provided for ODs to prescribe oral medication and remove foreign bodies. LB 636, a glaucoma bill, died in committee. That fall, Nebraska Academy of Ophthalmology president Peter Deidricksen addressed the NOA

convention and a task force was formed to "study areas of cooperation" between ODs and ophthalmologists.

A new glaucoma treatment bill, LB 619, was introduced in the 1995 session of the Unicameral and was carried to the next year's session when it was passed and signed into law by Governor Nelson. There was an extensive period developing the necessary rules and regulations to allow the State to issue certifications. In July of 1998, a 10-hour refresher course was held in Omaha.

In 1999, LB 415 was introduced to require eye exams for children before entering kindergarten and seventh grade. It carried over into 2000 but died for lack of support. The Board of Directors had letters sent to ODs who were facing loss of their licenses if they failed to meet the January 1 cut off date to upgrade their license by including glaucoma certification. A December Board of Examiners in Optometry meeting with their counterparts on the Board of Examiners in Occupational Therapy resulted in a letter going to occupational therapists to "clarify acceptable practices and the differences between the two professions' scope of practice".

Nebraska Academy of Ophthalmology representatives agreed to the provisions of LB 415, the proposed revision of Department of Motor Vehicles' vision standards, and shared NOA's concern about mail order contact lens companies. National legislation changed Medicare rules to allow ODs to order occupational therapy for people with low vision.

Dr. Janet Fett became the first woman to serve as NOA president in 2000. NOA introduced a new log and had legislation, which failed to pass, that

would exempt new licensees from CE requirements during their first year of practice.

Dr. Ed Schneider, donning the pseudonym Dr. Quentin Quack, became NOA's in house third party resource person, replacing PMI Inc. in 2000 and he continued to embellish the NOA web site with information on various plans and HIPAA issues. The first Children's Vision Symposium was held at the University of Nebraska in Kearney.

2002 saw more legislation, in the form of LB 1062, which provided ODs authority to delegate, under their supervision, certain duties to staff. That bill passed but LB 578, another student eye exam bill, failed.

A new student eye exam bill was introduced in 2003, carried and passed in the 2004 Unicameral. The Federal Trade Commission requirement to release contact lens prescriptions became law in 2004. Board of Examiners issued rules and regulations regarding the delegation of certain duties to staff. The 2004 Convention saw 133 ODs attend with 187 staff and 77 exhibitor personnel representing 39 different vendors.

The NOA Update became available on NOA's Internet site in January of 2005.

NOA members can now look forward to 2006 when we will hold our 100th consecutive convention and to 2007, the centennial year of the licensed practice of optometry in Nebraska. And we can wonder about the next 100 years. Will there be a 200th year for optometry, as we know it today? After over 700 years as the most widely used vision aide, will lenses be made obsolete by new refractive surgeries? Who will be the surgeons? Leaders within optometry are now speculating what changes may occur in the profession and health care in general, but only that eternal rascal, time, will tell.