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1970-1979: Investigating the Interstate Oratorical Contest during the “Me Decade”

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The decade of the 1970s further entrenched the socially progressive values that came to the U.S. cultural forefront in the 1960s. Investing in such activities as the Women’s Movement and Vietnam War protests, college students became increasingly vocal about social issues. Those speaking up on such topics included the interstate orators who crafted the IOC speeches of the 1970s. In order to analyze the speeches presented at the Interstate Oratorical Contest between 1970 and 1979, the first part of this paper will explore how this socially important historical time period influenced the speeches themselves. The second section will address the language style and organizational patterns the students employed in their oratories. Finally, the third section will focus on logistical issues, including the locations, demographics, and changing administrative details of the tournament.

The Context of History

The University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire recently celebrated its centennial. Although few buildings, academic majors or organizations remain the same as they were during the inaugural year of 1916-1917, the school’s administration extended a university-wide call seeking to identify and celebrate any programs on campus which shared the University’s centennial birthday. UWEC forensics answered that call after discovering an article in the school’s 1917 yearbook which touted the first year the Eau Claire Normal School’s forensic program ventured into Oratory. The article stated:

The first year of oratory and debating at Eau Claire has shown that our school is going to make a strong record in these activities. In Oratory, we entered into competition with other normal schools of the state in the State Inter-Normal Oratorical League. Milton C. Towner with his oration on “A People Despoiled” had the honor of serving as Eau Claire’s first representative in this league. Snowdrifts prevented him and a body of supporters from breaking their way through the gulches into River Falls on the day of the contest, so our first gun in the battle for supremacy in this league is yet to be fired ... While we have not won oratory and debate this year, we have done something much more important and fundamental. We have measured our prowess against older schools who are to be worthy foes, and we have looked forward to the next year with confidence and determination. We have established ourselves as competitors worthy of consideration in Inter-Normal school oratory and debating. (Periscope, 1917, p. 46)

One hundred years and many snowdrifts later, the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire continues to actively uphold this tradition, frequently qualifying orators to compete at the nation’s oldest forensics competition, the Interstate Oratorical Contest (IOC). It is a point of great pride for both our program and our school. It is a local example of a widespread and enduring fact: all of our forensics programs are grounded in history, and much of who we are today is a product of who we have been and what we have done in the past.

The IOC significantly predates the arrival of the first competitor from UWEC. In fact, for virtually all of the schools who participate in this annual event, the organization was launched well before our own particular institutions became part of it. The IOC began

in 1874 when representatives from five schools convened to compete against each other: Beloit College of Wisconsin, Iowa College (presently Grinnell), Iowa State University, Chicago University, and Monmouth College in Illinois (Schnoor, 1984). Needless to say, over the course of time both the organization and the speeches it rewards have changed in ways both sizeable and small. And while each of the fifteen decades that have passed can be profitably examined, the changing profile of the IOC in the 1970s is of particular interest here. Taking a snapshot of IOC in this decade helps to explain how the contest was in the process of evolving to a form more aligned with its profile today. This snapshot can be seen by reviewing key cultural events of the 1970s, examining how the IOC speeches reflected the cultural and political landscape of the time, identifying the most successful schools and topics recognized at the national tournament, discussing the compositional conventions and organizational devices evident in the speeches, and finally detailing the administrative and procedural changes which paved the way for the organization's current form.

The Interconnection of Historical Context and the IOC Speeches of the 1970s

The political landscape of the United States in the 1970s came alive in the topics and informational allusions made in the IOC speeches spanning the decade. It was a tumultuous time. Many marginalized groups, including women, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinx people, and the LGBTQ community continued their distinct yet interconnected fights to make their voices heard—and the decade found many Americans taking on the role of ally for these marginalized groups. Americans also found their voices of dissension while protesting such targets as the Vietnam War, the Kent State Massacre, Watergate, the Roe v. Wade deliberations, the Arab Oil Embargo, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, federal government spending, and the Iran Hostage Crisis. By the end of the decade, these societal fracture lines and disappointments had set a tone for advocates (both young and old) across the nation. Within the more specific context of college academia, faculty at colleges and universities were widely discussing the topics of the time, as evidenced by articles published in special issues of *Today's Speech*. Articles in the journal's Fall 1973 issue were devoted to discussing women and politics. Articles in the Spring 1974 issue talked about black rhetoric, black English, black theater and black literature. Soon after, the journal's Fall 1975 issue contained articles about Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy. College students in general—and forensics students in particular—were also very much engaged in these discussions, and the Interstate Oratorical speeches presented during the time span of 1970-1979 demonstrated this awareness. Grace Walsh, one of the period's most prolific IOC coaches, summarized the decade within a larger context in a foreword to the special edition of *Winning Orations* which included all twenty-four of the speeches she coached (many but not all during the 1970s). Her comments highlight prominent traits of IOC orations that cut across the years:

Many of the Interstate winners I remember most had ... identification with their subject—the coal miner's daughter who eulogized John L. Lewis, the Oriental [sic] who spoke of the discrimination against his people, the black speaker from Southern Illinois who talked about the real cost of racial discrimination. The six orators who were Interstate winners consisted of three men and three women. The subjects they wrote about grew out of the times when they were in college ... [for example] [t]he war veteran looking at educational problems. The speech on Joe McCarthy was written before the Senate investigation when

Joe was at the height of his powers. The speech on problems of drug abuse and the one on needs of the elderly, the need of fiber in diet—what a variety of problems and styles of delivery! (Walsh, 1984)

The 1970s specifically were definitely years filled with social conflict and social change. The political landscape of the era was reflected in the topics chosen by IOC speakers, in the references to the larger world that they made, and even by the emergence of “politically correct” language in their writing.

A concern with the abusive exercise of power (both by the government and beyond) shines through in the IOC speeches of this period. In 1970, various speeches alluded to the death count in Vietnam, Apollo 11’s journey to the moon, and the voting rights of eighteen-year-olds. The following year, IOC speeches referenced Kent State, Nixon, and the fact that members of the middle class were making an average income of \$15,000 a year. Speeches presented in 1972 placed a heavy emphasis on the Vietnam War, looking at such topics as troop removal, prisoners of war, inequality of genders in the military, forgiving dissenters, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The speeches of 1973 examined a variety of issues ranging from the shamanism of the government to foreign policy to the support of Black Colleges. Displeasure with the actions of the federal government continued to arise in 1974, when finalist James Ringenberg spoke quite angrily about the government and its waste of resources. Two years later, the IOC speeches of 1976 showed a nation tired of being taken advantage of by people in various positions of influence. Final round competitors that year talked about the over-use of tranquilizers, the harms of second-hand smoke, poor treatment of the elderly, and overpricing by auto mechanics. One of these themes was explored again in 1977, when Chuck Green continued the campaign to protect the interests of nonsmokers. Even so, the IOC speeches of this decade did not dig into some of the most prominent issues of the day which they might have explored. For example, except for a speech in 1971 that spoke about Nixon, the history of Watergate and Nixon’s impeachment are not notably present in the IOC speeches of this decade. However, the impact of the Vietnam War and a general sense of disillusionment with the government and governing policies were clearly in evidence and reverberated with the larger culture Americans were experiencing at the time.

Meanwhile, as Americans turned away from their government, they turned toward each other. The decade of speeches began as the 1970s did, with individuals taking up the mantle of social battle on behalf of others. Although the 1970s is often known as the “me” decade, the 1970s as represented at IOC was more of a “we” decade. As a continuation of civil rights battles fought in the 1960s, the speeches of the 1970s were frequently delivered by speakers who were fighting for the causes of others. Of the twenty speeches that were presented at the 1970 Interstate Oratorical Contest, seven of them were about civil rights, an additional seven dealt with government and policy reform, two spoke about mental health issues, and the remaining four addressed quality-of-life issues like leisure and loneliness. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the winner in 1970 gave a speech not about civil rights, but about pesticide poisoning. A year later in 1971, out of the 26 speeches at the IOC, 11 defended the rights of others. Four addressed the rights of students in our education system, two dealt with the right to privacy, and two spoke of essentially just being better citizens of the world.

This theme of defending the rights of others continued to be evident in IOC speeches throughout the decade. However, the allies who spoke typically didn’t belong to

the groups whose rights they advocated. Fenderson (1971), in her speech entitled *Man and Man* (defending gay rights), linked herself to homosexuals by saying that she had “a friend who admits to being one” (p. 22). In 1972, it was a male representative from the Air Force Academy who spoke in favor of women’s liberation. The 1972 Women’s IOC Champion, Candy Winston, told the stories of others to defend the non-standard dialect of Black Americans. Samuel Davis picked up this same mantle in 1977. Daniel Vice in 1974 defended the rights of Native Americans, and Janice Hammil did the same in 1976. Placing these speeches within their historical context, it is clear that the Civil Rights movement which became prominent in the 1960s was continuing to exert an influence not only across the United States but also at the Interstate Oratorical Contest every May between 1970 and 1979.

In order to defend and promote the rights of others, many IOC speakers in the 1970s emphasized the importance of breaking down racial barriers. Examining these speeches also draws our attention to the birth (as expressed in language) of the political correctness movement. Although IOC speakers across many decades have spoken on behalf of “people of color,” the language used to reference various groups has changed over time. In 1970, Beatrice Valdez’s speech, “Chicanos Help Themselves,” refers linguistically to “Chicanos” and “Mexican Americans.” Additionally, both a speech from 1973 (Stearns, p. 42) and an oration from 1979 (Brenner, p. 107) refer to the intellectually disabled as the “mentally retarded.” Native Americans are referred to as “Indians” in 1970, “Redmen” and “Indians” in 1973 (Livingston, 1973, p. 5), and as “American Indians” and “Native Americans” in both 1974 (Vice, 1974, pp. 32-34) and 1976 (Hammil, 1976, p. 16). African-Americans are referred to as “Blacks” in two 1970 speeches on black power, as “Negroes” in Winston’s 1972 winning oration (p. 28), and as “Blacks” in both a 1973 speech speaking about “Blacks being viewed as human beings” (LaMarr, p. 18) and a 1977 speech on Black English (Davis, p. 55). However, in 1973, children who came from interracial homes were referred to as “Children of Mixed Blood.” Interestingly enough, the IOC speeches from the 1970s document American’s progression not only toward a shared heart for equality but also toward an understanding of politically correct language.

The Results: Award Details for the Years 1970-1979

Between 1970 and 1979, 14 individual champions represented a total of eight different states (Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin) and 12 different institutions. Two programs achieved unique distinctions. In 1973, Eastern Michigan University was the home of both the Men’s Champion and the Women’s Champion (the only school ever to earn both titles in a single year). The only other school to receive two titles was the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, which was the home of the Champion in both 1976 and 1979. Meanwhile, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire also became the only school in the history of the IOC to be represented by two family members in the same final round when Mike Rindo took second place to his brother John Rindo in the 1976 final. Table 1 provides fuller details on the results of the decade.

Compositional Elements in the 1970s: Opening Devices, Theses, and Previews

In the manuscripts of speeches delivered at the IOC between 1970 and 1979, some interesting patterns arise in attention-getting opening devices, thesis statements, and organizational previews. The observations made here take into consideration speeches by participants, finalists, and champions alike.

Three types of attention-getting devices were especially popular at some point or another during the decade. In the early 1970s the attention-getters mostly consisted of one or the other of two basic kinds: simple personal testimonies, or literary quotations. Personal testimonies were very popular. For example, in 1971 a student with epilepsy recounted the narrative of her own experience of staying “addicted to drugs in order to lessen the symptoms of [her] disease” (Shaw, p. 79). In 1972, another student announced early in his speech on women’s rights that “there’s a chauvinist in the room” (Peppers, p. 39). In the middle of the decade, Deadra Longworth (1976) shared her woes as a woman who had been overcharged by several mechanics, including one who told her “don’t worry, little lady” (p. 32). And as the decade ended, Tim Friedrichsen outed himself as a “fat” man in the 1979 final round in his speech titled “Great American Fat Race” (p. 21). Other speeches alternatively relied on the use of literary quotations. These included excerpts from the works of Shakespeare, John Donne, Langston Hughes, T.S. Elliot, and John Keats (among many others). In the 1976 final round, both Mike Rindo and John Rindo quoted lines from books in their introductions. Meanwhile, a third type of opening device (which became very popular in later years) emerged in the latter part of the decade. More specifically, speakers began to employ narratives as their attention-getters. Chip Letzgus told the story of a child’s death in his 1976 finalist speech – and for what may well have been the first time, audiences heard an IOC finalist use the words, “this is not an isolated case” (p. 44). Building on this approach to the opening device, two years later, in 1978, Ruth Brenner opened her championship speech with a story of a boy who shot his sister while they were “playing a game” with a gun (p. 106).

The structures of the IOC speeches from 1970-1979 were incredibly loose (at least by today’s standards). This conclusion takes into account the use of thesis statements, initial organizational previews placed in the introductory section, and internal transitions. A distinct thesis was not evident in speeches until around 1976. John Rindo’s 1976 championship speech clearly stated in the introduction, “Americans have become too reliant on the minor tranquilizers to solve the problems of everyday life” (p. 62). John’s brother, Mike Rindo, followed suit with a likewise obvious thesis in his 1976 second place speech, asserting that “from the quick cures for the quick aches that come from old age to easy money through part-time work, gypsters and con men offer dreams that all too easily trap the elderly” (p. 64). Chip Letzgus (1976) also provided a clearly stated thesis in his fourth-place speech, stating that “[t]he lack of effective federal laws has created a critical need for better laboratory equipment and facilities” (p. 44). However, while these speeches included obvious thesis statements, it wasn’t until the next year that a semblance of what we know today as the “organizational preview” was seen. At the start of the 1970s, the typical structure used in IOC speeches did not seem to call for an introductory listing of “main points” which were going to arise in the body of the speech. Speeches presented early in the decade (1970-1973) relied mostly on questions as transitional devices, given that the speeches flowed from section to section as a narrative on the ideas of the time. But this approach to organizational structure changed as the decade moved on. It is noteworthy that, at the end of her introductory section, before moving into the body of her speech, Ruth

Brenner (1977, p. 71) claimed “I believe Americans must learn what fiber is, the potential health hazards resulting from a lack of it, and the fact that its addition to our diets could alleviate more anguish than all the health food fads and vitamin E gimmicks put together.” Brenner continued the practice of previewing her major points when she returned to the IOC in 1978 (p. 107) and said, “[w]e must recognize that a serious problem does exist, that there are three main causes or our failures in strategy, and that a new game plan could result in victory.” The inclusion of distinct organizational previews which identified the speech’s main points took off as a trend in 1979, when all of the top three finalists included a distinct preview listing three major points. Thus, Don Parker (1979) explained in his championship speech:

In the next few minutes, I’d like to talk about this problem of document fraud and about the men and women who do their paperwork every day and bill innocent Americans billions of dollars a year. I’ll give some case histories and show how paper fraud can affect individuals, business and government. Finally, I’ll suggest some solutions and ways you can avoid these paper pushers.” (p. 54)

Mary Beth Kirchner (1979, p. 79) also included an obvious organizational preview in her second-place speech. She told her audience, “[t]oday I hope to make you conscious of the history of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, the needs being voiced by its members, the solution that they offer to their problem and the role that each of us play in accomplishing that solution.” Third-place winner Elighie Wilson (1979) likewise made use of an obvious organizational preview in his speech on electromagnetic radiation. In fact, not only did he list all three of his main points in his preview, but he also introduced the now-common convention of stating a source as part of the preview. He said, “I will do this by describing significant harms caused by this type of radiation, two problems relating to the radiation, and finally I will suggest some solutions which might help end what Paul Brodeur calls the “Zapping of America” (p. 18).

The Interstate Oratorical Association: Evolution and Stability in the 1970s

The decade of the 1970s brought both change and stability to the Interstate Oratory Contest. The purpose of the contest was established in 1873, when the organization declared that its mission was to “conduct annual contests in the branch of forensics known as oratory, in which a participant prepares a manuscript speech and presents the speech largely from memory” (Schnoor, 1984). One-hundred years later, the IOC was still doing that (albeit perhaps in leisure suits), but the guidelines under which the organization was operating were facing both enduring and time-specific challenges. Issues faced by the association in the 1970s related to such diverse topics as the location of the tournament, ballot and tabulation practices, judge assignment guidelines, the use of quoted material, plagiarism, and fees and services.

Relative to the location of tournament sites, Schnoor (1984) tells us that “[i]n 1970 a rotation system was again adopted by the Association and the yearly contest was held in odd numbered years in a Central location and alternates in the even years between East and West locations.” However, this system did not long survive this decade. Schnoor goes on to note that “[a]t the annual meeting in 1984, the Association voted to end the rotation system” (p. 5). Table 2 shows this rotation clearly, as the sites for 1971, 1973, 1975, and

1977 were in the Midwestern states of Nebraska, Minnesota, Illinois and Wisconsin respectively, while the 1970 and 1974 contests were held in comparatively western states and the 1972 and 1976 contests were held in relatively eastern states. The 1977 contest in Missouri and the 1979 contest in Colorado do not follow the location guidelines established in 1970. Although the organization didn't officially end the rotation system until 1984, it is possible to guess that a difficulty in finding sites to fit the regional guidelines began as early as 1978. The ruling to lift the site restrictions eventually made its way to the 1983 business meeting.

In regard to ballot design and tabulation practices, the contest seems to have been run in largely the same manner throughout most of the 1970s. Those changes that did occur were comparatively minor. For example, although the ballots from the 1978 contest were printed on full 8 ½" by 11" sheets while the 1979 ballots were reduced in size to half-sheets, they employed the same scoring guidelines: they used a 1-5 ranking system (no ties allowed) and employed the 70-100 rating system (no score lower than a 70 allowed). The notes from the 1977 meeting report that the 70-100 scale was officially adopted by the organization in that year. In addition, 1977 legislation enacted the policy of dropping both the low rank and the low rating when tabulating the results.

Judge assignment guidelines in the 1970s were different from what they are today. Thus, ballots from 1978 reflect the fact that contestants that year performed their speech in three preliminary rounds for three judges – but unlike in today's contests, a contestant could be seen by the same judge twice. For example, in 1978, Ruth Brenner was judged by George Armstrong, Dennis Beagan, and Larry Weis in the first round. Then she was judged again by Larry Weis in the third round. That same year, Tom Christy was judged by Jack Kay, Joel Hefling and Ray Quiel in one round – and then again by Ray Quiel in another.

Some rules relating to the composition of speeches were reviewed and/or modified during this decade. One rule change related to the limits placed on incorporating direct quotations made by people other than the students themselves. In 1977, the amount of quoted material students were allowed to include in their speeches went from 10% to the 20% allowed today (1977 Business Meeting Minutes). Meanwhile, the word count limit was set at 1800 per speech.

The perennial problem of plagiarism surfaced at least once in the 1970s. The 1977 business meeting minutes reflect a plagiarism call and the removal of an award. A plagiarism claim was made against Ron Ford's 1973 second-place speech, and the organization ruled that Ford's placing should be withdrawn from public record and that third-place finisher Doug Steinkruger should be moved up to second-place. However, the 1973 *Winning Orations* (previously printed and circulated of course) still shows Ford as the second-place winner. As a side note, Ron Ford came back to IOC in 1974 and won the championship title that year.

Finally, the fees charged and services offered by the association changed a bit in the 1970s. As of 1977 (1977 Business Meeting minutes), the price for obtaining copies of *Winning Orations* became fifty cents each. That same business meeting approved the expenditure of \$25 to help with the copying of the publication. A year later, the Business Meeting minutes for 1979 reflect the adoption of a new policy proposed by C.T. Hanson and George Armstrong which allowed for the videotaping and audiotaping of the speeches. The cost levied on a school for attending IOC in 1979 was still \$50 if the institution was represented by two speakers or \$40 if the school brought a single speaker.

Conclusion

During the 1970s, as in all the other periods of the IOC's life, the speeches written by the students who competed at it reflected key events which were shaping their worlds, and thus their daily lives. It is also a decade in which significant evolution is apparent, and the examination of it allows us to glimpse some of the historical roots which feed various competitive practices today. A significant link in the chain of IOC's history, the 1970s deserve continuing study.

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Table 1

Interstate Oratorical Contest Results: 1970 – 1979

Year	Division	Student	School	Title	Topic
1970	Women's	Diane Klemme	Wayne State U. (Michigan)	"The Age of Gerontion"	Aging
1970	Men's	Art Campbell	William Jewell College (Missouri)	"Is it Really Good News?"	Leisure time
1971	Women's	Pat Warren	U. of Akron (Ohio)	"Bring Forth the Children"	Inner city schools
1971	Men's	Jay Sullivan	U. of Northern Colorado (Colorado)	"The Ecological Rape of the Human Guinea Pig"	Pesticides
1972	Women's	Candy Winston	Defiance College (Ohio)	(untitled)	The failure of urban education to educate Negro children
1972	Men's	John Danner	Loras College (Iowa)	"Pandora's Second Chance"	Legalization of marijuana
1973	Women's	Judy Ann Sturgis	Eastern Michigan U. (Michigan)	(untitled)	Heroin babies
1973	Men's	Tony Vehar	Eastern Michigan U. (Michigan)	"No Head"	Handicap accessibility
1974	Open*	Ron Ford	Gustavus Adolphus College (Minnesota)	"Out of Touch"	Lack of connection with our past, present, and future
1975	Open	Roger Woodruff	Illinois State U. (Illinois)	(untitled)	(not known)
1976	Open	John Rindo	University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire	"Life, Librium, and the Pursuit of Happiness"	Tranquilizers
1977	Open	Tim Gambe	Illinois Central College (Illinois)	(untitled)	Decline in reading and writing skills in schools
1978	Open	Ruth Brenner	University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire	"The Juvenile Justice Game"	Juvenile justice
1979	Open	Don Parker	Mankato State University (Minnesota)	"The Paper Pushers"	Document fraud

*The two divisions were reunified as of 1974.

Table 2

Interstate Oratorical Contest Locations: 1970 – 1979

Year	Site / School	Region
1970	West Yellowstone	West
1971	Omaha, Nebraska	Central
1972	Bowling Green, Kentucky (Western Kentucky U.)	East
1973	Mankato, Minnesota (Mankato State University)	Central
1974	Pueblo, Colorado	West
1975	Peoria, Illinois (Bradley University)*	Central
1976	Gatlinburg, Tennessee	East
1977	Eau Claire, Wisconsin (University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire)	Central
1978	Liberty, Missouri (William Jewell College)	Central
1979	Denver, Colorado	West

* Notes from the 1974 Business Meeting show that bids for the 1975 contest also came from North Dakota State University, St. Olaf College and the University of Wisconsin – Stout, but Bradley University won the bid to host in 1975.