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Early History of the Iowa Mathematics Section

By R. B. McCLENON

On a certain evening in November, 1915, a group of six mathematics teachers had supper together in a small restaurant in downtown Des Moines. As I remember the group, it consisted of Professors Smith, Baker, and Reilly of the State University, Professor Neff of Drake, Professor Wester of State Teachers, and myself. Since we had all been attending the discussions in the Iowa Education Association, we very naturally fell to conversing about the problem of mathematics teaching at the university and college level. We all felt that the programs of the State Teachers Association, as it was then named, left a good deal to be desired when it came to the problems peculiar to the "college" teacher. When someone, probably Professor A. G. Smith, suggested that what was needed was a new organization which would concern itself with the subject matter of the college field, we all agreed enthusiastically. We finally parted after agreeing that each one in his own sphere would endeavor to rouse sufficient interest in such a new organization that in the near future we might hope to see our desire turned into reality. I am sorry to say that of this group but two remain*; and I regret very much that Professor Neff is unable to be at this meeting to give his own recollections of that informal gathering which proved so pleasant and profitable to us all.

As it turned out, we were far from being the first ones who had laid plans of this sort. A large number of members of the American Mathematical Society and others interested in collegiate mathematics called a meeting at Columbus, Ohio, which was held at Columbus, Ohio, December 30, 1915. The only person from Iowa in attendance was Professor Baker of the State University; but two others who were destined to become members of this Iowa Section were present, namely Professor McKelvey of Cornell University and Professor Rietz of the University of Illinois. At this meeting the constitution was adopted, whose first article read, "This organization shall be known as the Mathematical Association of America. Its object shall be to assist in promoting the interests of mathematics in America, especially in the collegiate field." Article V, Entitled Sections reads thus: "Any group of members of this Association may petition the Council for authority to organize a Section of the Associ-

*Within the state of Iowa, I have been informed that Professor Wester is at present living on the Pacific Coast.

ation for the purpose of holding local meetings. The council shall have power to specify the conditions under which such authority shall be granted.”

The next event in the story is recorded in the May, 1916 number of the *Monthly*, p. 187: “At the meeting of the Iowa Academy of Science in Des Moines on April 27, the Members of the Mathematical Association of America who were present held a conference and decided to petition the Council for the establishment of an Iowa section. An organization was effected with Professor A. G. Smith, of the State University, as president, Professor G. A. Chaney, of the State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, as vice-president, and Professor I. F. Neff, of Drake University, as secretary-treasurer. Professor R. B. McClenon of Grinnell College and Professor J. F. Reilly of the State University were appointed a committee on membership. The officers were instructed to prepare and present a petition to the Council for the establishment of the Iowa Section, the petition to be sent for signatures to all the thirty-two members of the Association resident in the State of Iowa.

Prompt action followed, and in the September, 1916 number of the *Monthly* we find on p. 270 the following paragraph: “The petition for the establishment of a section made by the members of the Association in the State of Iowa has been granted through the Committee of the Council which has in charge the authorizing of sections. The Iowa Section is therefore duly constituted as the fourth section of the Mathematical Association of America.” The other three were the Ohio Section, the Kansas Section, and the Missouri Section. (Charter members of the Iowa Section now living in Iowa are Professor Neff, Professor Rusk, and myself.)

The report of the First Regular Meeting of the Iowa Section is on p. 281 of the June, 1917 issue of the *Monthly*. The meeting was held at Grinnell, and the topics of the papers were “A Unified Course for Freshman Mathematics,” “The Foundation of Freshman Mathematics in Technical Schools,” and “Putting life into dry bones.” It is stated that the business section voted to plan each year for two meetings of the Section. This laudable intention proved impractical in experience, after a short trial. In view of the increasingly large number of papers now being offered at the spring meeting, perhaps the executive committee might do well to consider returning to this the original plan.

The *Monthly* does not seem to have published an account of the second and third regular meetings of the Iowa Section; and as I happened to have been on leave of absence outside the State that

year, I was not present at either of these meetings. But on the first page of the *Monthly* for 1920 we read: "The Iowa Section of the Mathematical Association of America met for its fourth regular meeting on April 26, 1919, in connection with the Iowa Academy of Science, at the Iowa State Teachers College, Cedar Falls, Iowa." The first paper is stated to be by Professor Rietz, "On the Teaching of a First Course in Mathematics." This is a slip of the pen for "On the Teaching of a First Course in Calculus," under which title the paper had already been published in the 1919 Volume of the *Monthly*, p. 341-344. The other papers on this excellent and varied program were so far as I know not published. They included topics from arithmetic, algebra, trigonometry, calculus, and differential equations.

The Sixth Regular Meeting of the Iowa Section is reported on p. 346 of the 1920 Volume of the *Monthly*. At this meeting the recorded attendance reached for the first time twenty members of the Section. The program was, as usual, helpful to those present, and an interesting item was an original construction of the 17-gon by a student.

The eighth regular meeting of the Section was held at Indianola, April 30, 1921, and is reported in the *Monthly* for 1921, p. 407. This is the first program which is accompanied by abstracts of the papers given. The topics considered are wide-ranging.

The first account of a fall meeting of the Section is found on p. 1 of the 1922 *Monthly*. This, the ninth regular meeting of the Section, was held in Des Moines on November 4, 1921. At this meeting Professor McKelvey presented the report of a committee of three on mathematics requirements for prospective teacher. Would that the recommendations given then could have been carried out in practice! Unfortunately, it seems perhaps more unlikely now than it did then that this can be accomplished in the near future. But it was at least interesting to think over the question, and the results of this meeting, as of the others before and since, have been valuable to most of us in our work as teachers.

The tenth regular meeting of the Section will be a suitable place to close these recollections. This session was held at Des Moines, April 29, 1922. The program was, as always, stimulating and helpful; but the chief feature of the meeting in my own memory was that four of our original six who had met in 1915 were present this time—Neff, Reilly, Wester, and myself.

In conclusion, it would be wrong to omit stating what is a fact, that with the passing years the new men who have from year to year

joined us have raised the standard of work done in the Section to continually higher levels:, so that we may with good reason hope for still further progress in the future.

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