

An Enchanted Convention

by John Farrow

I bet people would like to do this in Albuquerque.

So began the 2001 RRCA National Convention in a car driving back from Colorado Springs in 1997. No one in that car had ever attended a national convention before, but now that we had, we were full of energy and excitement and plans of our own.

Notes were jotted on the backs of seminar flyers: *Kid's Running* became "Committees," *Basic Newsletter Graphics* became "Fun Runs," *Club Websites* became "Volunteers." By the time we started down Raton Pass and back into New Mexico, we had several pages of outlines and notes.

Now what? Nobody knew. Time to call National.

1998: Peoria Is Next To Normal.

Peoria, Illinois. The middle of Middle America -- an All-American City. The most average place in the country where every woman has 1.86 children. It was there that we traveled to present our proposal for hosting the convention.

However, if we were going to present this proposal, we would first have to survive the ravages of fierce Midwestern thunderstorms and, even worse, an airplane full of Shriners. At least they weren't riding their tricycles up and down the aisle.

At the convention hotel, I noticed that we had just missed the Glenn Miller Orchestra in town. I check my watch -- it doesn't display the decade. On the plus side, however, June had been proclaimed Accordion Awareness Month. Perhaps here in Lawrence Welk's backyard the accordion is a popular instrument, but the entire month of June? Back in Texas we would let them out only once a year at Oktoberfest.

Peoria is justly proud of its sons and daughters who have gone on to make good,

including Betty Friedan. Fittingly, next door to the convention hotel at Big Al's, the feminine mystique was on full display in the person of Miss Nude USA.

But it was time for business -- an Inquisition before the RRCA executive board curious as to why in the world we would want to host their convention out in the desert -- **Don Kardong** as Lord High Priest, **Freddi Carlip** as Chief Interrogator and **Henley Gabeau** with her hands on the screws. Or so we thought. When all was said and done, we were blessed with the 2001 convention.

2000: What On Earth Have We Done?

This is going nowhere, fast. There's going to be a convention here before we know it and nothing is getting done. Like the proverbial dog who has finally caught the car, we have no clue as to what to do with this convention.

Sure, there are some three-year old notes and a written proposal, but that was the easy part. What is needed are some ideas to provide a semblance of order.

How about, you know, uh . . . maybe, you know, like burritos . . . or petroglyphs . . . and then, uh, well, Old Town and . . . yeah, Route 66 . . . maybe the Aquarium . . . you know, red or green . . . sponsors -- what sponsors? . . . volunteers -- why me? . . .

A verb, guys. We need a verb.

Slowly, almost grudgingly, things began to take shape. While progress was slow, we were finally, mercifully, under way. Soon the hotel renovation was finished and beautifully done. Final planning sessions were held sitting around the pool. Guests begin arriving.

Thursday: Under the Moray Eels.

It's chilly out, but the colorful RRCA light sculpture offers the promise of a warm reception within. The day has been spent in executive board and state representative meetings, and by now all were in need of good cheer and spirits. And within the labyrinthine Albuquerque Aquarium, they found both.

After wending their way through a fascinating array of exhibits on the marine habitats of the Gulf

of Mexico -- salt marsh, eelgrass meadow, surf zone, coral reef, open ocean -- members gathered in front of a huge tank of sharks, rays, spiny lobsters, beaky parrotfish and fluttering butterflyfish to mingle amid the soothing melodies of a guitar duo.

Western Region Director **Po Adams** and Colorado state rep **Lisa Paige** were engrossed by the guitars animated conversation as Texan **Mel Cyrak** held forth nearby. Across the way, RRCA President **Freddi Carlip** and Georgia state rep (by way of Santa Fe) **Marlene Atwood** caught up on the latest while Executive Board Director **Mark Lidman** and New Yorker **Jim Stasaitis** enjoyed a laugh.

Overhead, the moray eels glided back and forth above the gathering in their glass-bottomed aquarium, oblivious to the good times down below.

Friday: Chasing An Inside Straight With a Shot and a Beer.

In an opening ceremony that will be long-remembered, **Allen Roy Paquin**, part Zuni and part Jicarilla Apache, entranced those gathered with a haunting version of the Zuni Sunrise Song, a blessing for those gathered. It marked the 44th RRCA National Convention as something unique.

Then it was down to business as members disbursed to regional meetings. Primary on the agenda was the subject of state championship races and kids' running, which state reps were urged to promote. The Western Region also considered such problems as the fact that it is illegal to run on city streets in Montana.

At the *Runner's World* State Rep Lunch, **Marlene Atwood** was recognized as State Rep of the Year. She summed up the prevailing sentiment quite nicely: *I wouldn't want to be anyplace else in the world.*

The afternoon flew by with seminars on *Runner's Health*, chaired by ARR's own **Dr. Marie Boyd**, *Promoting Children's Running* with Florida's **Kim Ottaviani**, while *Working With Sponsors* included a panel of **Mel Cyrak**, founder of the Dallas White Rock 'n' Roll Run, and **Nancy Karpheim**, assistant race director of the Bix 7 in Davenport, Iowa. Elsewhere, 76-year young **Po Adams** chaired the *Master's Running* seminar,

while those interested in *Course Certification* headed out on a fleet of bicycles to learn how to make certain that no one's 10k would be four miles long.

Later, runners gathered outside for the afternoon Poker Run through the bosque and down to the zoo. Competition for a better hand was fast and furious (*I'll see your 7 and raise you a 10*), even if the pace was not. The best I could do was an inside straight, good for maybe a side bet in Tucumcari. Several runners worked their way to five aces. Where is Wyatt Earp when you need him?

Part way to the zoo, what should appear but a wondrous aid station staffed by none other than Las Tres Amigas de los High Desert Wind Runners, offering the best in libations from South of the border! The pace slowed noticeably -- mañana and margaritas on everyone's mind! Just remind me to never again have a shot of tequila in the middle of a run.

Where do you guys keep the oxygen around here? It was one of our friends from Norfolk.

I hear there's a big cloud of it hanging over the Eastern Seaboard right about now.

Eventually everyone made it past the aid station and there was plenty of barbecued ribs and chicken at the zoo, while the *Running Times* auction offered hot bargains on cool items. However, a cold wind blew in and the action soon adjourned.

It was back to the hospitality suite of the Tidewater Striders, where the generous hosts of next year's convention plied us with more food and drink and good cheer. The prospect of a Virginia ham is just too much to resist.

Saturday: Burrito Deluxe.

Dawn saw 175 runners admiring centuries-old petroglyphs as they climbed the escarpment to the West Mesa during the Breakfast Burrito Fun Run. Soon a glorious sunrise flooded over the cloud-shrouded Sandia Mountains as runners returned from the vicinity of the extinct volcano cones. Afterward, all got their daily Dos with a breakfast burrito at *Dos Hermanos* -- red or green, of course.

The morning flew by with seminars on *Creating Successful Newsletters* with **Lani**

Johnson, *Better Websites* with **Warren Fink**, and *Club Legal and Financial Management* with **Libby Lord**. Coaches also continued their certification process.

If it's noon on Saturday at an RRCA convention, it must be **Bart Yasso's** Outdoor Adventure Lunch. Even if you have seen the slides and heard the stories before, they never seem to get old. And today being Cinco de Mayo, Bart started it all off by breaking a piñata filled with Powerbars and gel.

His insights always shed new light on running to the top of Mt. Whitney (you have to walk 11 miles back down to the road), in Antarctica (penguins are preceded by their smell) or in Sri Lanka with its rhinos (they are the definitive turn-around point of any run). And of course, the Bare Buns 5k raises the question of whether or not to show your medal to your mother.

The afternoon held more seminars (*Club and Race Management, Volunteers, Women's Running*) before the annual business meeting opened to an exciting new PowerPoint presentation on the RRCA, complete with U2 soundtrack, created by *Footnotes* editor **Megan Kearney**. After the financials and a few business matters, long-time Executive Director **Henley Gabeau** stunned the group by announcing her retirement this Fall. Her statement was so unexpected that Western Region Director **Po Adams** fell off her chair, literally.

The evening's awards banquet also featured the PowerPoint presentation, but with a few extra slides added in tribute to Henley, causing a sustained and heart-felt standing ovation for someone who has given more than 20 years of service to the RRCA.

The keynote speaker was legendary track coach **Joe Vigil**, whose remarks cited from the vision of Thomas Jefferson to the humanity of Emil Zatopek -- and quite a bit in between as he encouraged runners to work hard as well as to always have a goal in their pursuit of excellence. *It is the process, not the end result. If you don't try, there is no purpose.*

Sunday: Endangered Feces.

Sunday morning arrived much too early for those who helped close down the awards banquet,

but arrive it did, and in beautiful fashion. Gone was the cold, swirling wind and clouds, replaced by warm sunshine, expansive skies and calm air.

Part way through the Run for the Zoo 10k, I notice the extremely precarious nature of the position in which I am running. Directly in front of me is a runner wearing a shirt extolling the virtues of a variety of exotic animals. In large brown (*brown!*) letters are the words *Endangered Feces*.

This is not the best of places to be, a point I take pains to make known to my aching body. Come hell or high water, this is one runner we are not going to stay behind.

Slowly, somewhere in the vicinity of the Country Club I finally ease in front of him, a very small accomplishment on an otherwise rather unaccomplished morning. At the finish, it is time to savor a few popsicles while saying goodbye to friends from around the country before heading home to crash for a long nap.□

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