



Twenty Five Years of Developing a Community of Humor Scholars by Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L. F. Nilsen

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As English teachers, we were attracted to the study of humor not so much through literature as through language play. We wanted to make our grammar lessons more interesting than students seemed to think they were, and since both creating and catching onto humor requires an understanding of complex language structures, we decided to study people's figurative and playful uses of language. Our interest in humor soon extended far beyond language play because like people hiking into Arizona's Grand Canyon, the further into humor studies we got the bigger it became.

Our work with humor can be divided into three main parts. First, were the six WHIM (Western Humor and Irony Membership) conferences which we held at Arizona State University on April Fools Day weekends from 1982 through 1987. Second, we helped to organize and run the ISHS (International Society for Humor Studies), which sponsors annual humor research conferences and publishes a highly refereed quarterly: *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. Our third contribution is our writing about humor, which culminated in our *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor* (Oryx Press, 2000). It was judged by the American Library Association as one of 20 Outstanding Reference Sources in 2001 and by *Choice* magazine as an Outstanding Academic Book for 2000.

In 1972, the year before we moved to Arizona State University from Iowa, where Don was teaching linguistics at the University of Northern Iowa and Alleen was earning her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa, we convinced the UNI English Department, to sponsor a conference on metaphor. We noticed that the presentations and the breakout sessions, which received the most enthusiastic responses, were the ones that touched on aspects of humor. In Arizona, we waited until we were both fully established at Arizona State University to apply for a grant from the Arizona Humanities Council to hold a WHIM (Western Humor and Irony Membership) humor conference on the April 1st weekend of 1982. We expected that those who came would be people much like ourselves: English teachers who wanted to talk about the humor techniques used in literature. We were happily surprised when not only these people came, but also medical practitioners, scientists, writers, politicians, social activists, performers, journalists, psychologists, and the general public. We learned that biologists give funny names to newly developed plants, while astronomers do the same for the names of features on the moon and for minor planets. One year students from our dance department performed a humorous dance for lunchtime entertainment, while another year our music department gave a humorous recital.

Three out of our six years we had some funding from the Arizona Humanities Council. Two years we had modest funding from ASU, and one year we had to do it without any outside support. Because of the funding from the Humanities Council, the events had to be open to the public at no cost. So even before the conference began, we had a good illustration of irony in that we charged the speakers and let the listeners come for free. We required that people who proposed speaking pay a \$25.00 membership fee to our newly organized WHIM organization. Besides coming to the conference, their membership would entitle them to receive a copy of WHIMSY (Western Humor and Irony Membership Serial Yearbook) which would be published and ready for sale at the next conference. Rather than publishing the abstracts as a conference proceeding, we chose what we called "concretes," especially interesting paragraphs or observations. We were compiling these in the days before computers were common and so they

are easily identifiable as “desktop” publications. When we sent one to our University President, Russell Nelson, he sent a tactful thank-you note acknowledging that he had never received anything “quite like it.” In spite of their quaintness, we are glad we have them as a record of the six conferences:

- 1982: The Language of Humor; The Humor of Language
- 1983: Humor and Metaphor
- 1984: Contemporary Humor
- 1985: Humor Across the Disciplines
- 1986: American Humor
- 1987: International Humor

We were so eager for the conferences to succeed that we started publicizing the first one months in advance. Early in the fall, we read that Art Buchwald was coming to the Phoenix area for a speaking engagement. We wrote and ask him to have lunch with an ASU planning committee working on the proposed humor conference. When he agreed, we invited about a dozen faculty members along with a half-dozen local newspaper reporters that we judged to have some interest in humor to lunch in a conference room at ASU’s Student Union. Alleen stayed as host at the lunch while Don went out to pick up Buchwald at a Scottsdale resort. She was frantically scrambling in her mind how she could conduct an ad hoc planning meeting in case Don didn’t get back with the guest of honor. Thank goodness, Don found Buchwald and also managed to find an on-campus parking place so that by the time people had eaten their salads, Don and Buchwald strolled in. We had a lively question-and-answer session. The most valuable of Buchwald’s observations was that a humor conference couldn’t possibly succeed because people would come expecting to laugh constantly for three days and that was impossible. With his challenge fresh in our minds, we began spreading the word that this was to be an “academic” conference on humor, not a joke festival. We also planned it so that different people would attend different sessions. A few years later, we nominated Buchwald for an honorary doctorate and when he came to speak at graduation, we had the pleasure of telling him that at least partially because of his original warning—or challenge—the conferences were mostly a success.

Over the course of the six conferences, we learned that more people like to speak about, rather than listen to, observations on humor in particular pieces of literature. We puzzled over why we always got the most proposals for sessions on literature, but that the audiences in the literature break-out sessions were always the smallest. We decided it was because in a 20-minute paper a speaker does not have time to both introduce the audience to the author and the book and also to discuss the humor. We remembered that the literature sessions we enjoyed the most were always about books that had read.

Another of our observations was that tension exists between researchers and practitioners. Since noticing this in humor studies, we have also seen it in such fields as medicine and between faculty members in the university’s academic units and their counterparts in Colleges of Education. It distressed us to see “scholars” rolling their eyes and in other ways expressing a sense of superiority to the people doing workshops or advocating using humor as a tool for relaxation or for the building of a spirit of friendliness and well-being. We operated on a theory of inclusiveness, first because it was a requirement of our grants, and second because we think there is something to be said for having a critical mass. We also believe that practitioners and scholars can learn from each other, but at the same time we recognize that in a field such as humor, which is already academically suspect, there is something to be said for making sure that the scholarship is above reproach.

A related issue is the difference in people's attitudes towards publicity. From the very beginning we courted publicity by inviting local reporters to the first meeting with Art Buchwald. Some years we would have panel presentations by reporters and editors. Among the editors who made these presentations was Alexander Kohn from Israel, founding editor of the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, which has now morphed into *AIR* (Annals of Improbable Research) connected with the MIT Museum and its annual Ig Noble awards. Other participating editors included Reinhold Aman, editor of *Maledicta*; Scot Morris, the puzzles editor for *Penthouse*; Charles Preston, the "Salt and Pepper" cartoon editor for *The Wall Street Journal*; and Paul Krassner, editor of the satire newsletter *The Realist*. Partly because we met on April Fools Day, which is a beautiful time of year in Arizona, and also a minor holiday that the media want to acknowledge in some way, several major papers and magazines sent reporters. But no matter what publicity we received, conference attendees complained because the reporters would present such ironies as photos of someone asleep in the audience or overblown titles appearing on papers about fairly simple concepts. But we noticed that even the most critical scholars never turned down an invitation to be interviewed for television. The year of the International Conference in 1987, conference speakers were featured on *Nightline*, and in one of the earlier years, the *Today* show came out and did a feature story. When NBC phoned to make arrangements, Alleen confused everyone by proudly announcing that "*Today* is coming tomorrow."

Our first Saturday night joke-telling contest was only a modest success. The setting was too formal (we stayed in the same auditorium as where we held the keynote speeches) and by Saturday night people were ready to move off-campus. We were so worried about not having enough participants that we even bribed (or coerced) our son, who was then an ASU student, to tell a joke. In later years, we held the contest across the street in a hotel ballroom where people could sit at tables, buy drinks, and wander in and out as in a nightclub. Another key to a successful contest is having a lively moderator. Some years we were lucky to have comedians Paul Krassner and Larry Wilde doing the job. We didn't pay as much attention to who was judging the contest and one year a judge stood up at the opening and solemnly announced that there were to be no ethnic or gender-based jokes. Half of the joke-tellers visibly wilted as their minds frantically scrambled to come up with politically correct jokes.

One memorable contest was won by Claudia Foy, a deaf student from ASU who signed her jokes while an interpreter spoke the words. Another was won by a psychologist from New York. Part of his success was his Brooklyn accent, which in Arizona seemed almost exotic. A newspaper reporter asked him where he got his prize-winning joke and he said that one of his patients had told it to him. The reporter, thinking she was getting into the spirit of the conference, jumped to the conclusion that he analyzed his patients' problems through the jokes they told him. He quickly let her know that she was reading way too much into it. "Never underestimate," he said, "the simple power of a patient and a doctor laughing together."

At the first conference, we had enough money to pay basic expenses for only a couple of speakers. Don chose to invite Hamlin Hill from the University of New Mexico to serve as a draw for people interested in American humor. Alleen chose to invite Cheri Kramerae, a feminist linguist from the University of Illinois, to serve as a draw for a strand on feminist humor, an idea which at the time was considered an oxymoron. Throughout the conferences we never paid a speaker's fee. At the most we paid for airline tickets, and if we had enough registrants at local hotels to earn free rooms, we offered these as enticements to keynote speakers. We also waived the WHIM membership fee for "keynote" speakers, which we

defined as anyone who spoke to the whole conference instead of to a break-out session, which means that in a three-day meeting we might have as many as forty or fifty “keynote” speakers.

We began referring to our annual gatherings as “Stone Soup” conferences because they developed so much like the old folktale about the French soldiers who came to a town that claimed to have absolutely no food to spare. The soldiers offered to show the townspeople how to make soup from a pot of water and three smooth stones. After they had this concoction boiling, they hinted that it would be even better if only someone would add an onion and someone else a little salt and maybe a little pepper. Then someone else contributed a carrot, and then a handful of beans and a piece of ham, and so on.

One of our favorite “Stone Soup” contributions came to us while we were eating lunch at a Chinese restaurant. A woman in the booth next to ours leaned her head over and said, “Aren’t you the humor conference people?” When we acknowledged that we were, she told us that her best friend was married to the writer Max Shulman, the author of *Barefoot Boy with Cheek* and head writer for the *Dobie Gillis* television series. She was eager for a visit from her friend and so begged us to invite Shulman to speak at the conference. When we explained that we didn’t have any money, she assured us that wouldn’t be a problem because the Shulman’s could stay at her house and they owed her a visit anyway. She gave us her name and the Shulman’s address and we went right back to the office and sent a letter. It worked, and Shulman was a wonderful after-lunch speaker.

Another “Stone Soup” contribution came from Alleen’s being in charge of the Arizona Young Reader’s awards in which children voted through their school libraries for their favorite authors. She arranged for the celebration to be held at ASU on the day before the humor conference so that the authors who came for that celebration (mostly with financial support from their publishers) could stay and do a session on humor in children’s books at our WHIM conference for children and their parents. Nationally famous authors appearing at the first conference included Tomie De Paola, Jack Prelutsky, Mike Thaler, Alvin Schwartz, and Jerry and Helen Weiss. This “Humor in Children’s Literature” session proved to be such a good idea that we often repeated it even after the conferences went to different cities. Our best event in recent years was in 1994 when we met at Ithaca College in upstate New York. Being this close to New York City made it easier to entice authors to come. Paul Zindel, Joan Bauer, Paula Danziger, Jerry and Helen Weiss, and Bruce Coville participated in an evening session open to the public and jointly sponsored by the Ithaca Public Library.

Other celebrities who over the six years attended our conferences through variations on our “Stone Soup” approach included Presidential speech writers Gene Perret and Robert Orben; poets Eve Merriam and Lee Bennett Hopkins; Laurence Peter, most famous for developing “The Peter Principle,” cartoon collector James Heineman; and Gershon Legman, the world’s foremost collector of dirty jokes.

The 1987 conference on International Humor was the culmination of our efforts. Thanks to James Boren, six of the top Soviet humor scholars, writers, or cartoonists were in attendance. We also had participants from throughout the United States and from Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, England, France, Iran, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, Poland, South Africa, Turkey, and Wales. By this time, the ASU community was well acquainted with the conferences, and faculty and staff responded positively when we sent out a call for help to host some of the international scholars so that they would not have to pay a hotel bill on top of their airfare. As we go around campus today, we still occasionally run into someone who reminds us of who they hosted for this last conference.

President Nelson gave a reception for the international visitors and presented gifts to the Soviet delegation. They were guests of honor because in April of 1987 *glasnost* was just on the horizon, and in fact one scholar was not allowed to come and so sent his adult son instead. Because of his official government affiliation he was on a restricted list. He could have come as far as Phoenix, but not to the ASU campus because our campus was within a proscribed mile limitation enforced both by the US and the USSR in relation to their respective military bases. The location in question was Williams Air Force Base, which has now been decommissioned and turned into ASU East Campus. Because of the Soviet participation, prior to the conference two FBI agents came to our house to interview us and find out just what we were up to. At the conference itself, two different agents tried to be inconspicuous. They were unsuccessful, especially after comedian Paul Krassner, who was one of the famous protestors of the 1960s, stood up in the opening session and solemnly asked, "Would the two FBI agents please stand up so we can acknowledge their presence." Of course no one stood up.

The most fun that the Soviet delegation had was an evening spent at Rawhide, a Wild West entertainment center twenty-five miles north of Tempe in the desert. After a chuck wagon cookout, they dressed in cowboy costumes and had their pictures taken with a sexy barmaid playing the role of an 1880s saloon keeper. The most embarrassing moment occurred midday on Saturday when they heard a loud siren go off from atop the butte that forms the north side of the ASU campus. When they asked what it was, someone gave the automatic explanation of it being a test for the air raid warning system in case Russians attacked. Word of the conversation traveled in hushed tones through the conference attendees with none of us knowing whether to laugh or be embarrassed. Shortly after this event, the Saturday siren was permanently retired.

By the end of the 1987 conference, we had used up every favor anyone at ASU had ever owed us and we were more than happy to accept Victor Raskin's offer to hold the 1988 conference at Purdue University. One of our doctoral students, Margaret Baker, took on the responsibility in 1989 at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. At the Hawaii conference we undertook the formal organization of the International Society for Humor Studies. Even though we changed WHIM to stand for World (instead of Western) Humor and Irony Membership, it was obviously a detriment to young scholars trying to get financial support for a conference, especially one being held in Hawaii. We appointed a constitution committee and elected a slate of officers.

Don volunteered to serve as Executive Secretary, a job which at the end of 2004 he is turned over to Martin Lampert, a psychology professor at Holy Names University in Oakland. Don's job had been to provide continuity, to lend support to conference conveners, to run the elections for officers, and to collect the dues. Because the journal was printed first in Germany and then in England, Don also took on the job of mailing out the individual copies to members, while the publishers (Mouton de Gruyter) handled library subscriptions. Perhaps Don's most long lasting contribution, will be the bibliographies of humor research that he began compiling and printing on a variety of topics. At last count he had nearly 150 on topics ranging from such authors as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, John Irving, James Thurber, and Mark Twain to such topics as Legal Humor, Language Play, Psychology and Humor, Humor in Education, and Health and Healing. Students and other researchers frequently contacted him for copies, and when new members joined he would send them copies on topics related to their interests. He used to mail out paper copies, but now he sends them electronically. Martin Lampert is in the process of putting the most important ones on the ISHS website so they will be fully accessible.

Don started the bibliographies in connection with the WHIM conferences where he would distribute lists of the books written by conference speakers. He also solicited display copies from publishers and from authors. After he had recorded bibliographic information and displayed the books at a conference, he would mark them with a big WHIM LENDING LIBRARY stamp and let attendees borrow them for a year. We still meet people around the country who guiltily confess that they have a WHIM LENDING LIBRARY book on their shelf.

Under the ISHS constitution, host institutions for the conferences now alternate between the United States and other countries. Our world travel itinerary depends wholly on where the ISHS conferences are held. We've been to Hawaii, Luxembourg, France, Australia, Norway, Japan, and Italy. We are looking forward to going to Denmark in 2006 and either to Taiwan or South Africa (the decision is still being made) for 2008.

Alleen's contributions to ISHS have been serving on the Constitution Committee and holding various offices. She was president in 1992 when ISHS met with its French counterpart in Paris and again in 2001 when Larry Mintz was the Conference Convener at the University of Maryland in College Park. Through 2003, she edited a "Humor in the News" column, which was included as a feature in each issue of the journal. The original purpose of the column was to find a sophisticated way of including something that would make readers smile, if not to laugh, in a scholarly journal. But as with many incidents of humor, the column turned out to have more value than simple amusement because it recorded changes in cultural attitudes toward humor in public life.

We were fortunate to be inaugurating our WHIM humor conferences in the 1980s because during Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981-1989) his skillful and usually beneficent or self-mocking use of humor inspired a general interest in the role that humor can play in communication in general, and in politics, in particular. In 1986, former President Ford added to the idea by working with the Gerald R. Ford Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan to sponsor a symposium on Humor and the Presidency. While the late comedian Pat Paulsen, who had himself run for president several times, compared the event to an "Ayatollah Khomeini Symposium on the Sexual Revolution," the popular press gave it considerable attention. Photographs of President Ford tripping Chevy Chase, who had made jokes about Ford's awkwardness, were widely printed in newspapers and magazines.

Also in the 1980s, Arizona's Congressman Morris K. Udall was so well known for his ability to bring out an appropriate story or joke that he named his 1988 memoir *Too Funny to be President*. While on the surface, this sounds like a put-down for humor, many people would say that it was his extraordinary skill in finding just the right story to tell at the right time that put Udall in the position of being considered as a presidential candidate. However, by the time he died in 1998 times had changed. While praising him for his funny and non-antagonist humor, fellow Arizonan Bruce Babbitt observed that Udall would have been out of place in "a Congress like we have now," where legislators no longer take time "to tell a story, to philosophize a little bit" or to laugh at themselves.

Another change in attitude that the newsletter chronicled was a change in the general public's wish-fulfilling hope that humor could cure illness. In the 1980s people were excited about Norman Cousins's 1979 *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration*. Humor fans had high hopes when they heard that Robin Williams was going to star in a 1998 movie, *Patch Adams*, based on the true story of Dr. Patch Adams. But when the movie came out, it was generally panned by reviewers with such comments as this one from our local newspaper, "Some people will buy into *Patch Adams*. But you have to be able

to stomach a heaping platter full of hokum to do it.” Humor scholars have begun asking such hard questions as, “Even if it could be proven that people with a sense of humor live longer, would it be clear which was the cause and which was the effect?” and “How does the amount of adrenalin and other ‘good’ chemicals in a patient’s blood compare after a hearty laugh and after a visit from a clergyman, a gift of flowers, or in a children’s ward after a visit from someone’s pet?”

Other “downer” stories that Alleen reported on included the one about the Montreal Museum of Humor closing indefinitely after having been open for only ten months in 1993 and 94. It had lost \$10,000 in each of its ten months of existence. In a similar story, in its sixth year of operation, the \$15 million International Museum of Cartoon Art in Boca Raton, Florida had to close its doors and go searching for a less expensive home. Another disappointment was that the \$5 million investment from Mohamed al-Fayed to reinvigorate England’s *Punch* magazine was to no avail. Sadly, the magazine was put to rest a second time and editor Peter McKay good naturedly mused on a quote from former editor Malcolm Muggeridge who observed that “England is the only place where trying to be funny is considered an insult.”

If Alleen were still compiling the newsletter (Amy Carroll from the University of Central Oklahoma now does it), she would have written that the biggest blow to those of us who love humor occurred in the spring of 2004 with the release of the photos taken at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These photos of smiling and joking young Americans abusing Iraqi prisoners would not have been nearly so emotionally wrenching, nor so damaging to American interests, had the perpetrators of the events not been joking and laughing.

On a more positive note, one of the things Alleen learned from doing the newsletter is how the world is starved for humor as shown by how hard the producers of newspapers and other media look for ways to include humor where it is not expected; for example in news stories about humor controversies, humor-related milestones, and humor contests such as the Annual Bulwer-Lytton contest for “wretched writers.” As part of this, humorists get longer obituaries than other famous people because the writers of obituaries are eager to balance out the basic sadness of their stories so they include humorous anecdotes and quotes. The newsletter reported on an unusual number of humor-related obituaries because many of the “greats” who in the second half of the twentieth century were responsible for developing humor appropriate to the new media of television, animation, and syndicated newspapers have now reached old age. When Milton Berle died in 2002, Joseph Epstein wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that Berle’s death “marks not the end of an era, as the lower platitudinarians like to say, but the closing down of the memory of a unified popular culture in America. By this I mean a menu of entertainment events that the better part of the nation could enjoy.”

Among the other humor pioneers now deceased are scholars Walter Blair, Hamlin Hill, Gershon Legman, and Willard Espy (all but Walter Blair had come to our Arizona conferences); musician Victor Borge, columnists Erma Bombeck and Lewis Grizzard, authors Douglas Adams, Jean Kerr, Ken Kesey, Joseph Heller, and Jean Shephard; and children’s entertainers Buffalo Bob Smith (*Howdy Doody*), Bob Keeshon (*Captain Kangaroo*), and puppeteers Shari Lewis and Senor Wences. Other deaths include those of comedians Henny Youngman, Alan King, Joey Adams, Steve Allen, and Red Skelton; actress Imogene Coca, actors Jack Lemmon and Ray Walston (*My Favorite Martian*), film producer Billy Wilder, animator William Hanna, cartoonists George Price, Mischa Richter, Al Hirschfeld, Herblock, and Bill Mauldin; and television stars Allen Funt and Carroll O’Connor (Archie Bunker).

When Charles Schultz died in January of 2000, Gary Trudeau observed that the world had lost the creator of the first postmodern comic strip. When Hank Ketcham died in 2001, Brian Walker, who had just curated an exhibit of *Dennis the Menace* cartoons, observed that his father, Mort Walker, along with Hank Ketcham and Charles Schultz “began their iconic strips within about six months of each other in the early 1950s. All three...came from the Depression-era generation that valued hard work. They did not understand the whole idea of taking time off for sabbaticals.”

Alleen’s keeping close tabs on news from the humor world made our third contribution to humor studies feasible. One of Don’s former students happened to work at the Oryx Press in Phoenix, which published specialized encyclopedias. She suggested to her company that the Nilsens could probably write an encyclopedia about American humor. When the Oryx editors contacted us, Don responded positively because when in 1992 he had published an annotated bibliography on scholarship relating to American literature, he had been restricted to 300 words per entry and was eager to give fuller treatment to many ideas. Alleen was enthusiastic because she had saved drawers full of news clippings collected for the “Humor in the News” column.

The Oryx editors were surprised that we wanted to do the writing ourselves rather than parcel it out to our friends. Our reasoning was that we couldn’t imagine how to divide up the subjects so as to ask for contributions and if we were that foggy about it, how would we keep contributors from overlapping and repeating each other. Besides, we weren’t sure we had that many friends we could lean on. Our first assignment was to make a list of all the topics we wanted to treat, while the next assignment was to look at fairly recent reviews of books about humor—this is when we were glad we had saved our copies of *To Wit*, the newsletter of the American Humor Studies Association. The co-incidence of our doing the work at the turn of the century inspired the idea of a 100-year history, but we cheated a bit by including Mark Twain and even a few non-Americans on the grounds that their influence had been too great on the twentieth century to be ignored.

The only way we could envision writing such a big book was to look at each subject as an article for a magazine or a journal. We decided that if we did one article a week, we would have the book finished in 110 weeks. The only problem was that the editors wanted it within one year, so we had to speed up. When we turned it all in, it was too long and we had to cut back to 98 topics, but we saved some of the material by squeezing it into the other essays. Another bit of “wasted” work was that by thinking of each piece as a magazine article, we started out by devising “interesting” lead-ins. Editor Henry Rasoff rejected the variety we were trying for and had us come back to starting each article with some kind of a definition of what we meant by the topic. At the time we were disappointed, but now we are grateful for his suggestion because it lends a degree consistency to the book.

As to our future plans, we hope to continue being active in the American Humor Studies Association and in the International Society for Humor Studies. We smile as we hear about people making proposals for meetings in 2008 and 2010 because we aren’t sure how much longer we will be up to international travel. Already we know that we are too old to lug mail tubs of journals to the post office, but so far we are still teaching and writing. Because ASU is such a huge conglomerate, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is instituting a program of related courses for incoming students. The idea is that approximately 20 students will be grouped to take three classes together on a related topic. We are trying to design one on humor without being so playful that parents will demand a tuition reimbursement.

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