

# Fifty Years of Cable Camaraderie

The Cable TV Pioneers are marking five decades as 'keepers of the flame'

BY K.C. NEEL

It started out in 1966 over a nice dinner at the Americana Hotel in Miami Beach, Fla., celebrating 21 of the cable industry's most influential members.

This year, the Cable TV Pioneers will host more than 550 people at its annual dinner gala on May 15 in Boston.

Along the way, it helped create and sustain what is now The Cable Center, the cable industry's historical and educational hub, in Denver.

Not bad for an organization that will induct 14 new members to its impressive rolls this year (see page 46). They are, alphabetically: Jeff Bewkes of Time Warner Inc.; Charles David Cerullo of INSP; Glenn Duval of Challenger Cable Sales; Leslie Ellis of Ellis Edits Inc.; Marwan Fawaz of Sarepta Partners; John Gibbs of Comcast; Steve Goldmintz of Marcum Search; John E. Heslip of Comcast; Yvette Kanouff of Cisco Systems; Peter Kiley of C-SPAN Networks; Mark Lieberman of Viamedia Inc.; Mike Mason of Comcast; John Arthur Ogren of SpeedConnect and Brian Roberts of Comcast.

After that first dinner, Fred Stevenson, who ran Rogers TV Cable in Rogers, Ark., sent an enthusiastic letter to all the original pioneers, asking whether any of them would be willing shell out \$5 for a color photo of the group taken at the dinner.

## 'JUST KEEP BREATHING'

A couple of weeks later, after hearing from only a couple of pioneers, Stevenson sent out a tongue-in-cheek press release announcing that an organizational meeting of the Pioneers Club had taken place in Stevenson's office. "Only Mr. Stevenson was present at this organizational meeting and, being eminently qualified for the job, especially because of his age, he was nominated (by Stevenson), seconded (by Stevenson) and subsequently elected by acclamation (by Stevenson) to be the new executive chairman or this illustrious new club."

"When asked what the purpose and goals of the club would be, [Stevenson] replied, 'No purpose, no goals, no nothing. Just keep breathing.'"

Eventually Stevenson ex-



The Cable Pioneers tradition continued in 2015 when the latest class was inducted ahead of INTX in Chicago.

## TAKEAWAY

The Cable TV Pioneers are celebrating a half-century of honoring the industry's influential members.

ited the group and Ben Conroy, who started Uvalde Television Cable in Uvalde, Texas, took over. Others who joined in to take leadership roles included Ed Adler of Weston Cable Television Corp.; Sandford Randolph, who built the cable system in Clarksburg, Va.; and Les Read, the HBO executive who has been the group's executive director since 1996 (and a Pioneer since 1977).

"Les is really the keeper of the flame," Susan Bitter Smith, the Pioneers board chair and executive director of the Southwest Cable Communications Association, said. "No one can duplicate his knowledge of the history of the Pioneers, the industry, and our members."

"Les knows and keeps track of every member and he has been invaluable not only for those amazing connections, but also for that incredible voice that guides us through the induction dinner every year."

The Cable Pioneers has always focused on camaraderie, community, friendship and a little networking. The dinners are traditionally formal affairs and held at the same time as the NCTA convention (now known as INTX).

## EMBRACING A CAUSE

In 1983, the executive committee decided the group needed a higher calling. Talks took place with Penn State University to form a cable-television museum and learning center at the university.

The museum opened in 1985 with \$20,000 in seed money. The Pioneers later undertook a campaign that raised \$2 million to provide an endowment for operations and to fund a chair at Penn State.

When the museum moved to University of Denver in 1997, the Pioneers again stepped in to help fund the operations of the Cable Center and expand the Hauser Oral History Project. While the organizations have two distinct boards and responsibilities, the Cable Center board and Cable TV Pioneers board work closely to advance the mission of the Cable Center.

As Mike Pandzik, founder of National Cable Television Cooperative and former chairman of Cable TV Pioneers, said in his oral history of the group: "We're not involved in world peace. We're not involved in nuclear disarmament. But in our little corner of the world, I think we do a very good job. And this Cable Center in Denver is a great example of what can happen when you get a bunch of people together who care about each other and care about their industry and want to leave something of substance."

Added Read: "It's the finest crowd in the business. You can't keep an old entrepreneur down. They just keep coming back, like rich people."

For more about the Cable Television Pioneers, please read on through these pages. **Q**



The plaque received by members of the Cable Pioneers' inaugural class in 1966.

# Cable Pioneers: 50 Facts for 50 Years

Fun things to know about a colorful group of industry influencers

BY K.C. NEEL

To help celebrate 50 years of the Cable Television Pioneers, here are 50 things we thought you should know about the group. Special thanks to Pat Kehoe, Les Read and Susan Bitter Smith for guidance.

**1.** To become a Cable Television Pioneer, you must have a minimum of 20 years of direct involvement in the cable industry and during those years have made a meaningful contribution in building the industry.

**2.** There are 534 active members. There are more people who were members who are now inactive, or have died.

**3.** There are 252 deceased Pioneers.

**4.** The first 21 cable TV executives in the group were honored with a plaque designating them as Cable TV Pioneers.

**5.** That first meeting came in 1966 during the National Cable & Television Association convention and took place at the Americana Hotel in Miami Beach, Fla.

**6.** The original 21 members were: **William Adler, George Barco, Charles Clements, Benjamin Conroy, Jack Crosby, Bill Daniels, Glenn Flinn, Fred Lieberman, Albin J. (Malin) Kozminski, Martin Malarkey, Bruce Merrill, Sandford Randolph, Albert Ricci, Gene Schneider, Milton Shapp, E. Stratford Smith, Fred Stevenson, Robert Tartlton, Archer Taylor, Frank Thompson, Edward Whitney.**

**7.** Jack Crosby is the sole living member of that first group.

**8.** Of the 21 original inductees, honored by **Stan Searle**, the publisher of *TV Communications* and *CATV Weekly*, 15 showed up to the dinner. The other six received a tongue-in-cheek letter from "social director" Ben Conroy asking for their resignation because they were no-shows.

**9.** In the beginning, there was no vision; no goal. It was simply a social club where competitors could get together and socialize as friends. It wasn't until later, when the group got involved with the Cable Museum at Pennsylvania State University, that a more formal mandate was created for the organization.

**10.** Two women were inducted into the group in 1967: **Polly Dunn**, who owned Columbus TV Cable Corp., and **Yolanda Barco**, an attorney and cable executive.

**11.** It took 12 years before another woman was inducted into the group.

**12.** By 1982, 16 years after the organization started, there were four women and about 200 men.

**13.** Of the 534 active members, 61 are women.

**14.** Initial inductee **Sandford Randolph**, who built cable systems throughout the South in the 1950s, served as the group's ad hoc executive director for the next two decades. He wore a gold dinner jacket every year.

**15.** That famous dinner jacket is part of the Cable TV Pioneers exhibit at the Cable Center in Denver.



The gold jacket Sandford Randolph wore to each year's Cable TV Pioneers induction now hangs in an exhibit at The Cable Center in Denver.



The initial Cable TV Pioneers class of 1966 boasted 21 members.

**16.** The largest Cable TV Pioneers class was in 1977 when 66 cable executives were inducted to the group.

**17.** The smallest Cable TV Pioneers class was in 1970, when three new members were inducted.

**18.** In the beginning, cable executives had to be involved in the cable industry for at least 10 years to be considered for membership into the Cable TV Pioneers.

**19.** To help keep the organization alive and fertile, someone from each incoming class must serve as a board member.

**20.** There are currently 13 active board members who serve three-year terms but the organization is in the process of rejiggering its bylaws to reduce the terms to two years and increase the number of board members to either 15 or 16.

**21.** **George Spelvin** was first "inducted" into the Cable TV Pioneers in 1968. Ben Conroy was making a list of Pioneers prior to the annual dinner and added the mythical theatrical character to the list of Pioneers. Other members joined in on the hoax but some cable operators were sure he was real even though they had never met him.

**22.** George Spelvin is listed as a Cable Center donor, having donated \$299-\$499.

**23.** There are several graduates of Women in Cable Telecommunications's Betsy Magness Leadership Institute who also are Cable TV Pioneers. **Betsy Magness**, wife and partner of Tele-Communications Inc. founder **Bob Magness** (1969 inductee), was never inducted into the Cable TV Pioneers, though.

**24.** Not all Cable TV Pioneers have been inducted into the Cable Hall of Fame and not all Cable Hall of Famers have been members of the Cable TV Pioneers.

**25.** In 1983, several Cable TV Pioneers got together with Penn State University and developed a plan to fund and establish a national cable television museum and learning center.

**26.** At its annual meeting on June 1, 1985, at the Desert Inn and Country Club in Las Vegas, the Cable TV Pioneers voted to establish the National Museum of Cable Television at Penn State and appropriated \$20,000 to assist Penn State with the startup of the museum.

**27.** The group undertook an industry-wide fundraising campaign to raise \$2 million to provide an endowment for operations and to fund a chair at Penn State.

**28.** The Cable TV Pioneers bylaws were written and approved in 1989 — the first time formal eligibility rules were put into place.

**29.** The first managing board consisted of Ben Conroy, Polly Dunn, Sandford Randolph, **Frank Thompson, Bill Bresnan, Burt Harris** and **Bill Strange.**

**30.** In a somewhat tongue-in-cheek press release dated Aug. 5, 1966, Fred Stevenson, president of Rogers Television Cable Inc. in Rogers, Ark., declared himself to be the



The 1967 class (pictured) included the first women pioneers, Yolanda Barco and Polly Dunn.

the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago, to which the dinner returned in 2015.

**32.** The total tab for the Pioneers dinner in Chicago was \$686.85, or \$26.40 per person.

**33.** Tickets for this year's event are as follows: \$3,500 for a 10-guest table; \$395 for a single guest; \$195 for inductee; \$195 each for a Pioneer member and immediate family (spouse, children).

**34.** Sponsors were added starting in 2007 to help defray costs. The first sponsors were Home Shopping Network, Reed Television Group (then-parent of *Multichannel News*) and Scientific-Atlanta.

**35.** This year's sponsors include Time Warner Inc., PK Network, Arris, CommScope, Comcast, Carslen Resources, Turner Broadcasting System, Duycom, HBO, Viamedia, INSP, Cisco Systems, Communications Equity Associates, Scripps Networks Interactive, Starz, AMC Networks, Bright House Networks, Cinemoi, Warner Bros. and YAS Capital Partners.

**36.** The original 21 Cable TV Pioneer members received a plaque from Stan Searle, publisher of *TV Communications*, but he did not choose the inductees. That task was left to Charles Clements, who built the first cable system in Washington and was eventually an executive with TCI; Bill Daniels, chairman of Daniels & Associates; and Bruce Merrill, who built Arizona's first cable system. The identity of those executives was kept secret for years.

**37.** The Pioneers "Gold Coat" Sponsorship is named for founding member Sanford Randolph's gold tuxedo jacket.

**38.** At each banquet, "The Pin Ceremony" recognizes current Pioneers who are celebrating their 25th anniversary. There are 32 members who have received 25-year pins.

**39.** The annual dinner is usually held at a historic hotel in the city where INTX (or the NCTA) show is being held, such as the Millennium Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, which used to host the Academy Awards. Other memorable sites include the Dallas Art Museum, the Fox Theater in Atlanta and the Plimsoll Club in New Orleans.

**40.** For years, the chairman of the dinner was from the city where the NCTA convention was to be held. That member was then responsible for securing the hotel space, figuring out the menu and making sure the event would go off without a hitch. Today, a designated dinner committee meets soon after the dinner is held and plans the next year's event for several months to make sure the event goes off without a hitch.

new executive chairman of Cable TV Pioneers. The release noted the vote was unanimous, which was easy because Stevenson was the only person to attend the organizational meeting he called for earlier. Asked what the purpose and goals of the club would be, Stevenson replied, "No purpose no goals, no nothing. Just keep breathing."

**41.** The original bylaws called for an official board with no titled board members. That changed a few years later.

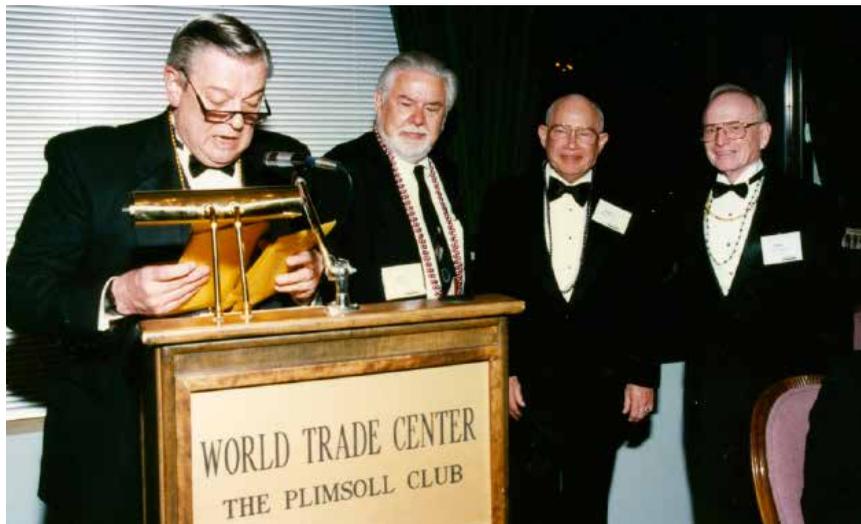
**42.** Membership dues are \$50 a year.

**43.** The initial managing board consisted of Ben Conroy, Polly Dunn, Sanford Randolph, Frank Thompson, Bill Bresnan and Bill Strange.

**44.** The current board consists of **Susan Bitter Smith**, chairman; **Ben Hooks**, vice chairman; John Hagerty, secretary/treasurer; **Les Read**, executive director; **Ann Carlsen**, director; **Frank Drendel**, director, **Jim Faircloth**, director; **Dave Fellows**, director; **Pat Kehoe**, director; **Mike Pandzik**, director; **Dick Sjoberg**, class rep; and **Larry Eby**, class rep.

**45.** Every year, the Pioneers would bet on whom Bill Daniels would bring to the dinner but everyone knew it would be a beautiful woman. One year, he brought popular entertainer **Abbe Lane** and her husband, who was looking to get into the cable business. Lane did an impromptu performance at the dinner but not many people paid attention because they were talking amongst themselves.

**46.** In 2010, the Pioneers Dinner turnout was so large that some tables had to be set up in the hallway to accommodate the crowd. The inductees were called up to the stage without warning and were squeezed in on chairs. It was the last year the organization didn't have pre-recorded introductions. Les Read was playing emcee and was introducing all the new inductees when he dropped all his papers, but he never missed a beat as other board members gathered up the stack of papers so he could continue.



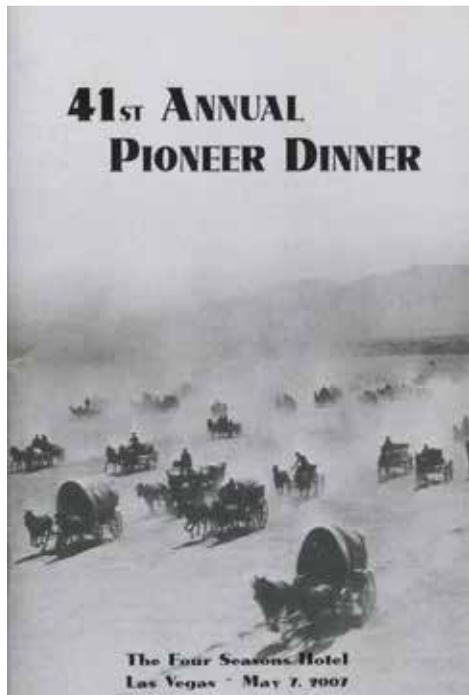
Cable Pioneers executive director Les Read (l.) gives 25-year membership pins to Pioneers John Campbell, Bob Weart and Hank Symons.

**47.** To goose the George Spelvin spoof, Conroy had an associate's wife pretend to be "Spelvin's wife" and attend the dinner in his absence.

**48.** The Cable TV Pioneers and Cable Center Hall of Fame induction dinners started out being held simultaneously. The first joint dinner was held in 1998 at the Fox Theater in Atlanta — a beautiful event, professionally produced by CNN. But it took five hours to induct the pioneers and do an appropriate recognition of the first class of the Hall of Fame. A couple of years later, the two events separated to give honorees their fullest attention without taking up serious chunks of the day.

**49.** The Pioneer dinner is the last industry group event to stick with the formal black-tie theme.

**50.** In 2008, the Cable TV Pioneers dinner was held at the World War II Museum in New Orleans. Many pioneers — especially the older members — showed up early to take in the exhibits and venue before the dinner. Taxicabs couldn't get close to the building so guests had to walk a block in formal attire during a very hot, windy evening to get to the museum. When they got there, the badges weren't ready and people had to mill around before they could enter. The acoustics were atrocious. Nevertheless, it is considered one of the most memorable Pioneers dinners. **Q**



The cover of the 41st Cable Pioneers dinner program in 2007.

**MORE ONLINE**

Learn more about the mythical "George Spelvin" at [multichannel.com/May16](http://multichannel.com/May16).

# Cable TV Pioneers in Pictures

Snapshots from the group's 50-year archives

Pioneers **Don Anderson** (l.), **John Malone** and **Bob Johnson**.



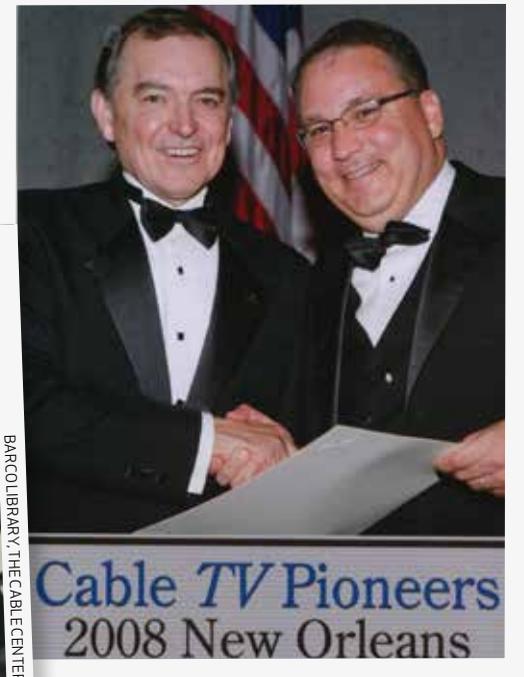
**Charles Clements** (l.) with **Sandford Randolph**, who's dressed in his signature gold jacket.



At the 1969 event (l. to r.): **Frank Thompson**, **Ben Conroy** and **Sandford Randolph**.



Front row (from l.): **Gail Sermersheim**, **Bill Bresnan** and **Sandford Randolph**. Back row (from l.): **Burt Harris**, **Bill Arnold**, **Frank Thompson** and **Les Read**.



**Jim Faircloth** (l.) inducts **John Pascarelli** in 2008.



Current Cable Pioneers executive board members (l. to r.): **Ben Hooks Jr.**, vice chair; **Susan Bitter Smith**, chairman; and **John Hagerty**, secretary/treasurer.