



# THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

PAPER PRESENTED BY FELLOW  
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Fifty Years  
of the  
Academy of Electrical Contracting

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The Academy of Electrical Contracting was formed in 1968 by action of NECA's Board of Governors. The father of the Academy was NECA Executive Vice President, Robert L. Higgins, who recognized the need to address what he called the "Leadership Maintenance Problem." As he wrote in his 1988 Academy paper, we needed "some method to recognize those who have done so much for the Association to keep them active, to make them feel wanted, and to involve them in future activities."

The purpose of the Academy was to offer an opportunity to recognize those individuals who had walked the extra mile for NECA's growth and development. These individuals deserved the accolades that come with this Hall of Fame type of recognition. Unlike most Halls of Fame, though, where the accomplishments recognized are firmly in the past tense, Academy Fellows continue to participate within a structure that benefits the electrical contracting industry as it moves forward.

While the purpose of the Academy has remained unchanged for fifty years, it has evolved; some of the original rules and practices have been modified and improved. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of those changes and explain why they were made. I hope to record for future Academy leaders how a good idea became even better, and provide a background for changes that will undoubtedly be made in the next fifty years.

Before I begin this task, however, I'd like to share a little of my history as a part of the Academy. I was hired by Bob Higgins to be NECA's Secretary-Treasurer in 1982. Four years later, Higgins asked me to replace Rufus Manderson as Secretary of the Academy. Manderson had served as Secretary of the Academy for 11 years and had established many of the procedures, etc., for the Academy. He retired from NECA in 1986.

In 1992, I was inducted as a Fellow of the Academy and John Grau and I agreed that having Russ Alessi as Secretary would give him better access to potential contributors to the recently established Foundation (now ELECTRI International). I continued as Secretary of the Jury of Fellows and as a member of the Board of Directors until 2009 when ELECTRI required more of Alessi's time and I returned as Secretary of the Academy.

When I retired from NECA in 2012, Grau agreed to allow me to continue in this position. It has been my great pleasure to work with NECA officers and Fellows during these 37 years. I've seen a lot - researched a lot - and would like to share some of my observations about the first 50 years!

In preparing this paper, I've decided to group my observations into three categories: The Rules, the Annual Meeting, and Convention Gatherings.

## The Rules

### **Academy Rules (and subsequent Revisions)**

The original *Rules* were called *Working Rules for the Academy of Electrical Contracting* and were adopted in 1968 by NECA's Board of Governors, after ratifying the amendment to NECA's Bylaws (adding Article XI) that created the Academy. In 1971, a special committee was established to review the *Rules*. The committee was chaired by Bob Colgan and he was assisted by A.L. Berg, Karl Sipfle, Charles L. Scharfe, Jr., and then-Secretary Bernie Trimble. The committee made some recommendations, primarily changing the term "Membership" to "Fellowship;" in 1972, NECA's Board of Governors approved these changes to what has since been called the *Rules of the Academy*.

The *Rules* remained unchanged for 25 years although the Board of Directors would periodically approve changes to the way the

Academy functioned. At the June 1998 meeting, Chairman Bob Doran appointed a committee to review the current *Rules* and make suggestions for changes. This committee was chaired by Leo Weber and I assisted along with H.D. “Buz” Allison, Mort Hoffman, and John Grau. Following a detailed review of all Board of Directors minutes for past actions, the committee met several times and returned one year later with recommendations for changes to the *Rules*. Those changes were approved as submitted by the Board of Directors in 1999 and were then sent to NECA’s Board of Governors for their subsequent approval.

Besides some housekeeping changes, here is a recap of the significant changes to the Rules:

- Recognition of the Emeritus category to acknowledge that a Fellow, at some point, cannot meet all the obligations required for Academy Fellowship. Requesting Emeritus status permits a Fellow to remain in good standing with the Academy without having to adhere to the requirements to attend meetings, present papers, etc.
- Requirement of acknowledgement of acceptance/understanding of nominees’ commitment to the Academy prior to induction.
- “Working Group” replaced the two-committee structure (eliminated were the previously-separate *Heritage Committee* and *Electrical Promotion and Education Committee*) which enabled all Fellows in the Working Group to be able to participate and hear the latest developments in ELECTRI research, etc.

Almost 15 years later, in 2013, another change was made to the Rules. Here are some of the revisions incorporated following approval by NECA’s Board of Governors:

- New Fellows would be invited to join the Academy, advised of the requirements for Fellowship, and asked

to acknowledge their understanding and acceptance of such requirements via a signed statement prior to their induction.

- New Fellows must appear in person to be inducted and receive the honor of Fellowship in the Academy.
- Removed the requirement for a formal dinner for Fellows at the NECA Convention (a reception had replaced the dinner in 2004).

Another revision is in the works for the 2018 meeting. This change will add future winners of the *Robert L. Higgins Association Executive Distinguished Service Award* to the list of other award winners (Comstock, Coggeshall, and McGraw) which automatically qualify recipients for Fellowship.

Note: The NECA Association Executive Distinguished Service Award (established in 1989) was changed in 2017 by NECA’s Board of Governors to add Robert L. Higgins’ name to this award due to his past service as NECA Executive Vice President, including his ideas to create the Academy. This action is not retro-active (meaning previous winners are NOT automatically eligible for induction into the Academy), but previous winners who are nominated for Fellowship will be given special consideration based upon their accomplishments in winning the award.

Another change by NECA’s Board of Governors in 2017 was the establishment of a new National Award for individuals promoting political leadership within our industry. The winner of this award, the *Abraham Lincoln Leadership Award*, will also be added to the list of awards whose winners are automatically eligible for induction into the Academy.

**The Shrinking of the Academy Medals!** A significant decision was made in 1970 when the Board of Directors reviewed over 300 sketches and made a decision about the design of the medal (and Academy logo) that continues today. Communicating Tradition and Leadership

were critical to the design. The initial Academy medals were then created and presented to Fellows at the 1971 General Meeting.

Two years later, there was a discussion about the size of the medals and the length of the ribbons. It was felt that the medals were too cumbersome for wearing. In 1974, the medals were “down-sized” to the current size. When the smaller medals were distributed to all Fellows, a shadow box (suitable for display) was also given to any Fellows who had received the larger medal. Lapel pins were suggested in 1972 and debuted shortly thereafter as a version suitable for wearing anytime.

**Is “Fellows” a sexist term?** When we inducted the first female into the Academy in 1989, I had to review the definition of “Fellow” because I had always associated the term with males; you know like lads, buddies, etc. *“For he’s a jolly good Fellow,”* sure seemed like it was about males!

In fact, there are several definitions of fellow. As I had thought, the first definition is *“a man or boy;”* the second definition is *“a person in the same position, involved in the same activity, or otherwise associated with another.”* That pretty much identifies Academy Fellows, doesn’t it?

But wait, there is a third definition: *“a member of a learned society.”* I think that nails it!

By the way, the first female inducted into the Academy was Margaret Borg, long-time chapter manager of the Intermountain Chapter in Utah. Margaret is remembered for wearing a tuxedo to the Academy formal dinner!

**Is Staff worthy of Academy Fellowship? Or should the Academy be restricted to Contractors?** From time to time there have been discussions (among Fellows, the jury, and the board of directors) about whether staff (be they national or chapter staff) belong in the Academy. First, let’s review some history about what the founders of the Academy felt about this issue when the Academy was created.

The Rules stated (and still do): *“...any person who was an **officer of NECA** or was the **recipient of one of NECA’s national awards** . . . shall be deemed to meet the requirement(s)”* and *“be entitled to Fellowship in the Academy . . .”*

Accordingly, 65 past NECA officers and award winners automatically became Fellows in 1968 following the establishment of the Academy. This included two NECA staff officers: Paul M. Geary and Robert L. Higgins, each of whom served as NECA CEOs.

Further, at the first annual meeting of the Academy at the Greenbrier in July, 1969, a Jury of Fellows selected a class of 11 individuals for Fellowship. As required, the Board of Directors subsequently approved these nominees and they became the first class of inductees at the NECA convention in 1969. Guess what? Two individuals in this class were staff: Robert Wilkinson was chapter manager of the Inland Empire Chapter (and later Director of Services at NECA National) and James Christiano was NECA’s Eastern Regional Director. So, both a chapter manager and a national staff member were selected for Fellowship based upon their contributions to the electrical contracting industry as staff members.

If you think this might have been unusual, the second class (inducted in 1970) also included Perry T. Shilts (Southeastern Michigan Chapter Manager) and Charles Scholibo (NECA’s Director of Labor Relations) as part of the class with 13 new Fellows that year.

One other consideration about this subject: I have heard Fellows refer to the “Academy of Electrical Contractors,” which (if that were the name of the group) might mean that fellowship would be restricted to contractors; but the actual name is “Academy of Electrical Contracting” which seems to expand the definition of who might be eligible for Fellowship.

## Annual Meetings

**What about the early meetings?** Most are aware that NECA's Board of Governors approved of the Academy at their 1968 meeting in Philadelphia. The first meeting of the Academy, which included current and past NECA officers and national award winners, was held the following week at Philosophical Hall which is located adjacent to Independence Hall and has been the headquarters of the American Philosophical Society. A formal dinner for Academy Fellows and their guest was also held at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel.

The first annual meeting was held at the Greenbrier in West Virginia in July, 1969, where the first class of new Fellows was reviewed and approved by the Jury of Fellows. That first group of 11 individuals was inducted at the NECA Convention in Miami that fall.

From any list of past Academy annual meetings, you can see that there was a rotation of meeting sites that included The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, WV, The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, CO, and Pebble Beach, CA, resorts (Del Monte Lodge and The Lodge at Pebble Beach). After seven years, it was decided to investigate some other parts of the country.

Speaking of sites, the following four states have hosted the most Academy annual meetings in the first 50 years:

1. **California** has been the site of **12 meetings**: Pebble Beach (4), Napa (3), Del Coronado, Laguna Beach, Rancho Mirage, San Diego and Santa Barbara
2. **West Virginia** has accounted for **7 Academy meetings** - all at The Greenbrier
3. **Colorado** has had **6 meetings**: Broadmoor (5) and Aspen
4. **Florida** has also had **6 meetings**: Boca Raton (4), Breakers, and Ponte Vedra

This accounts for 31 meetings. We have had **two meetings** in the following four states:

1. Arizona (Wigwam and Biltmore in the Phoenix area)
2. Georgia (Cloister in Sea Island)
3. New York (Lake George and New York City)
4. Virginia (Williamsburg)

That adds eight more meetings. We have had **one meeting** in the following eight states:

- Connecticut (Mohegan Sun)
- Idaho (Coeur d'Alene)
- Michigan (Grand Traverse)
- North Carolina (Grove Park Inn)
- Pennsylvania (Hershey)
- Texas (Austin)
- Vermont (Stowe)
- Wyoming (Jackson Hole)

If you total these meeting, these account for the 47 meetings in the United States. We have also had three meetings outside the US. London, England, was the site of the first non-US meeting, and we have had two meetings in Canada, at Banff Springs (in Alberta) and Whistler (in British Columbia). That accounts for the locations of our 50 meetings.

In 2019 we will return to Canada with a meeting in Quebec City (in the province of Quebec) at the historic Fairmont Le Chateau Frontenac.

**Why are the annual meeting dates always in early June?** The Rules of the Academy (Article 4, Sec. 1) states: *"The Academy shall hold an Annual Meeting during the period from April 1 through July 31 of each year and shall also hold a reception for Fellows during the NECA Convention."*

The first seven meetings were held in July, then meetings began to rotate between April (6 meetings) and July (with a few others). Of the first 19 meetings, 11 were in July, six in April, and one each in May and June.

Attendance at meetings was declining and part of the issue was increased travel requests for NECA Executive Committee members who were finding it difficult to add another two or three-day trip to their schedules. It was suggested that if the May/June meeting of the NECA Executive Committee could be held in conjunction with the annual Academy meeting, that would be one less trip and would assure that Vice Presidents would attend the Academy meeting.

The first such joint meeting was in May 1988 at the Breakers in Palm Beach, FL. Different from today's meeting sequence, however, the Academy meeting preceded the Executive Committee meeting. Later, we determined that it made more sense to reverse the order of the two meetings. With the Executive Committee meeting first, any important developments from the Executive Committee meeting could be shared with Academy Fellows by NECA's President. And that's why we meet in early June.

We are aware that Memorial Day, Father's Day, and some graduations (not to mention weddings) occur around this time and we try to schedule our meetings between Memorial Day and Father's Day, but it's impossible to schedule around our children's and grandchildren's graduations and weddings.

**Meeting Registrations?** When the Academy was established, the Rules stated: "*...the personal expenses of the Fellows of the Academy incurred by them in attending its meetings and participating in its program shall be borne by them.*" Article 2, Sec 6(f) of the Rules includes similar language today.

The first meetings (from 1969 until about 1990) were held at resorts that offered a "modified American plan" (or MAP) whereby the cost of the hotel room included breakfast and dinner. There were also some resorts offering an "American Plan" (AP) that included three meals per day. The Cloister was an example of a resort offering the AP.

Because all Academy meals were taking place in the hotel or resort, the meals (and hotel room) were paid for directly by the Fellows. This was a customary practice for resorts like the Greenbrier, Broadmoor, Boca Raton, etc. During the 1980s, many resorts began moving away from offering MAP or AP meal plans as part of their pricing structure. Some resorts that didn't routinely offer MAP pricing would (at our request) create a method to track these meals with tickets or vouchers. But this was often problematic for the resort as well as for our guests. Also, we didn't want to be restricted to only meeting in places that offered meal plans.

One of the disadvantages of these meal plans was that we were required to have all meal functions on the resort property. That limited us from using some nearby properties. As an example of the flexibility we now have, we would NOT have been able to have our opening reception at the beautiful TPC Sawgrass Clubhouse near the Ponte Vedra resort in the Jacksonville area in 2010. Also, in recent years, we have often offered an open middle-night that enables Fellows and guests to visit nearby restaurants with their friends. Think the Jackson Hole Shootout in 2017!

Because of these changes, we implemented a meeting registration fee which is designed to cover the cost of the food functions offered (and paid for) by the Academy for Fellows and guests. Accordingly, Fellows continue to pay their personal expenses when attending Academy meetings.

**First Day Meeting Schedule Changes!** For the first 30 years of Academy meetings (1969 through 1998), the format for the first day of the meeting (on Friday in recent years) was as follows: Jury of Fellows and Committee Meetings in the morning with the Board of Directors meeting in the afternoon. Members of the Board of Directors could play golf in the morning; golf was available for others in the afternoon.

Effective with the 1999 meeting, the time of the Board of Directors meeting was changed to follow the conclusion of the morning meetings (generally at 10:30). This schedule enables afternoon activities (golf and tours) to be available to everyone.

**Working Group replaces the two-committee structure in 1999!** When the Academy was founded, it was decided that the Academy should have two focuses:

- **Electrical Promotion and Education Committee** was to study, and recommend to the Academy's Board of Directors, specific programs or projects for the promotion and advancement of the electrical contracting industry.
- **Heritage Committee** was responsible to study the probable nature, functions, and needs of the electrical contracting industry in the future - specifically beyond two decades - for the purpose of endeavoring to provide information of value in NECA's long-term planning.

Fellows were assigned arbitrarily to one of the committees and there were two separate meetings that discussed a variety of topics. Reports of the discussions of each committee were shared at the Board of Directors meeting as well as with the general Fellowship. This became a little repetitive for any Fellows in the committees who then attended the General Meeting the following day, particularly if the Fellow was also on the Board of Directors.

By replacing the two groups with one Working Group, ELECTRI researchers gained the ability to participate and both share and gather information about their projects. This change has proven to be very effective and less repetitive.

**The Nomination Form Evolves!** The form that nominators use to nominate individuals for Fellowship has undergone several changes over the years. Early forms were four-page printed (and folded) forms that required a typewriter to

complete. The first two pages requested some personal information (for example, place of birth, marital status, military service, education including high school, trade school and college). Not only was this information difficult to gather without alerting the person being nominated, the answers weren't relevant for determining a person's qualifications for membership. Consequently, these questions were dropped from the form, focusing the jurying process more fully on each candidate's accomplishments.

Typewriters were phasing out and we needed to find a way to make it easier for nominators to submit the proper information in the right format. Fifteen years ago, we went with an online form that requires people to complete the required information on the Academy website while the narrative, photo of the nominee, and letters of support from Fellows, etc. could be accomplished using word processing software. This capability makes it much easier for people to amend their submissions when necessary.

We also began sharing information with our jurors via electronic means. This saves a lot of trees and postage (because we don't need to print and mail large books of nominations to the jurors). Each year, we find innovative ways to enhance this process and I'm confident that this will evolve further.

**Let the spouses hear the speaker too!** Prior to 1990, our guest speakers would first meet with the Chairman-appointed escort committee who would then escort the speaker to an area where Academy spouses were having coffee. The speaker would have a photo-op with selected spouses and make some comments to the group of spouses, generally for five minutes. The escort committee would then take the speaker to meet with the Fellows for in-depth remarks, including Q&A. This was deemed to be very intimate because there were only 50-80 Fellows at those meetings.

Shortly before the May, 1990, meeting at the Boca Raton Hotel & Club, I was sharing our customs with the speaker's bureau regarding the schedule for our speaker Lou Holtz. The bureau informed me that, "these are two speeches and you will have to pay two fees." I discussed these requirements with then-Academy Chairman Emerson Hamilton and we agreed that it just made sense to invite the spouses to hear our guest speaker.

At that time, some of the formal dinner discussion that evening was Fellows sharing information with spouses and guests about what they had heard that morning. Now all can participate in the discussions and can compare their thoughts about this shared experience.

So that's the origin of our current joint coffee break and how spouses and guests came to be invited to hear our speakers - and I know that it's been appreciated!

**I hate those f\*\*\*in' French!** From the beginning of the Academy's formal dinners (both at the annual meeting and the convention), the printed menu was translated into French. This was done, I believe, to make the occasion seem more special. In some instances, the resort or hotel would provide the menu in French; in other cases, we would hire someone to provide a translation for us (not really knowing if it was correct or not).

In 1986, I had recently been named Secretary of the Academy and was trying to figure out the best way to get the translation for our 1987 meeting at the Greenbrier. In talking with then-Academy Chairman H. E. "Buck" Autrey about my dilemma, he uttered the words above and that was the end of our menus in French.

To put this in perspective, there was some anti-French sentiment about that time! For example, you may recall "Freedom Fries" replacing French Fries on many menus. And that's why our formal menus are printed in English (unless we're having filet mignon) - and we can know what we're being served!

**Seating at Formal Dinners** had a different approach in the beginning. There was no advance request for dinner table seating. If you had a group of people wanting to sit together, they had to enter the dining room together. Each person would receive a card with a table number from the Academy Secretary. This was done to avoid the awkwardness of people roaming around the dining room in search of a seat as well as to avoid people sitting alone.

In more recent years, the Board of Directors felt it would be good for Fellows to be exposed to different people. To accomplish this, we have encouraged Fellows to request one other Fellow/couple to sit with and then we have randomly filled in tables.

### **Convention Gatherings**

#### **Convention Gathering Replaces Formal Dinner.**

At the June 2004 meeting, the Board of Directors acted on a suggestion that the Academy formal dinner, traditionally held during the NECA Convention, be replaced by a reception-style gathering. The primary impetus for this change was the declining number of evenings available for Fellows at the NECA Convention who were being invited to attend other events including chapter events, supplier activities, and the reception held by ELECTRI International (which was supported by many Fellows).

On October 17, 2004, an Academy reception (without a formal dinner) was held at the Jonathan Club in Los Angeles. Following the Academy reception, individuals supporting ELECTRI International were invited to join Academy Fellows for the first joint reception. This tradition has continued for 15 years. While some miss the formal dinner, most do not miss bringing formal attire to the convention just for the Academy event. We continue to honor the newly inducted Fellows at this reception.

Notes from the 2005 annual meeting in Whistler, BC, indicate that a survey of Fellows attending the LA reception were very positive.



It's also interesting to note that the report discussed the site of the 2005 joint reception in New Orleans at the Audubon Tea Room in the Garden District of New Orleans. No one remembers that reception, however, because Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans and we had to cancel the convention. The cancellation caused NECA to schedule a short meeting in Chicago to conduct the business of NECA (Executive Committee and Board of Governors meetings) and induct new Fellows to the Academy.

So, we went from two formal Academy dinners per year to one formal dinner.

This year, however, we're planning to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Academy with a formal dinner and program at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia on September 30. You won't want to miss it!

**Where can I learn more about the history and purpose of the Academy?** There are two other papers on this topic. They can be seen on the Academy website under *Historical*:

- *Establishment and Purpose of the Academy of Electrical Contracting* was presented in 1980 by Richard W. Osborn ('68), a former NECA President.
- *The Academy of Electrical Contracting: Past-Present-Future* was presented in 1988 by Robert L. Higgins ('68), a former NECA CEO.

I would be remiss if I didn't give a special "shout-out" to Bob Higgins and John Grau for allowing me to serve this fine industry for 37 great years.

#### **ABOUT Mike Thompson**

Mike Thompson served as NECA's Secretary-Treasurer for 30 years from 1982 to 2012. Upon his retirement from NECA, he continues as Secretary of the Academy.

