

Reflections of a Convention Coordinator

By John Ellis, AREA Convention Coordinator, 1990-2000

(Editor's note: John Ellis served as AREA Convention Coordinator for a decade. In 2009, he provided the following summary of the 10 conventions he organized that included Dallas, New Orleans, Las Vegas, Boston, Dallas (again), Nashville, San Diego, Reno, Hampton and Denver. This article appeared in the October 2009 issue of the AREA Newsletter. John died a month later on Nov. 22, 2009 at the age of 89.)

IN THE BEGINNING... When I moved back to Dallas in 1988, after 10 years of retirement living in Granbury, southwest of Dallas-Fort Worth, I told the AREA Board that I would like to help in any way that I could. In a few days, I was president of the North Texas Chapter. Shortly thereafter the Board decided they would like to have the 1990 convention in Dallas and the North Texas chapter would host it. (They decided where they wanted the go two years ahead—in this case, 1990—because it had already planned a cruise in 1989.) Continuing this policy gave me two years to plan each convention. It was the first of ten conventions I was involved in as AREA's convention coordinator.

I reviewed the files of recent conventions and they had a number of committees involved. So, selecting some who had served on previous committees, I set up seven committees with 36 people. It turned out to be a big mistake. Planning the convention with such a group wore me out and was very inefficient. In subsequent conventions I had two of the smallest possible committees with just one member each—one to handle the money and one to arrange golf tournaments. At each of the following conventions, I would ask for volunteers to help in the Hospitality Suite and as tour bus monitors.

INITIAL PLANNING

The first year, after the Board's decision, I would write to all of the hotels, in the selected city, that would reserve at least 200 rooms for us. I also would ask for the best rate they could give for any week in May and details of their accommodations. I would select the 3 or 4 most favorable for us and set up meetings over a two-day period. Then, with two others (one usually the president) I would go to the city and meet with the selected hotels. We would agree on one for our convention. I also sought a company to provide bus service for tours. Then, I would gather information on places to visit or see, from members from that area and Convention and Tourists Bureaus.

While this was going on, I would be working on the second year of finalizing details for the next convention. . During that year, the program was outlined and negotiations of details with the hotel and tour sites began.

From the beginning, it was understood that I would not guarantee any figure until two weeks before the event. I would keep in touch with each of them on a regular basis-weekly if necessary-of the latest situation. Everyone was on a first name basis. Every event selected went into a program. When finalized, about 90 days before the convention, camera ready copy was given to a carefully chosen printer to print the invitation. They were mailed to members about 60 days in advance. In addition, a souvenir program was prepared that contained information that would be useful to guests of the convention, listed guests' names and acknowledged any assistance provided at the convention.

OBJECTIVES

I planned to make the conventions "break-even" events-no profit-to give guests the best value for their money. The Board loaned me about \$1,000 "seed money" the first year but none thereafter. This was mainly for printing and early advertising. We were lucky enough to have Larry Phillips editing the AREA Newsletter and Barbara Kirsch, editing the Exchange Post, to help us with promoting the conventions. What success we had was due in great measure to their cooperation and efforts.

We had a separate bank account-something I insisted upon. I kept the checkbook in my pocket throughout the convention and paid bills and gave refunds on the spot. When checks were received for reservations, the

reservations and checks went to Tony Marma for verification who then deposited the checks in our account. The reservations were returned to me to set up files for each event and to print tickets on my computer.

Prices for all events were based on the total cost of food, if included, guides, admission fees, transportation and any other costs. The price for buses was based on the size of the bus and assuming that they would be 80% full, i.e., if a bus carried 40 passengers we would divide the cost of that bus by 32 (80% of 40) to get a cost for each passenger. The price of the event would then be the dollar nearest the total cost. If a bus was more than 80% full, we gained the difference. We would also benefit when guests would decline a refund and tell me to put the money into the treasury.

After each convention, Tony Marma's records were edited by the AREA treasurer and, to my knowledge, none of our records or transactions were ever questioned. Also, members sent photos to me, taken at the convention and I prepared a photo album. Then, every year the albums of previous conventions were on display in the Hospitality Suite.

A Hospitality Suite was one of the key requirements in our negotiations with hotels. We had to have a room, at no extra charge, for 40-50 people, for our use 10-12 hours a day and where we could serve beverages, including beer. I would solicit beer and soft drink donations from vendors-rotating my requests to at least three different suppliers. They were available to guests for donations to the Scholarship Fund. A posted sign suggested 50 cents for soft drinks and a dollar for beer-but we usually received more. I also got merchandise donations from vendors which we auctioned off for the Fund. I have no record of how much the fund received each convention but it was considerable.

CONVENTION MEMORIES

Dallas, 1990—A tour of Texas Fair Park, with historical significance and the site of the annual State Fair, was on the program. Only six had signed up, and I told them we couldn't afford a bus but would get a van to take them on the tour or they could have a refund. They chose refunds and were satisfied. This was the only event in ten years that I had to cancel for lack of interest.

New Orleans 1992—We stayed at the Westin Canal Place and the hotel started on the 13th floor with a great view of the French Quarter. We had lunch on the Natchez steamboat and dancing to authentic Dixieland jazz.

Las Vegas 1993—Here we had a Las Vegas-style buffet with a Stage Show and also had a tour of Hoover Dam.

Boston 1994—A really memorable convention. I started out reserving half of the main floor at the Boston Pops Concert-where you could be served drinks-and kept adding to it as I got more reservations. By convention time, I had reserved about 95% of it-eight bus loads of retirees and guests. A convention record! One group missed their bus and, after sending the others back to the hotel, I drove around in the empty bus until we found them. Thus keeping our record intact of never losing a guest. And that wasn't all in Boston. We had a great clambake cruise on The Spirit of Boston with a lobster lunch.

Dallas 1995—A fun night for all was had at Medieval Times enjoying a huge dinner while knights in armor held jousting tournaments. Also, a full-day trip to Louisiana Downs was a happy time for some and a sad one for others.

Nashville 1996—A week in Music City had to include an evening at Opryland with many famous performers we've enjoyed for years. Then, who could forget the dinner cruise on the General Jackson and its musical review?

San Diego 1997—I told the Board I wanted to get out of the convention business but agreed to go to San Diego with the new coordinator to select a hotel--which I did. Then, I prepared a file of notes for him, about 2 inches thick, with a two-year schedule of actions needed to be taken-monthly for the first year, then weekly for about nine months then, almost daily for the last three months. I included data from recent conventions and copies of important correspondence with hotels and others involved in the convention. In the end, it was a wasted effort since the coordinator chose to re-invent the wheel.

Reno 1998—A most unusual tour was a visit to The Mustang Ranch, one of Reno's famous bordellos. Then, there was the fantastic buffet at Harrah's which included a famous stage show, New York, New York.

Hampton 1999—A MUST trip for all was the visit to famous Colonial Williamsburg, which took you back to life in the days of the Revolution. The Spirit of Norfolk entertained us with an unusual buffet, a show put on with the ship's staff and an evening of music and dancing.

Denver 2000—This was my "swan song" as a coordinator. I really quit in 1997 but said I would handle one in Denver, my home, if they wanted it there. They agreed, so I started planning it.

Late in 1997 the AREA president called me and said the 1998 Reno convention lost its coordinator and could I take over? Hotel arrangements had been made, as well as for some events on the program, and I had over six months to work on it so I agreed, but continued to work on the Denver convention.

Then, a few months later I got another call that the 1999 convention, planned for Hampton VA, lost its coordinator and nothing had been done and could I help out? I got on a plane and met with some wonderful chapter members and we negotiated for a hotel and began planning the program. Thanks to their help, and guiding me in an unfamiliar area, we were able to come up with a program-but I continued to work on the 1998 and 2000 conventions.

Finally, after the Reno and Hampton conventions were out of the way, I had a year to concentrate on Denver. Coming up with a program was easy because there are so many fabulous sights to see in, and near, Denver. Since I had extra time, over a three year period, I wanted to plan a convention where nothing went wrong—no problems with the hotel or buses, all schedules would be met, bus drivers wouldn't get lost, and guests would have no complaints. Finally, after ten years, I GOT IT!

Well, to be honest, wasn't a PERFECT convention. After our program had been printed, the hotel changed the room location for many of our meetings and guests had to be told with a note in their program. It embarrassed me, but nothing could be done.

Some of the most notable tours in Denver were:

- Visiting the AF Academy near Colorado Springs and the suspension bridge over the Royal Gorge, highest in America.
- Driving through beautiful Rocky Mountain National Park at 11,000 feet.
- Touring through the U..S. Mint
- Going up Pike's Peak on the cog railway train

Being on the top of Mt. Evans on the highest paved road in the U.S. Experiencing the fantastic acoustics at Red Rocks Amphitheater Thrilled by a dinner show featuring the great NY musical, "42nd Street." As an special souvenir for guests, I put together booklet of AREA's history. The information in it was gleaned from all past Board Meeting minutes, prior issues of the AREA Newsletter and various correspondence in AREA's files. (I was a Board member at the time and had access.) I called it, AREA Looks Back.

FINAL THANKS

I have probably given you the impression that I handled the convention without any help which would be an inexcusable error on my part. I said I only had two assistants after the first convention: a treasurer, who for many years was Tony Marma—may he rest in peace—and someone to handle golf tournaments. For the first few years, I would twist a different arm each year for a volunteer golfer. Then, one year Bill Cortez, the spouse of a retiree living in Junction City, KS. made the mistake of criticizing how a tournament was handled. So, I told him he could handle the next one--which he did and all those that followed while I was coordinator.

It would be impossible for me remember the names of, nor thank, the countless AREA members that I called upon to be bus monitors, help in the Hospitality Suite-which required two shifts of four people each day arrange bridge tournaments, collect tickets for tours, and for so many other jobs. Whenever I needed help, someone was always there.

I mentioned the Exchange Post and the AREA Newsletter and many times I had to call on someone else from HQ and they were always helpful and responsive. Finally, those who made donations of merchandise and the cooperation we received from hotel staffs helped immeasurably.

It was a great trip and I miss it. If I were 50 or 60 years old, I would still be at it. But not at 89!

