

Fossum and Peterson Retire from AMS Positions

On February 1, 1999, two long-time AMS leaders retired from their Society positions. Robert M. Fossum of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign retired after ten years as secretary, and Franklin P. Peterson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology retired after twenty-five years as treasurer.

Working in two of the most important positions in the Society, Fossum and Peterson contributed much time and hard work to keeping the AMS running smoothly. This was not a simple matter of maintaining the status quo: both served during a period that saw sweeping changes in the Society's traditional fiscal base of scholarly publishing, as well as rising expectations about what the AMS can do for its members and for the broader mathematical community. The long-term

service of Fossum and Peterson was crucial in helping the AMS address these new challenges.

The AMS Banquet held on January 16, 1999, during the Joint Mathematics Meetings in San Antonio was specially dedicated to honoring these "two titans," as they were called by Robert Daverman of the University of Tennessee, who is the new secretary of the AMS. During the banquet, Daverman introduced speakers honoring Fossum, and John Franks of Northwestern University, who is the new treasurer of the AMS, did the same for Peterson. The speakers were Bus Jaco of Oklahoma State University, Andy Magid of the University of Oklahoma, David Sanchez of Texas A&M University, and B. A. Taylor of the University of Michigan.

Magid, who served as associate secretary for the Central Section from 1988 to 1996, described the first time he attended an AMS meeting in San Antonio, in January 1976. At the end of the meeting, he was with a small group headed for the University of Illinois, and they were stranded at the St. Louis airport because of a winter storm. Fossum led them to the rental car counter, booked a car, and got the group home despite the bad weather. This was typical of Fossum, Magid said: "He took charge, he took risks, and he delivered."

As secretary, Fossum was deeply involved in a wide range of AMS activities: handling appointments for the Society's one hundred-plus committees, overseeing the selection process for prizes, preparing agenda and minutes for the Council meetings, serving on the *Notices* Editorial Board, to name just a few of his duties. Fossum served as secretary during a time that saw the rise of electronic publishing and the World Wide Web, which



Enjoying remarks during the AMS banquet are from left Franklin Peterson, Donald Lewis, Robert Fossum, Robert Daverman, and Robin Fossum.



Frank Peterson reacts to receiving a commemorative chair in recognition of his service to the AMS. Robert Fossum also received a chair.

offered enormous potential benefits, as well as substantial risks, for the Society. As Magid put it, “Robert’s loyal service has been a rock of stability on which all this rests.”

No colorless bureaucrat, Fossum had clear opinions about how things should be done. One example may be found in his opinion column “Parting Shot,” which appeared in the December 1998 issue of the *Notices* and which proposes eliminating some of the AMS Policy Committees. Magid joked about an alleged incident at an AMS Sectional Meeting in Fargo, South Dakota, in which he joined a group going out to dinner. The maitre d’ turned Fossum back at the door for lack of a necktie. Fossum went to his car and returned with a jumper cable around his neck. The maitre d’ relented with the quip, “Okay, you can come in, but just don’t try to start anything.” The real joke, says Magid, “is the idea that anyone could let Robert in anywhere and not expect him to start something.”

The name Franklin Peterson has appeared on every AMS check issued in the past twenty-five years. As treasurer, Peterson was an ex officio member of the Board of Trustees and played an especially important role in scrutinizing the Society’s budgets and overseeing its financial management. In recent years, as the skyrocketing stock market made risky investments seem attractive, Peterson argued strongly for stable, conservative investments of the Society’s funds. Much of the credit for the healthy financial state of the AMS today goes to Peterson. The Society has benefited greatly from his long term of service, which has brought consistency and institutional memory to its financial decisions.

While his work has focused mostly on fiscal matters, Peterson has gone above and beyond the call of duty when needed. Once, when a fight was brewing between some of the AMS headquarters office staff and the Ann Arbor office of *Mathematical Reviews*, Peterson invited the relevant parties to lunch at his home and dipped into his legendary wine collection. The lunch calmed the

waters and defused the fight.

During the banquet, Taylor, who serves as AMS associate treasurer, recalled that in the inflationary 1970s the AMS weathered a great deal of financial hardship. The Board of Trustees established an “economic stabilization fund” for the AMS. Peterson oversaw the effort to build this fund so that it contained one year’s operating expenses. Taylor also noted the increasing size and complexity of Peterson’s job during his twenty-five years in office, as the AMS staff grew by 50 percent, its revenue increased 500 percent, and its net assets soared 1400 percent. This “remarkable stewardship,” Taylor said, demonstrates Peterson’s “unselfish, voluntary leadership focused on the goals of the Society.”

The AMS owes an enormous debt of gratitude to Robert Fossum and Franklin Peterson, who made such generous contributions of time and talent on behalf of the Society.



Robert Fossum saying goodbye.

—Allyn Jackson