

# Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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## AMS in the Twentieth Century The Start of the *Notices*

In his book on the history of the AMS from 1938 to 1988, Everett Pitcher writes, "From the beginning of the Society through 1953, preliminary announcements and programs of meetings were issued as separate.... In 1954 the *Notices* began as a periodical. One purpose was to take advantage of the favorable postal rates allowed to periodical publications...."

"In addition to preliminary announcements and programs of meetings, the *Notices* contained notes on appointments and news about publications in mathematics. Announcements of fellowships, grants, and conferences appeared in increasing numbers. Abstracts of contributed papers were moved from the *Bulletin* to the *Notices* effective in 1958.

"Letters to the Editor were a frequent subject of disagreement in the development of the *Notices*.... Not until 1958 did Letters to the Editor become a feature.... The [first] letter was followed by this note:

The purpose of this new department is to provide a forum for discussions of the programs of the Society, and a method for communicating information of interest to the membership. Questions concerning matters of scholarship, such as those relating to the location of primary references, will be welcomed.

The Council has instructed the Editor of the *Notices* not to allow the new department to be used for quick publication of mathematical results, and not to accept criticism of *specific individual papers* or of *specific individual reviews in Mathematical Reviews* or elsewhere....

"The last paragraph of the note corresponds to the fact that the editor [who was then the executive director, J. H. Curtiss] was solely responsible for the acceptance of letters."

Letters were a controversial subject both for the range of the allowable content and for the power to decide which particular letters were acceptable. A "forum for discussions of the programs of the Society" offered the potential for a conflict of interest on the part of the person deciding about letters, and various schemes were tried over a period of time to get around this problem.

Pitcher continues, "Abstracts of papers presented at meetings or offered by title were printed in the *Bulletin* after the fact for many years. The system was changed so that abstracts appeared currently in the *Notices*, effective with [1958]. This arrangement continued through 1979, at which point the journal *Abstracts of the American Mathematical Society* was started.

"From its beginning [in 1891], the *Bulletin* was the journal of record of the Society. It contained reports of Council and Business Meetings, elections, reports of the treasurer, bylaws, and other items of Society business affecting its membership. The Council of 26 January 1977, in the course of considering the redirection of the *Bulletin*, ordered that the *Notices* become the journal of record of the Society...."

"Abstracts were only the beginning of the appearance of substantive mathematics in the *Notices*. It had always been regarded as a 'throwaway' journal, of little value after the occurrence of the programs listed in it. Already in 1972... a column called 'Queries' was instituted...."

"When the journal became one of record, it was realistic to put articles with mathematical content of more permanent value in it. In 1982, Ronald L. Graham was named associate editor for special articles and the first such article... appeared in the February issue. The new direction was a source of discontent among those readers whose concept was still that of a throwaway."

Twenty-three "special articles" appeared in the *Notices* between 1982 and 1993. By the early 1990s the relative roles of the *Notices* and the *Bulletin* had become a more and more frequent subject of discussion. A Committee to Review Member Publications was established to make recommendations, and it did so in 1993. Those recommendations and their aftermath will be the subject of a later column.

—Anthony W. Knapp