



## My first RSNA meeting: A wacky memoir

C. Whitley Vick, MD

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It's curious to me what one commits to long-term memory from radiologic meetings of long ago. For some, it's the lists of differential diagnoses or the nuances of various and sundry diseases. For me, it's the people, events and funny happenings that I tend to remember most.

With yet another edition of the Radiological Society of North America's scientific meeting and exhibition reliably approaching like the roasted turkeys and pumpkin pies of Thanksgiving, I welcomed the opportunity to share with you all a few of my own memories of this grand-daddy of radiologic meetings.

I was just a young radiologist back in the mid-1980s, trying to figure out how things worked in our specialty, when I figured the mighty RSNA might be just the place to learn. My first impression upon arriving for my first meeting was just how *huge* it was—that mass of radiological humanity; that endless, cavernous McCormick Place; all the bustling, bumping and buses; all the lofty professors with their hats and ribbons; all the far-too-many choices of what to see and do; and of course, all the daunting information overload. I'll also not soon forget Chicago's

biting cold wind, nor my stay at the proverbial “last resort” hotel, which served up a tuna steak as tough and smelly as a shoe sole.

### Hangovers and screaming women

At this particular meeting, I was scheduled to present a rather inconsequential paper at one of the more out-of-the-way venues. Having obsessed over my five-minute presentation for months, my time was finally at hand. Although I usually sought to be in bed by 9 p.m., I ran into the director of my fellowship the night before my presentation, and he invited me to share a drink.

He was a man of strong constitution, while my alcohol-consumption capacity hovered somewhere near non-existent. I vaguely remember making it back to my hotel after midnight and waking up all-too-soon after to the clanging of the alarm clock and a banging in my head. I arrived at McCormick Place in full hangover mode and went straight to the “slide room” to review my talk. With minutes to spare, I then dashed over to a nearby restroom for a quick and very urgent pit stop.

Something, however, seemed to be off, as I simply could not locate a urinal. Should I

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**Dr. Vick** is a recently retired radiologist who earned his medical degree from Emory University in 1977, served his residency at Massachusetts General Hospital and a fellowship in ultrasound at Yale, taught at the Medical College of Virginia, and worked in private practice for 23 years. He now works as a boat captain on St. Simons Island, GA.

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just use the sink or try to make it to a stall? As I stood there pondering this question and reaching for my fly, a woman suddenly emerged from one of the stalls. Startled—to say the least—upon seeing me, she shouted an expletive. With no time for explanation, I could only bolt, as my time in the spotlight was quickly bearing down. I muddled through my presentation, peering now and then out at my small audience. I'm pretty sure I saw the woman pointing at me and describing the unfortunate encounter to everyone within earshot. I was certain this was to be my legacy at the largest, and arguably most important, meeting of my profession.

## Pre-PowerPoint antics

I also recall a young assistant professor from one of the Harvard teaching hospitals who arrived at a lecture hall just in time for his own presentation, only to drop his slide carousel and spill his slides all over the floor. He rushed to reinsert them, but his carefully chosen sequence clearly had been disrupted. Nonetheless, he gamely proceeded to demonstrate his skills as a master ad-libber and stand up comic, asking us to turn our head sideways, read backwards and upside down, and jump backward and forward in time. The result: An absurd, surrealistic comedy and a young academic who exhibited grace under pressure—both of which I remember well—but whose subject matter I retain no recollection of whatsoever.

## Party time

RSNA social events in those days could also be instructive. These events generally consisted of parties, dinners at high-end restaurants and quasi-scientific “infomercials” put on by vendors. Striving to convey an air of exclusivity, these affairs often required an *invitation*, which carried the implicit message that you, the recipient, were a cut above the

common rabble, a person to be reckoned with, and the maker of big purchasing decisions. Despite the potentially tawdry tenor to these affairs, there could be some entertainment value if you kept your eyes open.

Indeed, at one large cocktail party, put on by one of the large film manufacturers at a posh Chicago hotel, I witnessed a rather strange ritual, something akin to a pagan communion. Sitting at one of the many bars in the party room, a radiologist “guest” was receiving a curious libation known as an “upside-down margarita.” Thin and serious-looking, this fellow wore a coat and tie with dark trousers and penny loafers—clearly a mover or a shaker (I honestly can't tell the difference). As the man leaned back in his chair with head and neck arched, and his eyes staring at the ceiling, the bartender poured tequila and other ingredients into the man's wide open mouth, and then mixed the concoction with a swizzle stick. Upon removal of the swizzle stick, the recipient swallowed—amazingly, as best as I could tell, without aspirating. The man's legs then began to quiver as though he were seizing, agonal, or orgasmic, and his trouser legs hiked up to reveal milky white, nearly hairless calves above thin, black socks. My fellow party-goers and I witnessed this debauchery and fine example of glottic control in absolute amazement. Before long he was back up on his feet, presumably ready to discuss equipment purchases, and the next lucky customer took the seat for his turn.

Having not been to the RSNA in many years, I'm not in position to say how things have changed, if at all. This is just my own brief glance back at how things were almost 30 years ago. I'm sure many of you have acquired lifelong memories of your own from RSNA, and this year is certain to be no exception for the newbies at RSNA 2015. Should you find yourself in need of a very urgent pit stop on the way to your presentation, though, do yourself a favor: Stop and check the sign.