

# CHAPTER 13

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

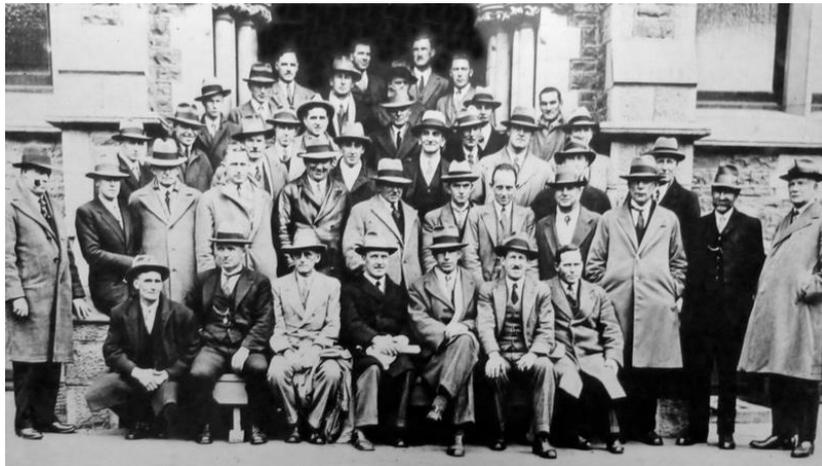
### How the conference evolved and communication of findings and ideas improved

The Grassland Conferences began as meetings around a table in January 1931 and the first real conference took place at what is now Lincoln University in 1933. While the main focus was on the agenda, in subsequent years it evolved into a series of conference sessions and a field trip relevant to the region where the conference was being held.

However, there was probably just as much important interaction during the social breaks. Friendships formed, often between sector people, and research collaborations began. The new and good ideas spread into the regions and communities.

#### Setting the format

The formal sessions however, were probably just spoken presentations in the early conferences. Those present would listen to the polite, formal speakers as they related their experiences in pasture research matters. It would be informative, but rather formal and frankly, sometimes rather tedious, when a speaker droned on for too long a time.



*Christchurch 1933 -  
all formally dressed and all male*

I'm told there is a recording in existence on Cockayne's presidential address. It was broadcast annually by the national radio service in the early years; but it went on for an hour and must have been soporific!

The sessions were interrupted and enlivened by visits to research areas where those present could see what had been discussed in the venue.

As the NZGA peripatetic format developed, attenders also wanted to see farms in the host region, to see for themselves what was going on outside their own region. Looking over a fence has always been a strong stimulus and a good habit among farmers!

The Conferences came back to life after the Second World War, when slides and projectors appeared on the conference scene, enabling the presenters to show their findings and opinions to the audience on a screen. A field day format was introduced, enabling those attending to see the host region's farming and its problems and opportunities.

By the 1950s, a three-day Grassland Conference format had developed, based around hearing about the local advances and challenges on the first day; seeing the region on the field day, usually on the second day; and discussing the technological advances made on the final day. The Grassland Memorial Trust Awards were presented after a session, or at the Conference Dinner once the GMT was developing in the late 1960s and 70s.

In this way new ideas from the research institutes, universities, businesses and other farms were aired and communicated to others, spreading and advancing New Zealand grassland technology for all to try and adopt in their own enterprises. Hosts heard about national advances and visitors experienced the farming in the host region.

### **Valuable meeting place**

The annual conference became a place to meet, learn and take new ideas back home, some to try and others to build upon. It was the catalyst that led to further advances. It also allowed attenders to visit the many regions a year at a time and learn about the farming practices there.

Our annual conferences brought attenders from overseas countries, as they had heard about the dynamic effect of the Annual Conferences on the farming industries.

This helped to give this country a strong international reputation for cost-effective grassland farming. Sending copies of the *Proceedings* to overseas institutes was also valuable - that's where I saw it first!

The psychology of communicating technical matter began to improve when farmers and others in the audience realised some were dozing through some presentations. So when the offers of papers increased, the time allowed for each presentation was reduced to an optimal 15 minutes, allowing time for questions and answers before the next presentation.

The field trips involved up to four stops, and at each site the visitors would split into groups, each to see a particular topic but circulating to all topics at the allotted time. This gave everyone a chance to debate and contribute.



In 1931 Cockayne and his colleagues had meant that the process was to make their science and its findings relevant, essentially for New Zealand farmers and practitioners.

### **New pasture technology**

When the technology and products, such as the *Grasslands* range of pasture plants, became known to work on the land, overseas countries sought them. This encouraged a strong export market for the New Zealand seed growers and companies, and other products followed.

Controlled grazing evolved in the 1960s and 70s, when the electrified fencing was commercialised and also exported. Any country could make the fencing equipment but it was New Zealand that was promoting controlled grazing management, tested and found to be profitable and sustainable on our farms.

However, this fencing had to be applied as a package, and that package was what we were exporting. So the conferences grew in popularity and speakers were encouraged to use ordinary language, minimising the scientific jargon content in those days.

### **Session challenges**

There were some milestone events though, during the Conference sessions in the 1950s and 60s. One featured Ernie Madden and Eddie Suckling, both researchers at DSIR Grasslands, who gave contradicting results from their separate legume oversowing trials in consecutive presentations. This must have created some strong audience participation at the time, and it certainly did back at Grasslands after the conference. A careful vetting of publications was established after this incident.

However, by the mid-1960s the presentation standards must have slipped once more, making South Canterbury farmer Bill Hurst Senior create an award *For the Most Entertaining Speaker* at each conference. The prize was then fifty pounds and it proved a successful move.

Bill said he had slept through several papers, so wanted to keep those attending informed and interested about what was being presented. This Award continues to this

day, and in the late 1980s the Executive Committee added another award to cover the poster displays.

At the first NZGA Conference I attended, held in Te Kuiti for the first time, my Grasslands colleague Dr Warwick Harris won Bill Hurst's Award for his presentation on *Why Browntop is Bent on Creeping* by describing the pasture competition between ryegrass, clover and browntop as a battle among three armies, which is exactly what occurs in the sward.

### **Visual aids**

Slides or transparencies, as we called them, became quite striking at times. Dr Jennifer Hartley, with MAF in Palmerston North, shocked the audience in 1975 at the Hastings Conference by showing photographs of eye damage in lambs and sheep caused by awns of barley grass. We all got the message!

However, I sat through one presentation in Whakatane where the speaker showed one slide with a table that was A4-sized, then proceeded to talk about only one value in the table centre, which the audience couldn't see.

And of course, there are those who present text tables, some with only five bullet points (which is the most there should be in a slide) and then proceed to read the text, which the audience has already read in a few seconds!

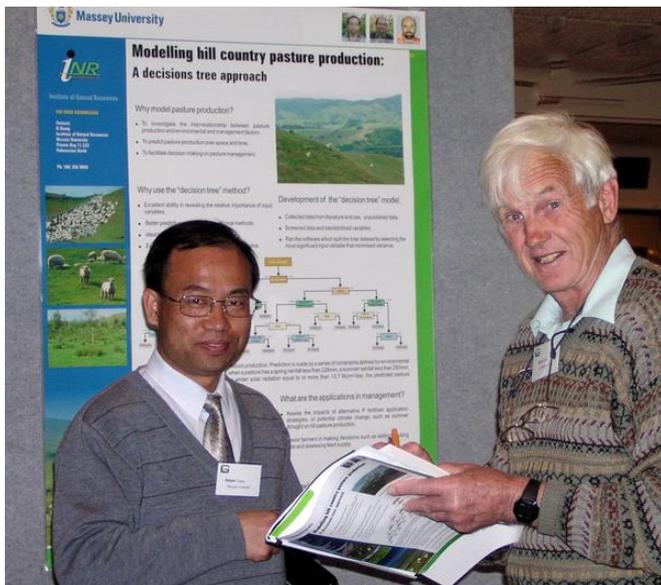
### **Timing the Conference**

But possibly the best equipment for running the conferences was a clock and a bell, or better still music. The clock was on the speaker's lectern and showed the speaker the time clearly. The session chair controlled the bell or recorder, which was set going a minute before the scheduled end for the presentation. It told the speaker and the audience that it was time for the session to stay on track, keeping the programme running on schedule.

### **Poster sessions began**

As NZGA moved into the 1980s, we launched a trial poster session at the 1983 Gisborne Conference. The attenders talked to the authors by their display for up to an hour. People circulated among the poster authors and derived much more from this exercise than sitting and listening to a one-way presentation.

This enabled more papers to be included at each conference (and in the subsequent Proceedings), and the format has been continued ever since.



*The late David Scott discussing his research as a poster*

The individual conference speakers made their reputation by giving interesting talks at the meetings - in the spoken sessions, during the poster sessions and out on the field day stops.

This created a very popular “sandwich” of regional experience for members, and NZGA membership rose to 1500 by the mid-80s. Some farmers brought their

wives with them, treating the event as an annual holiday, and the organisers even started arranging wives' local tours to gardens and other regional attractions while the spouses saw some of the region's top farms.

A commercial display area also developed, encouraging the businessmen and businesswomen to promote their pasture technology. The Conference has become a popular venue for company staff to gather and catch up, individually and as a team.

### **Novel IGC Format**

In 1985 at Kyoto the IGC featured 20 New Zealand speakers in all, and also the Australian speakers, excelled in presentation when compared with those from other countries. It all came to a really positive climax at the 1993 International Grassland Congress held in Palmerston North, with satellite meetings in Christchurch, Hawke's Bay and Hamilton before concluding in Rockhampton, Queensland with a tropical session.

Most of the papers were presented as posters, with each session only introduced by a spoken paper. This allowed a 90-minute summary discussion on the topic afterwards, and enable much more socialising among those attending - authors and audience members. This format was developed by Dr Gavin Sheath and guaranteed his subsequent participation at future Congresses, for everyone's benefit.

Then in 2020 the pandemic stopped all such conferences from being held. Associations such as ours have struggled to find alternative means of communicating their topics, and until these important meetings can resume, all we can do is to read about it, with only local discussion.

I feel that New Zealand members are missing their annual conferences, and I'm certain that they will return in droves once it becomes safe to hold them once more.