

# THE SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE ON LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES: A Quarter Century of Service

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The origins of the Southeastern Conference on Latin American Studies (SECOLAS) are similar to those of several regional associations whose histories have previously been summarized in this journal.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to foster more and better academic courses on Latin America in the United States, the Pan American Union convened a national round table in Washington in April 1952 and, during the ensuing decade, sponsored a series of regional conferences to discuss similar problems and to provide for future cooperation and interchange. One such meeting, held on the campus of Duke University (Durham, North Carolina), 12–13 February 1954, was organized by R. L. Predmore of the host institution, and was called the “Southeastern Regional Round Table on Teaching Problems in the Field of Latin American Studies.” Anibal Sánchez-Reulet represented the PAU and explained the history and purpose of such regional meetings, which, in other forms, had actually preceded the Washington round table by as much as thirty-five years.

At the Durham meeting participants discussed such topics as textbooks, supplementary readings and teaching aids, research problems, exchange of professors and students, Latin American area studies programs, job opportunities, and cooperation with the PAU, as these applied to the three fields of languages and literature, social sciences, and history. In addition, they elected Sturgis E. Leavitt (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and Linton L. Barrett (Washington and Lee), general chairman and secretary, respectively, and formed a steering committee consisting of Leavitt and Barrett, together with the chairmen and secretaries of each section as follows: languages and literature—Hayward Keniston (Duke University) and Karl E. Shedd (University of Georgia); social sciences—Robert W. Bradbury (University of Florida) and Federico G. Gil (U.N.C. at Chapel Hill); history—Alfred B. Thomas (University of Alabama) and Alexander Marchant (Vanderbilt University). It was not until the second meeting (Athens, Georgia, 21–22 April 1955) that the current organization name was adopted and the decision reached to use the abbreviation SECOLAS.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, it was not until the third meeting (Gainesville, Florida, 16–17 March 1956) that the participants pledged to continue permanently the association and the convening of annual meetings.

The twenty-five annual meetings (1954–78) that have been held or planned

during the life of SECOLAS reflect the geographical and disciplinary breadth of interest in Latin America within the southeastern region. Twenty separate institutions will have hosted these twenty-five conferences in eighteen different cities in seven states. The tradition has been to link the meetings with an institution of higher education, so that even when the participants have lodged in off-campus facilities, all or some of the formal conference activities can take place on the campus of the host college or university. This practice has permitted SECOLAS members to know more fully the faculty and resources of certain schools in the region, and has often aided the host institutions in promoting an interest in Latin America within their own communities. It has also reduced for the Conference and the participants the expense of conducting the annual meetings, as the hosts, at least in recent years, have covered the costs of registration, local arrangements, a reception, meeting rooms, and the luncheon and dinner speakers, in exchange for no more than a one-dollar registration fee.

Attendance has ranged from a few dozen, in the early years, to as many as 200, with the average in the last decade probably falling between 100 and 125. Not surprisingly, choice of meeting site seriously affects attendance, with central locations such as Atlanta and Athens tending to draw somewhat better than the peripheral ones such as Miami and Lafayette.

As will be noted, the focus of the annual meetings has varied from general themes applicable to the entire Latin American region to a concentration on specific countries, but always with the hope of attracting contributions from as many disciplines as possible. Perhaps due to the origins of the Conference, there has been a tendency to devote recurring attention to problems and methods of teaching and research in the Latin American field. At least nine of the meetings, including the first five, can be considered to have displayed such an orientation, while nearly all of the others have contained individual papers or even whole sessions concerned with pedagogy or methodology. Otherwise, SECOLAS has probably experienced the same proportion of originality and imitativeness as has marked the programs of other regional and national associations.

The two principal officers in SECOLAS have been the president (general chairman till 1960) and the secretary-treasurer. Since Predmore organized the first round table in 1954 there have been twenty-five general chairmen or presidents elected at the annual meetings, including twenty men and three women.<sup>3</sup> These have represented seven separate disciplines (history: 11; languages and literature: 7; political science: 4; economics: 2; anthropology: 1) and fifteen different institutions. By contrast, the office of secretary-treasurer has been filled, either by appointment or election, by only eleven persons (two females), representing seven institutions. Other offices that have gained importance include annual program organizer, a role at times assigned to the president-elect, local arrangements chairman, and, as will be discussed below, the editors of the Conference's two publications.

In its early years SECOLAS operated without charter or formal rules of membership, affiliation being extended informally to all interested persons in the so-called Southeast. But with the adoption of the first constitution in 1959, dues were set at \$2.00 a year and full membership restricted to residents of the

region (see note 2 for definitions of Southeast). Beginning with the business year 1972–73, individual dues and subscriptions were set at \$4.00, institutional subscriptions at \$6.00, the level they still maintain. The question of membership as such is still in the process of being resolved (see below).

In an attempt to give the Conference a greater sense of unity and to facilitate communication, the *South Eastern Latin Americanist*, or *SELA*, was initiated as a quarterly bulletin in September 1957. The first editor was Frederick E. Kidder of the Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico (San Germán). With a brief interruption, he served as editor till 1961, having carried the job with him to the University of Florida in 1959, and began the practice of combining the roles of editor of *SELA* and secretary-treasurer of SECOLAS. It was at Gainesville in 1965, under the new editorship of Felicity Trueblood, that *SELA* passed from its original mimeographed format to a clearly more pleasing and professional printed format.

Over the years the objectives and, hence, the contents of *SELA* have been seen as threefold. In the first place *SELA* remains an organ for communication of professional news and notes, with special emphasis on the affairs of SECOLAS and on activities of individuals and institutions in the Southeast. Second, it has become a vehicle for the publication of short substantive articles and review essays. Third, it carries notices of recent publications in the entire field of Latin American studies, the latter function made more useful to its readers due to the bulletin's relatively brief lead time.

For about a decade *SELA* often carried among its articles versions of papers delivered at the annual meetings. Yet the desire persisted to find some method to preserve a more complete record of the labors of those meetings. Thanks to the efforts of Eugene R. Huck and the financial support of the Sears Foundation and West Georgia College, most of the papers from the 1967 meetings were printed in West Georgia College, *Studies in the Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (June 1967). By special arrangement, the proceedings of the 1968 meeting were published as *Artists and Writers in the Evolution of Latin America* (University of Alabama Press, 1969), edited by Edward D. Terry. Both of the above were distributed free to all members of SECOLAS. Finally, due again principally to the labors of Huck and his colleagues at West Georgia College and the financial support of the Sears Foundation, volume 1 of the SECOLAS *Annals* appeared in 1970, presenting the papers of the 1969 conference. Although Huck has since moved to Kennesaw Junior College and the Sears Foundation has withdrawn its support, the *Annals* now numbers 8 volumes, with volume 9 in preparation.

It was originally hoped that all papers presented at the annual meetings, including the luncheon and banquet addresses, would be published in the *Annals*; and to the extent that authors provided the editor with good copy by the stated deadlines, such was the case. In recent years, however, several interrelated factors have complicated the situation. At some conferences, for example, program chairmen have expanded the number of papers so as to increase participation and broaden appeal. Also, in line with evolving practices in certain disciplines, several participants have chosen to prepare rather lengthy papers and present just an oral summary. At the same time, printing costs have con-

tinued to rise. As a result, in 1975, Huck, asked for a review of SECOLAS publication policies, looking to a possible grant to him and succeeding editors of some discretionary power in selecting and in requiring revisions of papers to be printed. In turn, Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr. (president, 1975–76) appointed an ad hoc Committee on SECOLAS Publications, chaired by the secretary-treasurer. The report of that committee was adopted at the 1976 meeting and provided for the creation of a three-person editorial board—the editor plus two—to select those papers to be included in the *Annals* and to suggest revisions to be made prior to publication. The 1977 volume, based on the 1976 meeting, was the first to appear under the new system. The same ad hoc committee, by the way, also proposed that, for the moment, no changes be dictated for *SELA* and that decisions on content, etc., remain in the hands of the secretary-treasurer-editor and his or her designated staff.

If SECOLAS has never been as large or active as some of its members might ideally wish, still it would be difficult to conclude that its present condition is anything but healthy. In recent years paid membership has fluctuated between 200–250 persons, about 90 percent of whom reside within the Southeast, to which can be added approximately forty library and institutional subscribers to the publications and an almost equal number of addressees to whom the publications are sent on an exchange or complimentary basis. Among these roughly three hundred institutions and individuals who regularly receive *SELA*, the *Annals*, and other SECOLAS communications are several dozen located outside the Western Hemisphere in countries as distant as Japan, England, The Netherlands, East Germany, and the Soviet Union.

One disappointing aspect of the composition of the membership rolls has been the inability to attract a significant percentage of paid members from outside the area of higher education. The participation of school teachers, professionals from other fields, and laymen is minuscule, while that of students, even on the graduate level, is not markedly better. And the attendance of such groups at the annual meetings has been almost equally negligible.

Also disappointing is the low level of representation, even among academics, from some states within the region. While no single state overwhelms the rest, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia have tended to dominate the membership, with Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee forming a relative middle group, and the others lagging behind. To some degree this imbalance reflects differences in total population and in the traditional importance of Latin American studies at educational institutions within the states. Yet the paucity of members in Kentucky, Mississippi, Puerto Rico, and Virginia, as well as the inadequate numbers from several other states, suggests that SECOLAS has not sufficiently, at least not convincingly, publicized the advantages of affiliation either in the newest states to be linked with the region or in those states where Latin Americanists have arrived in significant quantity only in recent years. In fact, given the stabilization of membership over the past five years or more, it appears that SECOLAS has not recruited large numbers of new members from any state. Thus far these patterns have not diminished the activities or vitality of the organization, but, if not corrected, they could portend serious problems for the

future. Similarly, it would seem advisable to solicit greater input from such disciplines as economics, geography, sociology, and anthropology to balance better the traditional dominance of history, languages, and, to a lesser degree, political science.

Puerto Rico is a special case within SECOLAS, given its geographical situation and its anomalous political ties to the United States. Considering the dominant cultural ambient of the island, we might assume, or at least hope, that Puerto Rico would play a unique role in the life of the association, and, as noted above, a few residents of Puerto Rico were active participants in SECOLAS' early development. Unfortunately, over the long haul, Puerto Ricans have not paid dues, attended conferences, or contributed to publications in large numbers. The SECOLAS leadership has at various times discussed the desirability of holding an annual meeting on the island, but cost considerations have always seemed to outweigh the probable benefits.

It is likely that as of 1977 SECOLAS membership offers the best professional bargain anywhere in the United States: four quarterly bulletins (contents described above), the *Annals*, and a program brochure for still only \$4.00 per year to individuals. This has been possible through the generosity of various institutions that have subvented the secretariat and the printing costs of the two formal publications, as well as of those that have defrayed costs associated with the annual meetings. In the case of the secretariat and *SELA*, which have been administered by the same office at least since 1958, the support has come from the University of Florida (1959–70), the University of Alabama (1970–73), Clemson University (1973–76), and, again, the University of Alabama (1976–). As previously noted, the earliest editions of the *Annals* were subsidized by a grant from the Sears Foundation of Atlanta, but remaining expenses then and, more recently, full costs of publication have been covered by West Georgia College (1970–74) and Kennesaw Junior College (1975–). As a consequence of this ongoing financial assistance, and despite the relatively low dues, the SECOLAS treasury has continued to fatten, such that the balance on hand as of 22 April 1977 was \$5,943.73. Should either or both of the subventions be suddenly reduced, this surplus would aid in maintaining current programs while alternate funds were being sought.

One additional concern expressed among some members in recent years is the extent to which the constitution has fallen into disuse. The first SECOLAS constitution was adopted by the membership in 1959 and provided for the election of a president and of a council composed of fifteen members, including the president, president-elect, and immediate past president, plus one councilor from each state and three councilors-at-large. The council was, directly or indirectly, responsible for all affairs of SECOLAS and was to appoint a nominating committee, members having staggered two-year terms, as well as the secretary and treasurer who held three-year terms. This rather complicated organization was substantially streamlined by the revised constitution approved, again by mail ballot, in 1963. This second document combined the offices of secretary and treasurer and reduced the membership of the council to four: president, president-elect, immediate past president, and secretary-treasurer. The president

was to appoint the secretary-treasurer for a three-year term, with approval of the council, while the latter alone was to appoint the nominating and all other committees.

Since the early 1970s, however, without any amending of the constitution, the council and nominating committee as distinct bodies have ceased to exist. Instead, nominations and general policies are being developed during the annual meeting by an open caucus of all past and present officers in attendance or by the independent actions of the president and/or secretary-treasurer. In addition, the latter officer is being elected by mail ballot among the entire membership, while the annual program chairperson is being named by the president, where previously the title had fallen on the president-elect. Also, the annual business meeting is now selecting the sites of future conferences from among bids submitted by institutions wishing to serve as hosts, and participation in all voting is now open to all persons paying dues whether they live in the so-called Southeast or not. Apparently no bylaws have ever been adopted.

As a result of these increasingly informal and perhaps illegal procedures, the members voted at the 1974 meeting to create an ad hoc committee to advise the Conference on the revision of the constitution and the drafting of bylaws. Richard Gray (president, 1974–75) appointed such a committee and charged it with preparing a report for presentation to the 1975 meeting. At that later time, the Conference received the report and tentatively approved the first three articles in the draft of a proposed new constitution. However, the conference voted to return the remaining portions of the draft to the committee for revision and possible expansion and called for a mail ballot on the revision prior to the 1976 meeting. In fact, the committee ultimately made its report directly at the 1977 business meeting, where the members in attendance gave approval, with minor changes, to the proposed new constitution.

If accepted, in turn, by the general membership via a mail ballot, the 1977 constitution would change the corporation's name to Southeastern Council on Latin American Studies, remove the precise regional definition and hence any hint of limitation on membership, restrict in number and formalize the structure of the executive committee, and standardize the procedures for electing all officers except those responsible for the annual meetings, who will continue to be appointed. The basis will also exist for the development and application of bylaws.

As SECOLAS held its twenty-fifth meeting, in April 1978 in Charleston, S.C., there was cause to be proud of what had been accomplished during the past quarter-century, and reason to hope that future years will find SECOLAS contributing to an expansion of Latin American studies in the Southeast.

#### SECOLAS GENERAL CHAIRMEN (1954–60) AND PRESIDENTS (1960–79)

- 1954–55 Sturgis E. Leavitt, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- 1955–56 A. Curtis Wilgus, University of Florida
- 1956–57 Alfred B. Thomas, University of Alabama
- 1957–58 Charles W. Arnade, Florida State University

- 1958–59 Luis Aviles, Pensacola Junior College  
1959–60 Bernard L. Poole, Erskine College  
1960–61 Margaret V. Campbell, Florida State University  
1961–62 Federico G. Gil, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
1962–63 A. Curtis Wilgus, University of Florida  
1963–64 Eric N. Baklanoff, Vanderbilt University  
1964–65 Robert W. Bradbury, University of Florida  
1965–66 Jane L. DeGrummond, Louisiana State University  
1966–67 Alfred B. Thomas, University of Alabama  
1967–68 Ione S. Wright, University of Miami  
1968–69 Manuel D. Ramírez, University of Georgia  
1969–70 Eugene R. Huck, West Georgia College  
1970–71 William E. Carter, University of Florida  
1971–72 Edward H. Moseley, University of Alabama  
1972–73 John D. Martz, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
1973–74 Nestor Moreno, University of South Carolina  
1974–75 Richard B. Gray, Florida State University  
1975–76 Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., Tulane University  
1976–77 Edward D. Terry, University of Alabama  
1977–78 Joseph L. Arbena, Clemson University  
1978–79 William L. Harris, The Citadel

SECOLAS SECRETARY-TREASURERS AND EDITORS OF SELA

- 1954–55 Linton L. Barrett, Washington and Lee University  
1955–56 Harry Kantor, University of Florida  
1956–57 Ethel Marshall, Alabama College  
1957–58 Herberto Lacayo, Florida State University  
1958–61 Frederick E. Kidder, Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico,  
San Germán; University of Florida  
1961–62 Ethel Marshall, Alabama College  
1962–65 Philip F. Flemion, University of Florida  
1965–70 Felicity Trueblood, University of Florida  
1970–73 Edward D. Terry, University of Alabama  
1973–76 Joseph L. Arbena, Clemson University  
1976– Lawrence A. Clayton, University of Alabama

NOTES

1. See *LARR* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1975) for brief introductions to the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies (PCCLAS) and the Midwest Association for Latin American Studies (MALAS).
2. Originally, Southeast was defined to include Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, and Tennessee. In 1972 the boundaries were expanded to embrace Kentucky and Virginia.
3. Two individuals (A. Curtis Wilgus and Alfred B. Thomas) were selected twice, once each as general chairman and later as president.