ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Ernest H. Kiekenapp, O.D., Secretary-Emeritus and Chairman of the History Committee of the American Optometric Association.

Interviewer: Maria Dablemont, Librarian/Archivist of the American Optometric Association.

April 25, 1967, at the home of Dr. Kiekenapp, 6800 Chapel Lane, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Dablemont: Shall we start to tape your recollections for your own future library?

Kiekenapp: Well, that would be a rather difficult thing to do. Although I, myself, have contacted many old-timers... And you too have been contacting many of them, and it certainly is going to bring out some very revealing facts that I think will be of great interest to readers, if not at this particular time, in the years ahead.

Dablemont: I believe that these interviews are very important because we have lost so much of the past history of optometry, and they will help us to reconstruct this history. Then, shall we start from your life?

Kiekenapp: Well, putting myself on record is not an easy thing, but I've got a little outline here that I will follow and see whether or not the record will take it. I was graduated from the Stone School of Optometry in 1912, and I went into the practice of optometry at Lake Benton, Minnesota, in 1914. I served with the 332nd Field Artillery overseas in World War I, and after another year of postgraduate work at the DeMars School, I reentered practice of optometry in 1920 at Faribault, Minnesota, the place where I was born. I was elected Secretary of the American Optometric Association in June, 1922. Well, yes, I was the Chairman of a committee or two, the Resolutions Committee, for instance, and I was very much interested in the AOA, due to the fact that I was very friendly with Albert Meyer, former President
and Secretary of the AOA; and I chose him as my ideal as a professional practitioner and as an organization man.

Dablemont: Yes, that's fine, but our records indicate that you were offered the position of Secretary in 1921. Is this correct?

Kiekenapp: Yes, that's correct. I was offered the position in 1921 at New York, but I turned it down because I thought it was a little too heavy for me, and so I refused to take on that responsibility. Then, next year, the Committee waited on me again at Indianapolis, and they finally got me to relent, and I decided that I would take a chance and run for Secretary of the AOA, and whether it was fortunate or unfortunate--anyway, I made it.

Dablemont: Who was the Secretary before you?

Kiekenapp: That was Dr. Nicum of Dayton, Ohio, and he was a very good secretary, though I never saw any of his records, which really are the evidence of the type of secretary that a man would be. He was a very fine gentleman and I liked him very much. Of course, he had his political enemies like we all do.

Dablemont: Let's go on with the rest of your career then.

Kiekenapp: Well, then, as I say, I moved from Faribault to Minneapolis in 1936 to assume increased duties for the AOA on a full-time basis, which
position I held for 35 years. I published and was the first editor of the Journal of the American Optometric Association, in which capacity I served for 32 years.

Dablemont: May I ask you a question? Could you describe that office you had in Minneapolis? Describe the office and the help you had, how many rooms you occupied and all this.

Kiekenapp: Well, at first when we went to Minneapolis, we had only two rooms—one for our secretary and one for myself. That was very limited, since we had to do mimeograph work in the secretary's office, and it was rather crowded. Then as we grew and the work demanded more space and more help, we were able to obtain it. The budget of the secretary was increased, and when the Congress was held in Minneapolis in 1950, we had nine rooms and nine employees, and two men assisting me with the Journal. And all the publications, the Visual Digest as well as the Journal of the AOA and pamphlets and so forth, came out of our office at 404 Wilmac Building. When the Congress was held in Minneapolis, we held open house, and many of the delegates that came up to 404 Wilmac Building inspected our office. We were very happy to show them the growth of the AOA Secretary's office and the accomplishments that we were able to effect with the increased dues and budget allotments given to the Secretary's office.

Dablemont: Dr. Kiekenapp, would you please tell us now about your membership and honors?
Kiekenapp: Well, I'm a life member of the Minnesota and American Optometric Association and life member of the American Optometric Foundation, and a member of the American Academy of Optometry, the Distinguished Service Foundation, and the past Secretary and, presently, honorary life member of the International Association of Boards of Examiners in Optometry. I'm a member and Gold Medal recipient of Beta Sigma Kappa Honorary Fraternity (that was given to me in 1950); in 1961, the recipient of the Phi Theta Epsilon Memorial Trophy—its Pennsylvanica College; and 1935 I was awarded Honorary Degree of Optometry by Illinois College of Optometry, and Honorary Doctor of Ocular Science in 1938. Then I was awarded a fellowship in Distinguished Service Foundation of Optometry in 1930, and was given a Distinguished Service Award by the AOA for 35 years of meritorious service at the time of my retirement in 1957. Of course, I might also add that at the time of my retirement in 1957 I was elected Secretary-Emeritus of the AOA.

Dablemont: You wrote many articles for publication and you gave many radio talks. Would you please tell us about that?

Kiekenapp: Yes. I wrote a number of radio talks and other publications, that is, other manuscripts for publication, like for instance I was author of an article entitled "Why Glasses Cannot be Fitted by Mail or by Lay Agent." That was in 1927. And I was, as a result of that, asked to go to Washington and to appear on the stand for the Postal Department because of that particular article, which the Chief Postal Inspector had read. And I was, also, author of the Minnesota State Board Handbook and Directory. That was
published in 1929. I guess altogether, I probably wrote over 300 editorials for the AOA publications. Then, as a member of the League of Minnesota Poets, I authored, oh, perhaps more than 200 poems, and I was a contributor to Poet's Anthology magazine--and believe it or not--listed in Who's Who in America. I am a member of the National Writer's Club and member of the Lion's Club--have been for 45 years; and I'm, also, life member of and past Commander of Post #43 of the American Legion in Faribault, Minnesota.

Dablemont: Tell us about your whistling and that Magic Conference. I have heard about that.

Kiekenapp: Well, do you think anybody'd be interested in that in an interview? (Laughter)

Dablemont: Oh, let's hear, let's hear. I'd like to know about this myself. (Laughter)

Kiekenapp: Well, since you asked, I suppose I'd better answer you. Yes, I'm a member and Past President of Ring #19 of the International Brotherhood of Magicians. I do an act known as "Mathemagic." Now it just happens that a lot of people are interested in magic, some, oh, they will do levitation acts and pull rabbits out of hats and soforth, but I...

Dablemont: Do you pull these rabbits out of the hat, too? (Laughter)
Kiekenapp: No. (Laughter) I go into a little different style. I do blackboard work, which involves a lot of mathematics, and I've always made a sort of a hobby of that, having already met Thurston and Houdini and Keller and Blackstone—they were friends of mine. I had an opportunity of meeting them and they got me interested in it. And then, here's another Ripley "Believe It or Not." I, in the entertainment field, do what is known as the "Piccolo Solos without a Piccolo." Sounds funny but, frankly, what it is, is whistling solos. I actually took it up professionally and took instructions at the Minneapolis School of Music from Bertha Maude Pratt, the professional whistling teacher. I was on several programs, student programs and so forth, with several bands—332nd Field Artillery over in France and England—and I'm also with the Zura Temple Vaudeville Unit. These are recreations if, after a day's work, you feel like letting off a little steam with exercising some of the talents that are hidden to people in the daytime. So, it's just a lot of fun. Everybody has to do that if he doesn't play golf or something like that.

Dablemont: You mean that you whistle all your troubles away?

Kiekenapp: That's right. Just whistle and your troubles will fade away.

Dablemont: Now, Dr. Kiekenapp, I believe it is time to tell us about your activities as of today.
Kiekenapp: Well, at present I am Chairman of the History Committee and, as such, we are trying to build the story of optometry and the AOA as it occurred over the years. This is really quite a job, and we're getting a lot of valuable help from some very important people. I've contacted many of the old-timers, Past Presidents of the AOA and chairmen of departments and committees that were active years ago, and I'm trying to collect memorabilia from heirs of those that have passed on that might have something to contribute to the history. Naturally, all Past Presidents of the AOA have a story to tell, and we're trying very hard to get as much of the detailed account of their trials and tribulations while in office that will contribute to the history of optometry and the AOA. So, all in all, we are covering as much ground as we can, as fast as we can, and it's a slow job at best.

Dablemont: Thank you, Doctor. Your work for optometry is an honor to a man and an honor to a profession, even leaving so much out as you have done. You did not say that you kept optometry and the AOA together for many years, and almost singlehanded. You did not talk about the very difficult days in which there was little hope that AOA and optometry would survive.

Kiekenapp: Well, frankly, if I did, people might say that I have "I" trouble—in other words, I was in the picture so prominently that it might have an adverse effect. I really had the central office of the AOA, and in order
not to be misunderstood, I actually used a nom de plume occasionally. Sometimes I wrote under the name of "Douglas Young" and I had a column in the Journal by "Bifocal," which seemed to go over pretty good. In order not to overdo any publicity for self, I actually prohibited the use of my own photograph among the others in the Journal, mainly because I wanted the men in the field to read the articles, and if they saw nothing but the name Kiekenapp, they might be scared away. True, we did have some very serious breaks in optometry. There were lawsuits. States, not satisfied with some of the things we were doing or endeavoring to do, withdrew, withheld their affiliation fees, and it required some fence mending and a lot of healing of wounds that, again, caused travel to the trouble spots. And it was necessary for us to go direct to these spots and talk to them, reason with them, get them to come back to support the AOA, which, after all, represented optometry on a national basis.

Dablemont: This means that you regretted, as Secretary, that you could not better communicate with the Associations and members throughout the country?

Kiekenapp: Well, yes, that's true. Naturally, communication in the early days was more or less limited, and we just had to do the best we could for the times that we were living in. Our very best actions took place, of course, at the Annual Congress, when the House of Delegates got together with the Board of Trustees and worked. The Board of Trustees were really hard-working
men. Of course, it was up to me to keep them organized and supply them with reports for discussion, and the various reports of the different departments came into the Board for consideration, and it was really a very difficult job. Many of those men worked until 2-3 o'clock in the morning, particularly the Resolutions Committee. I well remember the many years when the Resolutions Committee, guided by Harold Kohn of the Legal Department, worked until daylight to be ready with resolutions that the Resolutions Committee were to present to the House of Delegates; then to bed for about two hours of sleep, and back on the floor for the House of Delegates. I remember many a time it was necessary for me to get to bed at 2:00 and up again at 4 to get my records ready for a House of Delegates' session. This, of course, was necessary because important actions were to take place that were to govern our affairs for the next year, and to approve those that we had charge of and accomplished, or failed to accomplish, the previous year. So, in those early days, it was not easy going. Today, things are very very much different. Communication is better; more frequent meetings can be held, because affiliation fees today enable the Board and the various committees and delegates to meet more often and to consider the very important things that come before them in this day of our history. As we see the splendid work done by the various committees, departments, Board of Trustees and the House of Delegates, we look back at the very difficult times we had in trying to keep up with the many things that were overtaking us that needed attention. Today, we are glad and very happy to say, that a revamping of the organization, the increased staff and help, has enabled us to accomplish much more
and better things for optometry than we were able to do in the earlier days when we lacked the unity necessary to move forward at greater speed.

Dablemont: It's so much like you, Dr. Kiekenapp. You always avoid talking about yourself. Perhaps you would feel better if I asked you to give now a message to the students of optometry and the younger men in the profession.

Kiekenapp: Well, you're very generous. I will say, though, that I do feel much better giving a message to the students in school or the younger men just having entered the profession. Now, suppose I give a point-for-point observation that might be of help to you who are just entering the field of optometry. Frankly, consider that you are about to enter a marvelous field of adventure. You will blaze new pathways and in doing so, you will encounter many unforeseen obstacles. However, backed by the best in academic preparedness, the traditional courage and fortitude, you are destined to win, though against odds. With educational, cultural and social advantages which you possess, you will attempt to find your place in the warring factions of society. You will encounter varying patterns of human conduct, and in the business and professional relationships which you will mold, you will constantly see yourself in the mirror of public opinion. At times you will meet with disappointment and discouragement. Occasionally, your hopes and desires may seem retarded. Many of these obstacles, however, will be purely mental hazards and cause you to succumb to the unnecessary handicap of an inferiority complex, which today is so largely contributing to a
sterility in human relations. You will have before you a world of opportunity; however, I must ask you to remember that opportunity is the measure of responsibility. May I, therefore, in all seriousness, set forth a few salient facts which may evoke that necessary sense of responsibility, as well as give forth that measure of encouragement which will speed you on your way to success. Let's look at optometry's far-reaching service, for instance. Let no one underestimate optometry's benefits to humanity. Lay corporations and unscrupulous promoters would make the public believe that vision is merely a casual something we can take for granted, that the cosmetic factor and cost of a pair of glasses are paramount. I'm going to ask you to extend your thoughts a bit and see just how far-reaching the fruit of your service really may go. Yours will be the opportunity of giving new life to discouraged people. You may be responsible for the discovery of undeveloped talent. Your service will contribute to increased skill of labor, as well as increased production and industry. You will play an important role in the prevention of traffic accidents, yes, the saving of human lives. You will take an important part in the prevention of crime and juvenile delinquency. Your gift to the grandfathers and grandmothers will enable them to more fully enjoy many hours in the afternoon of life. You will assist others to hold steady aim at the target of their life's ambition. Indeed, by your ministry, you will relieve distressed eyes which cripple efficiency, retard learning, and prevent the enjoyment of the society of friends. Yours is a responsibility that mere words cannot describe. One author reminds us that nature has opened her generous arms to the children of learning; has bestowed
on us through the precious gift of vision more than the wealth of kings, finer
colorings than those of the greatest artists, more subtle changes than all
the arts and sciences have yet created. Keep in mind that the eyes are the
gateway to the mind, the expression of the soul, the inspiration of the heart;
and that by their miracles are the pages layed open where lie vast stores
of learning, where the workings of numberless minds are yours, the pulse
of countless hearts, and the history of all peoples. Yours is the solemn obli-
gation of keeping at its best this priceless heritage. May I, therefore, con-
sider the value of your service to humanity as being almost in direct propor-
tion to the value and importance of sight to life itself. All of these require
that every optometrist must assume a measure of responsibility for the prog-
ress of his profession, besides exemplifying the ideal professional, ethical
optometrist in his private practice and social activities. Every man owes
his allegiance to that organization which best guarantees the progress of
his chosen calling. To bring out this point pertaining to your profession,
I do not believe there is an optometrist who will dispute the fact that educa-
tion and organization are the logical and foremost means of advancing the
profession of optometry and gaining for it the full recognition that it deserves.
I, therefore, wish to emphasize that in my opinion, certainly local societies
are most desirable, state associations are absolutely necessary, and a na-
tional association is, indeed, indispensible. Besides championing the cause
of the profession, organization has much to offer to the individual practitioner.
Certain benefits and privileges gravitate to the member who supports his
organization. He is entitled to attend postgraduate clinics, educational lectures, and demonstrations. He is privileged to keep in constant touch with the various departments, all of which have some constructive program to offer. There is a slogan that I have used so many times, that tells a long story in one sentence, and that is "Membership in the AOA is like an insurance policy." Moral: Keep up your insurance! So, I admonish you to listen patiently to every man's plea, whatever it may be. Remember, no man's opinion is worthless. Even a watch that won't run is right twice a day. So, I beg you to act with full confidence in yourself in every matter. I ask you to remember that you are not beyond the stage of taking advice. Be a good listener, for he who acts as his own lawyer, has a fool for a client. Keep all the friendships you have ever made and pledge yourself a growing list each day. Remember, he who does not keep his friendships in repair is making for a lonely old age. Pledge yourself you will make profitable use of leisure time. Build a good library and use it. Accept civic responsibilities which will furnish an outlet for your instinctive desire to serve charity. Therein lies the civic side of your profession, which offers untold satisfaction as a reward and ample opportunity to extend that magnificent obsession without limit. As my closing remarks to the students and young practitioners, let the spark of initiative keep your enthusiasm up high. May you realize every lofty ambition and, thus, be worthy of the leadership to which you aspire. Keep before you always a mental image of yourself as a successful person, and remember, nature is beautiful, friends are dear, and opportunity lies close at hand. Go ye, therefore, with confidence in yourself and faith in the future, and keep your appointment with destiny.