Committees are essential to the life of any professional organization. What exactly are these structural units, which prove so useful — and so pervasive — to organizations such as the American Association of Law Libraries? Robert's Rules of Order, the international parliamentary model for associations, defines a committee as “a body of one or more persons, elected or appointed by ... an assembly or society, to consider, investigate, or take action on certain matters or subjects, or to do all of these things.” Throughout its history, AALL has depended on committees for all these tasks, and several more. In addition to working as the productive engines of the association in such arenas as publications, statistics, and education, committees provide AALL members with important outlets for discussing and defining the profession of law librarianship.

In 1920, President Frederick C. Hicks described the important role committees had already played in AALL: “...the Association has solved, or sought to solve many of the troublesome problems common to those who administer and use law libraries.” Hicks might have added that committees also played a crucial role in providing AALL members with opportunities for active participation in their organization. Half a century later, the 1974 Task Force on AALL Re-Organization reported that, “Under our present organization, participation is almost exclusively provided through the committee structure.” However, it found “Membership on committees by their very nature has to be limited in size.” (Item 1) In part because of these restrictions, many members had reduced opportunities to participate in association activities until AALL established Special Interest Sections in the 1970s, which at the same time gave committees more freedom to focus on completing their specific missions.

The expansion in the number of questions that association members pondered in committees is reflected in their growing numbers through AALL’s history. A 1906–95 timeline illustrates that the number of committees active in each decade generally increased from 1906 until 1970. (Item 2) These numbers have held steady or declined recently, partly because of the appearance of SISs in the 1970s.

The association’s first annual meeting program showed that one of the more important matters charged to a committee was the drafting and promulgation of AALL’s first constitution and bylaws. (Item 3) The fledgling group immediately appointed four other committees and charged them with reporting back at AALL’s 1907 meeting. Two of these committees acted as liaisons to other organizations, one arranged a method for exchanging duplicates, and one explored “the matter of a possible supplement to Jones’ Index to Legal Periodical Literature, the first seeds of the current committee on the Index to Legal Periodicals.

Annual meetings proved to be important events for committees, for it was here that they presented annual reports to the Executive Board and members. In AALL’s first years, law librarians had ample opportunity to attend a broad array of discussions and presentations at the meeting. A photograph and program from the 1908 Lake Minnetonka, Minnesota meeting illustrates the collegial quality of the gathered membership. (Item 4) The relatively small size of the meeting and its program gave committees the opportunity to discuss their tasks with people representing all facets of AALL. (Item 5) By the 1950s, membership had reached almost 1,500, resulting in annual meetings whose size and scope made it increasingly difficult for members to sample everything being offered. The 1951 annual banquet photograph in Boston’s Copley Plaza Hotel shows an attendance that dwarfs the Minnesota gathering of 40 years earlier. (Item 6)
Whereas committees delivered their reports as a group to the assembled association members in 1908, by 1951 each committee met separately to discuss business during the course of the annual meeting, as shown on the back cover of the 1951 program. (Item 7) With the AALL’s growth during the first half of the century, committees — especially the committee assigned the task of organizing the meeting — found it more and more difficult to fulfill their assigned tasks and to serve as outlets for working and socializing.

While growth posed problems, committees welcomed the advances and opportunities that it provided. By the 1930s, AALL committees acted to provide a firm foundation for the expanding profession of law librarianship. Secretary Lotus L. Mitchell’s July 30, 1931 letter congratulated Hobart R. Coffey on his appointment to a committee that was charged with seeking appropriations for law school libraries. (Item 8) While the work of these committees was essential in expanding the AALL’s professional presence, it also placed great demands on law librarians already hard-pressed for time. A January 7, 1952 letter from Coffey illustrates how difficult it was just to keep his correspondence in order. (Item 9) He informed Chair Helen S. Moylan that he would gladly accept his appointment, though “I was unaware of the fact that I was a member of the committee.”

One of the more critical tasks that AALL has sought to accomplish through committees has been the periodic re-assessment and re-organization of the association’s structure. These self-evaluations have sparked serious discussions on how to make the best use of committees. The 1974 Task Force on Re-Organization addressed problems resulting from the dual demands placed on committees: as both membership outlets and the association’s workhorses. In 1987, a Special Committee on Committees studied AALL’s structure and summarized its recommendations to improve the efficiency of its committees. (Item 10) As its chart suggests, this exercise in self-scrutiny served to tighten and refine the organization’s structure, to force AALL to weed out those parts that had outlived their usefulness, and to prune those that had grown too large.

AALL spent its first several decades focused on the day-to-day operations of a professional association, activities in which committees played a crucial role by defining issues of interest to law librarians. In the 1930s, William Roalfe’s proposal to re-organize AALL added a new dimension to all this work. Under the Roalfe Plan, the association embarked on an ambitious program of self-examination and expansion in a project that laid the foundation for AALL’s future growth. Many of the association’s current standing and advisory committees were founded in the wake of the Roalfe Plan. (Item 11)

**ENGINES OF CREATIVITY**

Most who have served in professional associations would confess to having questioned, at least once, whether committees are worth the effort they demand. AALL committees take an enormous amount of members’ time. Often, a group’s final report may seem disappointing in proportion to the efforts, and with only a short historical perspective, one finds committees revisiting the same issues and solutions as their predecessors. Yet these criticisms are too near-sighted. Despite the redundant reports, lengthy meetings, and time-consuming paperwork, committees are essential to associations such as AALL. The 1971 Guidelines for Committees stated, “AALL functions principally through its committees, [and] membership on one of them is a serious and important professional duty.” (Item 12) President Hicks produced an impressive list of committee accomplishments just 14 years after AALL’s start, including debates on and proposed standards for “binding, cataloging, subject headings for catalogues, shelf-classifications, exchange of duplicates, insurance valuation, [and] securing Latin American laws.”

Committees are central to AALL’s ability to formulate and articulate the concerns of law librarians, as seen in the Committee on Binding’s 1909 working paper on Law Book Making. (Item 13) A. J. Small, one of AALL’s founders, wrote an introduction to the binding report that captured the committee’s spirit: “Hence, like a good physician I suggest and recommend that we seek to remove the cause of book ailments and administer a tonic that will bring about the condition of a sea-shore-buckram-tan to the cheeks of the volumes; put a few more stitches into the weak backs and use good strong tapes with cloth joints instead of strings or jaconet to hold body and soul together.” (Item 14)

AALL has often called upon committees to produce statistical profiles of law librarians. Currently, the Statistics Committee carries this responsibility, but they were by no means the first. The Education
Committee designed a 1936 questionnaire “to ascertain the practices common to law libraries with a view of improving such standards and of providing a guide to law library science.” (Item 15) Committee members amassed the data from these forms to produce an understanding of law librarianship as it was actually practiced in law schools around the country.

Always quick to see emerging trends, the same committee embraced computer technology a mere 25 years later. In a November 24, 1959 letter, President Frances Farmer suggested to Education Chair Mary Oliver that she submit a request to the Executive Board to have the committee’s questionnaire results tabulated and processed on IBM punch cards. (Item 16) The board approved the request, and the committee submitted its 320 surveys to IBM for processing.

Some 20 years before the Education Committee entered the computing age, AALL as a whole was digesting a series of reports charting its future course. The Special Advisory Committee on the Expansion Program’s 1936 report lauded the results of a 1934 vote endorsing AALL expansion, which would “meet the urgent needs for coordinated effort on the part of the law libraries in the United States and Canada.” (Item 17) It also called for more changes, including an executive secretary and more frequent meetings by the executive board. This report capped a process begun by William Roalfe, who had urged in 1930 that the association take immediate steps to ensure its future progress, including the establishment of a permanent headquarters, and the expansion of the Law Library Journal. (Item 18, courtesy of the Northwestern University Archives) Roalfe served on several committees implementing his suggestions.

Among the Roalfe Plan’s most visible and long-awaited developments was the establishment of a permanent headquarters. Not surprisingly, a committee played a key implementation role to secure funds to support the staff and space for AALL. According to the 1964 promotional efforts of the Headquarters Fund Committee, “Headquarters will provide a centralization of records, activities and communications. It will produce an efficient image of our profession. It will improve the professional status of each and every member by presenting the public image of a responsible, international, professional association.” (Item 19)

The fundraising efforts of the mid-1960s underscored the crucial role that finances play in the growth and ongoing functioning of AALL. Committees are the units that often solicit, disburse, and manage funds. Forrest Drummond, chair of the Committee on the Index to Legal Periodicals, presented AALL President Helen Newman with a grim picture of his committee’s charge in 1950: “Since this report covers a rather depressing year for the Index I am afraid that it is not too interesting and certainly not a very happy one.” (Item 20) The publication posted a deficit of almost $5,000 for the year. Drummond’s picture was not entirely negative, for he believed “that economy measures are doing the trick.” By 1952, the publication proved him right, and the committee reported a balance of almost $2,000.

COMMITTEES CONNECTED FOR JUSTICE

Committee members work hard to forge links among association members, law librarians, the wider legal community, and the general public. AALL’s Code of Ethics, drafted by the Ethics Committee in 1974, provides the foundation that securely welds all these links to the association. (Item 21) It outlines common standards for law librarians and promulgates a code of conduct to govern the profession’s members. The Code’s preamble highlights the responsibility of law librarians to fulfill their duties to their libraries, to their profession, and to society at large. Ervin Pollack, who proposed that AALL adopt a code of ethics, considered it to be a crucial component for a professional association, for “its ultimate purpose would be to further human relations, while its more immediate objective would be directed towards servicing the legal system.”

The National Legal Resources Committee provides a notable example of a committee whose mission called for working closely with people and institutions outside the association. As part of its activities, the members of the National Legal Resources Committee helped to establish and streamline the Government Depository Library System. In 1984, the U.S. Senate commended the “many dedicated people associated with the depository library program for their significant contribution in furthering the cause of free and open public access to Government information.” (Items 22 and 23)

The purpose of these collaborations is not simply to garner praise. In its exchanges with other
people and institutions, AALL committees seek to foster ongoing dialogues on issues of importance to law librarians. President Carroll Moreland's January 23, 1956 letter to Helen Newman expressed concern not so much about any specific setback as about the failure to make known AALL's viewpoint. (Item 24) She wrote that the federal government's "Special Committee preparing standards for Federal library positions has brought out its revised draft, and has ignored the recommendations of our Committee on Civil Service Positions with respect to subject specialization." Moreland asked Newman, then the U.S. Supreme Court Law Librarian, to present AALL's position at a hearing before the Civil Service Commission. In this, she sought both to champion the association's interests and to maintain the important professional ties connecting AALL and the federal government.

Joint committees with other associations are a further means for AALL to achieve its goals, but such committees can be cumbersome, as illustrated in Bernita Davies' July 19, 1949 letter to Helen Newman concerning a joint committee formed by AALL and the Association of American Law Schools. (Item 25) The two groups appointed only law librarians to the committee, since it was developed for "inspectional duties" — that is, ensuring that law school libraries met appropriate standards. As the committee addressed a wider range of issues, people questioned its composition. Davies, then a member of the committee, discussed with Newman "whether it [the committee] should be half librarians and half law school teachers." (Item 26) AALL and AALS adopted this suggestion in later years.

Committees in AALL work in all arenas of the legal field. In the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, association members responded to civil unrest, strong anti-war sentiment, and a vocal civil rights movement by gathering in groups dedicated to social justice issues. AALL responded by forming committees to put these ideals into practice. Elizabeth Poe, affiliated with the "program for concerned law librarians," made a proposal to Vice President Viola Bird in 1971 that the association form a "special committee to study the problem of prison inmates' access to legal materials." (Item 27) Poe's plea was heard, debated, and granted; the Special Committee on Law Library Service to Prisoners was born shortly thereafter. In time, this committee dedicated itself to issuing publications to benefit prisoners, including recommendations for prison law library collections and a list of "Law Libraries which Offer Service to Prisoners." (Item 28) This committee's work continues today as part of the Contemporary Social Problems SIS.

AALL committees also sought to make connections with students who were considering librarianship as a career. Under Marian Gallagher, the Recruitment Committee designed a 1962 brochure to celebrate AALL's "youthful profession" and lure prospective law librarians: "To the qualified person, it offers a challenging future in a rapidly expanding field." (Item 29) Gallagher, long-time University of Washington law librarian, devoted a great deal of her time to training others to provide legal information quickly and efficiently. (Item 30) Her work exemplifies all AALL committees that carry out the routine and extraordinary tasks of the association. These members and chairs constantly renew the issues and concerns that inform the profession of law librarianship while keeping AALL members connected to the wider world.

This exhibit was prepared by Andrew Nolan under the direction of William Maker at the University of Illinois Archives at Urbana-Champaign. The photographs and documents are from the AALL Archives administered by the University of Illinois Archives. The Archives welcomes additional AALL records and information concerning the papers of committees, both past and present. Send materials and inquiries to:

AALL Archives
Room 19 Library
1408 W. Gregory Drive
Urbana, IL 61801
(217) 333-0798
e-mail: axxarch@uicvmc.aiss.uic.edu

COMING ATTRACTION: For 1996, the Archives is considering an exhibit examining the social side of the AALL, particularly at the annual meeting. If your library has photographs, scripts, newsletters, correspondence, or other materials or information about the more informal side of AALL business, we would appreciate receiving copies to use in preparation of the exhibit. Documents or inquiries can be sent to the above address.