



ALCA's first meeting. From left: Ken Jenner; Ed Stafford; first president Julian Graham; Warren Purdy; Walter Diestch; Tom Lied; Tom Rich; Ernest Berthe; Don Sawyer; Ken Schmidt; Ed Reinecke; Jim Omura; Grant Tigwell; Bob Hoffman; John Lindsay; Don Groth; F.J. MacDonald; Harris Grand.

# ALCA

## changed with industry

By RUTH E. THALER-CARTER

**W**hat began 35 years ago as a small group of concerned business owners is now a leading trade association for the landscape industry.

The Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) serves exterior and interior landscape contractors, with a wide range of programs, services and vision.

By expanding services and smoothly adapting to the changing nature of its industry, ALCA has evolved from a small group of dedicated founders to a network of professional-level services and activities.

As recalled by Tom Lied, CCLP, chief executive officer of Lied's Landscape Design and Development, Sussex, Wisc.; ALCA president in 1968-1969, and the last active contractor who was a charter member, ALCA began through the efforts of magazine publisher Jim Garland of the California Landscape Contractors Association.

### California model moves across nation

"Jim felt that the state association was working well and had developed a dynamic value in California, but that there was a need for a national association representing landscape contractors," Lied recalls. "He felt

we could use the California model as impetus but that we needed a national voice."

Garland used his magazine to announce plans for an exploratory meeting in Chicago, inviting both landscape contractors and their suppliers to attend. That led to a decision to form a national entity, along with "the usual mix of short-sighted and long-term goals," says Lied. "One person wanted a vehicle for group purchasing and discounts on training publications. Another wanted leverage and limits on competition and regulating prices. Another wanted the national group to be politically active. Others wanted social and business visibility to improve the industry's image. Some wanted a focus on increasing profits through education. There was a strong interest in growing together and sharing ideas, being educational, which has survived through the years."



**Bailey: Define our role as professionals.**

The charter members agreed to form an association, drafted a constitution and by-laws, and elected Julian Graham as the first president. "He was the most interesting, funny, pleasing individual - a real role model," says Lied.

The group set a date for its first conference in New Orleans. It was "Dutch treat," and everyone paid their own expenses.

"One reason that ALCA originally formed as a national organization was to fill a need for members of the industry to be both better business people and better landscape contractors," said Rodney L. Bailey, CCLP, president of Evergreen Services Corp., Bellevue, Wash., and ALCA president in 1985, as well as a member and/or chair of every major ALCA committee since joining the association in 1974.

### We are professionals!

"ALCA was the first national group that recognized that we deserved to exist as professionals. The founding role was in education and that has been its guiding role ever since." In its early years, ALCA developed programs to reflect all aspects of running a landscape contracting company. A December 1977 issue of its newsletter reflects this commitment to educating members, with coverage of a two-day Maintenance Symposium (now the four-day Landscape and Grounds Maintenance Conference) and announcements of an annual meeting, Intiorscape Symposium (now the Interior Plantscape Conference), Management Seminar, Capitol Hill update and new members.

"ALCA's principal contribution to individual members and the industry has been to provide a forum for interacting and exchanging ideas and philosophies that are aimed at making us all better contractors,

which makes the industry better all around," Bailey says. "We feel free to share information because competition is not an issue. Any changes over time, such as how the association is organized, have been in response to changes in the industry and often have driven the industry. The most healthy change I've seen over the years is in focusing more on what we do rather than our geographic identities."

"The hallmark of ALCA has been benchmarking, networking, sharing ideas and education," Lied says. "The focus on education evolved through programming that serves the special interests of various segments of the industry." Among ALCA's earliest and most ingrained values has been its commitment not only to professional education, but to "acquainting young people with established contractors and improving the industry's image by building confidence among members," says Lied. "In the early days, every time you called yourself a 'landscaper' instead of a 'landscape contractor,' it cost you a buck! ALCA was the catalyst for converting the mentality of landscape contractors from 'this is a fun business' to 'landscape contracting is a good venue for earning a living' - from being a tradesperson to being a professional business person."

#### Business basics first

ALCA formed "when people were less concerned about building and expanding their markets and more concerned about how to do the work of running a business, because the market was so great at that time," says Lied. "Now that we're in the second and third generation of business owners, we've gotten more professional and more astute. ALCA and its various teaching institutions have led to better-quality members when other industries have been declining."

#### Shows with other groups

A hallmark of ALCA's growth and



**Lied: Better quality members fill ranks.**

success over the years has been its productive partnerships with other organizations in the industry. For example, joining forces with the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) and Professional Grounds Maintenance Society (PGMS) led to the annual Green Industry Expo trade show, now part of the

ALCA Landscape and Grounds Maintenance Conference every fall. The ALCA Interior Plantscape Division Conference will be held with the Tropical Plant Industry Exhibition (TPIE), starting in January 1998. ALCA demonstrates the benefits of plants in the workplace and promotes using professional landscape contractors to colleagues in many fields by participating in World Workplace every year.

ALCA's growth over time has been steady. The association today has approximately 1,500 member firms and a staff of 13, with an operating budget of \$2 million a year. Current services include:

- ▶ two premiere industry conferences and trade shows, for the interior landscape industry and exterior and maintenance specialists;
- ▶ a wide range of specialized programs for company leaders, sales staffs and other industry members, including: the annual Executive Forum for company leaders, Masters in Management for the Landscape Industry Seminars and more;
- ▶ a full-scale certification program;
- ▶ extensive training and publication services;
- ▶ collaborative links with other associations in research, environmental issues, horticulture, arboriculture, nursery services and others, including a Capitol Hill presence;

▶ a wide-ranging public relations program to promote the value of landscape contracting services to the public and help members enhance their own grassroots PR activities;

- ▶ several awards programs, recognizing excellence in the profession;
- ▶ a strong Safety Program that promotes safe workplace practices in individual companies and throughout the industry;
- ▶ member benefits, including access to tailored business insurance, long-distance discounts and other business programs;
- ▶ high-technology access through electronic mail and an Internet website.

#### Long-range plans

One important ongoing aspect of ALCA has been its commitment to long-range planning and incorporating Total Quality Principles into the management philosophy of both the association and its member companies. Lied has championed that process for the past 25 years as chair of ALCA's Crystal Ball Committee.

The first Crystal Ball Report to come out of that vital process gave a clear portrait of

the industry, noting that:

"The (landscape contracting) industry needs to understand itself and to be able to clearly describe its function to interested parties ... The landscape contractor is a service contractor ... Landscape contracting began as an agricultural-oriented industry with its roots stemming from the nursery industry ... The work of the landscape contractor is more diversified and more complicated ... [becoming] more closely aligned with the general contracting industry."

—Ruth E. Thaler-Carter is a freelance writer and editor who has produced the ALCA newsletter for several years. She is based in Maryland.

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