

Vail Vitrectomy Meeting: Beginnings

BY H. MICHAEL LAMBERT, MD, FACS

In the summer of 1972, a group of 4 intrepid vitreous warriors began backpacking trips to the San Juan range near Telluride, Colorado. Robert Machemer, Tom Aaberg Sr., Paul Wetzig and his son Rich, and Guy O'Grady made this trip each summer for several years. On the first trip, between hiking and libation, these pioneers of vitreoretinal surgery began discussing the idea of a vitrectomy seminar along the lines of a laser seminar that had been held a few times in Vail around 1970-72. In 1974, Robert



Robert Machemer, Guy O'Grady, and Tom Aaberg Sr., backpacking in Colorado in 1972.



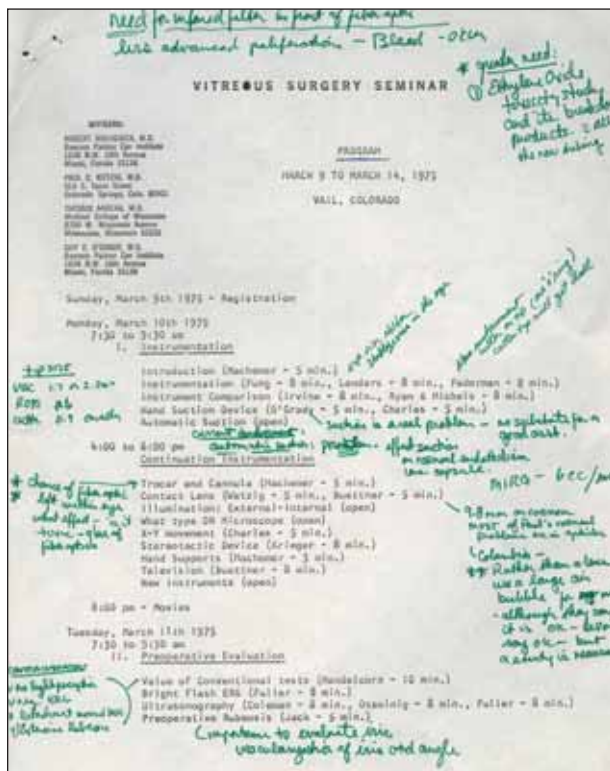
Paul Wetzig, Tom, Rick Wetzig, Robert, and friends in 1973.



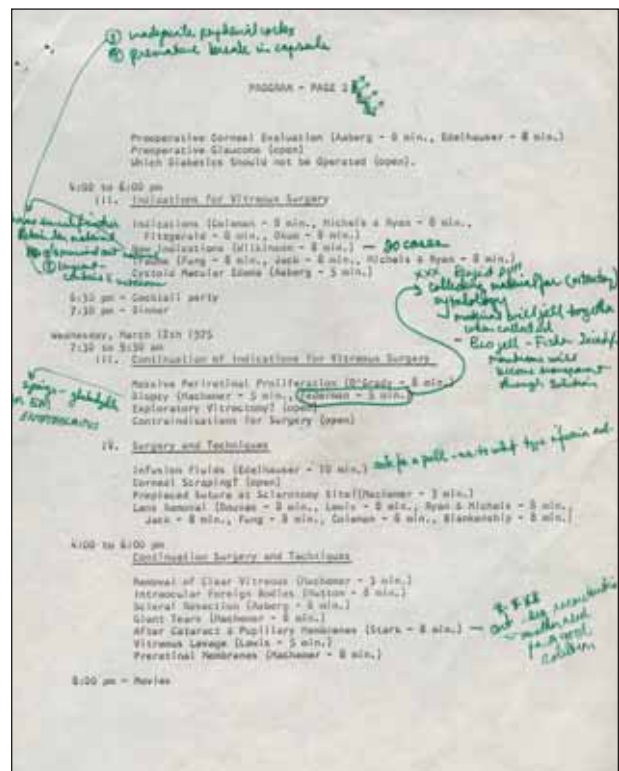
Robert, Rick Wetzig, Tom, and friends backpacking the San Juan Range in 1973.



Announcement Letter for Vail Number 1: Vitreous Surgery Seminar



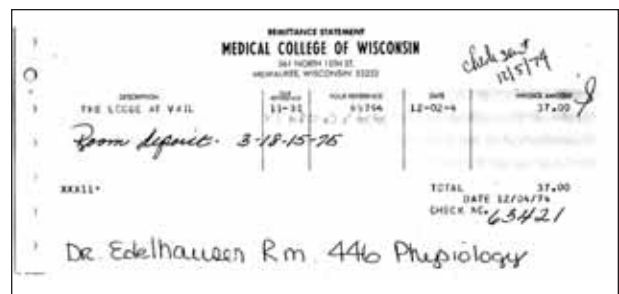
Program of Vitreous Surgery Seminar
(Vail Number 1) Page 1.



Program of Vitreous Surgery Seminar
(Vail Number 1) Page 2.



Program of Vitreous Surgery Seminar
(Vail Number 1) Page 3.



Hank Edelhauser's receipt for the 1-night deposit to secure his room for the first Vail meeting at the Lodge at Vail at \$37 per night. A check on the cost of a room at the Lodge for March 2012 showed a cost of \$629 per night—17 times the amount in 1975. Imagine multiplying the cost of a vitrectomy in 1975 by 17. Or, perhaps, let's not.

announced that the first "Vitreous Surgery Seminar" at Vail would be held in March 1975, with the 4 back-packers as the presiding officers. Participation would be by invitation only to limit the size of the audience and to facilitate lively discussion and exchange of ideas.

Subject matter for the first Vitreous Surgery Seminar included instrumentation, surgical technique, surgical complications, postoperative complications and indi-



Tom, Robert, Rick, and friends in 1973.

cations for vitrectomy, and laboratory research. Participants were required to present a new talk—something they had not previously presented—and the meeting was held in the spirit of open discussion of new ideas. Presenters included vitrectomists, anterior segment experts, and researchers. The participant list included Machemer, Aaberg, Landers, Federman, O'Grady, Charles, Ryan, Michels, Irvine, Wetzig, Buettner, Krieger, Fuller, Coleman, Fitzgerald, Fung, Edelhauser, Douvas, Blankenship, Hutton, Stark, Lewis, Urrets-Zavalía, Jack, Tasman, Bresnick, Myers, Brightbill, and Mandelcorn.

The original 4 continued backpacking for a few more years, making their last trip in 1976. Tom Aaberg Sr. fondly remembers climbing Mt. Handy (one of the 14,000+ ft peaks in the area) that September on his 40th birthday. As the valiant group approached the peak, only Robert, Tom, and son Tom Jr. pushed on to the top. With only 100 feet to go, the trio spotted a bear approximately 300 feet away heading down the peak. In his usual analytic manner, Robert assessed the situation and told the 2 others that because the common theory is that bears can run uphill much faster than downhill, he would wait and keep an eye on the bear while the oth-

ers finished the climb to the summit. This bit of trivia may help explain why members of the group are holding beer cans in many of the photos taken during these hiking trips.

CRITERIA FOR ATTENDANCE

The Vail Vitrectomy meeting has been held every 3 to 4 years since its inception (the timing determined by when Robert felt that there was enough new information to hold such a meeting). The rules have been simple for attendance: attendees must be invited; all attendees must present new information that has never been presented (preferably about surgery, research, or histopathology); and attendees must agree not to divulge the information presented at the meeting, whether in a presentation or a publication, until it is presented.

The Vail meeting has undoubtedly inspired several other innovative forums in retina. A direct offshoot of the Vail meeting was the Milwaukee Vitrectomy Course first held in 1975. This was a similar meeting run by Tom Aaberg, Robert Machemer, and Ron Michels, and it included the first-of-its-kind vitrectomy hands-on lab. The meeting rotated among Milwaukee, Miami, and Baltimore.



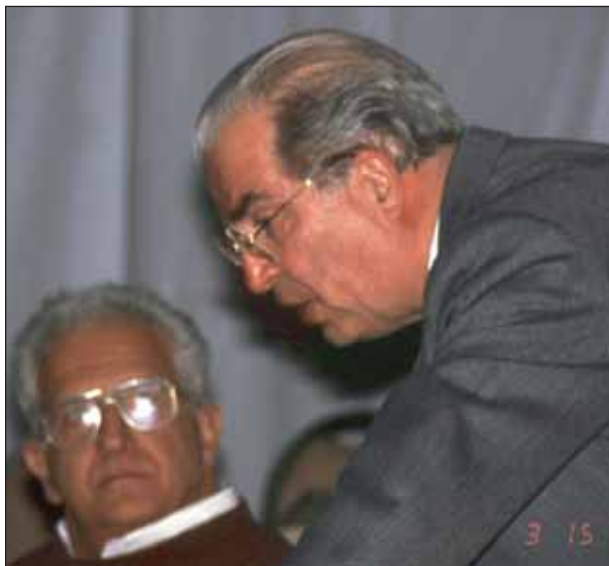
Milwaukee Vitrectomy Course 1975. From left to right: Robert, Darrell Willerson, Steve Charles, and Ron Michels.



Hands-on Milwaukee Vitrectomy Course, 1975. Robert once noted to Tom that the dog on the poster seemed to be paying the most attention to him.

VAIL VITRECTOMY OVER THE YEARS

In the early days, there were no company biases or consultancies to be disclosed. Dr. Machemer, among others (including this author), was particularly sorry to see this change over the years. Regardless, Vail continues to be one of the most interesting and informative meetings in our field, with the newest information presented in a friendly, albeit busy, format. It has



Robert discusses a presentation with Relja Zivojnovic at their last Vail Meeting on March 15, 1996, which was also Robert's 63rd birthday.

always been an exciting meeting with exchange of new ideas and passionate debates. And, of course, the back row continues to be reserved for injured skiers/retina specialists.

In 1996 Robert attended his last Vail meeting, and he and Relja Zivojnovic were honored for their many contributions to our specialty upon their retirement. Those of us who have known the men who founded Vail Vitrectomy have been fortunate to walk in the footsteps of these giants of our field. Some are still among us. Cherish and continue to learn from them. Honor them and say, "Thank you for leading the way." We all have a few special people in our lives we strive to emulate. These men are among my few. ■

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Tom Aaberg Jr., Christel Machemer, and Hank Edelhauser.

H. Michael Lambert, MD, FACS, is Chief Executive Officer of Retina and Vitreous of Texas in Houston, PLLC; Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology at Cornell/Methodist Hospital; and a Clinical Associate Professor at Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences and Baylor College of Medicine. He can be reached via email at mlambert@me.com.



CONTACT US

Send us your comments via email to
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A vertical banner with a black border. At the top is a diamond-shaped logo with a white mountain peak and the text "VAIL VITRECTOMY" in white. Below the logo is a photograph of a snow-capped mountain range under a clear blue sky, with evergreen trees in the foreground. At the bottom, on a black background, is white text that reads: "Please look for more information on the March 2013 Vail Vitrectomy Meeting in upcoming issues of Retina Today."