

“WHO IS THIS STURGIS?...”

Edwin C. Bliss, CP

A few years ago, a newspaper columnist wrote, “The word is out—the American Medical Association has followed the lead of the American Bar Association and the United Automobile Workers Union and displaced Robert in favor of Sturgis.”¹

The writer then went on to explain that Robert referred to **Robert’s Rules of Order**, which it said had previously been the “Bible” of the nation’s parliamentarians, and that Sturgis referred to **Sturgis Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure**, “which is coming up fast.”

“But who is this Sturgis,” the writer asked, “whose single name, like Picasso or Sinatra in their fields, is enough to identify the nation’s leading parliamentarian?”

Who indeed? Well, she is the late Alice Sturgis, and I’m sure she must have been pleased to have been called “the nation’s leading parliamentarian.” She was a warm, charming, witty woman who didn’t take herself too seriously; but she enjoyed the limelight, and she welcomed any opportunity to promote the cause of parliamentary procedure—and the modernization thereof.

It amused Alice Sturgis that her reputation seemed to intimidate people. On one occasion she was brought in at the last minute by the officers of a large national association, who anticipated some fancy parliamentary shenanigans by a belligerent group of dissidents at the organization’s annual convention. She was taken immediately to the stage, and introduced as the world’s greatest parliamentarian.

“When you hear something like that, you know there is a purpose—they are trying to impress the audience,” she said later, “and it had just that effect. Nobody let out a peep, because there I was, ready to do something, they thought. Now, that’s not a constructive use of parliamentary procedure, and I don’t like it—but I am amused by it.”

Although she had co-authored a textbook² in 1923 based on Robert’s Rules, during the 1930’s and 40’s, as she became involved in the operations of dozens of national and local organizations, she became increasingly disillusioned with **ROR**, feeling that it was unnecessarily “ritualistic.” She later wrote of Robert, “In part he relied upon the peculiar and specialized rules of Congress of the 1870’s. In part he in-

vented his own rules and did not base them upon court decisions. The result was a book which emphasized technicalities rather than principles.”³

So Alice Sturgis set out to write her own book, based not on her opinions, nor on Robert’s, but on court decisions, and on the consensus of leading experts on parliamentary procedure. The Board of Advisors for the first edition, published in 1951, included such names as Charles L. Watkins, parliamentarian of the U.S. Senate; James A. Farley, former Postmaster General; Paul Hoffman, President of the Ford Foundation; Laura Lorraine, Executive Director of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs; Paul Mason, Parliamentarian of the Senate of California; Owen J. Roberts, Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; Albert Woll, Counsel of the American Federation of Labor; Mrs. Glenn Suthers, Parliamentarian of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs; and other leading authorities in the fields of law, government, education, religion, business, and labor.

The Second Edition, published in 1966, added other experts to the Permanent Board of Advisors, including Erwin D. Canham, Editor of the Christian Science Monitor; Wallace Sterling, President of Stanford University; Floyd Riddick, Parliamentarian of the U.S. Senate; Ross Malone, President of the American Bar Association, and a number of others.

With such an impressive array of expertise, the book won widespread acclaim, and was adopted as parliamentary authority by a substantial number of national organizations.

The extensive use Mrs. Sturgis made of court decisions was a new departure in the field of parliamentary law. As former American Bar Association President David F. Maxwell pointed out, “Though herself a non-lawyer, she consulted lawyers extensively in preparing the work, and this consultation is reflected in its contents. Amongst the lawyers she consulted are several leaders of the American Bar Association who aided actively in the planning and preparation and who are now on the permanent advisory committee. ...Indicative of the highly professional legal background of Mrs. Sturgis’ volumes we note that some 3,000 decided cases from higher courts were reviewed in preparing them. Thus her rules have solid authority in legal precedent.”⁴

Mrs. Sturgis, who was an advisor to groups ranging from the Girl Scouts to the American Farm Bureau, once averaged 140 conventions a year, tapering off to about 40 in her later years. Although politically conservative, she refused to let her personal opinions interfere with her parliamentary activities, and she worked for both Democratic and Republican political organizations, counting among her friends and acquaintances such disparate personalities as Herbert Hoover and Walter Reuther, Amelia Earhart and Kathleen Norris, Woodrow Wilson and John J. Pershing.

When the United Nations was being established in 1945, she was asked to assist the American delegation. She urged Alger Hiss not to accept the

unanimous vote requirement in the Security Council, a procedure which she said ran counter to the basic principle of parliamentary procedure, rule by the majority. But her protests, and those of the Senate parliamentarian, were to no avail, which is one of the reasons why the Security Council has never been an effective instrument for resolution of problems through democratic processes.

Incidentally, while her book requires a two-thirds vote to close or limit debate, as does **RONR**, Mrs. Sturgis was never comfortable with this exception to the principle of majority rule. Just two weeks prior to her death she was in the office of Senate Parliamentarian Floyd Riddick, seeking his counsel as to whether future editions of the **Sturgis Standard Code** should follow the example of most legislative and administrative bodies, requiring only a majority vote for such purposes, unless otherwise specified in an organization's bylaws or standing rules.

Among Mrs. Sturgis' clients were a number of labor unions, and many who now use her book as their parliamentary authority do so as a result of first-hand contact with her. For example, she once taught an eight-session course for presidents of United Auto Workers locals, with the diplomas being handed out by her and Walter Reuther.

She also assisted many unions with bylaws revisions, and was recognized as an authority on the special parliamentary requirements mandated by the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 and the Taft-Hartley Act. Her interest in unions is reflected in the special section on labor organizations in the Second Edition of her book.

Mrs. Sturgis became interested in parliamentary procedure while a political science student at the University of California, before World War I. Someone was needed to teach a summer course in the subject, and although she was only a student, between her sophomore and junior years, and although she had no background in the field, she brashly volunteered. The dean accepted her, and because of publicity about the unusual procedure of having a student teach a course (and perhaps because she was a very popular coed) there was a large registration for the course. "At first I was horrified," she said later, "but it turned out to be fascinating and great fun." Later, at Stanford University, she wrote her master's thesis on parliamentary law.

When World War I broke out she wanted to serve overseas with the American Red Cross, but was too young, so she lied about her age, was accepted and sent to France. Fluent in French, she was one of three women accredited as correspondents for Army newspapers. While in France, she married a former University of California classmate, Lt. Eugene K. Sturgis, who later became a prominent attorney. They lived in Piedmont, California, a suburb of Oakland, until her death in 1974 and his in 1976. They had three children.

In addition to having her **Standard Code** reflect expert opinion and legal precedent, Mrs. Sturgis also wanted it to be concise. Instead of having a rule for every conceivable contingency, she chose to rely far more than Robert did on the common sense of the chair and the assembly. (For

example, she avoided cluttering up her book with such rarely used motions as *To Fix the Time to Which to Adjourn*, recognizing that any competent chairman could deal easily enough with such an eventuality without a special rule and that the incompetent ones probably wouldn't be aware of such an obscure rule, anyway.) Thus, by focussing on principles rather than rules, she kept her text to a mere 283 pages, compared to 642 (including the tinted pages and index) for the current **RONR**.

Another aim was simplicity. She endeavored to eliminate cant phrases, such as "previous question," and "Are you ready for the question?" which were fully understood only by those familiar with parliamentary procedure. She recognized that the expert tends to forget how confusing some phrases might be to the uninitiated. In a meeting of a typical organization, for example, many people will think "lay on the table" means to kill a motion; others will know that it means to postpone temporarily, and still others will simply be perplexed. So, she reasoned, why not just use the term, "postpone temporarily," so that everyone will know what's going on?

This was a cardinal principle with Alice Sturgis. She felt that Robert's books had been slanted far too much toward those trained in the subject, with little consideration of the average person, who spends little time in meetings, and lacks the time or inclination to master unfamiliar terminology. Parliamentary procedure, she believed, was too important to be the exclusive domain of trained parliamentarians.

She favored simplicity not only in terminology, but also in procedure. Thus, she deplored Robert's requirement that the motion to reconsider could be made only by one who voted on the prevailing side, which she said resulted in "ridiculous subterfuges," as members would vote the opposite of the way they felt, in order to be able to move reconsideration. She noted that "The courts have held that Jefferson and Cushing were right in following the historical principle that anyone can move to reconsider, unless the assembly has a special rule forbidding it."⁵

And finally, Mrs. Sturgis wanted her book to be readable and modern, so she avoided the stilted language used by Robert. That she succeeded in her effort to write in a lucid, understandable style is evidenced by the fact that her book is the parliamentary authority for such organizations as the National Association of Teachers of English and the College English Association.

As the Sturgis book was adopted by more and more organizations, pressure mounted on **ROR**, which was increasingly viewed as dated. One of the nation's leading newspapers,⁶ for example, referred to Alice Sturgis as "the woman who made **Robert's Rules of Order** obsolete," which was certainly a bit of hyperbole, but which indicated which way the wind was blowing. And Mrs. Sturgis herself was quite candid about her aim: "I'm trying to replace Mr. Robert," she told one reporter, "and I'm giving him a pretty good run for his money."

One can only presume that the publication of **Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised** in 1970 was a direct result of the fact that so many major

organizations, such as the Farm Bureau, the American Dental Association, and countless others, had abandoned Robert and adopted Sturgis⁷ during the 1950's and 60's. Something had to be done to stem the tide, or Robert would become a relic of a bygone era, along with Cushing, Hatsell, and others whose contributions, while significant, were primarily of historical interest. Sarah Corbin Robert and her associates⁸ recognized that **ROR** was not susceptible to "revision" in the ordinary sense of the word, but that it would have to be replaced by a completely new work if it was to offer a viable alternative to Sturgis. Hence, they chose to write a new book, with a modernized format, but retaining, regrettably, all of what Mrs. Sturgis called the "ritualism" of the original **Robert's Rules**. Gregg Phifer reflected the thinking of many parliamentarians when, commenting on this lost opportunity for reform, he said simply, "They blew it."⁹

Whether or not Mrs. Sturgis is continuing to give Mr. Robert a "run for his money" is an open question. While quite a number of leading organizations now use Sturgis instead of Robert as their parliamentary authority, a majority of the nation's societies still use either **ROR** or **RONR**.¹⁰ However, no one can deny that the young coed who decided in the early years of this century to master parliamentary procedure succeeded in leaving her imprint on the field. Her book—and her influence—will be around for a long time. Among the general public her name may not be a household word, but among knowledgeable parliamentarians no one is likely ever to ask, as did that newspaper reporter, "Who is this Sturgis?"

ENDNOTES

¹. *Oakland (California) Tribune*, Sept. 2, 1969, p. 24.

². Alice F. Sturgis and Alta B. Hall, **Textbook on Parliamentary Law**, Macmillan, 1923.

³. Alice F. Sturgis, **Learning Parliamentary Procedure**, 1953, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc. p. 18.

⁴. *American Bar Association Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 10.
Learning Parliamentary Procedure, p. 195.

⁶. *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, Feb. 25, 1973, p. 5.

⁷. In addition to switches to Sturgis, there were also some organizations switching from **ROR** to **Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure** during this period, notably Optimist International and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

⁸. For discussion of the authorship of **RONR** see "Will the Real Robert Please Stand Up?" by Edwin C. Bliss, *Parliamentary Journal*, April, 1981, p. 69.

⁹. "The Robert Heirs Blew It," by Gregg Phifer, *Parliamentary Journal*, July 1982, p. 81.

¹⁰. **RONR** does not automatically supplant **ROR** in organizations whose bylaws specify **ROR**, as many still do. See “Do You Have to Buy the New **RONR**?” by Bernard J. Sussman, *Parliamentary Journal*, April 1982, p. 69.

Ed Bliss, who lives in Mountain Ranch, California, is author of the cassette tape album, ‘Please Come to Order!’ He wishes to acknowledge the cooperation of Paul Mason, John Baird, Hy Farwell, Kim Elizabeth Stuart, and Floyd M. Riddick in preparation of this article.*

As the “REVIVAL” feature in the April 1982 issue, we reprinted an article first published in 1935 in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* entitled, “Parliamentary Law in the Speech Curriculum.” We noted that we had been unable to obtain any information concerning one of the co-authors of the article, Alta B. Hall. While researching the article on page 129, Ed Bliss ran across the following information about Dr. Hall, which he has passed along to us:

Alta Hall and Alice Sturgis co-authored a book, **Textbook on Parliamentary Law**, published in 1923 by Macmillan Co. At that time, Dr. Hall was Supervisor of Instruction of the Long Beach, California, public school system, and conducted summer sessions on parliamentary procedure at the University of Southern California. She later became a professor of speech at USC, teaching classes for many years in both speech and parliamentary law. She and Alice Sturgis were lifelong friends and colleagues.