

The Transition

Recollections of the Move of the Cajal Club From the American Association of Anatomists to the Society for Neuroscience by One Participant

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The founding of the Cajal Club has been described in several publications over the years, most recently by David Whitlock (2007). It is safe to say that this club was founded by, and its long term survival assured by, individuals who greatly respected Cajal and his legacy, were at their most enthusiastic when talking about the nervous system, and, it can be said without contradiction, could party without needing much of an excuse. Every year the best excuse for a party (a socializer) was the annual meeting of the Cajal Club that was held in association with the annual meeting of the American Association of Anatomist (AAA). The following, very brief, history of the founding of Cajal Club is provided for those who may not be familiar with the birth of this unique organization.

April 3-5, 1947

The 60th annual meeting of the AAA was held at McGill University, School of Medicine, in Montreal, Canada in the spring of 1947. Dr. George W. Corner, a well-know figure in reproductive biology (and by this time a member of the National Academy of Sciences [1940], and a future member of the Royal Society of London [1955]), was the AAA President. His presidential address was concerned with a topic that is still debated by all anatomists, and neuroanatomists, to the present day; terminology.

On the evening of April 3, 1947, Wendell J. Krieg, a neuroanatomist of significant reputation, arranged a party in his suite at the Mount Royal Hotel. Consistent with his somewhat flamboyant style, Krieg organized a buffet for the attendees with labels on the various dishes identifying their contents: red nucleus (cherries), substantia nigra (caviar), and grey matter (an odoriferous cheese). There were other delicacies such as cerebrospinal fluid (spiked punch). Naturally, there was also sufficient amounts of good whiskey. By the end of the evening a small cadre of young neuroanatomists remained and listened to Krieg outline a plan to put together an informal group that would gather at the annual AAA meeting to discuss neuroanatomical topics of mutual, and shared, interest. A plan was put-forth, and accepted, and this group decided to call themselves

the Cajal Club (CC) after the father of contemporary neuroanatomy (see Whitlock, 2007 and the CC Proceedings, Vol. 4, 1996, for further details).

Although a loosely organized group, officers were elected. Wendell Krieg became the Nucleolus (President), E. Horne Craigie the Axone (a lifetime title recognizing his status as a former student of Cajal), Pinckney Harman the Apical Dendrite (Secretary-treasurer), and Clement Fox the Nissl body (Vice-President). The other founding members were; R. Frederick Becker, George Clark, James Graves, David Jones, Anthony Pearson, Duncan Hetherington, Arthur Jensen, Grant Rasmussen, Charles Berry, and Talmage Peele. Brief biographical sketches of all the founders can be found in the Proceedings of the Cajal Club, Vol. 4, 1996.

From this point the CC grew in membership, interest, and quickly became a very positive factor at the annual meeting of the AAA. The custom of the Cajal Club was to meet the day immediately proceeding the first day of the AAA meeting. I believe that the AAA saw the advent of the CC, and their desire to meet at the AAA meeting as mutually beneficial; AAA gained from the CC attendees, and the CC gained by AAA members coming a day early to attend the CC meeting. Within a very short time the complete CC program appeared in the overall AAA program (see AAA Program, 1952, p.5). For more than 50 years this cooperation continued to the benefit of both professional organizations.

The Transition-A Beginning and A Process

For a number of reasons, one being the formation of the Society of Neuroscience (SfN) in the early 1970s, attendance at the CC meeting began a slow decline by the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Concurrent with this shift was the fact that many neuroanatomists, even those who were steadfast anatomists and long-term AAA members, were gravitating to the Neuroscience meeting. Consequently, this slow decline in attendance at the CC meeting was accompanied by a concurrent slow decline in attendance at the AAA meeting; both affected the other.

I admire my friend Larry Swanson for asking me to recall the move of the CC from the AAA to SfN knowing that I had reservations as to whether or not the small CC would survive an affiliation with a massive organization. During the entire time that this potential move was being considered I was an officer in the CC (Alpha Helix) and was also an officer in the AAA (Secretary-Treasurer). When I became the Secretary-Treasurer of the AAA I suggested that the AAA provide a stipend to help offset the costs of the CC meeting since it was one important aspect of the overall AAA meeting; the AAA Board generously supported this plan. Part of the stimulus for this action was related to the slowly declining attendance at the CC meeting and, at the same time, the realization that the CC program had been, for many years, an important and integral component of the annual AAA meeting.

For several years before the final decision was made, wide ranging opinions were expressed at the annual CC Business Meeting concerning the possibility of leaving the AAA and moving to the SfN. It is to the credit of the officers of the CC that this

discussion was conducted over several years, all members were openly encouraged to voice their opinion, and all opinions were heard and respected. There was never an effort to force a decision on the CC members.

Several major concerns were expressed over the possibility of a move. First, it was unclear how the SfN might work-in yet another meeting of a satellite group; at that time the SfN meeting was very large and had a very compact program. Second, there was concern that a small group, like the CC, may not attract a sufficiently large audience at its satellite meeting to survive. As I recall, the SfN indicated that if CC affiliated with the SfN meeting but did not attract a certain number of persons to its (the CC) socializer, the SfN would not allow further satellite meetings of the CC. Third, with one foot in the CC and one foot in the AAA, I cautioned the members at these annual discussions that the AAA would discontinue its annual stipend to the Club if the CC moved to the SfN. By this time the AAA stipend had grown large enough to be one of the factors in the discussion. Fourth, there was the recognition that some attendees at the annual CC meeting were AAA members who did not attend the SfN meeting and that this group would be lost. At the same time it was noted that these numbers had declined. There were a number of other smaller concerns. All were considered and taken very seriously; I believe it is that level of serious deliberation that resulted in it taking several years to reach a final decision.

The Transition-The Plan, The Move, and The Outcome

One could argue that the plan that was put into place was somewhat of a stealth operation. Rather than jump from the boat into the lake, it was deemed wise to test the water; while setting in the AAA boat, the CC tested the SfN water. Some members, including the CC officers, recognized that the future was uncertain, but that the continued decline of attendees at CC with the AAA also did not bode well. I believe the major concern was what type of reception would the CC get in this very large venue and could we, as a small Club, generate an adequate interest level and following not only to survive, but to flourish. As it turned out we had little to worry about. The CC decided to continue to meet with the AAA and to have a second meeting in the fall at the SfN Annual Meeting.

In 1997, while Vivian Casagrande was the CC President, several of the officers and members of the club met informally at the SfN meeting to explore the possibilities of a move in greater detail. It was a convenient place to meet since a significant number CC members were regular attendees at the SfN meeting. At the 1998 SfN meeting the CC held a 'Social' (this appeared in the program) to which all were invited; no formal program, just a party (I believe Krieg would have approved). The munchies, engineered by Charles Ribak and Efrain Azmitia, consisted of beer and chips.

By 1999, and with the outstanding help of Ted Jones (long-time CC member and the 1998-1999 SfN President), the CC staged an organized meeting under the header Special Interest Social entitled "Modern Perspectives on Cortical Interneurons". The main speaker was Javier DeFelipe, a Cajal scholar of significant reputation, and other speakers included M. Celio, J. Morrison, P. Pasik, and C. Ribak. This social was well attended,

had lively discussions, and set the stage for future growth and success. At the 2000 SfN meeting the Special Interest Social featured an outstanding debate on neurogenesis in the adult entitled “Old or New Neurons?– That is the Question”, Chaired by John Morrison with F. Gage and P. Rakic as the debaters, and in 2002 Larry Swanson Chaired, and Pasko Rakic moderated an enthusiastic discussion concerning “Specification of Cortical Maps”. All of the Socials organized at the SfN meeting by the CC were very well received; attendance was excellent, there was broad interest in the CC as an organization, and a number of individuals expressed interest in joining the Club.

During this period of 1997-2002, the CC continued its affiliation with the AAA and continued to meet with the Anatomists at their annual meeting. In the spring of 2003 the CC met with the AAA for the last time, and in 2004 officially moved its annual meeting to the SfN. It was clear, early in this ‘testing period’, that a move to the SfN would be good for the CC and would, most assuredly, be a major factor in its long term vitality.

Over the last several years the CC has been very successful at the SfN meeting. The Socials have featured interesting presentations, some on controversial topics, and all have been well received. Attendance has varied, but a large room is always packed; I would estimate that 150-250+ are routinely present at most CC Socials. Membership in the CC has also increased directly as a result of the Socials at SfN.

So, what is the outcome? Obviously very successful! The careful and thoughtful deliberations of the CC officers and membership, the approach to ‘test the water’ (as it were) was well designed and carried out, and the transition was seamless. Based on its several very successful Socials at the SfN meeting in the interval of 1997-2002, the Club established a presence at SfN and realized that a move would be successful. All of the officers, past and present, and all of the membership, are delighted at the success of the CC at the SfN Meeting and look forward to the continued growth of the Club.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Larry Swanson for the invitation to write this brief recollection and to Charles Ribak and James Lynch for providing some background material.

References

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