



## The American Society for Surgery of the Hand

### THE BEGINNING

"It falls to few men to originate a surgical specialty."



*Sterling Bunnell, MD*

Sterling Bunnell, MD (1882-1957) was a general surgeon in the true meaning of the word. He believed that hand surgery is a "composite problem requiring the correlation of the various specialties: orthopaedics, plastic and neurologic surgery. The knowledge of any one of which alone is inadequate for repairing the hand."

In 1943, a friend and colleague of Bunnell, Norman T. Kirk, MD who specialized in orthopaedics, was appointed the Surgeon General of the US Army. Kirk soon realized that many soldiers needed reconstructive surgery requiring specialized care. He asked his friend, Dr. Bunnell, who had developed an overwhelming interest in hand surgery, to organize nine regional hand centers at Army Hospitals in the United States. Bunnell took on the task, and between November 1944 and February 1947 he visited these centers, organizing surgical treatment and teaching the proper care of patients with hand injuries.

Dr. Bunnell's monumental book, *Surgery of the Hand* (JB Lippincott, 1944), became the bible for hand surgeons and remained so for about 25 years.

As World War II drew to a close, Dr. Bunnell wanted to form an organization to continue to foster interest and innovation in problems of the hand. Several hand surgeons, especially Joseph H. Boyes, MD, embraced the idea. Shortly thereafter, 35 hand surgeons, mostly but not exclusively those who had worked in one of the nine hand centers, were designated as Founding Members of the American Society for Surgery of the Hand (ASSH).

Bunnell insisted that handling the complete care of the upper extremity required a multidisciplinary approach, so the ASSH has always welcomed and admitted surgeons trained in Orthopedic, Plastic and general surgery.

The initial meeting of ASSH was held at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago in January 1946 and attended by 26 of the 35 founders. A portion of that group is pictured below.



*Left to right:* Darrel T. Shaw, Joseph H. Boyes, Lot D. Howard, S. Benjamin Fowler, Sterling Bunnell, Arthur Barsky, Donald D. Slocum, Walter C. Graham, J. William Littler, William Metcalf, Richard H. Mellen, Gilbert Hyroop, Donald R. Pratt, William F. Frackelton, Robert L. Payne, Jr.

*Not pictured:* Harvey S. Allen, Hugh Auchincloss, Julian M. Brunner, Condict W. Cutler, Homer D. Dudley, Alfred W. Farmer, Gerald Gill, Edward Hamlin, Deryl Hart, Sumner L. Koch, William M. Krigsten, Clarence A. Luckey, Henry C. Marble, Michael L. Mason, Joseph I. McDonald, James T. Mills, George S. Phalen, William H. Requarth, Thomas W. Stevenson, George V. Webster

### **GROWTH OF A SPECIALTY**

ASSH remained a small society for 25 years. In addition to the founding members and 22 members admitted in 1948, no more than 11 members were admitted in any year, yet interest in hand surgery grew rapidly, encouraged by fellowships based mostly on a preceptor model. By the late 1960's, many well-qualified surgeons were clamoring for admission. In response, ASSH began to admit more members, starting with 41 new members in 1971. This number has continued to grow over the years.

ASSH has always been keenly interested in educating physicians at all levels of expertise about the care and treatment of hand problems. Starting in the late 60's and early 70's, ASSH hosted seminars throughout the US. Because JBJS did not have space to publish the large number of written and presented papers, ASSH created a new avenue for publication. Spearheaded by Adrian E. Flatt, MD (ASSH President 1975-76), ASSH founded the Journal of Hand Surgery. Dr. Boyes was named its first Editor-in-Chief.

In 1987, the American Foundation for Surgery of the Hand (AFSH) was founded to support research and education in hand surgery, allowing for the collection of tax-deductible donations to the field. Over 2007-2017, the AFSH granted over \$3.2 million in hand-related grants and awards.

Because of the tri-specialty nature of hand surgery, there was a growing need for a common credential to establish the specialty of hand surgery. George E. Omer, MD, an orthopaedist and ASSH president, led an effort through a great deal of persuasive diplomacy with the American Board of Surgery, American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery, and American Board of Plastic Surgery, to establish a certificate of added qualification (CAQ) in hand surgery. The first qualifying exam was given in 1989. The physician's parent board issues the certificate after the candidate meets certain qualifying criteria and passes the examination. A CAQ, now called the Subspecialty Certificate in Surgery of the Hand, is necessary for Active Membership in ASSH.

### TODAY AND BEYOND

Dr. Bunnell created a new surgical specialty by traveling the United States with his collection of lantern slides to share his knowledge. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ASSH has come full circle, carrying on the mission by leveraging technology and volunteerism to educate surgeons on a global scale and opening membership opportunities to hand care specialists around the world.

In 2013, ASSH launched Hand-e, a digital learning website with thousands of surgical skills videos and didactic educational content, which is accessible across the globe. All of the content on Hand-e is peer-reviewed to ensure that physicians receive the highest quality content possible.

In 2014, the Touching Hands Project was launched, sending a group of volunteer surgeons on their first mission to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Today, the Touching Hands Project continues to expand, offering medical treatment and education to underserved populations throughout the US and around the world.



In 2018, ASSH launched its second journal, an open access journal called JHS GO (*global online*). The vision of JHS GO is to create a truly global journal that widely disseminates clinical and scientific research at no cost to our readers.

ASSH now has over 4,300 members from around the world, including orthopedic, plastic and general surgeons, and allied health care professionals. Each fall, the Annual Meeting of the ASSH convenes in various cities to bring together members and non-members alike to educate and share the most recent innovations in hand surgery.

While much has changed - our size, our technology, our depth of knowledge - our mission to advance the science and practice of hand and upper extremity surgery has remained steadfast and will continue to lead us to exciting new endeavors. The history of the specialty and of the ASSH continues to be memorialized through the Chase Library.

*Adapted in part from an article by William L. Newmeyer, III, MD, FACS. For a comprehensive review of the history of the ASSH, consult The First 50 Years available for purchase from the ASSH. E-mail [info@assh.org](mailto:info@assh.org).*