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**Voices of Experience Series:
An Academy Interview with
Richard Vangermeersch, Ph.D., CPA, CMA**

Interviewed by Yvette J. Lazdowski

Plymouth State University



Richard Vangermeersch

“If you don’t express yourself, it will never be known....”

With this issue, we hope to start a series of articles that focus on capturing advice, reflections, and wisdom from our Academy members. Be it whimsical or serious, we hope to inspire current and future members of the Academy. We are proud to have long-time Academy member and renowned accounting historian Dr. Richard Vangermeersch as our first contributor.

AAH: What issues do you consider to be important for today’s accounting historians?

Vangermeersch: The number one issue is archiving of records—it does make a difference. Each person should archive his/her stuff: papers, posters, diaries, panels, pictures, etc. Stuff is not necessarily a bad word. Not doing it now, because we think our schools don’t want it is a mistake—what you may think of as being insignificant now becomes significant later. I know the staff and donated my papers to the University of Rhode Island. Who knows what is important 100 years from now? There is no way to know what someone will use or need in the future. As historians, we realize the importance of archives—especially at the

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school in which we are most affiliated.

AAH: Any other issues of importance?

Accounting history exposure in the world is also important. The 2020 World Congress of Accounting Historians will be the 50th anniversary of the First World Congress which was held in 1970, and should be recognized. This exposure is important as it shows accounting history is a world topic and what Americans do in the field has strong influences. There are two other upcoming milestones—the 40th Anniversary of the Academy in 2013, and the 50th in 2023. Those are real milestones, along with the 50th World Congress in 2020. Celebrations make people happy, so it's important to recognize these milestones.

AAH: What should accounting historians be working on today?

It must be fun and interesting when doing research. Do something you think is great, and people may not think it's great. Do something you don't think is great, and people like it! People love lists because if they find one item in a list to use in research, it's a success. Two items from a list is beyond belief.

An example is my work on Alexander Hamilton Church, which has a list focused on the ideas presented. It was all internally consistent. At the [United States] GAO, we were taught to "tell'em what you'll say, say it, and tell'em what you told'em." Good advice. There are opportunities for research in government accounting history—this has not been studied as much. This is a relatively new field for accounting history.

My list of 35 ideas for the Academy of Accounting Historians appeared in the October 2008 issue of the *Accounting Historians Notebook*. We initially wanted 100 items on the list (with Dr. Oktay Güvemli), but we came up with 35. [see reprinted list below]

AAH: Any advice for new accounting historians?

Don't be afraid of throwing an idea out—it's either accepted or rejected. Like the project I was involved with at Columbia—getting Columbia to allow the research, the AICPA to go along, and letting us pass out the monograph at the registration table for the AICPA Centennial in 1987. Some of this stuff takes years (see the 35 points below). If each person took one of the 35 ideas, who knows what would happen? You have to

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have a long-term goal in mind.

You should have fun at the events, like we did at the St. Louis World Congress of Accounting Historians in 2004 (that was where the 1st World Congress of Accountants was held in 1904). We had fun with the Elvis impersonator in Mississippi—you can't predict what will work and what doesn't work. If you don't push for something, it won't happen. If you don't express yourself, it will never be known.

AAH: Tell us what you are most proud of in your career?

The Alexander Hamilton Church book was absolutely something I wanted to do. I ended up with two books and ten articles. As a historical figure, he was the bastard son of the bastard son of Alexander Hamilton. I was able to see his house and get a quote from his landlord. Alexander Hamilton Church captivated people. I was able to use management and engineering terms in the book and it got engineers to relate to accounting. I'm talking their language. People had used Church's works in engineering—I was at two plants where they worked. I was able to see the blueprint in Manchester, England. This led to a robotic accounting project.

AAH: What should budding accounting historians and students know?

They should know about the Accounting Hall of Fame [the United States Accounting Hall of Fame based at The Ohio State University] and the stories of the members. Every student should be introduced to these stories. People like halls of fame—they find them fascinating. If the market likes it, give it to them. There are great books in accounting and if we don't study them, that's wrong! For example, Montgomery's writings, Leonard Spacek's book, George O. May, Donaldson Brown—all these people have incredible stuff to read. Books are more fun to do than articles, as you do a more holistic viewpoint.

AAH: Where would you like to see the Academy at 50 years?

It is very, very hard to keep a non-profit alive and well for 50 years—you have to work at it. We need to plan for the 50th now so we can see where we want to be. If we took a look at the 35 ideas and people each took an idea and stuck with it—it's a uni-focus, not a multi-focus. It takes time for these ideas to be worked on, but people love ideas. Books are good for this. The object is taking more time in developing the story,

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so less time is taken in discussing the details of how the research was done. I would rather interview people in application of their ideas than to discuss how I got the idea.

Have a suggestion for the next Voice of Experience? Please consider sharing your insights and experiences with our community. Send ideas, comments, and suggestions to Yvette J. Lazdowski, Vice President, Communications, at yjlazdowski@plymouth.edu. We look forward to hearing from you.

**RICHARD VANGERMEERSCH'S LIST OF 35 GOALS RE-
PRINTED FROM THE OCTOBER 2008 *ACCOUNTING
HISTORIANS NOTEBOOK***

1. **There should be a series of Continuing Professional Education (CPE) sessions on the history of accounting.** The United States has a fairly broad perspective of CPEs and I'm sure other countries do as well. Accounting historians certainly have completely missed this significant market.
2. **There needs to be developed a Ph.D. in Accounting History by a consortium of schools.** This Ph.D. may be a second Ph.D. for those with a Ph.D. in another field. Many of the classes would be conducted through electronic meetings between accounting history professors and these Ph.D. candidates.
3. **It is time to prepare a set of formal submissions to national "Council of Humanities" groups so as to recognize the History of Accounting as a legitimate contender for funding and recognition.** The fine relationship, as exemplified by Alan Richardson and Richard Mattessish between Canadian accounting historians and the Canadian Council on the Humanities is a role model for success.
4. **"The History of Accounting: An International Encyclopedia" needs to be revised.** Michael Chatfield and I co-edited it in 1996. However, the project was started in 1991. There has been a great out pouring of accounting history scholarship all over the world since 1991. There should be consideration of electronic means to revise the book.
5. **U.S. Steel, the first Billion Dollar Trust, should be the first project in a series of studies of accounting aspects of annual reports.** There has been a recent dissertation at Case University that could be an excellent role model.
6. **There is a need to reestablish the legitimacy of biographical research as a dissertation topic for Ph.D.'s in accounting.** We seem to have gone backwards on this type of dissertation since 1973.
7. **There are many significant people, (not accountants) who had a strong background and/or interest in accounting and who should be subjects of accounting historical research.** Another way is to focus on the important accomplishments of leaders of the accounting profession and of accounting educators. I did such a prelim-

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inary study on 15 U.S. historical figures. I was most disappointed by the reaction of my colleagues in accounting history. It appears that they are convinced that accounting historians have a very limited role to play in general history. I still respectfully disagree with this view.

8. **There is a need to expand accounting horizons to include leftish-type writings.** My recent research on Stuart Chase indicated that his leftish-type writings were omitted from *The Accountants' Index*. How many more writers and their writings might be a very interesting accounting historical research question throughout the world.
9. **Accounting historians should expand their horizons to include a broader scope of accounting historical figures like women and various minority groups.** For instance, in the United States both Afro-Americans and women have suffered mightily in terms of unutilized or underutilized potential in accounting. Yet some have succeeded.
10. **There should be a Great Books Series in Accounting.** Mortimer Adler certainly was successful with his Great Books Series for western civilization. Surprisingly to most, there are a substantial number of great books in accounting.
11. **There should be reprints of the proceedings of International Congress of Accountants.** The last proceedings of the International Congress of Accountants to be reprinted was the 1957 Congress.
12. **There should be reprints of the International Congress of Accounting Educators and Researchers.** This is unfortunate as some of the published proceedings are outstanding documents.
13. **There needs to be a number of schools throughout the world that house artifacts of International Congress of Accountants.** The University of Mississippi and the Paul Garner Center at the University of Alabama come to mind. With the proceedings and other artifacts found, bound, and passed around, accounting history would be truly a worldwide phenomenon.
14. **There needs to be noted the various collections of annual reports throughout the world.** They represent a treasure chest for national and international research.
15. **There is a need to expand Vangermeersch's 1978 base of twenty companies' annual reports to a global look at the accounting aspects of annual reports.** While this book has had a positive impact and remains in print, there is still much to do.
16. **There is a need to expand the base of accounting historians beyond "industrial companies".** While I have been less neglectful about railroad accounting than most accounting historians, I still admit to a bias towards "industrials" in my research. This came from being brought up in an accounting and finance world focused on "industrials" and railroads classified as being an "utility"-regulated organizations. This bias means there are many open research areas in railroads and utilities.
17. **There should be further research done on City Directories of the 19th Century.** How did accountants and accounting firms portray themselves in those more free-wheeling days? What a great possibility for international comparisons this area would make.

18. **There are many rich books on accounting and on accounting historical studies that still need to be translated into other languages.** This is also true for accounting periodicals. Anyone with strong language abilities could provide significant aid by translation of these works.
19. **There is a need to develop further the network of accounting historians throughout the world.** With the explosion in electronic means of communication, The Academy of Accounting Historians should be truly a worldwide force.
20. **Professional exams in accounting need much more study by accounting historians.** There are many, many different exams in professional accounting that society values very highly but accounting academics don't. In fact, discussions of and research on these exams are taboo in most academic circles.
21. **Accounting historians need to go beyond the private sector to study Not-for-Profits, Educational Institutions, Hospitals, Governments, and Persons.** Let's try to shake the private sector bias that permeates academics in accounting.
22. **There should be established Accounting History Research Fellows. One potential site is the AICPA Library at the University of Mississippi.** Let's name a few more history centers and declare them to be fellowship centers.
23. **There is a need to have a separate and well-developed listing of accounting research material in archives throughout the world.** It is incumbent on The Academy of Accounting Historians to replicate its 1978 study of archives in accounting so that researchers in accounting history know where to go.
24. **There should be an international study of the portrayals of accountants and accounting in cinema and literature.** There are some excellent examples for the United States as a guide.
25. **There needs to be reviews of various religions to codify references to accounting and accountants.** There have been some attempts at this with the Christian Bible but there have been few rigorous research efforts made to do comparative studies of different religions.
26. **There is a need to develop a number of general endowment funds for the propagation of studies in accounting history.** A guaranteed source of income helps assure enough funds for different initiatives in every year. Plans can be made well in advance if the income can be assumed.
27. **There is a need for the careful development of specific endowment funds for accounting historical uses.** Many contributors like to have their contributions go for a specific purpose near to their heart.
28. **There needs to be a better development of a roster of future leaders in accounting historical organizations.** We have to assign this task to the Trustees of The Academy of Accounting Historians.
29. **There needs to be studies made as to the current market for accounting history and as to how those markets can be expanded.** In my view, we have oversaturated a much too small market. I'd rather use our ingenuity to expand the size of the market. This is no easy task.

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30. **Accounting historians must realize the fragility of its current state.** There needs to be a concentrated effort--especially in the United States--to increase the supply of Ph.D. candidates and to interest some of them in accounting history.
31. **The World Congresses of Accounting Historians should be a model of how to preserve the happenings of all such international meetings of accountants.** With the return of the four-year cycle, we have a chance to have the time to prepare proceedings.
32. **There needs to be a specific network of past presidents of accounting history organizations.** Past presidents should all be involved as they have much experience to offer current administrators.
33. **There must be a need to understand the importance of tax-exempt status (for example, U.S. 501C organizations) to the development of accounting history organizations.** This is crucial for tax deductions for contributions.
34. **There is a need to establish a 2023 Committee for The Academy of Accounting Historians.** A fiftieth year celebration is not guaranteed. It will take much planning, dedication, imagination, and work by many to get there.
35. **There is a need to expand this list to 100 items and the longer list should be sent for rankings to all parties interested in accounting historical research.** This survey will enable us to see where we should go and where we should not. It should give us ideas as to the short run, intermediate run and long-run implementations of the selected goals. Goals should be ranked Good or Very Good and should be classified into: a 1 to 3 year frame, a 4-6 year frame, and a 7 to 10 year frame.

The Academy of Accounting
Historians has changed web
platforms — look for us at
our new web address:
<http://www.aahhq.org/>