

Early Predecessors of the U.S. Chess Federation

by John McCrary, past US Chess President

The U.S. Chess Federation has a distinguished pedigree, for the US and Britain were the first nations in the world to form national chess associations. Furthermore, the first American Chess Association, formed in 1857, was along with baseball and cricket, one of the first national sports organizations in the U.S.

Despite our pioneering beginnings, it took many years for a permanent American chess organization to become established. As strange as it now seems, for most of U.S. chess history, American players saw little need for a national organization! Nowadays, we would be lost without a rating system, a national magazine, regular championships sanctioned by an organization, standardized rules, a national scholastic program, etc.

But chess players in the 19th and early 20th centuries lived in a different world. They had no rating system, relying on vague concepts such as "first-class" player or "Rook player" in lieu of a standardized numerical system. There were comparatively few tournaments, even at the local level. There was no set method for determining a U.S. champion, and there were many resulting problems regarding that title. Several national chess organizations in the U.S. were formed between 1857 and 1934, but all failed to thrive until the merger of two such organizations in 1939 to form the US Chess Federation (USCF) now named US Chess.

The first national chess association in the United States, named the American Chess Association (ACA), was officially formed on October 19, 1857, at the First American Chess Congress in New York. Paul Morphy, who was soon to become one of the all-time great players, made the historic nomination of its first president, Colonel Charles D. Mead. Since Morphy was from Louisiana, his nomination of a New Yorker was an important gesture of national unity at a time of intense sectional divisiveness in the U.S. Judge A.B. Meek of Alabama, the President of the Congress itself, supported Mead's nomination, adding to the positive cross-sectional feeling in chess at that time, just 3.5 years before the Civil War.

The ACA decided to admit both individuals and clubs at dues "placed at so low a rate as to enable every chess-player to inscribe his name upon its book." The ACA published one issue of *The Bulletin of the American Chess Association*, which outlined its plans to build chess interest in the US and bring more cooperation among local clubs. But the *Bulletin* published no other issues although such were intended. It remains, however, possibly the first chess periodical to be officially published by any chess organization in the world. The ACA also successfully conducted a "World's Problem Tournay". But the ACA soon declared that it was "inexpedient" to hold its next Congress, projected to occur in 1860; and it became inactive. Nevertheless, it helped to inspire the formation of a Western Chess Association in Saint Louis on April 21, 1860, although that organization had no connection with the Western Chess association formed in 1900.

Yet another American Chess Association was formed in 1871 at the Second American Chess Congress, but gave little evidence of activity except for an abortive attempt to arrange a major tournament in 1873. Another American Chess Association was formed at the Third American Chess Congress in Chicago in 1874. Curiously, this ACA amended the idea of an open, economically democratic membership, by requiring prospective members to be approved by its Executive Committee, and increasing dues to \$5 (from the \$1 of the first ACA). This ACA attempted to organize the Fourth American Chess Congress in Philadelphia in 1876, but disputes led to its failure to achieve this. In perhaps the longest sentence in the

history of chess literature, *The Fifth American Chess Congress 1880* (Gilberg, 1881) said of the 1876 Congress: "The executive officers of the National Association formed at Chicago, who had been chosen from the representative players of Philadelphia for the specific purpose of attending to the necessary preliminaries for the Congress, proceeded to perform their allotted duties, but met at the very outset an unyielding resistance to their efforts from leading members of the Philadelphia Chess Club, who were determined to defeat any measures that should emanate from sources beyond the pale of their club; and who ultimately, when reparation of the injurious damages which a long and acrimonious personal warfare had inflicted upon the project was impossible, succeeded in compelling the officers of the Association to issue a manifesto resigning their functions and publicly pronouncing their organization dissolved".

Undaunted by the failures of three predecessors, another national chess association was formed at the Fifth American Chess Congress in 1880. Hoping for more success, they adopted a new name: The Chess Association of the United States of America. They also dropped the dues back to the more democratic level of \$2, and eliminated the requirement that new members be approved by the Executive Committee. In spite of those changes, the association apparently did little.

Hope springs eternal, so on September 4, 1888, yet another national chess association was formed. This new organization was called the United States Chess Association (USCA). A significant feature of this new organization was the participation of state chess associations. (State associations were a new concept, dating only to 1885, though some regional associations had existed before then). Steinitz said that "the authorities of six established State Chess Associations, namely those of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Virginia, Indiana, and Ohio" had called the convention that established the USCA. In order to encourage the formation of new state associations, the USCA held a tournament of state champions alongside an open tournament. Max Judd and Jackson Showalter played in the state champions' event, though their states did not have state associations and their "state champion" status was thus unofficial. Both had been claimants of the US Championship, itself then unsystematized and controversial, so the USCA hoped a match between the winners of the open tournament and the state champions' event would settle an official U.S. Championship. Although Showalter became the USCA Champion, it was not accepted as the overall U.S. Championship, which remained without a generally-accepted, systematized procedure.

The USCA did survive long enough to hold at least four tournaments at its annual congresses. However, when a new national organization was proposed in 1898, its organizers said that the USCA had not met since 1890, with a brief revival in 1893. With no viable national organization around, the *American Chess Code* (official rulebook) was published by the Manhattan Chess Club in 1897. On April 24, 1899, a new organization called The Chess Association of the United States was formed. It differed from its predecessors by emphasizing clubs rather than individuals as members, saying that "by placing control in the care of a council made up of delegates from all the chess clubs, it would so entwined with the direct interests of the local organizations that its work would be watched by all, and its life would become a part of theirs." This attempt to better integrate the local and national levels fell flat, apparently, as World Champion Lasker in 1904 was trying to "bring new life into the organization" by publishing its constitution in his magazine. However, Lasker also opined that "The wrecks of chess organizations that strew the beach of the ocean of time would seem to indicate that the chess-playing faculty is not accompanied by energy and continued effort that are necessary to success". Fortunately, the success of US Chess since 1939 has proved Lasker's pessimism wrong.

The Western Chess Association, founded in 1900 (one source gives 1890, though its list of tournaments begins with 1900) held its fifth annual championship in 1904 in Saint Louis in connection with the World's

Fair. That tournament allowed anyone regardless of residence to play, and its elected officers for 1905 included ones from South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, though these states were soon excluded from the Association. In 1906 the Western Chess Association called for a national gathering to form rules for an annual US Championship tournament. This call preceded by a month an effort by the Brooklyn Chess Club to create a new national association, a timing that caused some initial unpleasantness between the organizations. However, the Western Chess Association subsequently decided at its 1906 business meeting to remain regional, suggesting that other regions also form associations, while supporting efforts by others to create a national organization. The President of the Western Chess Association claimed that organization had 10,000 members in 1906. At its 1907 meeting, the Western Chess Association limited its "territory" to 16 states, plus Manitoba: the states were Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. By 1916, membership was opened to all the U.S. The 1920 and 1923 tournaments of the Western Chess Association were held in Tennessee and San Francisco, respectively. The Western Chess Association consistently favored annual tournaments open to all players, a tradition that has remained over the decades in the U.S. Open Championships.

Yet another national body, called the National Chess Association, was formed in St. Paul on August 17, 1906. However, shortly thereafter the Treasurer of the Chess Association of the United States, formed in 1899, claimed that his organization still existed, though apparently with little activity. Curiously, the President of this newly-formed National Chess Association was George Spencer of St. Paul, who was also President of the Western Chess Association at least earlier that year. The other officers were from a mixture of eastern and western clubs, including the prestigious Hermann Helms of Brooklyn. Neither this association nor the Chess Association of the United States appears to have done much.

On July 9, 1921, the United States Chess Association was formed in Atlantic City. Although it adopted the constitution of the Chess Association of the United States and had several very prestigious officers, it apparently did very little. A significant regional organization, the Southern Chess Association, was created in 1935 as a successor to the Southeastern Chess Association.

In 1926 the National Chess Federation of the USA (NCF) was formed in Chicago. Maurice Kuhns, a President of the Western Chess Association, became the first NCF President. At last, permanence was achieved, as the NCF survived long enough to merge with another organization to form the US Chess Federation in 1939. The NCF accomplished several important goals that have been carried forward by today's US Chess. It affiliated with the newly-formed World Chess Federation, an affiliation that has been maintained by US Chess. The NCF gained control of the U.S. Championship, giving it an official, systematic status determined by regular official tournaments. The NCF established a scholastic chess program. Its efforts to create a title system, however, were non-starters until the numerical rating system came years later. The NCF had only \$1 dues, but required a three-person Membership Committee to "examine into the character and history of every applicant for membership"-hardly conducive to big growth in membership! The Western Chess Association soon became a chapter of the NCF, a move that some felt diminished the status of the Western organization and its annual national tournaments.

Perhaps due to this restrictive provision and with some feeling that the NCF was too elitist, The American Chess Federation (ACF) was formed in 1934. The ACF was "a successor to the Western Chess Association", according to Arpad Elo, its President and later a major pioneer in creating the world-wide rating system. Elo added in 1935: "The Western Chess Association was founded in 1900 at Excelsior Springs, Minn., and since that time has sponsored an unbroken line of annual tournaments. Originally these tournaments were intended to be merely regional in scope as the name of the organization

indicated, but in 1916 the tournaments were opened to the chess players of the entire continent, and from that time on the outstanding players of North America competed to make the 'Western' a truly representative American tournament". Elo listed a number of top players who competed in these events, including several who are now in the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame: Max Judd, J.W. Showalter, Edward Lasker, Isaac Kashdan, Samuel Reshevsky, and Reuben Fine. The ACF planned to disseminate a wider appreciation of the recreational benefits of chess, especially to "the younger generation".

In September 1939, the NCF and ACF agreed to merge into one organization, called the United States of America Chess Federation. The merger was legally formalized later that year. US Chess assumed the functions of both the NCF and ACF, including the NCF's management of the U.S. Championship and its FIDE affiliation. The annual tournaments of the Western Chess Association and its successor, the ACF, became the U.S. Open held annually ever since by US Chess. In spite of this positive start, US Chess had only 299 members as of October 31, 1943. By 2003, the total membership reached 98,000. US Chess has become a major contributor to the international chess world in a number of ways, including popularizing Swiss system tournaments; issuing its own official rulebook; creating a major official chess periodical; and creating a numerical rating system that has been accepted worldwide. Much of the impact of the worldwide era of computer chess has come from contributions by US Chess members, including the marketing genius, Sid Samole, who created a world market for home chess computers at a time when only giant mainframes were playing chess. The US Chess Hall of Fame and World Chess Hall of Fame are unique in the world.

A fun fact about US Chess: Humphrey Bogart, the famous actor, was an officer in the early years of US Chess.