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Scholars take humor seriously at conference

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — Coming from Hungary to Hawaii and from India to Italy, up to 1,000 scholars will gather in this area in 1986 and 1987 to deliberate — and joke about — humor.

They won't just be junkets for comedians, said conference organizer Don Nilsen, an Arizona State University professor of English linguistics.

There's in-depth academic study of humor here, although, that idea may sound pretty funny to the lay person.

The national humor conference will meet in Tempe for the fifth and last time around April Fool's Day next year, and the sixth international meeting will take place in the area for the first time a year later.

Nilsen will be the host for both conferences with his wife, Aileen Nilsen, assistant graduate college dean. The two are founders of WHIM — World Humor and Irony Membership.

Previous international conferences were in Ireland and India.

Subjects already on the 1987 agenda range from a talk entitled "The Polish Joke," to "The Indispensability of Humor in China," as well as more abstract views of Jewish humor, South African jokes and a lack of humor among college administrators.

Unfortunately, not all those invited can attend, Nilsen said. For some governments, a humor conference is no laughing matter.

Scholars from many communist countries have been prohibited from attending, Nilsen said. One professor from Yugoslavia enclosed a copy of a letter from his government which told him, "We have absolutely no confirmation you will return."

"That's too bad," says Nilsen. Some of the best humor research has come from Eastern Europe.

Humor, when the meaning is stretched beyond just a good joke,

can be as influential as politics or science, Nilsen said.

"It's a good way to learn other people's ways of dealing with the language and other things," he said.

Satire in books, newspaper columns and cartoons communicates the changing mores of society.

"Satire is a method of social criticism and influencing the political process, a way of balancing out society," he explained.

Humor has an undercurrent indicating social trends, he said. Jokes come into fashion quickly and then disappear, Nilsen points out that jokes about drinking were dropped from Johnny Carson's monologue as the awareness of dangers of alcoholism and drunken driving increased.

Each nation has its own sense of humor that can be hilarious to the native but meaningless to the foreign visitor, Nilsen said.

Jokes in the United States often have focused on the battle between the sexes, such as "women driver" jokes, or the mistrust between races and nations.

"Western and Eastern humor is different," Nilsen said. "Western is sexist and racist. We're afraid the Italians are going to take our jobs or something, so they're put down."

"In jokes in the Eastern bloc countries, your job is fairly secure but the humor is used on politicians, but it's underground humor; it's a way of coping."

Americans' sense of humor has changed lately, he said. "We don't tolerate racist, sexist, age-ist jokes so much anymore. It's not that we're becoming a lax society, it's that we're changing."

"We have a different taboo system. We have more feeling — you don't hear women driver jokes unless the person telling it is over 50 years old."

"A joke is a test of tension," Nilsen said. "If you have joking between two groups, the best kind of joking is when there's moderate tension. If there's no tension — no humor."

What's up

Thursday

CAMPUS CRUSADE-NAVIGATORS-INTERVARSITY: will have a faculty forum 12:30-1:45 p.m. in 146 Physics Bldg.

HAGGAI FELLOWSHIP: will meet at 7 p.m. in 502 Rudder.
MSC PUBLIC RELATIONS: will have a workshop for all student organizations at 5 p.m. in 308 Rudder; "Marketing: You Look Ma-h-velous!" Dr. John Burnett of Marketing Dept. will speak.

MESQUITE HOMETOWN CLUB: will take group pictures at 7:45 p.m. Call 693-6248(Bryan) or 260-2863(Ron) for info.

VIETNAMESE AMERICAN STUDENT ASSOCIATION: will meet at 8:30 p.m. in 302 Rudder.

GUATEMALAN STUDENT ASSOCIATION: will meet at 8:30 p.m. in 402 Rudder.

CLASS OF '86: Class shirts on sale at MSC — Elephant Walk is Nov. 26.

DELTA SIGMA PI: will meet at 7 p.m. in Blocker (room TBA). Speaker on hotel management. Professional Attire.

ALPHA LAMBDA DELTA: will have a short meeting and take Aggeland picture at 7 p.m. in 203 Zachry.

AGGIES SPACE DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY: will meet to hear Joyce Davis of NASA's Machine Tool Programming speak on Employment and Co-op with NASA at 7 p.m. in 501 Rudder.

MSC CAMERA COMMITTEE: will not have a seminar on studio photography at 6 p.m. in MSC basement camera darkrooms. The seminar has been cancelled.

DANCE ARTS SOCIETY: will have Aerobics at 6:30 p.m., Intermediate tap at 7:30 and Inter/Adv. Jazz at 8:30 in 268 E. Kyle.

NATIONAL SOCIETY OF BLACK ENGINEERS: will meet at 7:30 p.m. in 401 Rudder.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ASSOCIATION: will meet at 7 p.m. in 404 Rudder.

Friday

MSC CAMERA COMMITTEE: will have a seminar on studio photography at 5:30 p.m. in MSC basement camera darkrooms. Cost \$25.

HILLE FOUNDATION: will have Sabbath services at 8 p.m.

INTERVARSITY CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP: will meet at 7 p.m. in Rudder (see screen for room).

CAMPUS CRUSADE FOR CHRIST: will have a leadership training class at 7 p.m. in 701 Rudder.

OFF CAMPUS AGGIES: will meet at 11:30 p.m. at Mt. Aggie to go to yell practice.

UNITED CAMPUS MINISTRY: will have Bible study at 6:15 p.m. at A&M Presbyterian Church offices.

TAMU VET CLASS OF '87 & BRAZOS CO. UNITED WAY: will have hog calling & greased pig catching contest at 7 p.m. at Louis Pearce Animal Science Pavilion. 4-man, 4-person co-ed teams. Honorary judge: Coach Jackie Sherrill. Applications available at Office of the Dean, College of Vet. Medicine. \$10/team of 4. Prizes will be awarded.

Plane crashes give NTSB hectic year

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Ron Schleede hasn't had a good night's sleep in months. He keeps getting telephone calls from places like India, Tokyo and Ireland where there is no respect for different time zones.

"And that's just the routine stuff," says Schleede, acting chief of the aviation accident division at the National Transportation Safety Board. Those calling him are NTSB investigators with updates on some of the major air crashes that have swamped the agency this year.

Things have been so hectic at the NTSB that it is not unusual for investigators to juggle two or three crashes at the same time.

To make matters worse, key senior staffers have left, some complaining about the style of management, and the five-member board is going into its second year short two members because of a political fight between the White House and Congress.

The safety board, which is charged with investigating not only aviation accidents but major accidents involving rail and highway transportation, has always been a busy place.

But this has been an unusual year even for this small agency which numbers just 340 employees and has a budget of \$22 million.

NTSB insiders acknowledge that this year's unprecedented string of air accidents has put unseasoned investigators to the test as never before.

At least a half dozen times, it has had to cancel meetings because it couldn't get a quorum. The board hasn't had a full complement of five members since February 1984.

The White House has proposed three nominees to the board, but the Senate Commerce Committee is refusing to approve two of them because senators question their technical competence.

John Lauber, a NASA researcher on human factors involving aviation, has unchallenged credentials and is expected to be approved by the committee on Thursday. But he will replace a current member, so the board is likely to go for another six months or so still two people short, congressional sources say.

It has been a strange year for the board in other ways:

- Investigators have had to organize a climbing expedition into the Andes to examine a plane wreck; they've helped put together a salvage operation in the Atlantic as part of another accident probe; and they've shuttled between Washing-

ton and Tokyo in connection with a third crash.

- The chief of the aviation accidents division resigned for a job at the Federal Aviation Administration, and the board has had trouble filling the post from within because top investigators are too busy handling ongoing crash cases.

- Critics have begun talking of a "brain drain" because some veteran investigators have left — a charge that makes some who haven't left angry because, as Schleede complained, it implies "that those still here are incompetents."

Among those that have left are the agency's top expert in pilot behavior, who went to the FAA, and its leading expert in analyzing aircraft black box recorders, who took a better job at NASA.

While there has been turbulence, board chairman Jim Burnett says the talk of poor morale has been exaggerated. And he says those who have been promoted to fill vacancies have a better technical education than those they replaced, although they may not have had much on-the-job

"tin kicking" at crash sites.

NTSB insiders acknowledge that this year's unprecedented string of air accidents has put unseasoned investigators to the test as never before. Two top investigators who recently were brought in from field offices had little chance to test their new surroundings before they found themselves heading a "go team" on its way to a major airline crash.

There also have been cases where special projects such as one examining the increasing number of near collisions on runways have had to be put on hold.

Investigator Jack Drake, had barely settled in to the Washington office last summer after transferring from the Atlanta field office, when he was put in charge of the runway investigation. But then he found himself heading for Milwaukee as head of a "go team" investigating the crash of a Midwest Express DC-9. He was barely back in Washington when his work on that crash was interrupted by a near collision at National Airport involving an Eastern Airlines jet and a helicopter.

The runway incursion investigation again has been delayed, acknowledges Burnett, 38, a former Arkansas traffic judge who was appointed to the board three and a half years ago and later made chairman.



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