

A Condensed History of D.C. Fandom

by Rich Lynch

Although Washington, D.C. fandom is not usually regarded as strongly “serious and constructive,” or “sercon,” in character, it didn’t start out that way. The first known pseudo-fan organization in the city, the Outsider Club of the late 1930s, was literary in nature and so strongly dedicated to supernatural fiction that it considered science fiction and its fandom undeserving of interest.

The first true science fiction fan organization in Washington was the World War II-era group known as the Washington Worry-Warts. It consisted mainly of notable fans such as Jack Speer, Elmer Perdue, and Milton Rothman, who had been assigned by the military to the city as part of the war effort. It was a bit too loosely organized to be called a club, and when the war ended so did the Worry-Warts, as there was not yet enough interest among locals to keep the organization going after the fans on temporary duty returned to their home cities.

In the end, it fell to the local fans to form a lasting science fiction fan club in the nation’s capital. In 1946, Charles “Chick” Derry began contacting fans he knew in the city with the idea of eventually forming a fan club, but a club did not come into existence for about another two years. It took a nearby Worldcon, in Philadelphia in 1947, to provide the needed momentum. Derry met another active Washington fan, Bob Pavlat, at the 1947 Philcon, and together they were able to generate enough enthusiasm from five other D.C. fans to form what turned out to be a lasting organization. The result was the Washington Science Fiction Society, which changed its name a few months later to the Washington Science-Fiction Association, or WSFA. Meetings were held twice monthly, and the first meeting site was a public building in downtown Washington.

By 1950, WSFA had grown enough that more activities were possible than just meetings every first and third Friday. It held its first convention, called the “Conclave,” that year; it was a one-day event that drew about 75 fans and was successful enough that it was repeated the next year under the name of “Disclave.” WSFA in the 1950s gained its character as a club with an emphasis on socializing, which it retains to this day. The meeting place moved to members’ homes, and each bimonthly meeting became the equivalent of an extended room party at a convention, a tradition that also persists to this day.

By the early 1960s, Disclaves had become multi-day events and were starting to become multi-interest, so WSFA decided to try something *really* interesting: sponsor a World Science Fiction Convention. It’s only other serious bid to host a Worldcon (for 1950) had garnered only enough votes to finish third of the four bids considered by the business meeting of the 1949 Worldcon. But by 1962, things were different. The club had the wherewithal and active membership base to support a bid, and also an influential fan (George Scithers) to act as chair. The bid won broad support at the Chicon III business meeting and the city of Washington was host to its first Worldcon, the Discon, in August 1963.

That first Discon was memorable for many reasons, not all of which involved science fiction. It was held just days after an event staged nearby that had helped to shape the world of the 1960s – the “I Have a Dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Lincoln Memorial, only about a mile from the convention hotel. The convention itself honored Isaac Asimov with his first Hugo Award, Philip K. Dick with his only Hugo Award, and E.E. “Doc” Smith with the inaugural First Fandom Hall of Fame Award, but the person who was honored the most was its very deserving Guest of Honor, Will F. Jenkins, who wrote science fiction under the name of Murray Leinster.

The attendance of that first Discon was about 600 people, and the fallout was that the attendance of Disclaves steadily grew after that, reaching almost 1,500 by the late 1970s. But before that, Washington fandom (under the chairmanship of Jay Haldeman) won the right to host a second Worldcon, this time in 1974. In the decade that had elapsed since the first Discon, Worldcons had dramatically increased in size. Discon II, at more than 3,500 attendees, was the largest science fiction convention ever held at that point in time. The professional Guest of Honor was a writer who had burst upon the scene, to great fanfare, only a few years earlier: Roger Zelazny. Hugo Awards were presented to some of science fiction's most notable writers: Arthur C. Clarke, Harlan Ellison, James Tiptree, Jr., and Ursula K. LeGuin.

Over the years, WSFA has hosted other notable conventions besides the two Discons, including the 2003 World Fantasy Convention, the 2004 SMOFcon, and a 1999 writer's conference co-hosted with the Smithsonian Institution. The smallest but one of the most entertaining of these special conventions occurred on February 29, 1980, when a one-off "Datclave" was held in commemoration of a February with a fifth Friday (WSFA often hosts parties on fifth Fridays in months where there is one). Disclave itself was discontinued after the 1997 convention following a now legendary incident at the convention hotel, in a room occupied by people who were not members of the convention, which resulted in a large amount of water damage to several floors of the hotel. Disclave got the blame, and it became impossible to have serious negotiations with any suitable D.C.-area hotel for several years after that. It was not until 2001 that WSFA was able to once again host a convention. To accentuate the break with the past, the new convention was given a different name, Capclave, and emphasis was narrowed to highlight the science fiction short story. The first Capclave was deemed successful enough where it has become an annual event.

There are now more science fiction-related clubs and organizations in the D.C. metro area than just WSFA, including anime and gaming communities. The oldest of these is the Potomac River Science Fiction Association, which was founded in 1975 by WSFA members who wanted more sercon each month than the typical WSFA meeting delivered. And it turned out that WSFA's influence extended even beyond the immediate D.C. metro area: the Baltimore Science Fiction Society was founded in 1962 by five WSFA members on their way home to Baltimore from a WSFA meeting. WSFA itself lost its hyphen in 1980 and is now just the Washington Science Fiction Association. The strength of WSFA has always been its membership, and over the years there have been many accomplishments by its members, including thirteen Hugo Awards, two John W. Campbell Awards, one Skylark Award, one British Fantasy Award, and one Locus Award. WSFA sponsors a monthly fanzine, *The WSFA Journal*, that first saw publication in 1965, and WSFA members are involved in a monthly cable television show about science fiction, *Fast Forward*, and two specialty book publishers: Old Earth Books, whose publications have received both Locus Award and World Fantasy Award nominations, and the WSFA Press, which has previously published collections of stories by Disclave guests and recently published a short story anthology, *Future Washington*.

Additional information about WSFA and its activities can be found at the WSFA web site (www.wsfa.org) and the Capclave web site (www.capclave.org).

Note: "Worldcon," "World Science Fiction Convention," and "Hugo Awards" are registered service marks of the World Science Fiction Society, an unincorporated literary society.