

A Brief History of Mensa

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The Chinese invented intelligence tests in the seventh century A.D. The Mandarins ran China for centuries and were chosen by examination. They were tested for memorization and understanding of the Confusion classics, and so were screened for intelligence.

Mensa, however, dates from 1945. That year Roland Berrill and Lancelot Lionel Ware met by chance in a train, became acquainted and discovered that they shared an interest; the formation of a club in which membership would be determined by intelligence only. Berrill was an Australian living in England at the time. He was a lawyer, but did not practice because of an independent income sufficient for his needs. Ware was a student at Oxford University. He later became a lawyer.

Ware's interest in I.Q. testing started in 1939. He administered such tests and wanted to start a club of people able to score very high on a reputable intelligence test. On March 11, 1946, Ware gave Berrill the Cattell III "A" test. Berrill passed, and immediately started recruiting. It was Ware's record cards that provided the first list of prospective Mensa members.

Berrill had the first piece of literature printed on October 1, 1946. This date is accepted as the date of founding. October 2, 1976, a plaque was attached to the outside of the building at 12 Saint John Street, Oxford to commemorate the occasion. The plaque reads, "The International Society of MENSA began here 1 October 1946.

Roland Berrill named Mensa. He recruited, organized and led the first members. His hope was that the organization could be put to a useful purpose in society. But then as now, socializing was purpose enough for most members. The first annual gathering (AG) was November 6, 1948, at the Cumberland Hotel in London. We do not know how many attended, but at the end of 1953 the turnout at the Mensa monthly dinner was four.

The first American Mensa members joined from 1951 to 1959. A reporter named John Wilcock went to England in late 1959 and attended a Mensa meeting. When he came home he wrote a column about the Society published in The Village Voice, a Greenwich Village newspaper.

Peter A. Sturgeon, a medical writer living in Brooklyn, N.Y. read the column and wrote to the Mensa Selection Agency in England on March 8, 1960. He passed the test and became a member May 1960. In August 1960 Sturgeon was authorized to start a New York City regional group and was sent a list of 22 Mensans in the U.S. The first meeting, which is considered the founding meeting of American Mensa was on September 30, 1960, at Sturgeon's home. By December 1960 membership was 50. Until January 1962 membership processing was done through England.

The American group needed money to publish their own newsletter, and their biggest problem was getting reimbursement from England, due to red tape and slow communica-

tion. England sent the first list of American members to Sturgeon May 18, 1961. There were 92 members in 16 states.

May 26, 1961, Serebriakoff asked Sturgeon to look for a secretarial service so that the American group could take over its own recruiting. Sturgeon told Serebriakoff that the main difficulty was that "everyone comes in expecting something exciting to happen, but nothing does." He spoke further about a "lack of focus." He said, "I'm sure we can recruit an enormous number of people here in the States; the problem is going to be what we'll do with them." At this time the American Mensa Committee consisted of any and all members interested enough to show up.

Request "A History of Mensa" from the national office if you would like more information about the subject.