
Thomas A. D’Amico, MD, and The American Association for Thoracic Surgery Centennial Committee

Henry Theodore Bahnson (Figure 1), 57th president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery (AATS), was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, on November 15, 1920. The third of 4 sons, he was reared in a family that valued hard work, integrity, and education—values that he would emulate throughout his career.1 He received his undergraduate education at Davidson College, where he excelled academically and athletically. He was president of his class, was president of his fraternity, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa and Omicron Delta Kappa (BS, 1941). He completed his medical degree cum laude from the Harvard Medical School in 1944, where he was the valedictorian. As a second-year medical student, he performed coagulation research in the Thorndike Laboratory at Boston City Hospital, and as a fourth-year student he conducted research with Dr Lewis Dexter at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. He was 1 of only 6 third-year students to be elected to the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Society, and 1 of 3 to be awarded a John Harvard Fellowship.1

Bahnson was accepted into the training program in surgery at Johns Hopkins by Dr Alfred Blalock (30th AATS president). Just before moving to Baltimore, Bahnson received permission to marry from Blalock, who generally preferred his residents to be single. Bahnson and his wife Louise were to raise 2 daughters and 3 sons, 1 of whom was named after Blalock. After surgical internship at the Johns Hopkins Hospital Bahnson served 1 year in the US Navy Reserves in the Philippines. He then returned to Hopkins to complete his training, Bahnson and Spencer were invited to Sidney, Australia, to supervise cardiac surgery at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. They shipped a Lillehei heart–lung machine to Sidney and tested it first in the canine laboratory. During testing, all the animals died. Bahnson was not slowed by this apparent failure, however, which he attributed to the canine species. He and Spencer proceeded to perform cardiac surgery on 30 patients in the span of 4 weeks without a single death.2

In 1961, Bahnson was promoted to the rank of professor of surgery. The next year, he spent 3 months at the University of Vienna assisting Professor Fritz Helmer in the development of a modern cardiovascular surgery service.1 On his return from Vienna in 1963, he was recruited and appointed as the George V. Foster Professor of Surgery and chair of the Department of Surgery at the University of Pittsburgh, a position he held for 24 years, transforming the department “from a position of indifference to empowering significance.”2 He was the longest-serving chair in the school’s 116-year history and was the first to hold the Foster Chair in Surgery.1

In addition to being a world-class surgeon and surgical investigator, Bahnson was a devoted teacher. His trainees usually had their first operative experience with their department chair after 6 to 8 exhausting hours of a cardiac procedure, when the sleep-deprived intern would be called on to close the arterial connection to the heart–lung machine with rudimentary instruments and sutures. As the fledgling
In April 1977, Bahnson presided over the 57th Annual Meeting of the AATS in Toronto. He was the senior author of an important paper at this meeting regarding subvalvular aortic stenosis, and he also delivered his presidential address, “Our Obligation to Developing Nations.” Bahnson spoke eloquently and presciently about the imperative of the global nature of medicine, a concept that continues to be relevant today. Specifically, he discussed the value of American thoracic surgeons in the teaching and training of foreign medical graduates, as evidenced by the Evarts Graham Travelling Fellowship. He also cited the contribution of American surgeons traveling to teach and operate in foreign lands.

Henry Bahnson died on January 10, 2003, at the age of 82 years of complications of a massive stroke that he had had 2 weeks previously. Despite his age, he remained academically active to the end, giving his last overseas lecture only 6 weeks before he died in Moscow, where he was recognized by the Bakoulev Scientific Center for his contributions to the development of cardiovascular surgery in Russia. At his memorial service at Heinz Chapel at the University of Pittsburgh, it was remembered that Bahnson had an unusual balance of intellectual curiosity, emotional control, and physical strength that permitted him to excel. It was also remembered that his family values of hard work, integrity, and education framed a career that has been matched by very few in the history of cardiothoracic surgery.

FIGURE 1. Henry T. Bahnson, MD.

References