EDITOR-IN-CHIEF FOR QUARTER OF A CENTURY

As IADC celebrates 50 years of its quarterly journal, it seemed only fitting to speak to its longest standing editor, Marsha Cohen, who stood at the helm of Terra et Aqua for 25 years. We caught up with her at her home in Florida to talk about the highs, the lows and a good dose of serendipity.

When and how did you decide to become an editor?

Well, I left university in the late 1960s with a bachelor’s degree in English. At that time, as a woman you either became a teacher or went into publishing and I was absolutely dead set not to teach. So I landed up in New York and was offered a job at The Viking Press. It was an old, independent, very elite publishing house where salaries were low because you were honoured to be working there. The job they actually offered me wasn’t in editorial however but in production. I was like, what’s production? I mean, what does that actually mean?

I found out quickly enough. Production meant doing cost estimates, choosing cloth for covers and paper and doing corrections. In those days all the correction work was done by hand. Sometimes we would get books from England and would have to take all the double “l’s” out and remove the “u’s” from “harbour”. It was wild. Viking had a fabulous list of authors, like James Joyce and John Steinbeck. I learned so much. We would visit printers and typesetting plants. Then slowly typesetting, which was originally done manually with lead, and letterpress printing, were phased out and replaced by electronic setting and offset printing. I always say this stint in production served me well. It taught me the nitty gritty of the trade. And that’s how I sort of fell into publishing.

What brought you to the Netherlands?

I had worked in a couple of places in New York, then in 1970 I decided that I was done with Nixon, the Vietnam war and all of that. At that time, my cousin was already living in the Netherlands and was saying, ‘You really have to come over. You’ll love it. It’s swinging.’ And so I was a lot of young people did. I was just going to go for a couple of months and then I met Dominique Boer, the man who would later become my husband and well, I stayed. I was actually supposed to go back to graduate school at Columbia University to study creative writing because I really wanted to write. But I just decided, it’s okay, I’d rather be in the Netherlands. After a while I got a job at Elsevier.

There I started working on technical and scientific journals, editing the weirdest assortment of subjects. That was my first foray in publishing in the Netherlands. I lived in NL for seven years and was doing freelance work here and there, and had started a family. Then my husband, who was editor in chief working for the VNU, a large Dutch magazine publishing company, had the opportunity to work for them in the USA. So we decided to move. When that job ended he didn’t want to go back to the Netherlands and we decided to stay in the New York area and start our own communications company. It was a challenge. But we both had exactly the same sort of inclinations in communications and anything that came our way we simply took on.
INTERVIEW

Meet Marsha Cohen

Marsha Cohen received a degree in English language and literature in the USA, producing a magazine from scratch promoting Dutch-American relations. A mix of culture and business. Then via we were introduced to the new communications director for the Dutch tax office. We had developed a system using algorithms to improve communications and used that to redesign the form for pay-in-keeping taxes that you fill in when you get withholding taxes that you fill in when you get

I proved very successful and is actually in a museum in Germany. The tax office had thousands of forms but they said it couldn’t keep working with an American company and needed a company somewhere in the Netherlands. So, we rented out our house in New Jersey thinking we wouldn’t be overseas that long. we moved to The Hague and continued our company. Our postcard was a couple of people to join us and in a couple of years we went from a staff of two to 100 people.

How did you come to join IADC? Boy Opmeer, who owned a printing company in The Hague that we used, walked into my office one day and said “I have a client who has a journal and they want me to do it, but I don’t speak English. Would you like to work together and bid on it with me?” We made a presentation and they liked it, and we signed a contract for two years. That’s how it came to work for IADC, because we were both clients of Opmeer Printing. It was totally serendipitous. Truly, I feel like many things in my life were serendipitous and this was certainly one of them.

What was your knowledge of IADC? Zero. Peter Hamburger was the Secretary General at the time and he just hired him. He wanted to change the direction of IADC. I had no clue what dredging was and I had never heard of IADC. He actually didn’t know what direction they were going in because I didn’t know where they were coming from, but he wanted to make IADC more PR oriented. And had this company Tagan Group with 12 graphic designers and so we took the existing material and made a new design. More readable, more user-friendly for a broader audience.

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Can you tell me about the origins of Terra et Aqua? The journal started by a group of engineers back in 1971. It’s first editor was Dick Drost, and it was called Dredging! Dredging! In those days, it was black and white with technical drawings but it was still quite basic. Somewhere down the line in the 80s, it changed. The journal wasn’t just for people in the dredging industry but also for those who were interested in the industry. The philosophy being that if you might be, let’s say a one-time user of the dredging industry, we – the industry – do this work all the time. We know what we’re doing. So depend on us to give you the information and let us explain to you what it is that we actually do. You know, dredging did not always have a good reputation. Protestors were not uncommon. NIMBY was a keyword – Not in My Backyard. With Terra et Aqua, we developed a vehicle to reach out and educate a broader public, town the rest of the year. In both places, part time and the New York area the rest of the year. In both places, part time and the New York area.

What are the considerations of producing a journal for a worldwide audience? One thing that was very important was to realise that the journal was going all over the world and being read by many people for whom English is a second language. That comes with its own set of challenges regarding how you present information in an understandable way. In addition, you are trying to inform non-technical people. You really had to think about the length of your sentences and how to present technical information in a way that was more easily absorbed. Those considerations didn’t always fall into the consciousness of the dredging community. I mean, they are engineers doing what they’re doing. They are experts in science and maths. I said, you have to teach me about dredging and I teach you about communicating. That’s the deal. And it worked.

How would you characterise dredging professionals? I found people in the dredging industry from the get-go to be wonderful. They were warm. They were open. They may not have known anything about graphic design but that was beside the point. People were anxious to share their knowledge with me because I knew nothing and they would spend hours explaining things. Those articles would come in and I would say, oh, of course we have to make this more comprehensible for a person like me. Then we would go through it because what often happens with people who are technical is that they assume that others have the knowledge that they have. That’s fine if you’re writing for a fellow engineer but you can’t always assume that with a broader public, especially stakeholders and government of officials. My value was in knowing how to write and the value was being able to explain it to. We were all different and the enthusiasm was totally contagious.

It’s interesting I was having lunch recently with a group of people and every one was talking about their careers. I had to explain to them what dredging and maritime construction are. How it touches everyday life. Seriously, nobody knew I live in Florida part time and the New York area the rest of the year. In both places, we are threatened by hurricanes and we have beaches that are eroding. Dredging companies come in and replenish the coastlines. Dredging is at the forefront of environmental protection of our coastlines. There are big researcy programmes going on at the moment in the New York/New Jersey area because of the hurricanes and all the damage that was done a few years ago by Hurricane Sandy. Although the Jones Act imposes limitations on international companies dredging in the USA, the scientists and engineers in it in Europe or the USA and the Far East, exchange information with each other at the time. The controversy amongst those in the industry is special. The industry is filled with down to earth people who are excited by what they do. More than ever in this time of climate change and rising sea levels the industry is so important.

When I think of windmills, I always think of Don Quijote. Oh, those dredgers, sitting at windmills.

When I took over IADC, wanted to publish it three times a year and started producing 32 pages. 16 pages black and white, and 16 pages with a second colour. Then one day Boy Opmeer suggested we tried to print the journal four times a year. We would fall under the category of a regular publication, which reduces the mailing rates considerably. We thought about it, we created enough financial possibility to publish four times a year. We only said we could only print four times a year, we had to do it even further. The postage cost went down. I guess it was 1993 when we became a quarterly journal. Clearly a case of a magazine printer knowing more about Dutch media law than I. We went to a great team with the added value that comes from a new partnership.

Slowly we started expanding the budget because once we saw that Terra et Aqua was successfully speaking to people and was actually coming out on time and fulfilling the industry’s wishes, things really turned a corner. We started printing in full colour. And increasing the number of pages. At one point, the length of your sentences and how to present technical information in a way that was more easily absorbed. Those considerations didn’t always fall into the consciousness of the dredging community. I mean, they are engineers doing what they’re doing. They are experts in science and maths. I said, you have to teach me about dredging and I teach you about communicating. That’s the deal. And it worked.

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There was no such thing as transferring a 10 MB photo at the press of a button, so people used to FedEx and mail me photographs.

What impressed you about the dredging industry?
What are your thoughts on Terra et Aqua as it is now?
I think with the redesign back in 2018, that was the moment that Terra really blossomed. I mean, visually it blossomed and became what it is now. Informationally and technically, it is now. It's all hard rock. There are a couple of articles in Terra et Aqua that they did to create that new look.

What I found so fascinating, not only about Terra et Aqua in general but about the dredging industry specifically, was in order to complete a project the importance of stakeholders became key. You can't do anything anymore without you consult with your stakeholders. They have to understand what you're doing. In Panama, they had an referendum to decide whether or not to allocate money to make the improvements to the canal. The government and the dredgers had to really explain what they were doing, how they were going to do it, how it would create jobs and be a boost to the economy. That was a big change from people just going in and starting to dig somewhere and we lose where we end up kind of thing.

How you communicate with the public became so important. The dredging industry is still picking up and learned from the lessons of others in that regard. As in the case of Shell that was embroiled in a public dispute over the decommissioning and disposal of the Brent Spar, a redundant oil storage installation in the North Sea. The dredging industry looked at what Shell's failures and thought what lessons can we apply to our projects?

You travelled to many events around the world. Any standout memories?
One of the things I really appreciated about being part of the industry was travelling to so many places and finding out about different cultures. It's an opportunity I don't think I would have had in my earliest dreams. You can travel everywhere as a tourist but it's a totally different experience when you're travelling for business. You're there working and are part of a community. And in the case of dredging, it's an industry that is trying to improve the society. You get such a different insight into the culture, into the economics and the social structures of accounting.

That also comes with weird experiences. I remember we were in Kuala Lumpur for a PIANC event and we had about projects. That was so impressive. To go in there and figure out how to enlarge the canal and to build a lock to expand it. It's all hard rock. There are a couple of articles in Terra et Aqua that they did to create that new look.

The secretary of transport for Darwin, Australia, invited us all to dinner and I was the only woman in the group. In that Far East, very often they serve a whole fish with the guest of honour getting the head with eyeballs intact. Well, as the only woman, I got the body. I looked at that fish head for a very very long time but just couldn't bring myself to eat it. And how were your sea legs?
One of the first times I went out on a ship it was dredging out in the North Sea and we were shuttled out on a tender to the ship. So there's my life vest on and my hard hat and we climb on board. It's my first time on a dredging ship, so I'm taking lots of pictures, taking to the captain, generally excited by getting toured around the machine room and the bridge. Then the ship returns to shore to discharge its large load of sand. Well, they unload the ship and I find it's much higher out of the water, the ballast is gone. And then came the time for us to disembark. One of the crew simply throws down a rope ladder off the side of the ship and says "Don't look down you'll get dizzy and fall between the ship and the tender." And I'm like, OK. I just walked back down that ladder. Sort of. I swear it was like walking from the top of a six-story building. I thought how do these people do this? It was really terrifying.

Then the colleague I was with starts to descend and the actuallylooked down and just freezes. He was just standing there frozen to the spot and his crew totally had to talk him down the ladder. So my sea legs were fine. But I didn't know I had a fear of heights!

You were editor of Terra et Aqua for 25 years and I get the sense no regrets. None whatsoever. I feel like my life has just been a series of serendipitous decisions. None whatsoever. I feel like my life has just been a series of serendipitous decisions. I mean the fact that I decided to go to the Netherlands in 1970, actually travelled by a Norwegian freighter from Brooklyn to Antwerp having no idea where Antwerp was, or what they were saying when I got off the ship. Then I took the train to Amsterdam. When we came into Antwerp, we had to go through all those locks. Now of course I understand why – because the harbour of Antwerp is situated on an inland waterway. So we went through this series of locks and never thought about it at the time. It was just great experience, sitting on the deck, watching this ship go up and down. But realise now these locks are just one of the things that the dredging industry does.

That reminds me of the Environmental Aspects of Dredging book that we wrote. That was also a monumental project. I was fortunate with Nick Bray and Gerard van Raaij. We had it in England. Geri de Barwas in Abu Dhabi and was in the USA. We were in this round the clock schedule with someone, somewhere always working. Oh, and the printer was in India. You know that time was what dredging was about. Everyone was everywhere all the time, in crazy places. Nowadays it's off limits, dredgers without borders. I remember did an interview once with someone who was working in the Doron gas fields off the west coast of Australia. First off I was in the USA and we had to figure out the time difference. We ended up with him on mobile phone standing in the middle of the sea, giving me an interview.

I don't know, there's something romantic about dredging, the willingness of its employees to venture all over the world, combined with its workhorse practicality and the huge amount of research and innovative thinking that propels it forward. So I have absolutely no regrets. I landed in a place by chance and I think I just lucked out and had an incredible job for 25 years.

Are you still involved with the dredging industry?
Well, it's all about in 2015, I started writing articles for an American dredging magazine so I keep my fingers in the sea for a little bit longer. I know a lot of the American industry and the people at the Western Dredging Association (WEDA). I'm actually working on a project for WEDA at the moment. Also, for about five years, I was on call to help out on the Terra. I was in touch with what's going on in the industry. I stood behind the member boards as well as IADC's website and of course Terra et Aqua. I know it kept my brain functioning, having to puzzle out the bigger picture and lead me to spend with everything. It's all good and then these times of trawls threats from climate change, dredging has a higher profile than ever. The practical implications of maritime engineering and dredging applied to our world belief that we are custodians of this planet. I'm glad to be part of it. It's fun toting at the windmills.