

## *A Leisurely Walk through PLATO's History*

### **“A do-it yourself, grass roots university for retired people.”**

by Michael Stevens

Most groups have an origin story and so does PLATO. Although PLATO was formally organized in May 1987, its development began more than a year earlier. One version puts the key moment in southern California. Another version places it on a tennis court in Madison. But no matter where it took place, all accounts agree that the spark that created PLATO in Madison began in the mind of Bob Elsas, a retired Madison businessman and CPA.

While on a trip with family in Los Angeles in 1986, Bob spent time with a retired attorney named Henry Attias, who was the father of Bob's son-in-law. Henry spoke energetically about a member-led senior learning group at UCLA that had changed his life. When Bob expressed interest in knowing more, Henry invited Bob to attend one of the classes. There were about fifteen other people at the session, which consisted of a presentation and discussion of Southern California's water problems. Bob was impressed, and Henry suggested that a similar program could be developed in Madison. Bob gathered information from staff at UCLA and returned to Madison, turning the idea over in his mind.



**Bob Elsas (left) and Henry Attias in California, 1986, where the idea for PLATO was hatched. (Photo courtesy of Deb Elsas.)**

Soon afterwards, Bob was playing tennis at the Nielsen Tennis Stadium in Madison with George Calden, a retired clinical psychologist. In telling the story ten years later, no one remembered who won the match, but memories of the post-game conversation remained vivid. While standing at the baseline, Bob told George that he had a question for him. George expected Bob to propose another match, but instead Bob told him about his experience in California. And then he asked, do you think this could work in Madison? The animated conversation continued all the way to the locker room. George remembers Bob describing the idea as “a do-it yourself, grass roots university for retired people.”



**George Calden. (Photo courtesy of Ginny Calden.)**

George agreed with Bob and suggested that Bob contact Nancy Abraham, Associate Dean of the Division of Inter-College Programs, which he did on March 15. Soon afterwards, George himself took a trip to California later that year, with introductions in hand from Bob to the UCLA program administrator. It took more than six months to get a meeting with the UW, but Bob was persistent. The first meeting was held on Thursday morning October 16, 1986, in a now-demolished building on Mills Street, with Bob, George, and Norm Jacobson, a retired communications specialist in attendance. The work in creating PLATO had begun, and little did the three men know that it would grow into something larger and long lasting.

Bob, George, and Norm continued to be involved in PLATO's early years and served on the planning committee, which evolved to become the PLATO board. According to a story told for the fifth anniversary of PLATO, Bob and Norm tossed a coin to see who would become the committee chair (later President) in December 1986. Bob won the coin toss and said to Norm: "You're It." Thus, PLATO found its first chair, and Norm continued in that role until he moved from Madison in 1988. Bob served as the first Recorder (later Secretary) and wrote his recollections of the founding for a PLATO writing course. As for George, he served on the planning committee, wrote his recollections, and taught three courses: "American Folk Music," "Famous Composers," and "Unforgettable Videos."

*Part of an occasional series on PLATO history.*

**Henry Attias (left) and Bob Elsas  
in California, 1986. (Photo  
courtesy of Deb Elsas.)**

