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The Florida Society of Newspaper Editors evolved from an organization formed in November, 1955, as the Florida Society of Editors.

This group was organized at a meeting in Ocala called by James A. Clendinen, then assistant editor of the Tribune. Its stated purpose was "to improve the editorial page as a forum of informed opinion through the interchange of ideas and to advance the cause of responsible journalism generally". Its membership was limited to editorial page editors and editorial writers on daily newspapers.

At that time the Florida Daily Newspaper Association and the Associated Press Association were the existing organizations for dailies, and they dealt almost entirely with news, business and production problems. The Florida Society of Editors was intended to give those involved in editorial writing and editing an organization covering their area of interest.

In the consideration of a proposed charter at the Ocala meeting, discussion led to a heated debate over what grounds were proper cause for expelling a member from the Society. R.N. (Bert) Dosh of the Ocala Star-Banner ended the debate with the sage comment: "Look, fellows, we haven't gotten any members in yet. It's a little premature to talk about how we're going to kick 'em out".

Clendinen was the first president. Other officers and directors were William Wiley of the St. Petersburg Independent, R.N. Dosh of the Ocala Star-Banner, Marion Gaines of the Pensacola News-Journal, Herbert Davidson of the Daytona Beach News-Journal and Jeanne Bellamy, of the Miami Herald.

The Society's annual meetings included discussions of editorial page techniques, led in some instances by out-of-state editors of national reputation, and panels on state and national issues.

Among other projects, the Society established an annual Defenders of Freedom Award, to go to the public official judged to have made the most notable contribution to freedom of the press. The first award was made to Governor LeRoy Collins in 1960. Several years later it was discontinued.

In 1969, under the leadership of John McMullan of the Miami Herald, the Society was reorganized as the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors, with membership broadened to include both news and editorial executives -- following the pattern of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. McMullan was elected the first president. Other officers and directors were Earle Bowden of the Pensacola News-Journal, John Walters of the Florida Times-Union, Malcolm Johnson of the Tallahassee Democrat, Don Baldwin of the St. Petersburg Times and Clendinen. The organization took place at Gainesville, in conjunction with the 90th annual meeting of the Florida Press Association.

The editors, incidentally, heard Governor Claude Kirk attack the press for its "negative attitude" toward his administration.

One purpose of the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors was to give news and editorial executives an organization independent of Associated Press and United Press affiliation and to broaden the program content of the semi-annual meetings. An important result, of course, was the Society's takeover of responsibility for the annual newspaper contest formerly managed by the Associated Press.

The Society established in 1972 Florida's top journalistic honor, the FSNE Distinguished Achievement Award, carrying a \$500 cash prize and a plaque. The award most often has gone to investigative reporters for a series of stories exposing government corruption, negligence or injustice.