

ASHRAE Leadership Recall (formerly Leadership Recalled)
Transcription

Interview of: Bud Mingledorff

Date of Interview: 2008 or 2009

Interviewed by: Pam Immekus and Bruce Longino

Note: Video is not complete.

Pam Immekus

This is my history interview with Bud Mingledorff. What started this is that I this in my archives somebody had collected over the years. And the story was so great. I'm going to read a little bit of it okay?

Bud Mingledorff

Yeah, okay.

P.I.

In 1939 a Savannah business man, Joe Boudreau, contacted the Carrier Air Conditioning Corporation of Syracuse, New York about air conditioning his new home he was building on Albacorn Street in Savannah. Air conditioning homes were very rare in those days so Carrier sent an engineer to Savannah to see Mr. Boudreau and look over his house plans. Mr. Boudreau asked his son in law, Lee Mingledorff, a recent graduate from Georgia Tech to sit in on the meeting. And Lee became the Carrier rep for the Georgia area. I think that's pretty cool. Now this thing says the house is still there. I tried to look it up, is it still there?

B.M.

Oh yeah.

P.I.

Okay, I tried to look it upon the internet but there wasn't any information on it. But that's pretty neat. I'll have to go and visit it.

B.M.

Yeah, you'll have to go and see it. It's one of the, today it's considered to be in part of the historic area of Savannah. It was like Buck Head in the 1930s. It was a suburb, it was a subdivision. Ainsley, kind of like Ainsley Park here. Was built during, really right after the depression. It was the first golf course development thing. Well Archly Park is what this place is called in Savannah. It's just south of Victory Drive. Victory Drive was the outer boundary of Savannah. That's the road that goes out to Savannah Beach that has the palm trees in a line that goes out to Tybee Island. It's really the dead end of Highway 80. And in the old days when I was a kid Savannah's fame to claim was that Highway 80 ends in Los Angeles. And you can drive literally from Savannah to Los Angeles.

P.I.

Another Route 66, huh?

B.M.

Yeah, another Route 66. Except they didn't make a television show out of it. But at one point in time that palm drive which begins just west, on the western edge of Savannah, goes all the way to Savannah Beach, was considered to be the longest palm drive in the country. Longer than the stuff in Florida, even though palmetto palms, which the people in Florida would contest it's not really a palm tree, but it is. So the house was being built then and a little background on Joe Boudreau. He was of course my grandfather on my mother's side since it was his son in law obviously, but Joe Boudreau was a Canadian illegal immigrant. He came down across the border, hobo-ed his way south. No money. His family owned a potato farm in Canada, in Montreal. He was French Canadian. Spoke English with a French accent. Wore one of these round derby hat, whatever you call that thing that

P.I.

Yeah derbies.

B.M.

Yeah, he was a character of some repute himself. And as he came south, he made an interesting discovery that the principle starch in the south was rice and potatoes. Well as a potato farmer, having grown up on a potato farm, he took personal offense to the fact that they didn't eat potatoes in the south. And decided there was an opportunity to potentially sell potatoes to restaurants, in particular Irish potatoes. Now later they learned how to market Idaho potatoes as a brand name, kind of like you would have Vidalia onions. Well at the time nobody had heard of an Idaho potato so he actually went, believe it or not, to upscale restaurants and talked them into offering potatoes as a accessory item to the menu.

P.I.

And they didn't offer potatoes.

B.M.

And they didn't offer potatoes.

P.I.

Wow did it.

B.M.

And they in particular sell Irish potatoes. And put down that we offer the finest Irish potatoes. And I would defy you to taste the difference between one potato and another. But in any way it worked. And I guess at the end of the day everybody's looking for some marketing statement that you could make about your restaurant or whatever. They had restaurants advertising that they had Irish potatoes on their menus.

P.I.

What a neat story.

B.M.

He actually became the world's largest potato broker, probably the only potato broker. He would buy potatoes from New England and put them on shelves and bring them to the port in Savannah. And then they would ship them as far west as Texas out of Savannah. And it was a J. L. Boudreau Company, but it had some slogan underneath it that related to, basically it was a food broker but he only sold potatoes. And he actually created a potato market that was so large that a bunch of farmers got into it in New England. And what happens of course in the world of agriculture is that when it becomes a parade it's time to get out. They switched from other crops, and switched to potatoes and then you had a glut of

potatoes. And the government of course then stepped in, as the government does. They didn't have price control potatoes so they put in a program where they would buy all the excess potatoes in order to support the potato prices. In other words instead of just subsidizing potato prices, the government in the 1920s decided to buy all the surplus potatoes.

P.I.

We never learn do we.

B.M.

No. So they would buy the potatoes and guess who they would buy the potatoes from? Joe Boudreau. And my grandfather had this neat technique. When the ship would arrive in Savannah they sorted the potatoes because the potatoes, believe it or not in the 1920s, they didn't understand quality control. Quality control was on the back end not the front end. If you think about it they were shipping from New England rotten potatoes. They would buy the potatoes in bulk from the farmers and they had these potato warehouses and stuff all around New England. Those were separate individual companies that were then selling the potatoes to Joe Boudreau Company. So what they did was then whatever potatoes they bought, they would be graded by size and by weight and then they would put them on ships and send them to Savannah. They would then sort the rotten potatoes and the bad potatoes and the bruised potatoes in Savannah.

P. I.

I bet that smelled good.

B.M.

Yeah. After they had already been hauled all the way from New England. So they're hauling bad product and assets all the way to Savannah. They would sort all of the potatoes in Savannah. Well here's the J.L. Boudreau Company with this huge contract with the government to buy massive amounts of potatoes.

Bruce Longino

They got the rotten potatoes.

P. I.

They stopped doing, yeah, okay.

B.M.

They sorted all the rotten potatoes into barges. And then they would haul the barges by sea tugs out into the Atlantic Ocean and dumped the barges.

Bruce Longino

Seems like you could have used them for fertilizer or something.

B.M.

No, they dumped them in the ocean. They had actually built special barges that would dump the potatoes into the ocean.

P. I.

That's unreal.

B.M.

I know. Instead of taking them, like Bruce says just throw them out on the fields and plow them under as fertilizer. They didn't want to do that. That would deflate I guess the fertilizer market. So Joe

Boudreau made a ga-zillion dollars marketing potatoes to the government and to find restaurants and ultimately the grocery stores and stuff like that.

Bruce Longino

So you're named for him.

B.M.

Yeah I'm named for him. And my name is Linley Boudreau and his name was Joseph Linley Boudreau. So she dropped the Joe part. A lot of people called him Bud as opposed to Joe, because everybody was Joe so they just nicknamed him Bud. But he became one of the wealthiest men in Savannah at the time. He was going to build his dream house during the Depression in 1939. This house was designed, conceived of in 1936 when the Depression was still going. The Depression really ended as the result of World War II but Joe Boudreau was making a lot of money coming through the Depression because he was selling all of his potatoes to the government. And the government was price supporting the potato market which only encouraged more people to get into the potato market which then encouraged the government to spend more money and buy more potatoes from Joe Boudreau. So the more potatoes the government bought, the more the farmers planted because they were still making a lot of money on potatoes. And it was only later that the government ever figured out that what we need to do is pay farmers not to plant. And that's when they started this other hair brained idea is that we'll lease the land...

Bruce Longino

Is that a political statement Bud?

P. I.

Yes.

B.M.

Well you see it happen today, in south Georgia they take some of the most barren land. The land that only grows scrub oak and that's what you lease to the government. Then you go buy the latest and greatest in high grade fertilizers and you take the money that you made leasing furrow land, you know, barren land to the government, you take that money and you buy and irrigation system. And you put in an irrigation system. You use the latest in hybrid seeds and fertilizers and you double the production of the fields you are planning and you use the money the government paid you not to plant and your actual production goes up.

Bruce Longino

Which is not what they were trying to do.

B.M.

Which is not what they were trying to do. You can beat any system that does not, other than the...

Bruce Longino

It's more interesting than air conditioning.

P.I.

Yes.

B.M.

The forces of the market place can always be beaten when you create this artificial thing.

Bruce Longino

Are you Republican?

B.M.

Yeah.

P.I.

Me too.

B.M.

But basically. I don't believe that the government ever does anything really right.

P.I.

It's doing stuff it shouldn't be doing.

B.M.

Yeah. Joe Boudreau rode that wave while it lasted and it was a good program in the government's mind because they went to one broker and bought up the supply which then kept the supply from hitting the market. Kept the prices up and it was, you know, we use the term in wholesale business, you rifle shoot into a market such as the apartment market. You go in and you plant load with a few big apartment jobs because you can go out and you can take an 800 unit apartment job and put 800 units down an assembly line but not erode your pricing into other areas. The pricing doesn't leach out of that one project over into another and another. And so the government was doing the same thing. Go buy all the potatoes from Joe Boudreau and that program by doing that and if we ditched the potatoes in the ocean then we have cured the problem. Except that it just continued to encourage more farmers to get into the business which created more political pressure to keep the price up. So Joe Boudreau designs, has designed this great house. Problem was that Joe Boudreau was Canadian and he was living in Savannah and it is absolutely tropical. The letters from the early colonist back to England is just dreadful because they describe this inhumane place.

P.I.

What is it, yellow fever, all kinds of stuff then.

B.M.

All kinds of stuff. And Joe Boudreau loved the south for a lot of different reasons but one thing he absolutely could not abide was the temperature and the humidity. And he reads about air conditioning in, legend has it, in Popular Mechanics. They have an article in there about air conditioning and Willis Carrier had been at it really since, I guess, 1912, I guess was when he put in the first unit. I know they just celebrated the 1900's

Bruce Longino

The hundredth anniversary.

B.M.

Yeah, 1904 I guess. So air conditioning had been around for about 30 years. But slow go. You know, it's like electricity was around in the 1870s but it was never massed produced until the early 1900s. Well same thing with air conditioning equipment. It was just getting traction. And he read about it. Wrote a letter to the Carrier Air Conditioning Company and asked them if they would be interested in air conditioning his house. And they said that they would if it was big enough, that they really didn't do a lot of houses. Well this particular house was big enough for their smallest unit. They wrote him a letter back and said that they would be interested in doing a house and they would send an engineer from Syracuse to Savannah to meet with him to do that proposal. Well Joe Boudreau was a salesman and he was counting on a super salesman coming out of Syracuse, selling the mechanical device. Now the other

thing you need to know about Joe Boudreau, he only had a fifth grade education. So he invited his new son-in-law that had graduated from Georgia Tech. My father was a freshman at Georgia Tech at 16 and was graduated at 20. But you know in those days, I guess the life expectancy was in the, about 45 or 48 something like that.

Bruce Longino

Better go ahead and graduate and go for it.

B.M.

Yeah, you had to get on with life.

P.I.

You had to be foreshortened.

B.M.

Yeah but he was what you would call an early achiever. So he had married Joe Boudreau's only daughter and had taken her off to live in Indianapolis and he had a job working for the Caterpillar Diesel Engine Company in Indianapolis. That was his first job out of Georgia Tech. So at 24 years old he came back to Savannah to meet with this Carrier engineer and they met in Morrison's Cafeteria in Savannah over lunch. And the Carrier guy laid out his proposal and before the meeting was over the Carrier guy not only sold Joe Boudreau the house but he sold my father the franchise to be the Carrier contractor from Savannah to Augusta to Tallahassee. So we had the entire lower half of the state from Augusta south of Macon, we cut a path south of Macon over to kind of a semi circle south of Macon.

P.I.

So that brought your dad back to Georgia?

B.M.

Brought him back to Georgia in Savannah and Joe Boudreau of course loaned him the money to buy the franchise. It wasn't like a lot of money but it was the Depression and this was in 1939. February 1939 to be exact. He comes back to Savannah immediately, he turns in his resignation, comes back to Savannah. The Carrier people trained him on the installation of that job and the timing was literally the frame of the house was happening. I mean the time to make the decision and go with this thing was now. So they brought him back immediately and he starts installing his first job under Carriers tutelage. Now Carrier was actually in the contracting business but getting out of it. They were going into the mass production of air conditioning equipment. Willis Carrier was still alive. He didn't die until the 1950s. But they had converted to the Carrier Engineering Company to the Carrier Air Conditioning Company and they were going to design more air conditioning systems and build a volume up and stuff like that. So at any rate they were franchising installers and exiting the installation business. And so he comes back to Savannah and the first job he does is his own father-in-law's house. Then he does a couple of movie theaters and a bank. You did all these big stores and then ultimately, there's an ad that we have that is really from the 1950s, early 1950s where Mingledorff's actually did the installation on the DeSoto Hotel. That got him a lot of the publicity that they wanted because a lot of, everything from the debutant parties to the weddings were all done at the DeSoto. And I can remember as a kid that we used to have a tent at the fair with a big sign out front, come in and feel air conditioning. And we had to convince people that they needed air conditioning. You don't have to do that today. But that was a big deal, that this was a nice thing to have. And I've never actually seen the data on it but I understand from my father that one of the other battles they had in the 1940s was that there was a belief that air

conditioning was detrimental to your health. That the temperature and humidity changes, going in and out of air conditioned environments would give you colds, make you susceptible to breathing issues and things like that. And there was actually a study commissioned by a grant given to the University of Alabama to study the effects of air conditioning on the health and well being. And of course the argument the air conditioning had at the time was, you know if you live in New England and you go from zero to 65, you know that's a 65 degree temperature change like that. I mean we're talking about 20 degree temperature changes. But it was the same crowd that believed you couldn't move faster than a horse could run, it was that same psychology that was there. And the country had just come through the block electricity movement. There was a big deal. They used to have protests on the streets in New York protesting the electrification of houses. And they would actually catch stray dogs and electrocute them on stage.

P.I.

They were trying to say it was dangerous.

B.M.

Because it was dangerous. And if they had invented the electric chair before they invented the light bulbs we probably wouldn't have light bulbs because there was a big movement that was absolutely convinced that electricity was dangerous. Too dangerous to have in an environment with children and stuff like that. So they would electrocute dogs to prove how dangerous this stuff was and scare the tar out of people with the thing. But that was the same crowd that was going after the air conditioning business as bad science. But that was what they were doing. So anyway in that environment we crank up Mingledorff's but it only lasted about two years. I think about 1939, 1939 February 1939 was only seven months ahead of the invasion of Poland. And what happened was when my father came back to Savannah in February, he and his father, my grandfather Mingledorff, owned a little machine shop called Forrest City Machine Shop, 18 people, second, third generation machine shop. The Mingledorffs emigrated from Germany in 1734. There was one Mingledorff that came over with a group of Salzbergers. And these were Lutherans from Austria which was Catholic and they were being persecuted in, they were from Salzberg, right outside Munich down in southern Germany. So they came over. A whole boat load of them. Raised the money, hired a ship, came over. Actually landed, the ship docked in Charleston and they wouldn't let them off the ship. Charleston was British and they didn't want a bunch of Germans, and in particular they didn't want a bunch of Lutherans so they set sail again and went around. You know the people in Charleston suggested that they go down to Georgia to Savannah. Overthorp's cranking up his deal and Overthorp kind of liked the idea as well because he talked the Germans into settling up the Savannah River in a little area, a high bluff area up there called Ebenezer. And it's still there, the little town of Ebenezer is still there. But all those Germans settled there and became the buffer between the Indians of the Savannah River.

P.I.

So kill them off first. No, that's great.

B.M.

And so that was why the Charleston, the people in Charleston were proud to have Overthorp in Savannah because he was now the buffer between the Spaniards in Florida. To get to Charleston to attack them you've got to come through Savannah. So word would get that they were marching up out of Florida. We had been principally those Germans that came out of Salzberg. They were principally

blacksmiths and hardware people. They were tradesman as a rule. And the Mingleorff that was with them was one of those people and I understand we were the hardware business and some things like that. But the branch from the family that I'm from actually was, they had this machine shop located in Savannah. So my father and my grandfather Mingleorff got together in April of 1939 and they bid on a minesweeper. Now a minesweeper is a wooden ship. It's actually the smallest quote ship the navy has. And they had never built a minesweeper but as a machine shop, one thing they knew, you could follow directions. It was actually more creativity in the air conditioning business then there was in the ship building business. And you had a set of plans and if you didn't design the ship there wasn't any creativity to it. They knew simply- (video ends)