

ASHRAE Leadership Recall (formerly Leadership Recalled)
Transcription

Video Interview of: Donald R. Bahnfleth

Date of Interview: June 1991

Interviewed by: Mike Kearney

Mike Kearney

Good afternoon, my name is Mike Kearney and it is my pleasure to interview with you this afternoon Mr. Don Bahnfleth, past president of the ASHRAE organization and currently president of the ZBA engineers and architects incorporated in Cincinnati, Ohio and we're conducting this interview as part of our ASHRAE's leadership recall program. And Don and I we've known each other for a while, since Nashville Tennessee and you count your start in the ASHRAE organization chairs, if you will really with an association with Hugh McMillan.

Don Bahnfleth

Yes, I was on the Board of Directors at the time, it actually started in the probably in a little earlier but in 71 but then in 75 there was a group called the president elect advisory committee and Hugh was just in that stage of becoming president then we met in Houston with him and I got to know him very well at that point in time. I got to know him very well at that point in time and that initiated a lot of activity and then I guess must have led to where I am today.

M.K.

Ok.

D.B.

Among them at that one particular meeting, we began to develop the council structure which is now the administrative structure, if you will, of the volunteers in society. We recognized that the board was becoming terribly overburdened and that we needed to involve more of the volunteers and the management of the various activities of which, of course, the society at that point was about a 10 million dollar business and it's tough for volunteers to really manage that so the council structure which gave us leadership and technology, publishing, administration, membership, and of course the regions council which is a part of the, was very important and that came out of that that particular meeting. Hugh was a very interesting guy if you don't particularly know him he was an action oriented person. And a typical, one morning I got a call sitting in my office, Hugh was at a phone booth at the airport in Houston on his way to Washington to meet with the DOE, the Department of Energy and he said Don we've got this opportunity to do something for the Department of Energy and he said would you chair it. And I said well, tell me what it is and I'll, at that time President Carter had imposed the Emergency Building Temperature Restriction Act and Hugh had committed to doing about a 350,000 dollar training program for the Department of Energy and I said well I guess I could probably handle that, what's the deal. He said well we got two weeks to put the material together so we put together a committee that my predecessor Bob McDonald was a member of that, Bill Wells, Faye McQuiston, who's now our vice president and we had the superintendent of schools, out of New Orleans.

M.K.

New Orleans, I remember that. I almost have his name.

D.B.

Can't remember his name but in any event, we got together and by golly in two weeks we had done it and then two months we had trained 60,000 people and to me that made the difference between a

dismal failure of the EBTR Act and total success. And again to me that was a turning point in the energy conservation activity of the society. We previously started in the standard 90 but that activity brought people together and really focused on the need to conserve energy.

M.K.

You got to watch the phone calls from ASHRAE that start out with we've got an opportunity.

D.B.

That's right. Every opportunity is a challenge or every challenge is an opportunity. He was a great guy to work for. And he was a mentor I suppose overall.

M.K.

How did you put, you had a small committee and they were in different parts of the country. McDonald was what, up in Minneapolis?

D.B.

McDonald was in Illinois and he was controls. We had Faye McQuiston who was the professor, and he had the education and experience. We had Bill Wells who was a consulting engineer, dealing with those problems on a day to day basis. And then we had the fellow from New Orleans, who was the school facilities engineer who represented the owner. And that gave us the balance that ASHRAE has because this is what makes the society great. It is not a single discipline organization. It has people who design systems as well as people who build them, it has people who operate and maintain them, has teachers who teach about them, and it has manufacturers who sell them, designed them, and research them. And when you put that altogether and come to a meeting and I know from having an editor of HPAC that we're the only technical society that can do that and we have a far better understanding of how our systems function in real terms than anyone else. Architects go and talk to architects, general contractors go and talk to general contractors, plasterers will go talk to plasterers. But in our industry we all come together and the common bond, common transfer of information is really powerful. It is why we are, I think we are without question the premier technical society in the United States today I say bar none, including the old founders societies.

M.K.

So after working with you at that level, then you began to get into the chairs worked towards...

D.B.

Yes, 75 was the board and around 19, what 80 we wound up as treasurer of society. And that of course was then the first real step into the chairs.

M.K.

First chair, yeah. What kind of job is a treasurer?

D.B.

Well it's obviously a very interesting one, you're the volunteer who's responsible for the 10,000,000 dollar business. Fortunately, we have an excellent controller but for my case it was a fantastic job because Bob McDonald, turned it over so we had a 600 thousand dollar deficit. We need to do something and we did. We started in a very powerful program of cost reduction, examined everything we were doing in detail which is what you have to do and out of that came a lot of activity as we removed along and through the chairs on to the presidency, that wasn't exclusive to my activity, but out of that came a lot of activity. I think this has put together a very strong base for the society today and you might, I don't know, like to hear some of those.

M.K.

Yeah, I'd like to hear some of those, but just definitely from that deficit, the society's finances have turned around to positive thing.

D.B.

This was a very real surprise, it was a blindsiding kind of deficit because we had met at the annual meeting and it looked as if we were probably going to have a surplus from somewhere 600 thousand

dollars worth of invoices appeared. It turned out that there were a lot of things going on that could be improved. And out of that came we discovered, for example, that the society has been subsidizing advertising in the handbook, and if you recognize that the handbook is a once a year thing the advertising guide that was published anyway because it was obsolete, and that led to removing that advertising from the handbook which I think has been very positive. It really served no purpose. We had put a directory into the handbook, a directory of product and there are several of those in the field, done much better than we were doing and we pulled that out. So that's not, wasn't a cost any longer and then we began to look at all the ways we communicate with members and interestingly enough out of that came Insights, it wasn't called that it was a newspaper that would lead us to membership communication and free the magazine, the Journal, which was caring so much institutional material, but advertisers didn't see it as a very interesting magazine. And we were able to pull all of that out eventually and it is now I think it's one of top magazines in the country. At the time we started it, it needed help and I had some special insights being an editor of a magazine for 13 years that I think helped that and I could work with the staff and we approved it. So I think out of that came a very strong journal. We have insights and discussion today of something called a research bulletin that was a part of that. Emil Freeburg who is recognized here as you may know, was the info on the fellow on the publishing council at the time I was chairman, that put that together. Because as treasurer you're also chairman of the publishing council which was strictly a business venture at that time.

M.K.

Well the publishing council, I'm just getting into that activity. They've got some zeros and camas after those number's now.

D.B.

Oh, yes. At that time we, everything that we did we lost money one in publishing. Now our fundamental objective was to disseminate information and therefore we had an obligation to do that but the charter didn't say we had to go to a loss? So does IRS because even though you're a nonprofit you don't have to be losing money and what lead to the zeros you see was the strategic plan that followed and Bob McDonald had be as chairman of the committee that put the strategic plan together and that worked, we began to look at how we can turn our publishing venture from a loss to at least a self funding and in that time, we developed the objectives which were later put together by people on the publishing council and we began to do things that we should have been doing, marketing. We hadn't really marketed our publications. We're like the guy who built the great mouse trap, hope somebody would come buy them and son of a gun they didn't. And that came out of it. And we also began to press for increased research contributions, and you heard today they're up to a million and a quarter dollars. It's time we started that it was at about 600,000, and we began to put pressure on that growth. So those were exciting times, and that strategic plan.

M.K.

I bet they were and that strategic plan, just putting the first things down on a strategic plan would be a very challenging thing.

D.B.

Involved a lot of people, involved a lot of the past presidents, involved the society staff, it involved a lot of grassroots members in the first-ever was really a very, very substantial effort finally was boiled down to the first plan. And it really was, I was amazed because it was completed in Bob McDonald's term and Bob proceeded me and was implemented, began implementation in my first term and I could not believe the excitement that that created among the volunteers. If you had asked me before hand would that have happened, I would have said no. I've never seen people turn to and implement things the way that was done. And that's why the publishing venture became profitable, the research effort grew, our activity and government affairs grew and you'd have to trace that back to that plan and its impact on the people.

M.K.

Was involvement in government affairs one of the line items on that strategic plan?

D.B.

Yeah, it was to broaden our outreach into areas that our technology can serve. And we had been a very introspective kind of technical engineering operation. For years we had some oh outside PR, which was pretty institutional and was trying to reach down to the consumer, and we are not a consumer organization, but in between there are a lot of people that needed to know, government needed to know. And of course the EBTR thing was kind of the beginning of that, but by that time we were really recognized by congressional committees, by EPA, by DOE. In fact DOE has been very, very close to us since the EBTR thing and we've been a very important force in helping them develop programs and providing really the technical basis to do things that need to be done in conservation

M.K.

Is, has DOE been the contributor in ways to our research and development efforts.?

D.B.

Yeah, the DOE contribution and I was involved in that too because I was on R and T when good old Frank Faust and I hope you interviewed him.

M.K.

Yes, and that's why I asked that question.

D.B.

Began to develop a special project activities and we helped write the first, helped him write the first special project policy. Through his effort we began to receive funding from a number of agencies, including the Department of Energy for research, which was of interest to them, but also of interest to us. We didn't do anything because government wanted it done we did it because it was something that would advance the technology

M.K.

Joint interest.

D.B.

Right it was a joint interest and it would advance the technology and would give mutual benefit. And Mr. Faust was just a marvelous salesman.

M.K.

Yes, he was a marvelous person, marvelous person.

D.B.

Yes, absolutely. See I've been touched by a lot of these guys that were really the giants in this business.

M.K.

Take a moment just to talk a personage, pick one and one of the beautiful things about ASHRAE is the people that you're placed in contact with. Can you pick one you'd like to chat about a little bit?

D.B.

What as just the most.

M.K.

Well not just the most.

D.B.

Well I could pick my twin.

M.K.

Your twin?

D.B.

Well you know that Bob McDonald and I, he gets on a plane from Denver and they call him Don and I walk down to the desk and they call me Bob.

M.K.

Okay.

D.B.

So when I registered this time in fact in my envelope was a name tag Bob McDonald.

M.K.

Is that right?

D.B.

Bob had something to do with that, but it was amazing to us how often we were confused. Bob and I have a lot in common, I guess besides gray hair and girth and the real thing that we had in common was to see the society grow and really be a force for good in the quality of life. And so he and I have spent a lot of time together as I said, he was, is really a great person, and one that I respected. If you looked at the people that had the most impact on me I suppose, the first was a guy by the name of Bob Roose who was an editor of HPAC. And active in the society but never risen into the hierarchy. And Bob was the person who talked me into coming into that part of the business. Interestingly enough, as I have a different history, I went to the magazine because the journal section which had always carried in HPAC had just been jerked from it because of the merger of ASRE and ASHAE. And the people at HPAC, Chick Price and Bob Jack and all the others who owned it had been so close to the society were told that we're going to put you out of business. And I went to fill the gap between the journal and no journal and for two years I did it, sixteen page technical report each month and some I did totally from scratch, some I had the participating authors and recovered subjects like air pollution control. We did three on that and they were used in Congress for testimony because they were the first time that they were put in a form that even Congressman could understand. And then we get into water pollution control and tie those two together and so we did a lot of interesting things to offset that, now the mags however had been very close so I was at ASHRAE and had the good pleasure of being here and being able to work with it. We never forgot, that from our side of the fence, ASHRAE was very important. The magazine continued really to support the effort, encourage people to come on board and so. But Bob, and I guess probably one of the most important guys in my career in ASHRAE was probably Hugh McMillan. I think he probably set a tone for some things so me that probably pushed me to where I'm at, if I'm anywhere. Yeah, George Millard.

M.K.

George Millard.

D.B.

And he was an excellent engineer and as we said in our little conversation, bright and a real contributor to what we were doing to EBTR because he brought the practical side of-

M.K.

Solid practical.

D.B.

Absolutely.

M.K.

I mean everything he was practical.

D.B.

I think he was responsible for hundreds of buildings as I recall

M.K.

Yes, yes.

D.B.

It was not a small job that he had in New Orleans.

M.K.

No, No. And he was into the details of that work-

D.B.

Yes, yes he was.

M.K.

-very tight, so when this energy thing came along, I'm intrigued that that's where you had him in this energy building temperature restrictions.

D.B.

You've got to credit Hugh with some of that because Hugh was, he put that balance together.

M.K.

Okay. You want to talk a little about balance in ASHRAE.

D.B.

I think balance is really crucial in one of the things that occurred during the time that Bob and I were coming through the chairs together is we got concerned that for a while we had all professors as presidents and all of a sudden we had a whole series of consultants and it was becoming, Bob of course was a manufacturer, he was with the controls manufacture and we were concerned about the future. We had not had a contractor in the chairs for a while. We had not had facilities management people, and by the way will still haven't but as we moved about among our sister societies and encouraged them to view ASHRAE as an important part of the life in this industry, we also encouraged a lot of CEOs to support their people to do the things that you see going on now. And it's kind of interesting, you know it isn't political at all. The job seeks the man, and we were doing this. And so we were putting people together into the positions that could be or they could become eligible for the presidency and would be recognized. And so in that group we had Don Rich, who had just taken office today, Neil Patterson, Dick Hater, Billy Manning, Damon Gowan, and we did that because we were trying to get some of that. We had another fellow from Kodak, who would have represent the facilities management side which is very difficult to find. And son of a gun they changed him from facility to real estate. Yeah that's not really politicking, that's just really planning the future. But the whole purpose of balance is what I've talked about before, unless the society maintains the balance that it has now all of the interests in the business, it won't maintain its strength. And you just have to go out and find people that will first of all agree to do it, and then you have to often work with their employer to make sure they will support them. And all those people I named, well Dick Charles is one, so you have consulting engineering, you have a couple of manufactures, you have an academic person. So you try to achieve that.

M.K.

Yeah, balanced viewpoint. Let's talk a little about your presidency and your theme of committed to serve. Chat a little bit about coming up with a theme, that was sort of new in those days wasn't it, a theme to the presidency?

D.B.

Well, there had been, I guess probably the last three or four years ahead of me, or four or five I'm not sure how many, there were people adopting themes. In fact you're going to be talking to Morry Backer before too long and that he had a theme. And now I'm going to tell you, the leftist head of mine, it came out of a song for example. And he'll tell you what that is. But I felt that one of the things that ASHRAE has in its volunteers is a commitment just beyond belief and I felt that ought to be recognized and it ought to be recognized because of what we were doing not only, not for ourselves but for society. And when you're selected you know, by your peers for that position I mean that's an absolutely astounding experience. You, just for example, a year, last half of my president elect year and the first half of the presidency, I spent 120 working days and 22 weekends away from home. And did that with pleasure, I'd never do it again probably but it tells you something about it and I don't think I'm unique. I think that job has been growing but you do it because of the confidence that has been put into you by your peers. And it is a growing experience, it's as Damon Gowan has said participation leads to professional growth. There is just no way to measure what happens to you, but we saw cultural changes

almost daily, because as we flew around the country, as you fly, well for example we went to Montreal for dinner, we opened a conference in Florida. That was on Saturday night, we opened a conference in Florida on Monday and spoke to Chicago, the Illinois chapter on energy on Wednesday, so you've taken 3 or 4 days there. We went from the uh...

M.K.

French Canadian.

D.B.

French Canadian to Miami or Tampa the south and back into the Midwest. You suddenly realize the diversity that exists and then of course we just traveled overseas and all of those experiences were just magnificent. And what made them so were the people. There is a personality that seems to be attracted to this industry that has a high level of commitment to serve and you find that out when you begin to speak about what they do at home. Most of them are involved in their church, their involved in the community, their involved in their schools and you just find that they seem to gravitate towards this business and they're very, very similar. You could go to other disciplines, look at architects and they have the tendency to be very arty, very sensitive, and very flighty. And our people on the other hand are very committed to do the things that we do and do it voluntarily. So that was a great, a great experience and I think the theme fit. And we had a lot of issues, we had in the year before, I had sat in on a Congressional testimony and we weren't sure whether indoor air quality, for example, was an issue or the figment of somebody's imagination but it became clear as we went along that was probably one of the most significant health concerns that we had in this country, we just didn't know it. So indoor air quality became a significant part of what I did, the issues that we were dealing with and we dealt with them at EPA and we dealt with other societies who had an interest and then of course our own people. We were pressing to get standard 62 released and as you know it took several years. We were also concerned about energy and energy conservation. We were sliding, backsliding into this "energy doesn't really matter it's so plentiful that we don't have to conserve it" and we were pressing to get standard 90.1 finished. I believe that was in 1986, because the Department of Energy had been commissioned by the Congress to do a standard for government buildings and they wanted to use standard 90.1 and we really, we'd get that dang-gon thing cranked out and you know we didn't make it. But within another year we had a draft that was good enough and that's what they used. If you go look at the energy standard that applies to government buildings it is essentially standard 90.1, so indoor air quality, energy, the CFC issue was kind of there but it was really kind of hidden. It wasn't really a significant- the other one, two others that I was concerned about, one was globalization. I felt that our industry had the opportunity to do what the automobile industry did and I didn't want to see that happen and you could tell that they, we were beginning to globalized in '85, that's six years ago, but it was taking place and then the opportunity to travel in to Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Dubai, some of Europe, it became clear that it was going to happen whether we liked it or not and we had better be ready for it. And if you, particularly the people over in Malaysia and that part of the world, they are hungry for the things that we have and they are going to work for it. A message to our people is you need to recognize that we didn't get here because we sat down and we hoped somebody was going something, it's because we were doers. And so we tried to convey some of that and the other was the fact that the human resource for our industry was very limited and it was going to be even more so. Before the demographics tell you that 1 in 4 in the year 2000 will be white males and the remainder will be blacks, women, and other minorities. I asked for example, for a list of the women in ASHRAE. I was trying to desperately to put together a program that would attract women to the business. I did an interview in the regional conferences the CRCs this year, I interviewed a lot of young people, a lot of young women and I said you know, how should I go about it and they said don't have a ASHRAE, you know women in ASHRAE thing, we don't want any, we're just like anyone else, we're engineers. So we tried to develop programs in which they would have someone they could follow. We got a professor out

of Illinois Institute of Technology, a gal who had world-renowned refrigeration, we tried to use her as a role model. When I got this list from ASHRAE there were 500 names out of almost 50,000 and one of them was my partner 'cuz his name was Francis. What that tells you is that we were following the law - you can't ask, are you a boy or girl or are you black or white or Hispanic or whatever because it's illegal however you're supposed to report it. So things have changed this end but also found that there weren't many minorities. There are very, very few. I could find very few in the chapters and I think if you look out today at one of our meetings you'll find that there are very, very few minorities represented and the society needs to recognize that and really get proactive. I've tried some things on my own working with black colleges and things but I think as a society we can direct things and we're kind of to get that message across. And we have some gals I think the ones that we got into key positions in committees are going to be the ones that become the first female president.

M.K.

The preliminary speaker at this meeting made a point about getting to the mind of the young black person or the female before certain stages of life, and I believe she said you have to get to the black person before their third grade, and the female before she's in the sixth grade and we're dealing with the thought on our little Historical Committee about museums. Should there be, could there be, if there was, what would it be. And I talked to someone about museums, per se, and he said that one of the driving forces for the contributors to scientific centers was the knowledge that you've got to get that young mind before they're in seventh grade otherwise, all these pressures to ah you don't want to be a techie, you don't want to be an engineer, you don't want to be an egg head, begin to weigh down on them and we lose that young mind to our profession. So I think that your theme, your focus there is very interesting. And we got to realize that that has got to go to the young mind, we've got address the young mind with these efforts.

D.B.

I don't think we realized at that point that we had to drive down that low but in the last few years it's become very clear that dealing with even high school is too late. Even people in junior high is too late and I sit on the advisory Board of North Carolina NT, which is a black, was a black alternative school back years ago, it's still black, it's managers are basically black and they're a part of a 25 school consortium which I think includes Georgia Tech and a lot of others who are trying to reach down into the black community and they started in high school and they are now in kindergarten. And they say that that's the only way they can find that they can reach and get them interested in the technology. So...

M.K.

We've got challenges ahead.

D.B.

You bet.

M.K.

We've got just a few more minutes here, would you like to sort of make another point or two and bring us to a close here.

D.B.

Well I guess if I were to close, as I said this is without question in my mind, the premier technical society in the world. I think that we need to be a little bit more proactive internationally, but if you really look about you, you'll see that the international community follows us and we're a very important issue there but what makes us great. The first thing of course, is people like yourself. We are a people organization, volunteer effort beyond the wildest stretch of anyone's imagination. There's one personal way to say it, the people that we have here that lead this society were all in one company, the people that powerful. So it's people. It's balance. It's the balance we said of the different interests of the society. It's communication. It's our ability to communicate through our publishing venture, through things like we're doing here today. And we've been working very hard at that. And then it's finally I

think the willingness of our members to share the technology that has developed within them. I used, when I was president, a little theme that they're a synergism that takes place. And I used the jelly bellies on the president's desk because at that time Reagan was president. And it's interesting, in this society, everyone goes by and they take the jelly beans out of the jar and they do something else though, because when you ask people they must be putting some back. But when you ask about it they say that they all have taken more away than they have given so the jar overflows. It's kind of interesting, everybody take away more than they've given and that doesn't work does it? But the synergism that takes place amongst people like ourselves as we work together and that's kind of the bottom line.

M.K.

I've tried to express that in my way, about the bumblebee that can't fly. I think that ought to be on our pens or something. I mean ASHRAE just shouldn't work. We've got this marvelous tradition of people doing things within the society, for which is no compensation, and very often no reason and it works, it happens. And committees do things and produce things. It's a marvelous tradition.

D.B.

It produces professional development and leadership and we try to get young folks involved. This fellow named Roger Haines who has written the book on controls and I had the pleasure of having him work with me for a couple years back not too long ago, and he said, you know, to a couple of my guys, you know I'm teaching these ASHRAE professional development seminars on controls. He said I don't get enough money to make it pay, but he says you know something he says I'm just putting back something that I was given. He said, I've taken so much more away than I can give, that I'd work for nothing. That's really where it's at.

M.K.

That's a good way to say it. Thank you Don, I really appreciate you taking time from your schedule for this meeting and I know you have a heavy schedule. You fellas, right after you were president, they let you go, no more work to do?

D.B.

Oh, no. you go to the nominating committee and then you go to long-range planning and then you're out. But I'm on the tech council now. Today I got an interesting one, I got an ad-hoc committee on certification. Question is do we certify, and if we do what do we do.

M.K.

Don, thank you very much for being here this afternoon.

D.B.

Listen Mike, thank you for having me.