

ASHRAE Leadership Recall (formerly Leadership Recalled)

Transcription

Video Interview of: Morris Backer

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Mike Kearney

Good afternoon, my name is Mike Kearney and it is my pleasure today to interview Mister Morris Backer president in the ASHRAE society in the years 1978 to '79. Morris welcome.

Morris Backer

Thank you. Thank you very much.

M.K.

Thank you for stopping by here this afternoon. I have thought we'd start with your start in ASHRAE. Can you tell us how you got involved in the work of the society?

M.B.

My boss for that involvement Harry Bovay encouraged us to participate in technical society work, as well as professional societies and with that in mind, his encouragements in allowing me to attend meetings and to participate on committee work got me excited about ASHRAE and the things that it is doing for mankind. That's pretty much it. It's kind of interesting Harry Bovay matched his actions with words, not only with words but by action. He was president to the National Society of Professional Engineers, one of my partners in the company was national president of ASME so he let us participate.

M.K.

That's a remarkable heritage isn't it? Bovay consulting engineers was a consulting engineering firm in Texas, with five or six offices?

M.B.

That's correct. We had offices at the time in Baton Rouge and Spokane and Albuquerque, Clute, Texas.

M.K.

Clute, Texas?

M.B.

Freeport. And our main office in Houston.

M.K.

Houston. Okay. Right, now in your years as president, '78, '79, we were involved with and energy crisis at that time as least we named it a crisis at that time. Can you tell us a little bit about the energy as it related to your...

M.B.

Actually we recognizes the need for conservation and proper use of the energy that we had even before our president of course, who is still a very hot subject and one we had a great commitment of effort from ASHRAE members. In particular we were involved in continuing development of 90-75, standard 90-75.

M.K.

And that's the standard on building energy use? Is that correct?

M.B.

Yes that's correct. And we were encouraging various code bodies to take a look at 90-75 and indeed many of them, in many cities and communities throughout the United States that it was in their best interest to adopt 90-75 as the guiding light for energy conservation.

M.K.

That was a little different for ASHRAE wasn't it, the writing of the standard with the idea in mind, that it would become part of a code, a building code?

M.B.

Well we didn't do that for that purpose. We did it for the necessary need and that it's there if you want to use it, in so many words.

M.K.

But it influenced the style of writing, it was a proscriptive document, it was a guide.

M.B.

That's correct.

M.K.

And if somebody adopted it as a code it wouldn't be a boilerplate.

M.B.

We were concerned, and tried to keep it from being tilted toward one industry or the other with great difficult completing chapter twelve as I recall. Which involved whether the systems were more efficient with electricity as the prime energy or gas as the prime energy source and how was the electricity generated, things of this sort.

M.K.

There were a lot of volatile issues that you are dealing with that standard.

M.B.

Correct. There were other things that were brought up in my ear, so to speak. There was ? brought up one that affected us all dearly. EBTR was the acronym and that's the, let's see what the..

M.K.

Emergency building temperature restrictions.

M.B.

Correct. That's what it was. This was the law, I guess, that said, in federal buildings in particular that temperatures shall be maintained at this level in the summer and at that level in the winter and it was pretty much a hot subject across the country.

M.K.

I remember those years because I remember the movie Patton, Patton in that movie said never tell the American fighting man how to do something just tell him what you need done and he'll get it done and when we put out those temperature restrictions we were telling the American people how to do it and it got kind of lively.

M.B.

We were not just talking to ourselves during this period of time. We spent a great deal of time talking to our leaders in Washington, and any place else necessary for our voice to be heard. And of course this was not for monetary gain, this was for the betterment of our country which is another reason why our ASHRAE is so outstanding.

M.K.

That's a common thread in characteristic through these conversations. There was an outfit called BEPS or a document called BEPS, building energy performance standard. Can you relate that?

M.B.

I believe that that standard if you will, was develop by the AIA in connection with the HUD or what government agency I forget. But with that in mind that was being pushed as the energy standard for the

USA. We had the uphill battle to get 90-75, an acceptable alternative to BEPS and this was accomplished. It worked to our general benefit.

M.K.

The 90-75 was a much more comprehensive document than the BEPS document was it not

M.B.

The performance was not that difficult to achieve using that doctrine. It worked very well. And saved a great deal of energy.

M.K.

While you were, I don't know how to say this, I always want to say you had one year as president, but it's not just one-year is it, it is a whole series of years that go into it.

M.B.

I'm still going at it.

M.K.

Still going at it. But in your time in the spotlight, let's say, there was another awareness that came up. We were at that time, the headquarters of the society was located in New York City.

M.B.

And ASHRAE was growing in membership. Our member services was increasing. There was just no room to put anybody in our offices in the United Engineering Center. There was no space available for us to increase our square footage, our office space in that location. So we, in recognizing that we needed to do something we started a study to determine if we should move from United Engineering Center and if so where. Should we stay in New York, should we go to Atlanta, should we go to Dallas, should we go wherever it would be best for the society. As you know, we are now located in Atlanta as a result of that work showed that we were able to move at less cost than we were paying and it all worked out very well. This was not done necessarily completely in my term of office. I'll give full credit to president at the time following me, Hugh McMillan. He acquired the building for ASHRAE, purchased the building, had it cleaned up everything. The difficult nature was handled by Hugh and his staff of people. I can't say Hugh.

M.K.

Well, you did the administratively correct thing, you got the idea going and gave it to Hugh to get it done right?

M.B.

Well it did work out exactly that way. There was as part of the executive committee McMillan would be aware and contributed to all the planning of ASHRAE during my term.

M.K.

Who worked on that committee with you with regard to the awareness that there might be a need to change the New York City site?

M.B.

I bet you Richard Perry and Bob McDonald and myself, we were in charge of the search committee as to identify which city that would best suit our needs. We started out with about 12 cities in mind and called down to about 4. They included even at that stage New York City and Washington DC and Dallas and Atlanta. After additional study and homework looking at airlines and looking at what time zone we were in to better serve our members and everything that we thought would be applicable we came to the decision that it would either have to be Atlanta or Dallas. Then we went to see those cities again and talked with chambers of commerce and others who were delighted to have the opportunity to talk to ASHRAE. Anyhow as you know it all ended like a good fairytale. We have our own business now.

M.K.

Well with you and Hugh McMillan both being from Texas how did we end up over in Georgia?

M.B.

Well we missed one.

M.K.

You missed one.

M.B.

Missed up on one.

M.K.

While you were in the presidency there was several developments that occurred while you were there, do you want to sort of highlight things that you're particularly proud of and fond of looking back on that happened while you were in that chair?

M.B.

Well we were looking at regional reorganization for one items. And that came about also from something good that was happening, we were growing and we were unable to service our members any more to the capacity that we had in the past. Our regional chairman had too many chapters to visit, monitor. We looked at that in a subcommittee format and found that what we needed to do was change from 10 to 12 regions, increase the size of board by adding 2 new directors at large and of course 2 more regional chairman and directors by virtue of the increased number of regions. Again in time has proved that this turned out to be a good decision. It's working very well.

M.K.

Is this where St. Louis and Kansas City that region split apart?

M.B.

Yes, exactly.

M.K.

I remember that that was a traumatic thing because the geography of that split left the chapter I was in, in Nashville was in a region that didn't have any chapter that was nearly as strong as the St. Louis, Kansas City, chapters. And so they've grown up and evolved and changed.

M.B.

We have another security area which was the West Coast, including Hawaii. We were concerned, very much concerned that this would not be accepted. But it was recognized as being necessary and my own region, region 8 considered eliminating one of the chapters and moving it to another region, specifically, Little Rock, Arkansas. They said we're in the southwest conference so we got to stay in Texas. Region 8 does have a couple or at least has a chapter in Shreveport also. So we were Shreveport in Louisiana anyhow.

M.K.

Those gerrymandering borderlines is always an exciting topic. You also added three new chapters, did you not?

M.B.

We did. One in Florida, one in South Dakota, and one in Huntsville, Alabama.

M.K.

Huntsville, Alabama.

M.B.

They're all still functioning very well. But that was fun. We at that time had some 132 chapters and I think it's close to 160 now. International chapters in Hong Kong and elsewhere in the world, ASHRAE is a different society then it was just twelve years ago since I was president. It's much improved.

M.K.

And it must be very satisfying thing for you to look back on your role in that, and see that that was a contributing and stepping stone role with the expansion.

M.B.

We did this jointly within our membership, there wasn't one person to do these things. We worked together received input, ideas. It's a very unique society. It's just something special.

M.K.

Talk a little about some of the people that you have been particularly enchanted with and influenced by with your role in ASHRAE

M.B.

That could take our whole time.

M.K.

That would be fine. People is our business.

M.B.

I think one highlight of ASHRAE's growth and success in contributions made by the federal individuals, one in particular Frank Bridgers. I don't recall what year he was the president but he came up with the thought, the idea to have a presidential award of excellence. PAOE now called. This was a score board of activities so many points or credits for increase in membership and increase in research promotion, things of and that sort that idea has been adopted by every succeeding president since Frank was in office. It's not a code requirement, it's not a bi-law requirement at this rate to have a PAOE. Presidential award of excellence. It's something that's available as a tool which has been supplemented and added to with every succeeding president since Frank. There's been some outstanding leaders in the way of Bruno Morabito who's an outstanding engineer and great manager, who brought management by objective considerations into ASHRAE which again was significant improvement. I've mentioned Hugh McMillan earlier, an outstanding engineer and leader. Any numbers of them. Walt Beagle, Bob McDonald, Barney Burroughs. It's a role call.

M.K.

Yes it is.

M.B.

Hall of Fame people.

M.K.

Can you think back to an anecdote or an incident that you enjoyed and enjoy telling about when you guys get together?

M.B.

I do recall serving on the executive committee before I was president, when Bill Chapman was president in those days. And our executive committee included Bruno Morabito and Hugh McMillan, and myself and one other I forget who. But we would work as long as the work was there. I remember many evenings we stayed to 3, 4 o'clock in the morning and Chapman gained a real reputation for a real slave driver. The pay wasn't all that good.

M.K.

What is the pay on the Board of Directors those executive committees. What is the pay scale there?

M.B.

Well we contribute about \$50,000 each of that year at the time.

M.K.

For the honor of staying up until 3 or 4 in the morning.

M.B.

That's right – I didn't have a deck of cards.

M.K.

How important is golfing to go to being on these boards?

M.B.

Well there seemed to be a lot of golfers on the board but I don't know that they win any tournaments or anything.

M.K.

It's not a prerequisite is what you're saying?

M.B.

No it's not because there is so many golfers there. Couldn't begin to tell you.

M.K.

Well that's good. As we look back, Morris, your presidency in the late seventies. From that time you've seen the society change and be interested in you focusing or highlighting on changes in the society that you think are significant and would like to highlight.

M.B.

There are probably three items that come to mind. There was out work in international scene, probably the largest single change that I would recognize in ASHRAE. We can talk about that some more or the other couple items are phenomenal growth as a society and phenomenal growth in research promotion and activities. And the things that make ASHRAE really what it is today. I work in the international arena that has been magnified almost 100 fold since I was president. While we recognize the need to be a part of the world community and not just the United States and Canada, we never really took any positive stance other than making them feel at home, international visitors at our meeting, where we would offer language interpretation. Not interpretation, what am I trying to say?

M.K.

Well, and help them to adjust to a city where they didn't speak the language necessary.

M.B.

Correct. And where they could get a cup of coffee and get some help if they got in trouble or to have a wine party for them, and we done that a few times as you well. We're chartering chapters overseas now. Not just in Canada and the United States. But we've got in Australia and I think in Bangkok, Hong Kong, and there's no telling where we're going from this point.

M.K.

You mention the growth of the society itself, the number of people and the services that we are providing.

M.B.

Well I heard today that there is 52,000 members of ASHRAE. I think that this was a part of Daman's talk. I recall that when I went into office as president there were 32,000 ASHRAE members. It's almost doubled in its 10 or 12 years. There's got to be some good reasons for that and the reason prominent is that we are going a lot of good for a lot of people and for each of us individually. There's more return in being an ASHRAE member than any other single group that I can think of.

M.K.

Particularly if you participate, and participate at the level you've participated-

M.B.

At any level actually.

M.K.

In any level actually that's right. I mean level or hierarchy, just involvement of time.

M.B.

It's not that these people who have pushed their way up, they've been pulled by people who can recognize what they can do for this society. You know we're just there a year as president. You know you can hardly do much more than develop what's needed and then work on what was needed before your time and make things happen. So it's kind of hard to say that this belonged to that president this belonged to another. It belonged to all of us.

M.K.

Nicely said. You mentioned growth in R&D. I think that's a fascinating aspect of ASHRAE's contribution to the society.

M.B.

Research and promotion.

M.K.

Research and promotion, I'm sorry.

M.B.

Yes we see the figure Damon said throughout the day. I believe it was 1 and a half million dollars in research. Exceeded our goal of contributions by 6 percent. See I wasn't sleeping, I listened.

M.K.

I think just to me the nature of those contributions is remarkable. Anybody who's raised money of that order knows you get 4 or 5 big contributors that can contribute 80 percent. ASHRAE is absolutely different in that.

M.B.

We're having a good time at it and people are recognizing the need and the good that's being done. And that's what it's all about.

M.K.

And it's all coming from the membership and the grassroots, 50, 100, 250 dollars apiece. That's the bulk-

M.B.

A great majority comes from that. The Austin, Texas chapter was honored by its research promotion chairman, achieving the William Bouillon...

M.K.

Bouillon Award?

M.B.

Not the Lincoln Bouillon. Bill Collins Award for research promotion. And Bill is really the one that started this thing off, he lit the rocket and everybody grabbed on to it and it's since gone out of sight and really done well. To things that happened from research projects is that we develop technical papers, these are disseminated at our society meetings and into our permanent literature, into our hand books used worldwide.

M.K.

And there's talk now of putting these papers that are presented at meetings like this on CD or discs such that you have computer access from a large library of this information.

M.B.

We are also translating our hand books into other languages. Specifically, Spanish, I think. Others are in progress but not completed.

M.K.

Well it's an exciting heritage isn't it?

M.B.

Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

M.K.

I think that we've reached the time that we should wrap this up and close. Would you like to give us something in closing, some observation or memory that you particularly like to have other people know about.

M.B.

Well from a personal gain standpoint maybe I will say that there is some personal gratification and knowing people worldwide. I can go in any city I believe without exception, and look in the phone book and call somebody that I know from ASHRAE. And it's not just somebody I know, it's a friend, it's a true friend. I recall in my consulting work in the South, I had a project that I needed to put a snow melting system in drive way and in the sidewalks around the building. Well I never designed a snow melting

system in Houston, Texas, but I can read the literature and found that low and behold Bill Chapman was the head guru who wrote all the papers during the years on how you put a snow melting system in. I called him by phone, spent an hour on the phone, he thoroughly explained to me how to do everything, told me where to get more data, sent me a pile of papers that he had written. You know this was, it cost me a lunch. So I don't know if that's an anecdote but it's a blessing to have these kinds of people as friends. And I mean they're big people, big in heart and soul and I'm glad to have friends like that.

M.K.

I can't think of a more appropriate ending for our conversation. It's a good place to make friends and to have them. Thank you Morris for being here and thank you for serving the society your fellow man through ASHRAE.

M.B.

Thank you.

End of Interview.