

ASHRAE Leadership Recall (formerly Leadership Recalled)  
Transcription

Interview of: James W May

Date of Interview: December 2, 1995

Interviewed by: Larry Fisher, Bob Logston, Ray Thornton

Larry Fisher

Greetings to the ladies and gentleman of ASHRAE. My name is Larry Fisher. I'm a member of the Louisville chapter in Kentucky which is part of region seven. I've been a member of ASHRAE since 1983. Today is December 2, 1995. I tell you that for a reason, I've been a member of ASHRAE now for 12 years. I'm also member of society historical committee and the region seven historian. As we all know, ASHRAEs celebrate its hundredth year as an engineering society in 1994 and '95. As part of the continuing celebration of ASHRAE history, there's been a program called leadership recall videos which is primarily consisting of past society presidents. Past society president James W May is our guest today. Jim was born in 1907. That makes him 88 years old. When I called to set up this video Jim was out on the golf course. As I said it's December. Jim's been a member of ASHRAE since 1935, that makes 60 years. Our interviewers today are going to be Bob Logston, who was born in 1915. He's now 80 years young. He also was on the golf course the day that I called. Bob's been a member of ASHRAE since 1954, 41 years. Also with us is Ray Thornton. Ray's the baby of the group. He was born in 1923. That makes him 72 years old. He's been a member of ASHRAE since 1956 or 39 years. Now totally, we have 241 years of life. And a 140 year of ASHRAE volunteerism. Briefly, Jim graduated from the University of Kentucky in 1929. He received his master's in 1930. He was the charter chapter president for Louisville in 1954. Jim served as our society president from 1965-66. Now I'd like to turn it over to Bob and Ray who will now interview Jim May.

Bob Logston

But it is not the Bob and Ray show. Larry that was a fine introduction for our good friend Jim. Jim, we saw each other Monday for lunch but we haven't worked together for quite a number of years, both of us having retired. Tell us about, Larry told us when you were born but you were born in Montana. Tell us about Montana and how you came to Kentucky and the University of Kentucky.

James May

True, I was born in Montana and lived there until I was seven years old in which time my mother died so I came back to Kentucky to live with an aunt. My father and mother were both Kentuckians. And I went to school, grade school and high school in Kentucky and then chose to attend the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Choice which I never regretted.

B.L.

You went to U of K. (to Ray)

Ray Thornton

I understand that when you enrolled at the University of Kentucky, it was not in engineering. How did you get into engineering?

J.M.

Well that's true, you're right. I entered the arts and science college and majored in art. But I also took engineering drawing on the side and so forth and a couple of professors in that department, who were in the college of engineering, named professor Oran and professor Nowlow, they influenced me and told me that they thought I belonged in engineering. So the next semester I enrolled in the engineering college. I lost most of my art credits but I had some of my credits transferred into the engineering college.

R.T.

So probably took you a little more than four years then to get through.

J.M.

It did. Actually yes. I went four years and a half at the university and I also was actually a fifth year graduate because I laid out a semester and worked for Anaconda Copper out in Anaconda, Montana as a draftsman. So I spent five years in Lexington in my undergraduate work.

R.T.

Now Jim, back in the time that you were enrolled at the University of Kentucky, I don't believe that they had the discipline of HVAC. Was it strictly mechanical engineering or how did you get involved in HVAC?

J.M.

Well that's kind of a long story. I was in the university in 1927 as a student and Dean F Paul Anderson, who was dean at that time, was president of ASHRAE, actually ASHVE in those days. And the dean was very active and very interested in the heating and ventilation in business. And as a matter of fact he served as national president of ASHRAE for one year. And then he also took a leave of absence from university and served as its director of research when the research facilities were at Bureau of Mines at Pittsburg. I actually don't believe that any one incident propelled me towards heating and ventilating. It was more a question of osmosis over a period of time. But I did my thesis on rating, testing and rating of unit heaters while at the university and the society for some instrumentation for that work. But I heard a lot about ASHVE in those days. And I joined as a junior member in 1935.

B.L.

Well Jim, that's your ASHRAE interest but what did you do, what did you work at after you graduated? I believed you graduated in 1929.

J.M.

Yes.

B.L.

And you told me earlier that Dean Anderson picked a job for the students.

J.M.

Pretty much true. We didn't have the people visiting the campus in those days as much as it is today. However we did have some visit the campus. But the dean pretty much picked out the man for the job. He had a job lined up for me with a greenhouse manufacturing company of which I was to design heating equipment. But I wasn't too much enamored by those prospects. And besides I had a girl in college. And she was still in college. And I didn't want to lose her so I wanted to stay close to Lexington.

So when the opportunity came to join the staff of the engineering college, I did so and I was hired by Dean Anderson.

B.L.

Well I remember, I first knew you in 1944 thereabouts. You're were at university, you were at American Air Filter Company.

J.M.

That's right I came down...

B.L.

But you had done some work for Air Filter over at the university.

J.M.

Well that's right. While I was at the university I tried to spend my summers in the field, we used to refer to it in those days. I worked one summer from Minneapolis, Honeywell, one summer for Johnson Service in Indianapolis, and two or three summers for American Air Filter as summer jobs. And they were all pretty good to me. They furnished a laboratory for me on the campus at UK and furnished all the equipment and the necessary supplies such as balances and so forth. And we tested a number of air filters for American Air Filter while I was at university. And then in 1943 they asked me to come down and work in the laboratory as a director of research. So I got a leave of absence from the university for one year and came to Louisville. And when that year was up they asked me to stay another year. And so I got my leave of absence at the university extended for one more year. And I was told then that that was the end of the line as far as the university 's concerned. So when that year was up and American Air Filter wanted me to stay that's when I had to sever my connections with the university. I worked for AF for the next 28 years.

R.T.

Now Jim you were instrumental in starting the chapter, ASHRAE chapter here in Louisville. You probably are the father of the chapter here so how did you get involved there?

J.M.

Well I had a lot to help. Kentucky didn't have an ASHRAE chapter, as a matter of fact they didn't have many ASHRAE members. But the American Air Filter Company, we were supplier of equipment to the heating and air conditioning industry. And so I just through a personal contact and so forth, we had a good many people that were interested in the society. And our first meeting we had I guess you'd call it the organization meeting, we had oh 40 people present and so forth. But when we were given our charter in 1954, we had between 90 and 100 people present at the charter meeting. As a matter of fact we had some visitors from Cincinnati who came down to help us with a presentation. And our charter was given to us by then president Nat Hunter who was president of US Radiator Company up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and a man by the name of Hutchinson who was then secretary of ASHAE. I might add that originally in 1894 when the ASHRAE organization was founded, they were known as the American Society of Heating and Ventilating Engineers. But after that with the advent of air conditioning, they dropped the term ventilation and added air conditioning to the name so they became the American Society of Heating and Air conditioning Engineers. And then in, I believe, 1957, our society joined with the American Society Refrigeration Engineers and that's when we became the American Society of Heating and Refrigeration, Air conditioning Engineers otherwise known as ASHRAE. It's rather interesting I think that after the ASHRAE was formed for the first few years the presidents only

served a six months term because there were many people in the pipeline for ASHVE and American Society Refrigeration Engineers and they felt like it was only fair to give them a chance to become president. So I believe the first five or six presidents only served a six months term. My term was '65-'66 and by that time we gotten back on the annual schedule.

B.L.

Jim, in the early days before we formed the chapter in Louisville in '54, you were active in ASHRAE, you served on technical committees and other activities within ASHRAE.

J.M.

Well, I did. My first assignment as a member was on the Guide committee in 1940. I hadn't been a member but about, a full member but about two or three years. And I was given the assignment of correcting the chapter on terminology and I was glad to accept. But it turned out to be a little more work than I anticipated. So many of the definitions and so forth of course could be carried over from prior Guides but in working at the conversion equations for a horse power and calories and BTUs and so forth, those constants had to be checked. And I was fortunate that the University of Kentucky at that time had the volumes of the international critical tables in the library. So I depended on them to a great extent to arrive at the fundamental definition of those terms. Of course that was long before we had a chapter in the state of Kentucky. And then I served on the, I don't know if you know it or not but the society didn't have a journal, didn't have a magazine, I should say in those days. We had what was called a journal and the journal was a supplement to a magazine called Heating, Piping and Air Conditioning. And it was carried every month as a supplement in that magazine. And one of my first jobs on the national level was a chairman of the Program Committee and we had to read every single article that went into the journal. That took a little doing but everybody, but that's a great thing about the society, everybody has been so willing to help and you can't help but acknowledge what a wonderful thing that is.

B.L.

That's volunteerism for sure.

J.M.

It is.

B.L.

But you should have learned in volunteering for those jobs you always find them more burdensome then you thought they were going to be. But it just wetted your interest to go ahead. When were you Regional Director?

J.M.

I don't believe I volunteered but you were chosen by the incoming president or asked by the incoming president to serve and you accepted to that extent. Well I was Regional Director, in those days in ASHAE days, we had what was called the Council. We didn't have a board of directors. It was ASHAE Council. I was a member of the council and I was a Regional Director of, I believe it was region five at that time. When the society was reorganized later with the addition of ASRE and so forth, we became region seven. But I had three years I believe as a Regional Director and then three more years as a Director at Large before I began as a national officer. Service as treasurer and vice president and so forth later on.

R.T.

Jim, what were one or two of the most difficult tasks that you had while you were president of society?

J.M.

Well let's see. In the first place I'd only been president about an hour when our Director of Research died of a heart attack. So that was a job that we need to fill immediately. And we employed a man from Westinghouse by the name of Buchanan. Roy Buchanan. And he took over as our Director of Research. And the other incident that I recall is a fact that in those days when we had the exposition we had it every other year but we depended to a great extent on the income from the exposition for research purposes. And doggone the IRS decided that we owed income taxes on that income. Well we protested of course to no avail and we paid up. But fortunately our protests must have had some effect because next year we got that money back with interest. I jokingly remarked to some of our board members that it wasn't a way that I would recommend to invest your money but at least we got it back with interest anyhow.

R.T.

Well if you look at the society today, we're 50 thousand plus strong. How does that relate to the society membership while you were president?

J.M.

Well while I was president I guess we had something like 60 chapters around the country and we had a membership around 19 thousand members. I believe I participated in the installation of three new chapters during that year. The one that I remember in particular was the chapter at Saskatoon, Saskatchewan which I had to practice saying in order to be sure that I didn't get it mixed up. But it's an interesting thing about the way the society has grown and how our publications have grown. I told you that my first assignment on the Guide and Data book was in the year 1940 and that year our Guide had something like 700 or 750 pages of information on performance and so forth. But it also contained the roster of the society. We were that small. And also the section on the manufacture's equipment. And that advertising of course went a long ways toward differing the cost of the Guide. But my, things have grown so much now, you know, we have three or four volumes devoted and we called it the Guide and Data Book because after joining with ASRE. They published what they called their Data Book so we combined the two into the Guide and Data Book as you know today.

B.L.

Jim, I was thinking about these jobs on ASHRAE didn't really pay you very much money, you know, like zero. So tell us about some of the jobs you did for the air filter company. Some of the challenges you had and the application of air filters during your professional life.

J.M.

Well I enjoyed the work with American Air Filter very, very much. And you're right. We had lots of different applications and some of which had never been done before. We made a lot of installations in the textile industry protecting the filaments and so forth that were used to form the fabrics. And we had a good business in the pressroom work, the publishing work and so forth. But one of our largest installations I guess in the electronic area was in the Houston Astrodome which had our filters in it. But we had a lot of interesting applications. You probably don't remember but we had our air filters on the submarines because the carbon dust generated was such that it should be removed. And so we developed filters for submarine application. And then in the African campaign in World War II we produced thousands upon thousands of air filters for the protection of airplane engines. And that was a

great thing about working for that company was that every day there were something new to do, to solve the best you could. I enjoyed it immensely.

R.T.

Jim, one of the things that comes to my mind is the technology changes throughout the years, but also the tools of the trade. For instance you take the slide rule which was pretty popular back in those days which has now become extinct like the buggy whip. And then came the calculators and computers and modern day computer. Any comments about the increase in productivity by use of these various tools?

J.M.

Well I don't think I'm a very good person to ask about that. But the first reason is I am sympathetic towards the slide rule. You wouldn't believe it but when I used adding machines and some of the small calculators, I still mentally point off my answer as if I was using a slide rule. Slide rules were very fast but they were not too accurate. But of course this is the computer age. It's getting so now that in college you don't seem to teach anything relevant to what used to be known as mechanical engineering. I don't know whether any courses taught these days on boiler operation and design and certain phases of air conditioning equipment. You're supposed to learn that after you get out. After you take your job. Then you go through the learning period. But this is certainly the age of technology. No question about it. And I believe it's going to continue that way and it seems like in the engineering colleges today, most of the emphasis is being placed on that type of equipment.

R.T.

You know back in the days when I was in school you would do a complex heat transfer problem with a slide rule and it may take you two or three days to arrive at an answer. And today it's a matter of punching a few keys on the board and you zip out the answer. And you have to consider the increase in productivity. How much more the young engineer can accomplish in a day's time than what we could.

J.M.

Computers have made a vast difference in that respect.

B.L.

Jim, you've told us many stories to some of us at lunch over the years about various and sundry people that you knew in the air conditioning business. As a matter of fact you told one earlier about Dean Anderson. Tell us a little bit about people that you knew and have worked with over the years.

J.M.

I think that's a great thing about the society affiliation are the folks you meet and the friends you make and the talent that you see exhibited every day. The number of people that work for society voluntarily, technical committees and things of that sort, really don't get the credit they deserve. It was my good fortune to know some of the people in the early days of society. I met Dr. Carrier. I had a couple of conversations with him. And Thornton Lewis. I thought it was rather interesting that when Dean Anderson was dean and was the president of ASHRAE in 1927 that two of his officers were professors named Harding and Willard. And it just so happened that they were the authors of the textbooks that I studied in college on the air conditioning. And I believe the story that you're referring to is University of Kentucky used to be pretty strong in the heating and ventilating game and we sent many, many people to join those companies in that field. One of them is Irvine Lyle, who was past president of ASHRAE and who was also president of Carrier at one time. And the stories told on Dean Anderson, I can't vouch for the truthfulness of it but Irvine Lyle was a great big, robust guy of six feet two or three. He played tackle

on the football team at UK at that time in his day. So he telephoned Dean Anderson said I need a man in the engineering department, you got somebody available. Well the dean had a young fellow by the name of Logan Lewis who had just graduated and was helping out the drafting room. And Logan Lewis was a small in stature, built more or less like a jockey. So the dean picked Logan Lewis for the job. Mr. Lyle met him at the railroad station and he called up the dean later. And he said: "I asked for a man and you sent me a boy". And the dean wired him back and said: "If I had known that you wanted a person that was mostly lard and short on brain I'd have picked somebody your size"! I can't verify that story but that's...

B.L.

Jim, I think we're going to have to wind this up pretty quick.

J.M.

I might add Bob that subsequently Logan Lewis became chief engineer at Carrier. And Irvine Lyle and Lonely Logan Lewis both were presidents of the society at one time or another and the award, the F Paul Anderson award that's given annually for the most part, was established by a graduate from the University of Kentucky to honor Dean Anderson. And who I believe at that time was employed by Buffalo Forge.

B.L.

Well in winding it up, I might say that you've had a very interesting career. And you knew a lot of good people. Lot of our pioneers. What would, I'm going to ask you what do you think young people should do today? Should they hunt for an engineering course? Should they become engineers? Is it a good field for them? How do you feel about that?

J.M.

Well, I think engineering is an ever expanding field and offers tremendous opportunities. That's my opinion. However, I think a young chap in making a decision should decide what course of action that he likes the best. If you don't like the job you're doing, I don't think you'll ever get to be very far. So if a person is talented along those lines, I would certainly recommend engineering to them.