

ASHRAE Leadership Recall (formerly Leadership Recalled)

Transcription

Interview of: Paul Christensen

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Interviewed by: Ole Fanger

Ole Fanger

Welcome to the Technical University of Denmark. My name is Ole Fanger. On behalf of ASHRAE I have the privilege to welcome our special guest which is Paul B. Christensen who was president of the American Society of Refrigerating Engineers back in 1951. We appreciate very much that he has come all the way in here to Copenhagen so that we can tape this interview where he will inform us about all his experience and memories from his time, his long career as a professional engineer and his long activities inside the American Society Refrigerating Engineers which was one of the predecessor societies to ASHRAE. He is now retired and is living in another part of Denmark and Copenhagen and he is 88 years and he is taking the time to come here by train, three hour train ride for this interview and we are very grateful to you that you took this long trip and the opportunity to come in here and share your experiences. Your name is Paul Christensen, that sounds very Danish and maybe can tell a bit about your background.

Paul Christensen

Alright. My father was named Johan Christian Valdemar Christensen. And he graduated from what was then called the Polytechnic Læreanstalt in Copenhagen, which is now I don't remember.

O.F.

That is the technical University of Denmark. That is where we are now.

P.C.

The technical University of Denmark the same. He graduated here in 1900 or 1901 I'm not sure which. As he came to the United States immediately after coming out of school and had a job there for a while and then he came back to Denmark for a while and he worked for the railroads in New York. But when he came back here he and one of his classmates decided they would start a business which was a blueprint business. After a while he decided he wanted to be an engineer and not just a blueprint maker. So he decided to give that up and go back to the United States. In the meantime he had met my mother here, is also Danish and they were married in 1909 and went immediately back to United States and I was born in 1910. My father was a civil engineer and he worked for railroads, did a lot of bridgework, a lot of railroad work.

O.F.

That was during the expansion of the railways in North America.

P.C.

Expansion of the railroads in America. And he told me at that time that all the graduating students with him talk a lot about building a bridge over Storebaelt.

O.F.

Okay, that was the dream.

P.C.

That was their dream. He never lived to see it come to a permission but now next Sunday they're going to open up the bridge now. It's a shame he couldn't see it.

O.F.

Well to everybody I should say that this Storebaelt bridge has been a dream for a long time for more than 100 years. And it's the second largest suspension bridge in the world to be inaugurated next week. And next week means 14 June 1998. So what happened afterwards with your father is an engineer?

P.C.

Well my father had several jobs with different railroads and building bridges and laying out railroad tracks and that kind of thing. In the last job he had was in Cincinnati Ohio where they were going to build a new railroad passenger station. There were five railroads that came into Cincinnati and they all had their own stations. So the job, they formed the five railroads put their money together and form the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company. One they designed a beautiful building there - they had an architect, they had an architect who did the architectural work but he was involved in all of the bridges and the railroad track layouts and that stuff. And I went to school during that time, I went to school at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken New Jersey. I graduated in 1931. Father came to see me graduate on a Saturday and we went down to the Jersey coast to have a little vacation and unfortunately Monday morning he died.

O.F.

That is very sad.

P.C.

Only 51 years old. But fortunately for me it was the tail end of the depression in the United States in there weren't many jobs available for engineers but they were just beginning to form the mechanical Department at the terminal company and he had gotten me a job in the mechanical department in the Cincinnati Union Terminal. So I worked there for three years until the whole thing was finished in my last job was to make the as built drawings in the powerhouse that they had.

O.F.

So what happened after you left the railway industry?

P.C.

well after I left the railroad company will I had several other jobs, and one along with a consulting engineer and one of the things that he did because prohibition was just finished and you can now buy alcohol in the United States legally, he designed a distillery for his friend and he had had several other kinds of jobs. One other jobs I know he made drawings for a heating system for the nuns in a monastery across the river from Cincinnati.

O.F.

Okay so that was your first jobs. The first legal, one of the first legal distilleries and heating for the monastery for the nuns.

P.C.

Yeah, that's right.

O.F.

Okay that was your start to the HVAC industry.

P.C.

So then suddenly I got a call from a man who was the chief engineer of the Kroger grocery and baking company in Cincinnati. And that was the headquarters of a large chain of supermarkets. They had supermarkets, well they were not real supermarkets but markets all over the middle part of United States. It was the third largest chain in the United States at that time. And he asked me if I could come and work for them because he said if I was as smart as my father was I might be pretty good for him. So I took the job, I know very little about refrigeration but I had to begin to learn something about it. It was arranging to have different kind of buying the right size equipment for the contractors who are going to install refrigeration and the various markets around town. And that developed then later but we also build extra large rooms where we, I remember one was a - they call a banana ripening room. We had to put a whole carload of bananas in a room and warm him up for a while and then cool it down. There was refrigeration involved with that. But one of the first trips that I had about the store refrigeration was before I knew very much about it I had a little book from one of the vendors, it told me a lot about various kinds of equipment you had and when I got down to the branch there they took me out to show me what the problems were in fortunately what I had read was enough to allow me to tell them what to do to correct it. So I was very lucky. And I kept on working for them for quite a few years and it was while I was working for them that I joined, became a member of ASRE. We didn't have a chapter in Cincinnati but there were several other men in Cincinnati who are also members of ASRE.

O.F.

That we are in the mid-1930s?

P.C.

1935 this was. And in 1937 David Fiske was the executive secretary at that time of ASRE, came to Cincinnati and we decide to have a chapter of ASRE there in Cincinnati. So we formed a chapter in Cincinnati in 1937. And I kept working for the Kroger Company all that time until in 1940 suddenly there was an outfit called Cold Storage Warehouse Company in New York City that needed a new engineer because the old engineer was going to resign. He was going to be pensioned off and his assistant was not given the job as president of the company so he quit. So there was room for me and David Fiske fortunately remembered me and told the new president of the warehouse company that maybe I could fill the bill. So I went from Cincinnati to New York to interview him fortunately I got the job. I was lucky again, I got the job. We had cold storage warehouse is in New York and Jersey City, in Newark New Jersey.

O.F.

That was during the big depression?

P.C.

Yeah, during the depression. We bought warehouses in Buffalo and we bought some warehouses in California. And later on I began to design a new warehouse for us in Minnesota. And then when I did get to New York I joined the New York chapter of ASRE and went to all their meetings and kept on going to their meetings and got very interested in ASRE. And lo and behold after a while I became treasurer of the ASRE.

National treasurer.

P.C.

National treasurer of ASRE. And it was just because of my affiliation with ASRE that have gotten the job in the warehouse company. So I owe a lot too ASRE and David Fiske for that job. Then in 1951 finally became national president of ASRE.

O.F.

Then you had served as treasurer.

P.C.

I had served as treasurer for three years before that.

O.F.

And you had also served as vice president? Or how was that normal rule at that time?

P.C.

I think I was vice president for a short period of time. For a year. And then that year IRI, the International Refrigeration Institute had a big meeting in London and because I was president of ASRE was asked to be honorary vice president of the meeting in London. So I went to London but first of all I decided that I would take some vacation time also so I-

O.F.

Well let's hear a little bit about the meeting. How was your impression about let's say the international scene?

P.C.

It was very good. I didn't get involved in many of the technical parts of it because I was sort of an honorary vice president there.

O.F.

But that was a good collaboration at a political level?

P.C.

Yeah it was very good. So let's see then.

O.F.

So you had a vacation.

P.C.

Yeah I had a vacation. But I decided to take a long vacation so I took my wife and daughter. We took a trip to Sweden and then to Denmark to see some of my relatives. And then my first wife's father came from Switzerland so we went down to Switzerland and from Switzerland we went to Paris and we saw all the sites in Paris and then we wound up at the IRI meeting in London.

O.F.

Okay. So that was a long trip.

P.C.

That was a nice long trip. I think I was going for six weeks. And then when I came back to the United States again after that trip a month later the boss called me in and said he didn't need me anymore. I guess the trouble was I took too much for granted. My head became larger than my hat. I got a swelled head as they called it. So I was fired. So I had to look around for another job and I couldn't find.

O.F.

It wasn't that difficult at that time.

P.C.

No it wasn't so difficult at that time. So fortunately there was a cold storage warehouse company in Boston and they were going to build a new cold storage warehouse in Portland Maine and there is where I got the job as a manager of the warehouse in Portland Maine. And I was up there while they were building it and helped supervise some of the building of it.

O.F.

Well that was quite a difference to move up north in New England compared to New York and Boston.

P.C.

Yeah it was quite a bit different. And Portland Maine was not, well it's a big city compared to the city that I live in now. It had 165,000 people in it. The reason they building warehouse in Portland Maine was because there were many things produced in Maine that were frozen and on their way to the market. A warehouse in Portland with a good distribution point so we got a lot of stuff from fish, chickens, peas, blueberries. In fact we even had a big belt conveyor that I was instrumental in installing in buying to freeze blueberries on the bands. Blueberries would bubble in the air blowing up on them in five minutes through the tunnel they were hard as a stone. And then we packed them in 30 pound cans at that time. And they went out to the Baker's and that sort of stuff. So that was what I did and I worked there for the rest of my working days until I retired in 1975.

O.F.

Okay so you had a really long time in New England.

P.C.

A really long time but in all of that time after I was president, I was still on the executive board of ASRE. And the ASRE people, the ASHVE I guess we call it, the American Society of Heating and Ventilating engineers decided maybe we should talk about making one. Because air-conditioning was becoming such a big business in the refrigeration business. And after many discussions we decided it was a good idea and apparently the other people decided it was a good idea too. So I think it was what, 1959 they merged and we had ASHRAE.

O.F.

Wasn't there some resistance before?

P.C.

No, not much resistance. There had been a little resistance but not too much. But one of the interesting part about my job in New York, I forgot to say this before was two of the men who had been presidents of ASRE before I had worked in the same company that I worked in so I was the third man in that one company, the cold storage business company that became president of ASRE.

O.F.

How were the national meetings at that time?

P.C.

The national meetings were very active, they had many good papers all the time in many good discussions. They would have a paper read and two or three experts comment on it as I guess they do now too. The meetings lasted for two or three days and we had social affairs also, big banquets and that sort of stuff too so that was what happened.

Today of course they have these discussions also but when I see Transactions from that time I'm impressed by the very extended discussions that would go on and often the information in the discussion is equally or more important than the paper in itself. Probably at that time there were fewer papers and more deep discussions. Is that your impression?

P.C.

Yeah I think so.

O.F.

It was a little more concentrated wasn't it on specifics? I think now you have ASHRAE meetings, you have 300 papers presented in a short time and not so deeply reported discussions.

P.C.

And now, what you call them, the symposiums but you also have ASHRAE has now, I can't remember what you call them.

O.F.

A special meeting. Seminars?

P.C.

Well they have seminars. But also they have codes or something like that.

O.F.

Sure. They have the standards.

P.C.

Standards and codes for this and codes for that and they use many cities use ASHRAE codes as their city code for what is involved, what the ASHRAE people are involved in.

O.F.

How about in your time in the 50s?

P.C.

We did some of that, we had some of that too. And we also had a Data Book and I did some work on the Data Book. The handbook we had to read by some of the chapters and bring them up a little bit up to date also. That worked out all right.

O.F.

How about some of the famous characters? Did you meet any of them like Willy Carrier?

P.C.

Oh, yeah. I met Will Carrier at a meeting in Cincinnati. I think that was one of the meetings where they began to talk seriously about merging the two societies and he was there. I remember a funny incident, as I told you a man from the York Ice Machine Company he was an air-conditioning man really. And he came to the meetings too. His name was Anchor Winther So it's a good Danish name. His father was Danish too. He went up to Willis Carrier and said are you a member here? And Willis Carrier was a big member in that organization at that time. But he was just like kind of a guy that would ask that kind of a question.

O.F.

Well I understand that the meetings took place a little bit like they do today, over several days.

P.C.

from what I can see I get, not the Transactions but I get the Journal and I get the program, what's going to take place. And the program is the same kind of a program but more of it today than it was at that time because it's a much larger society.

O.F.

How large was the society at that time?

P.C.

I don't remember exactly how much we had several thousand members already. We had some members that were in Europe also too.

O.F.

So what happened after your retirement in Maine from the company in Maine? And when was that?

P.C.

Well after I retired I took light easy for quite a while. And got a chance to play more golf than I had before.

O.F.

How come that you came back to Denmark again?

P.C.

That's a good story too. I came back to Denmark, my sister was an avid tourist. And she came over to Denmark many, many more times and I did. She and her husband convinced me in 1987 after my first wife had died that I should come over with them. And we took the ? Up from Bergen.

O.F.

The route along the Norwegian western coast.

P.C.

Eleven days. It was a wonderful trip. We had a wonderful time. And then we came to Copenhagen and met all the relatives. We had to meet all the relatives I had here and had a big dinner for them. And so the next year I decided I was going to come back over to Denmark and meet the relatives again. And I had seen my, this lady I had met when I was a boy, 12 years old on a vacation over here with my mother at that time. And so happened that her mother and my mother were cousins. And she was a very lovely lady and she was single and the funny part is her first husband's name was Paul Christensen too. But I convinced her in 1988 that she should come over to the United States. She had never seen the United States. So she came to United States and we took an automobile all the way out to the West Coast and back again for Portland Maine. Only 14,000 km.

O.F.

The classic coast-to-coast trip.

P.C.

Coast-to-coast trip, yeah. Back again. So after nine months we decided maybe we should get married too. We went down to the City Hall and she changed her name from Mrs. Paul Christensen to Mrs. Paul Christensen.

O.F.

Okay so you became Paul Christensen the second. And that was in the mid-80s?

P.C.

It was an '88, yeah.

O.F.

'88.

P.C.

We lived three months over there and then three months here, no six months here and six months there then six months here in six months there. And then we decide that was too much as going back and forth every year. And we decided to live permanently in one place or the other, Denmark or the United States. So my good wife, my new wife said you decide where we're going to live. My wife had a lot of relatives, a daughter and a granddaughter and so forth here. And I had only one daughter and she was on the west side of the United States and that's all I had. So I said were going to go to Haderslev and live there. So I lived in Haderslev ever since.

O.F.

Okay, and I would just add that Haderslev is a small provincial town with 20 or 30,000 people.

P.C.

31,000 people, yeah.

O.F.

And that is where Paul Christensen has been living ever since enjoying his ?. So Paul Christensen, at this time I want to thank you very much for taking your time to come in here to Copenhagen and share all your experience from your loan career inside our field and your experience with the predecessors of ASHRAE, the American Society of Refrigerating Engineers. Thank you very much for coming in here.

P.C.

You're welcome, I was very glad to come.

O.F.

Well thank you very much for coming. I hope that you have enjoyed watching this interview and enjoyed it equally much as I have making the interview with Paul Christensen. Thank you very much.

P.C.

You're welcome.