

THOMAS E. WATSON

ASHRAE President 2012-13



Pam Duffy: Tom, would you give us a quick biographical sketch of your life?

Tom Watson: Well, I was born in Lynchburg, Virginia. Actually, I was from Bedford County and moved to Staunton, Virginia when I was two years old. My father was a state horticulturalist, but my grandfather was a mechanical contractor and did work in St. Louis, Chicago, and other places like that. Did groundwater cooling of a paint factory here in St. Louis, so it's kind of a throwback. I'm a throwback.

My father was in agriculture, and I got into back into mechanical contracting. But I went to school right there in Stanton and graduated from high school there. Then I went to Virginia Tech, got a master's degree at WVU, and went into the Army. I was in the Army for two years, and I was in a place they weren't really hiring very well. It was like ten miles from the Cambodian border, and I saw this rice paper Newsweek that said the job market had just fallen through the floor. And so, I took an extra year in the Army. I was looking for a job and didn't have really wonderfuls lined up, so the way I got my job in the industry was the unemployment office made you go down and get an interview.

So, I went down to the plant, and they sent me to the office. I was dressed up, you know, Army haircut and a blue suit and a white shirt and all that stuff. And they didn't talk to me for three hours and let me go. And so, I was really upset with that. That wasn't nice. So, about a day later, a guy called me and said, "Hey, by the way you were down here. We'd like to look at hiring you." And I said, "I'm not really that interested." And he said, "No, no, come on down at nine o'clock. We'll let you know by 11." So, I went down there. They offered me 50% more money than any other position. And I've been there ever since 44 years, almost 45 years now.

Going back a little bit, my father took me to the train station every Sunday from the age of two. And we would go out riding trains together until he was 90-something, 90 years old. So, I always loved steam engines. I loved thermodynamics. It was great. I just, so the job I'm in now was wonderful. It was just right up my alley, what I always wanted to do. I've always been interested in machines. I can't remember when I didn't want to be a mechanical engineer. So, the other thing that kind of shaped me, it was kind of an odd situation. I was riding a bus back in the day, and there was a student in the college there, and I always wanted to get into aerospace because the Russians had just launched Sputnik. And I was in seventh grade, and everybody said, "Get into Sputnik, and we're gonna catch those Russians, you know, get the rocket launches." And he

said, “You know, there’s only three or four places you can work in the United States in aerospace.” If you’re a mechanical engineer, you have great geographic diversity. And so that was a wonderful advice, so I got into mechanical engineering because it allowed me a lot more flexibility wherever you’re employed.

And fast forwarding, I think our industry allows you great diversity. I don’t think, there’s only one or two continents, like Antarctica, I don’t think, but maybe even there we have air conditioning or heating, for sure. So, there’s, you can work anywhere you want to, and that’s a wonderful thing about our industry. I think it allows you to help people and things of that sort. So that’s where I really started off and just transitioned by luck or otherwise, into the industry. It wasn’t a fixed choice.

Pam Duffy: So, can you describe the HEC industry at that time?

Tom Watson: Well, it was pretty static and the last, I think, the refrigerant that I was involved with, I got involved with ASHRAE and refrigerant technology and standards and safety. And the last change in refrigerants was 50 years ago. When I joined those, it was like 40 or 50 years since there’s a new refrigerant being really used. And then it accelerated because of ozone depletion where we had new refrigerants. We had one in 50 years, and we now had 50 in one year, and it just has gone from there. And so that’s the major change is global warming energy ozone depletion, of course, and now I’m involved with legionellosis, which is another health issue, so I’m being involved with that standard. So that’s something I work on now. I’m back in the trenches in the standards world, so I really think ASHRAE allows you to really know a lot from a lot of different people. So, if you don’t know the answer, you know who to go to, for sure. That’s what I really like about ASHRAE.

Pam Duffy: So, how and when did you get started with ASHRAE?

Tom Watson: It was 1972. I went to the first meeting in Chicago, and it was at McCormick Hall, and that was it. It was 1972, and the first ASHRAE meeting I went to was.....

Pam Duffy: Excellent. And can you tell us a little bit more about your chapter and regional experience?

Tom Watson: Well, I had very little limited regional experience until I got as a DAL and started going to the CRCs and got more involved in the local chapter and the region. I came up through the tech side and TCs and all these different committees and things.

Pam Duffy: And so, during your time in the industry, what are some of the major issues that have affected you?

Tom Watson: Well, I just spoke to some of them, and I would say energy in ’74 and then ozone depletion. And then global warming, and now we’re involved with other issues, health issues, safety and health issues.

Pam Duffy: So how has ASHRAE interacted with the public over the years?

Tom Watson: I think not a lot, and we're doing better now. I think ASHRAE's getting to be better now, but for a long time ASHRAE was it really wasn't a public, people didn't understand what ASHRAE was. And now you have the CDC putting out a nice, beautiful little workbook on how to use the 188 and speaks very highly of ASHRAE. And when I was chair of 188, I get calls from the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post and CNDC; you name it. There's just a lot of media attention on ASHRAE at the time. That's accelerating. So, it comes down to global warming and all these issues that we're involved with it, where we get attention.

Pam Duffy: So, can you tell me about all of the different ASHRAE committees you have served on?

Tom Watson: Well, I'll probably would not be able to do that, but the one that I started off was TC 8.2, and it's when I went there a guy named Jack Schultz from a competitor said, "Yeah, what can we do to make you successful?" And it's like an old shoe when I go back to that committee. It's a wonderful committee and I got involved with TC 3.1, ASHRAE Standard 15, Standard 34, and primarily refrigerant and also centrifugal technology so that's where I started out.

And then I got a, once I was chair of the Standards Committee 15, then I was put on the Standards Committee, and before it was over, I was the chair of the Standards Committee. And then I got to be chair of the Tech Council, and then somehow, I became a DAL, and then I became a Vice President. I don't know how this happened, and I got to be president; I was totally shocked by that. I was, I had no clue that was gonna happen, so it really has just been, as time went on, things just—I kept enjoying what I was doing and doing things like that. The other thing I think was really important was the ad hocs I got to work on. And they were a lot of fun, but the one that probably shaped me the most was the global initiatives for ASHRAE. And the logo ad hoc was a lot of fun, so having a bunch of engineers trying to design a logo was a really a big challenge for me. So, I was the chair of that committee, and we I think we did okay. Some people love it; some people hate it.

Pam Duffy: Most people are okay with it. It'll probably change in a few years; I'm sure. Several years down the road. I'm sure it will change again. So, what people stand out as influences to you?

Tom Watson: Well, I mentioned one, and I think a lot of the board members, the presidential members, people on my committee, one fellow that really influences me is a fellow named Bill Richards. And I went to my first ASHRAE show in Chicago, and I walked up, and he said, "I'm glad you're using our product, and in your application. We really appreciate your business." And I said, "I'm really sorry, but I've just changed and gone to another product that's actually I think suits our application better." And he had me explain, and he said, "Yeah, I think you made the right choice." And he was late at a chair at 15 before I was. And so, a lot of integrity there. And so, those kinds of people, you know, really influenced me a lot, and that way ASHRAE should be doing things.

Pam Duffy: So, what events have occurred that have changed ASHRAE in your mind?

Tom Watson: Well, again, we're coming back to the energy, the global warming, ozone depletion. I think some of the things we've done for ASHRAE is to make it more strategic, and I think that's where ASHRAE, I think, is really on the right track today. The strategic planning process is a lot better. So, I think we're shaping events and not reacting to them as much as we used to.

Pam Duffy: And then, what has ASHRAE meant to the industry's growth?

Tom Watson: I think if you look all the way back to Willis Carrier and before that, all the leaders of our industry have been ASHRAE. I don't think, it's a hard sell sometimes for young people. They don't realize that the commitment you put into it is what you get out of it. And, of course, you being a YEA person, you know all about that.

Pam Duffy: Yes. So, speaking of YEA and young engineers, what advice would you give to young people looking to be successful in this industry or be successful within ASHRAE?

Tom Watson: Volunteer, get involved, and if you enjoy it, it'll be natural. So that's really, that thing I would advise you. Learning the people side, I always thought the technology was the cool stuff, but it's about the people and the context that you make it just so valuable. It's like an old family. When I walked into the hotel last night, it's like I was back with my family.

Pam Duffy: This is a fun question. Did any humorous events take place?

Tom Watson: One thing I think was somewhat funny is I was helping with a sales call in San Francisco one time, and we visited this engineer, and, well, I walked into the office, and he said, "Are you involved with ASHRAE?" I said, "Yes, I'm a chair of Standard 15, I'm one of these DCs, blah, blah, blah." And, oh, on and on, and all about me, right? And I said, "Well, what are you doing at ASHRAE?" He said, "Well, I'm the president, as Dick Charles." And, ugh embarrassment. Shows you how tuned in I was to the whole society. I was only at my level, which is really low.

Pam Duffy: So, outside of ASHRAE, what other interests or hobbies do you have?

Tom Watson: Well, I love to golf. I haven't golfed as much as I like to. And I like to go out and ride steam trains with Dan Petway, do things like that and others. And so, I still enjoy a lot the, I have a little dog; I walk in the morning every day, four miles we walk in the morning for breakfast. And so, I enjoy my grandchildren and my family. So, it's all centered about, I really married my wife's family because I liked their family a lot, and her cousins, and my brother-in-law actually set us up on the blind date, so we're still friends. So, believe it or not, so we do a lot of things together as a family.

Pam Duffy: Okay, last chance: any other comments you'd like to make?

Tom Watson: Yeah, I think one thing I'm really proud of is and since it's YEA that, I was really, my presidential theme was about broadening ASHRAE's horizons. So, Ashok Virmani told me once when I was visiting India way before I became president, "You know, Tom, ASHRAE really isn't providing the technology we need. It's all focused on North America." Yeah. So, 20% of our memberships were being underserved. So, we made a real and it's going forward with a lot of other people that are working on it now; 10 months is carrying forward where we're gonna have technology to serve, rather than just North America. Also, the Calgary Cold Climate Conference.

One other human service event which, I think would say is we had a refrigerants; there's various groups. There's the ammonia guys, and there's the hydrocarbon people, and then there's the halocarbon people. They don't talk to each other. They have their own conferences. So, my goal was to have a conference where everybody came together, broke bread, had a barbecue, and socialized and got to know each other. So, we kind of break down some of the walls and saw those. And so, we had this set up to be a NIST. And of all things, the hurricane came in and shut down the government shut down all the airports. And we're gonna have we're gonna have to cancel this conference. And everybody's in the hotel, stranded; all came in from Europe and Asia and everywhere. And Tony Giamatti pulled it off. He got the hotel to put the rooms together; we got the projectors, we it was almost a hurricane party; it was everybody had to socialize and hung out together, and it really worked out better than the barbecue when it happened. So that was just a stroke of luck. In a bad situation, it turned out to be good. So, ASHRAE staff has been so supportive to me. I really appreciate it.

Pam Duffy: Well, excellent. I think that's all the questions we have.

Tom Watson: Well, thank you. Thanks for doing this, too.

Pam Duffy: Yeah, thank you.