

Bert Phillips ASHRAE Interview

Life Before ASHRAE

I was the second of six kids raised on a family farm near Dauphin. As was typical in that time and place, by age eleven I was driving farm machinery, tending livestock and spending time in the bush with a rifle looking for animals to shoot. Fairly regularly someone I knew got injured or killed in a farm or hunting accident. We had horses and I participated in local rodeos, barrel racing, steer riding and bronc busting when given the chance.

I had a slow start in school, failing grade 1. I was a “slow reader” but always did well in math and science. An engineer spoke to my grade twelve class about engineering, and seven of the 15 males in the class chose engineering. I originally registered in science, but when told if I took engineering I wouldn't have to take any arts courses, I switched. Agricultural Engineering (now Biosystems) was a new faculty that appealed to my farm heritage, so that is my degree.

I wasn't ready to settle down when I graduated in 1972, so I took a term research position at the university and a year later went to Nigeria for a farm mechanization project. After waiting the better part of a year for equipment for the project to arrive (it never did), I came home with intent of farming. The Town of Dauphin was looking for a “Junior Engineer” so I did that and farmed. After a disastrous farm year I concluded that engineering was easier and paid better than farming. The Town Engineer quit, I became the Town Engineer then got married.

The town had serious storm drainage issues and had a leaky sewage lagoon. The drainage issues required right-a-ways for ditches and storm drains for which all practical routes crossed the land of the farmer onto which the sewage lagoon leaked. The farmer wouldn't talk right-a-way until he was compensated for the leaky lagoon, but the Town refused to address his complaint.

The farmer was my father. I needed to extricate myself from that conundrum and wanted ride my motorcycle. My wife wanted to go back to her native Trinidad. We quit our jobs in October 1976, loaded a motorcycle and headed south. After touring Mexico and food poisoning in Guatemala, the motorcycle broke down in Panama. We shipped the bike to Trinidad and flew there, arriving a few weeks before Christmas. I repaired the bike when it arrived and lined up a job. My wife decided she didn't like living in Trinidad so we shipped the bike to Florida, and spent a month or two touring Caribbean Islands.

It was still winter up north so we took the long road home, riding to upstate New York to visit friends and family, then down and across the southern states and up the west coast to visit more friends and family. We arrived back in Manitoba in late June of 1977 ready to work but employers seemed reluctant to hire someone with my transient lifestyle. I got a term position related to renewable energy at the University of Manitoba that led to a more permanent position with Dr. Gren Yuill/UNIES Ltd in fall of 1978. Gren, who had been my thermodynamics prof, was working on renewable energy and energy conservation. His focus on research matched my interests.

The Levels of ASHRAE

ASHRAE has three levels of governance: Society, Region and Chapter. At Society there is the technical side that funds and manages research, develops standards, writes the handbooks and puts together the technical programs for ASHRAE conferences; and the organizational side that manages the conferences, committees and Chapters. The Chapters are the grassroots of the Society. The Regional level of governance functions as the liaison between the Chapters and Society.

My ASHRAE involvements started at Society level on the technical side, followed by Chapter involvements, then Region and finally on the organizational side of Society.

My Life and Times on the Technical Side of Society

While there was great interest in energy conservation, renewables and energy security in the late seventies, that changed in the early 1980s and consulting firms that specialized in that field fell on hard times, and most abandoned the sector. Gren left UNIES but I stayed, worked part time and finished my MBA.

Gren had always spoke highly of the benefits of attending ASHRAE conferences. By 1984 my economy had picked up enough that I decided I could afford to attend the Annual (summer) conference in Kansas City. A bonus was that I could go by motorcycle. I was blown away by the quality of presentations and that I could question of the people that did the research and wrote the books, and they would take time to answer and explain. It was a mind blowing experience, on par with getting laid the first time. I wanted more. I joined ASHRAE and have been a Society member ever since.

I didn't get back to an ASHRAE conference until January of 1987 in New York City. I went to defend a proposal for an ASHRAE research project. My proposal wasn't successful, but after the meeting I again felt "that afterglow". In summer of 1987 I responded to an ASHRAE RFP to study the energy impact of freeze control strategies for air to air energy recovery devices. I rode my motorcycle to Nashville for the Annual meeting, and this proposal was successful. At home there wasn't afterglow, and that fall I became single again, but with kids.

A requirement of ASHRAE research projects is to attend Winter and Annual meetings and give progress reports to the sponsoring committee. I have attended every Winter and Annual meeting since, motorcycling to most (thirty plus) of the summer meetings.

In Nashville, Gren Yuill tagged me to be secretary of an ASHRAE Standards committee he was chairing. I got to work with the people that did the research and wrote the books AND then go for supper and to the bar with them. I joined other committees that covered topics of interest to me and learned a lot about a wide range of HVAC topics. This knowledge meant I had answers to a lot of tough questions, and if I didn't, I could often contact "*the authority*" on the topic for guidance. Some in our local community saw me as the man with the answers, which opened a variety of opportunities for me.

I quickly learned that, at least for me, being secretary was the best position on a committee. I learned the names of the key players around the table, and they got to know me. Because I needed to pay attention to what is being discussed and record key decisions, I became very knowledgeable of all committee activities. I learned the rules of order and kept meetings on track. After a meeting was done and I had distributed the minutes, my duties were done until the next meeting.

Traditionally at ASHRAE conferences, technical programs are primarily presented in the earlier parts of the days and technical committee meetings are held in the afternoons and early evenings. This meant I didn't have to choose between technical programs and technical committee meetings. I have accumulated more than 30 technical committee years of service and more than 40 standards development years, with many of those years as secretary and others as Chair, Vice Chair and chair of various sub-committees.

My Chapter Life and Times

In the late 1970's and first half of the 1980's, I attended the odd Manitoba Chapter meeting, but never found "community" there. It became a friendlier place for me in the late 1980's. I was Program Committee Chair from 1992 to 1994, Newsletter Editor for about twenty years beginning in 1993, President in 1994/95, Research Promotion Chair in 1995/96, CTTC Chair 2010 and Secretary from 2015 to 2021 and a Governor in some of the other years.

Newsletter editor was a position where I think I shone. Before email, the Chapter newsletter, Buffalo Tales, was mailed out prior to Chapter dinner meetings. Page 1 announced the upcoming program, the top of page 2 was the President's message and the bottom of page 4 listed the Chapter officers and committee chairs. It was up to me to fill the space between the President's message and the List of officers. If the President didn't provide a message, I often created one. I wrote about what I learned at conferences, sometimes about adventures I had riding to the conferences and sometimes meanderings and trivia from an over active imagination. I got a lot of positive feedback about my newsletter articles indicating that many recipients had read them.

Email eliminated the cost to print and distribute Buffalo Tales, but it seemed that the only part of the electronic newsletters that got read was the program announcement. In 2013 I put a note in a Buffalo Tales article that said I would buy a beer for the first person to tell me about the note at an upcoming supper meeting. Two months later someone mentioned the note. The newsletter was abandoned not long after that.

Regional Activities

Holding Chapter Chair positions and being Chapter President meant attending some Chapter Regional Conferences (CRC) which got me known in the Region, and I was recruited to serve as the Region XI Chapters Technology Transfer Committee (CTTC) Regional Vice Chair (RVC) from 2006 to 2009. During this term, I was assigned to the ASHRAE Technology Awards judging panel. This committee judges submissions for the ASHRAE Technology Awards, the winners of which are showcased in the ASHRAE Journal every year. In 2008, I was Chair. From 2018 to 2020 I was again recruited to sit on this committee.

My Life and Times on the Organizational Side of Society

At the end of my term as CTTC RVC, I was recruited into the leadership of CTTC. This involved being a Vice Chair for two years (2009 to 2011) followed by a year as Chair (2011 to 2012). The Chair of CTTC was also a member of the ASHRAE Webcast committee. This group put together professionally produced, three hour webcasts each year on a hot topic of interest to ASHRAE members. The annual webcast has since evolved into the ASHRAE Tech Hours, which are more frequent. The webcast committee met three times a year at ASHRAE Headquarters in Atlanta to identify topics, recruit

speakers, generate program outlines, review manuscripts, coach presenters and screen viewer questions during the live broadcasts. It was a fun committee for me and I served on all ASHRAE Webcasts and Tech Hours from 2011 until the COVID pandemic prevented travel and face to face meetings in 2021.

Through Region, I met Erich Binder from the Southern Alberta Chapter. He recruited me to be Scientific Committee Chair and member of the Conference Steering Committee for 7th International Cold Climate Conference held in Calgary, Alberta, November 2012. An outcome of this Conference was revival of a cold climate working group within ASHRAE of which I am a member. This group wrote the “ASHRAE Cold-Climate Buildings Design Guide”, published in 2015 and updated in 2021. I served as a reviewer and editor for both editions.

At the time of my tenure on CTTC, its mandate included government activities, a duty CTTC was not serving well. The powers above concluded that government activities should be assigned to a committee separate from CTTC, with its own regional representatives. The leadership recruitment committee for the new Grassroots Government Activities Committee (GGAC) asked me to serve as its inaugural chair, which I did from 2013 to 2015.

From 2015 to 2019 I served on ASHRAE’s Technical Activities Committee (TAC). TAC monitors and guides the activities of ASHRAE’s TCs. In 2020 I became a member of Society Rules Committee (SRC) and the Conferences and Exhibition Committee (CEC). As its name suggests, SRC is responsible for keeping societies rules and regulations up to date, clear and consistent. CEC organizes ASHRAE’s Winter and Annual conferences. While ASHRAE’s staff does much of the organizational legwork for the conferences, the committee members manage the review papers and program submissions, pick the best and slot them into program tracks and conference schedules. I am not sure how people who work full time find time to keep up with their obligations on CEC, but they do.

ASHRAE has a lot of amazing volunteers!

Advice, Opinions and Ramblings

I have been self-employed for most of my career and lived within the constraints that self-employment imposes. A friend whose business was making Harley Davidsons go fast complained that he couldn’t go on a trip with me when the weather was nice because that was when his services were most in demand. I explained to him that being self-employed gave him the freedom to do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, but if he wanted his business to survive, he couldn’t do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. Employed people face other constraints.

My recommendation is for young professionals to invest in your own lifelong learning. If your employer doesn’t see value in supporting your efforts at self-improvement, either financially or time wise, do it on your own nickel and in your own time. It will make you a more valuable asset to your employer, and to other employers. As an employer, I would have a negative view of an employee that wasn’t willing to invest some of his own time and money in self-improvement, and; as an employee I would have a negative view of an employer that was not willing to support my efforts at making myself a more valuable employee.

Your family is more important than your job. Because of this, there will be times and circumstances in which you must put your job ahead of your family in order to provide for them. But not too often.

There will be times in your life that work and family demands may prevent you from actively participating in organizations such as ASHRAE, and there will be times when you can actively engage. Get involved when you can, at a level that you can be effective, but don't over extend yourself. Not having the time and resources to effectively do a job is not beneficial to the organization or to your reputation.

I believe we should all give back to our profession, and that doing so not only benefits others, but is also beneficial for the givers. I think the more I gave, the more I got back, and the more I shared, the more I learned. That being said, don't volunteer to take on a duty in which you have no interest. You are not obligated to accept a request to volunteer, but if you do accept, you have an obligation to carry through.

Not all learning happens in classrooms and technical presentations. I have learned a lot from casual conversations at Chapter meetings and in hallway conversations at conferences.

An ASHRAE colleague used to refer to ASHRAE as "the American Society of Middle Aged White Guys in Suits". A long term focus of mine and a new one for ASHRAE is DEI which stands for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Organizations that practice DEI are found to generate a more diverse range of ideas and solutions to problems.

Just before COVID, during a hallway encounter, I introduced Katherine Hammack, a very influential woman within ASHRAE and beyond, to Farooq Mehboob, ASHRAE's incoming President. Katherine told Farooq that, during a technical committee meeting at her first ASHRAE conference about twenty five years earlier, I made her feel welcome and that her opinions mattered. That welcome was a significant reason she stuck with ASHRAE. Farooq told Katherine that when I was CTTC Chair, I lobbied to give him a leadership opportunity that enabled his progression in ASHRAE. All I had done was give equal opportunity to persons who weren't American, middle aged, white, guys or wearing suits. That this was significant in both their lives is an indication we need to continue to stress DEI.

ASHRAE posts member death notices with a listing of their ASHRAE activities. One of my ASHRAE friends, Andy, died recently at age 50, after a twenty month battle..... His notice listed contributions to his Chapter, Region and Society on both the technical and organizational side. Then I read someone else's notice that said "joined ASHRAE in 1957", fifteen years before Andy was born. Get involved and contribute to whatever organizations you join. Be remembered as a *doer*, not just a *joiner*.