History of a Person

Pittsburgh Chapter - American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers

Frances Farr, Woman Refrigeration Pioneer

Miss Frances Farr, Life Member of ASHRAE was born in the Borough of Bellevue, but while she was quite young the family moved to Penn Hills where she grew up. At that time, Penn Hills had no high school, so Frances attended and graduated from Westinghouse High School. Her father, John William Farr, was Advertising Manager for McKinney Manufacturing Co., a maker of builder’s hardware. He died when she was 12 years old. Besides Frances, there were her sisters, Mrs. Dorothy Fritz, Mrs. Jean Parsons and her brother, Mr. John William Farr II, all younger than she. Frances' grandfather, who was president of McKinney Manufacturing Co., stepped up to fulfill the father role and was influential in her decision to attend Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University). Frances took all the required science and math courses and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree. She had decided to become an English or French teacher, but this was not to be. At that time, teaching jobs were scarce and to teach would have required her to seek employment in a rural area. Frances' family situation required her to remain close to home to help with her younger siblings.

Frances landed her first job at West Penn Power Co. at Wood and Water Street in Pittsburgh doing general office work. After two years she transferred to the Engineering Dept. and the Reddy Kilowatt program. There she sometimes made layouts for electrical wiring for new residential buildings, thus putting some of those math skills to work.

Frances left West Penn Power after seven years and took a job with the Pittsburgh branch of the Frigidaire Sales Corporation in the Commercial Refrigeration Department. She worked closely with the Refrigeration Engineer and became very interested in this kind of work.

But this all came to a sudden end on December 7, 1941. As the United States mobilized for war, all the men in the branch office who were not inducted into military service, were called by private industry into manufacturing plants which were changed from private enterprise into the manufacture of war related equipment. As a result, only four people (two older men and two women) remained in the Pittsburgh branch.

In this way, Frances was propelled into a full-time job as refrigeration engineer. She was fortunate that Frigidaire Sales Corporation had a wonderful large refrigeration manual. (No manual since that time compares to it.) Thus, Frances started on her lifetime of a career of commercial refrigeration engineering.
After the war's end, she was involved with the sale of refrigeration equipment for the Howard Johnson restaurants along the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Also, at that time, since there was no equipment available for storing frozen food at home, large commercial locker type units were built for housewives who wanted to freeze and store large quantities of food. During that time Freon 12 was used for household and commercial refrigeration equipment alike.

Several years after the war ended, Frigidaire decided to pull out of the commercial refrigeration business and concentrate on home appliances. Frances wanted to continue in the commercial market; and when she received a call from Mr. John Blair, head of commercial refrigeration equipment at Williams and Company, she went to work for him. She calculated the refrigeration equipment required for applications brought to her by dealers and contractors. The jobs ran the gamut from small food stores to large refrigerated warehouses. She also calculated the refrigeration equipment required for air conditioning applications as well as sizing piping and ductwork. Many businesses in the Pittsburgh area relied on Frances for all their refrigeration requirements.

During her long career in the refrigeration business, Frances trained many other refrigeration engineers. Jack Gross, a current Williams and Company application engineer, worked with Frances for five years and has a lot of respect for one of the few women in refrigeration in Pittsburgh - ever! He remembers her for being an excellent teacher, for her use of correct English, and as one who was skilled in the use of the slide rule to do her calculations. (Before electronic calculators were invented.) She also trained David Lunney of Standard Air and Lite. Frances retired from Williams and Company in 1979. After that, she worked part time for several different firms, retiring permanently at the end of 1993.

Frances became a member of ASHRAE in 1959 when ASRE and ASHV E merged. Prior to that she had been a member of ASRE and served as Program Director for a one-year term. She became an ASHRAE Life Member in 1982.

Frances has throughout her life been very devoted to her family. Not only did she help with her younger siblings, but she also raised a niece and nephew, Mrs. Frances Ragan and Mr. John William Farr III and saw them through college.

She is Church Historian at the Bellevue Christian Church where she was president of the Board of Control for two terms and taught Bible School for many years. She has been interested in Creation Science for approximately 30 years and is a member of the Pittsburgh Creation Science Fellowship.

Truly an outstanding person, ASHRAE and the Pittsburgh Chapter can be proud of Life Member Miss Frances Farr.

Danelle Ardell & David E. Glenn
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