

The Early Years: A Voluntary Effort

by

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Today, the affairs of the System Dynamics Society are primarily run by a professional staff in Albany, New York. This was not always the case, however. Early on, darn near everything that needed to be done to run the Society was undertaken by volunteers who donated their time and skills. They did this, I believe, because they truly felt that it was important to grow the field of system dynamics and that the Society was the appropriate vehicle for facilitating the growth.

It is of course difficult, if not impossible, to know, remember, and recognize everyone who donated their time and effort to the Society during its early years. As such, I feel compelled to apologize up front to anyone whose efforts I fail to mention in this short essay. My goal is to mention those people and incidents that I remember best and leave to others the task of filling-in any gaps I most certainly will create.

The volunteer efforts in the early days of the Society can probably be best divided into three main areas: (1) hosting the annual conference, (2) editing the System Dynamics Review, and (3) central office operations. At the risk of stating the obvious, these three areas are huge, and required a heck of a lot of effort on the part of some truly dedicated individuals. Although I was involved to some degree in each of these areas, in the interest of making this essay manageable, I will focus only on the third category.

The early operations of the central office were primarily undertaken by whomever held the following Society positions: Vice President – Finance, Secretary, and Executive Director. The VP – Finance kept the books, met annually with the auditor to make sure the Society was complying with U.S. tax laws, and made sure the Society's modest endowment was properly earning interest. The Secretary kept the minutes of the Policy Council meetings, helped the President set the agenda for the meetings, and was typically the person who best remembered what the Policy Council had done in the past and was scheduled to do in the future. The Executive Director essentially did everything else. In fact, the people filling these three roles typically served multiple terms in office and basically were unofficially responsible for the early institutional memory of the Society.

Jack Pugh served as the Society's original Vice President – Finance and held the post continuously from 1983-1998. He always appeared at Policy Council meetings with several spreadsheets that summarized the

Society's financial position and offered modest suggestions to the Policy Council regarding use of the Society's funds. He always seemed to be concerned that the Society (a non-profit organization) was accumulating interest on some of its funds while simultaneously not spending them – a potential red flag for the US Internal Revenue Service.

The Society's original Executive Director was Julie Pugh – Jack's wife. This made complete sense for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that Jack and Julie could work on things together. Julie spent a great deal of time in the early years keeping records, answering mail and phone inquiries, and generally maintaining an orderly office. She (and Jack) also donated space in their garage and attic for much of the Society's surplus materials, such as extra copies of the Review and conference proceedings. Julie served as volunteer Executive Director until 1997, when the Society had grown large enough to hire its first professional staff.

From 1983-2000, the Society had only three Secretaries: John Morecroft (1983-1987), Bob Eberlein (1987-1994), and myself (1995-2000).¹ One of my vivid memories is of Bob turning over his Secretary's binder to me. This thing was stuffed with copies of Policy Council meeting minutes taken by both Bob and John and other miscellaneous documents. I quickly realized that it essentially contained the only written historical record of the Society, or at least of the activities of its Policy Council.

In 1997 the Policy Council, under the leadership of then President John Morecroft, decided to hire Roberta Spencer as the Society's first professional Executive Director and to move the Society's central office to the State University of New York at Albany. Among the tasks the latter decision required was, quite literally, physically moving the Society's "stuff" to Albany. This demanded a truck and a strong back (and possibly a weak mind). As I possessed all of these things, I was asked to haul all of the Society's stuff to New York.

The first moving issue I faced was that the Society's stuff had accumulated in two places: Jack and Julie Pugh's house and the basement of Building E40 - the long-time headquarters of the System Dynamics Group at MIT. In order to fetch the stuff from MIT, I contacted Jay Forrester's Administrative Assistant, Nan Lux, and asked her to help me gain access to the basement of E40 and to get permission to park my pick-up truck at the E40 loading ramp – the ramp made so famous by John Collins in the story of Urban Dynamics. Nan, of course, did this and also helped me locate the Society's materials in the basement of E40.

¹ In 1987, the Society switched the terms of office for its officers and Policy Council members from a conference-to-conference year to a calendar year. As such, both Morecroft and Eberlein served as Secretary in 1987.

Although it would have been much easier if the Society's stuff had been sorted before storage, it was actually quite interesting searching through boxes of miscellaneous system dynamics materials looking for the right things to load on to my truck. For example, I vividly remember opening a box and finding the original figures for Jay Forrester's Industrial Dynamics book, instead of Society materials.

Once my truck was loaded, I hauled the materials to Worcester and unloaded them into my kitchen – the only space in my house large enough to accommodate a big load of heavy boxes. There they sat until I was able to truck them to Albany. Moreover, I added to the stockpile by venturing out to Jack and Julie's house a week or so later and hauling the Society's other cache of materials from their attic and garage to my kitchen. At this point, you had to walk sideways down aisles of boxes in my kitchen to get from the stove to the table.

One advantage of having all of the Society's stuff in my kitchen was that I got to go through it with a fine tooth comb. Although most of it consisted of back issues of the Review, I did find a small treasure trove of fascinating historical documents that I made sure to preserve. Among the interesting items were a letter from Jay Forrester to senior system dynamicists from around the world asking their opinion about the formation of a system dynamics society, along with the associated letters of reply. Most of the responses were quite positive, although some of them voiced concern about the format of the Society's new journal and the possibility of an overly US-centric Society.²

As it turned out, when it was time to haul all the Society's stuff to Albany, Khalid Saeed was visiting WPI from Bangkok. Although he was extremely jet lagged, he agreed to help me move everything to New York. As you might guess, however, once we got on to the Massachusetts Turnpike Khalid was out like a light. He regained consciousness in Albany long enough to find a vacant couch in Milne Hall so he could sleep through the entire unloading process! The brunt of the unloading was done by Roberta Spencer and myself using a hand truck.

The last significant thing I can recall from the early volunteer days of the Society's central office operation was the initial use of the world wide web. The Society did put up a modest web site in the mid-to-late 1990s with a small amount of content. My view, especially after looking through the Eberlein and Morecroft binder and the historical materials stored in the Society's many boxes, was that the Policy Council needed a way to communicate and preserve its historical record. In other words, it needed a web site. I thus resolved to learn HTML, rent some server space, and produce a web site for the Policy Council.

² A related issue in the letters was whether an entirely new journal would be created or whether Dynamica would become the Society's official journal (possibly renamed).

The web site I created was not very high tech – it had very few, if any, bells and whistles. It did, however, have lots of content (text). For example, I re-typed and uploaded the Society’s constitution (at least a version of it I could find), and figured-out and posted the historical progression of Society officers, Policy Council members, and conference venues.

The most useful part of the site turned out to be the area devoted to agendas, minutes, and associated documents for Policy Council meetings. The usefulness of this area, however, was counterbalanced by the amount of work required to maintain it. At that time, everything had to be HTML-coded by hand and the documents submitted to me for discussion at Policy Council meetings arrived in a variety of formats which, of course, made the coding task more cumbersome. In addition, all of the documents had to be linked to the agenda file prior to the Policy Council meeting and to the minutes file after the Policy Council meeting.

Although it consumed a lot of my time, I think the Policy Council web site became a valuable resource for the Society and served as a foundation for the Society’s modern web presence. Indeed, much of the original content from that site resides on the Society’s web site today.