



## An Interview with Scott Bourgeois

Scott Bourgeois  
Sales Engineer (Trane Company)  
ASHRAE – Birmingham President (1991-1992)

Interviewed by John Jeffcoat (Chapter Historian)

**ASHRAE:** Scott, tell us about your background. How did you get into the industry?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Well, I graduated in engineering from LSU in 1971. I got into sales in a fashion similar to probably a lot of people: “by mistake”. In my senior year, I was interviewing mostly with construction companies that were recruiting civil engineers. An Army buddy of my Dad was the placement director at LSU. I was in his office one day signing up for interviews, when he asks me “*Scott, have you ever thought about being a Sales Engineer?*” Well my response was “*Mr. Ferguson, what the heck is a Sales Engineer?*” I had never heard of it. Nonetheless, I interviewed with Trane the following week. One thing led to another and I ended up in their training program in Lacrosse, Wisconsin. Afterwards, I ended up in Birmingham, AL by blind luck alone. Trane, at the time, didn’t always tell you where you were going until you finished the training program.

**ASHRAE:** So you didn’t know when you got hired that you were being assigned to the Birmingham territory?

**Scott Bourgeois:** No. In the beginning, they were telling me I was going to get to go back to New Orleans. Well, one thing led to another...and 45 years later I am still in Birmingham. It probably worked out for the best.

**ASHRAE:** How did you get involved with ASHRAE and what was your experience with the chapter?

**Scott Bourgeois:** I got involved with ASHRAE right when I came on board with Trane. It was basically mandatory to belong to ASHRAE if you were working for Jack Ballard. (Editor's note: Jack Ballard was the former owner of Trane's Birmingham branch). I got involved around 1972-1973. It was a little bit different back then because the meetings were all held at night. This caused the culture of ASHRAE to be a bit more social than perhaps it is now. We met at the old Elks Lodge in Homewood. Although the meeting wouldn't start until around 7:00 PM, they would open the bar up at 4:00 PM in the afternoon. You would probably have 50 or 60 people at the cocktail hour.

**ASHRAE:** Was there a technical presentation at each meeting in those days?

**Scott Bourgeois:** As I remember it, there were some technical presentations, but it was more of a social event. You have to remember, we had a lot more people coming to meetings in those days. I can remember having 70 or 80 people at every meeting.

**ASHRAE:** So you became president of ASHRAE in the early 1990's?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Yes, it was the early 1990's (1991-1992 to be exact).

**ASHRAE:** There are four common career paths for members of ASHRAE in Birmingham. You are either (1) the owner or owner's agent, (2) a consulting engineer, (3) a contractor, or (4) a vendor. You were a vendor throughout your career as a technical sales engineer for Trane. How have you seen the role of the vendor change over the course of your career? On the other end of the spectrum, what has stayed the same?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Well I think the personal relationships you form with your customers are the things that have stayed the same. It always helps to have a personal relationship with your customers. Do business with your friends. That's what I've always felt.

As far as what has changed, one of the major changes has been how the engineering has been removed from the vendors. When I first came into the industry we were required to select components that completed a system. In other words you had to build the system to a much greater degree than you do today. You would have to match the compressor performance with the evaporator and condenser performance to achieve the engineer's specific performance needs. It was much more time consuming then due to the lack of computers (when I first started we didn't have calculators either). There was a lot more you had to do as a sales engineer in order to engineer that system. The consulting engineers depended on the equipment folks for this information. After the sale, the contractors were also really dependent on you as well because they did not really understand all the engineering that went into it. You had to be technically proficient with your product.

As time went by everything became more unitary. For example, believe it or not, we didn't even have packaged rooftops when I first came here. Back then contracting companies, like the Hardy Corporation built rooftops themselves. We (or some manufacturer) would provide

the components; they would then construct the casing and install the components. Every now and again I see these “contractor units” on project, although not very often now.

The manufacturers evolved into making everything unitary (not only rooftops, but chillers, self-contained units, etc.), that made it a little bit easier for the engineers & contractors. It made selections easier for the engineers, and the contractors didn't require so much expertise in the field. For the vendors it was a double edged sword, because everything became a little more commoditized.

**ASHRAE:** You have worked in this industry for over 45 years. What would you tell someone in the early stages of their career as a sales engineer or vendor?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Well I think a couple of things. First of all, you've got to recognize that your customers trust you with their business. You've got to take that personally and make sure it's done right.

Secondly, you've got to be thick skinned, because you are going to lose more than you win. You need to be able to enjoy the victories, while not getting too upset with the defeats. Always remember that most people in our business are pretty fair. If you take it personally every time they don't buy a project from you, you are going to be miserable. You need to move on to the next one and thank the Lord for the orders you did get.

**ASHRAE:** Over that 45 year career span, does anything jump out in your memory as highpoints or things you were really proud of?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Those high points came more from the personal side than the business side. The personal friendships and the times with the customers are what I look back on most fondly. I can tell you stories of social events from 40 years ago, but remember very little of the projects that far back. You remember the good times you had, not the projects.

**ASHRAE:** There are some young guys out there just starting out. For a point of reference to those guys, can you ballpark an average on how many hours a week you worked over the past 45 years?

**Scott Bourgeois:** I would say I probably averaged around 50 hours per week. Now early on it was a lot more than that, probably closer to 60 or 70 hours per week. When I first started, Mr. Ballard required us to work half a day on Saturday.

**ASHRAE (John Jeffcoat):** I can attest to this. I worked on your team for close to 10 years, and I rarely remember you taking a lunch if you didn't have a customer with you.

On top of that, I will never forget coming into the office early morning during my first couple of months at Trane. It was shortly after 4:00 AM. I was there to pick something up before going out of town. To my surprise, you were already in the office working that morning. I remember thinking, “*What...exactly...have I gotten myself into?*”

**Scott Bourgeois:** Well, once Connie and I started having kids, I tried to get home at a decent hour every day, although I probably didn't do it enough. Mr. Ballard put a big emphasis on making sure you were out of the office by 5 PM every afternoon. He didn't want anybody working late because he knew most of his salesmen had families. He was big on family.

**ASHRAE:** So for you to accomplish that, what kind of daily schedule were you working?

**Scott Bourgeois:** I would get in early, sometimes before 5 AM, and try to get home before 5 PM to be with the kids.

**ASHRAE:** But you were basically working that type of schedule even after your kids were grown?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Oh yeah, probably for 25 years. This is a time consuming career. You are going to spend a lot of time grinding through stuff.

**ASHRAE:** Looking back, if you could give any words of advice to yourself 30 or 40 years ago, what would it be?

**Scott Bourgeois:** In hindsight, I would have concentrated even more on the art of selling and personal relationships than I did. Knowing how some hydrocarbon forms refrigerant is important, but the personal relationship side is more important, and more fun.

**ASHRAE:** So as you are closing in on retirement, I'm sure you have seen a lot over those 45 years. Where do you think the business will be 10 or 15 years from now?

**Scott Bourgeois:** I think one big trend that I see coming is VRF being used more and more on larger projects, which is something that we have probably tried to resist for the last couple years. At first it was kind of just the "new thing." Originally, we only saw it being used on a few jobs. Now it is being used on more and more projects. I look at how Trane and all the larger manufacturers are partnering up with VRF manufacturers. They must know something, as they are putting a lot of money into it. So I would say that is one trend in the industry that I see coming. It is an engineered product, and that is going to require room for technical salesmen.

**ASHRAE:** In the last 10-15 years, technology has advanced hugely in how we communicate with one another in this industry (from faxes, to emails, to cell phones). Especially with the younger generation coming in, it seems like more and more of them are comfortable with communicating mostly electronically. Do you think this is going to be a fundamental change in how technical salespeople deal with their customers, both the engineers & contractors, going forward?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Well, I think so. Technology is going to keep evolving, obviously. A good example is that engineers run their own selections now. As I mentioned, years ago that was absolutely unheard of. Nobody ran their own selections. The consulting engineers would call you to their office and give you the parameters for their selections. You would take it back to your own office, and it may take you days to do it manually (before computers). I think now it has evolved to where some engineers don't even call you. They just do it themselves through the software.

**ASHRAE:** To wrap up, is there anything you feel like I didn't cover that I should have?

**Scott Bourgeois:** Well one thing, I think we should all be aware that ASHRAE is the lifeblood of our industry. There are so many things that ASHRAE does that benefit not only the contractors & engineers, but also society at large. As an industry, we ought to support that through ASHRAE research. Whether it's a golf tournament, a clay shoot, or just writing a check. People in our industry need to realize what ASHRAE does for them, especially the younger folks. You may not be able to give \$500, but do what you can.