

Founding a Society

Reminiscences of the Conception and Birth of SWST ¹

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I hope you are aware that it is dangerous to call on an old professor to reminisce about times past. We try not to live in those days, but the memories come back to both haunt us and inspire us. I'll try today to concentrate on the latter. It is interesting to look back 50 years and more to consider again –and wonder at – what we started. I thank you for the opportunity to reminisce publicly about the world in which we found ourselves, how the conception took place, and a few of the birth pains. I thank you especially for carrying on and refining what we began.

We make up a very old field of specialization. Whether it is an old profession is a matter of definition. Wood science and technology has a very long history, dating back to the earliest records of humankind. I've written about that history a few times – that's what we old guys do. (Youngs 1989, 1999). However, I'll not get into that today. What is important to point out as we look back in these times of turmoil is that wood science and technology is very much a child of war. The two World Wars – and especially WWII – made great demands on the wood resource and the intensive research and its application taught us much about wood.

Wood supplied material for airplanes, weapons, vehicles, ships, ammunition, and

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for transporting such things to wherever in the world they were needed. Much of the research at the FPL was working on three shifts, supported by the military. Most of the experts in the field in this country were much involved in technical assistance to the military and the industry supplying the military. When I went to FPL in 1951, half the support was still from the military. This strong military emphasis and pressure led to many advances in wood science and technology that would have taken much longer in more peaceful times.

Nevertheless, wood science and technology, though serving many critical military and civilian objectives, was not well defined. Most of those who played a critical role in its early development were not trained as wood scientists in the sense that we know it today. They were engineers, chemists, physicists, and even a few foresters. For professional association, they looked to the American Chemical Society, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the American Society of Chemical Engineers, and others. Such professionals played key roles from the time the study of wood in any formal sense began in the late 19th and early 20th century. Harry Tieman was an engineering graduate of Cooper Union in New York. Alfred Stamm was a physical chemistry graduate of California Institute of Technology. And so on with other pioneers. Those who are of other professions still contribute much to wood science and technology. We encourage this and welcome them.

However, in the mid-twentieth century, those of us whose primary training and principal interest lay in wood science and technology were convinced that we were also professionals and should have a professional society to unite us in advancing the field. But how should we identify ourselves, and how would we define the field in which we found ourselves? We were working with foresters, civil engineers, chemical engineers, chemists, botanists, and many others identified by, and qualified for, their own professional societies. We were based in the Forest Products Research Society (FPRS), which had formed shortly after World War II as a medium to exchange the substantial body of information developed during the war years and to refine and apply that information for effective and efficient wood use. Representatives of the forest products industry; of universities engaged in forest products research, education, and extension; and of the Forest Products Laboratory had come together in the mid- to late-1940s to form FPRS.

Those of us in wood science and technology had been meeting informally during FPRS conventions in the 1950s to consider the idea of a professional society that reflected our interests and aspirations. Why not FPRS? By 1957, we had decided that, while FPRS provided a common base of interest and medium of information exchange, it could not meet our need for an organization that would identify and safeguard our professional interests and growth and define the qualifications of the profession. At the 1957 Buffalo meeting of FPRS, we formed a committee, chaired by Jim Bethel, to study options and propose feasible

alternatives; the committee was charged to report back a year later, when we would meet at the FPRS convention in Madison (Fleischer and Foulger 1983, Ellis 1999). This formative action and direction really began what we now call SWST and makes it possible for us to celebrate our 50th anniversary here in Knoxville this year. The baby was born, but squirming and nameless.

The first annual meeting was held in 1958, with an executive session at my house in Madison. At that meeting Jim Bethel and his committee introduced a draft constitution and bylaws for a professional society to be named the American Institute of Wood Engineering (AIWE). The name was the subject of much debate; we had not yet defined ourselves. We decided that this would be a good beginning and adopted the drafts, but, to give us time to consider it thoroughly, we added a sunset clause – it would expire in two years if not further improved and reaffirmed. Thus, AIWE came into being, with great hopes but an uncertain future. The first elected officers were President Jim Bethel, Vice-President Herb Fleischer, Secretary-Treasurer Bob Youngs, and Directors Fred Dickinson, Art Muschler, and Alex Panshin. Headquarters would be at the office of the Secretary-Treasurer, the first being my office at the Forest Products Laboratory.

A major consideration, in addition to the particulars of an organization that would define and bring together our profession, was to avoid a break with FPRS. We developed a cooperative agreement that required one to be a member of FPRS in order to become a member of AIWE,. We were also careful to work closely

with FPRS in our beginning efforts at publication and meeting scheduling. We have continued that cooperation, although the formal agreement was rescinded in 1960, to avoid our becoming “a society within a society”.

The AIWE name didn't last long. Nor did the moving Secretariat. When we next met, in 1959 in San Francisco, we agreed that, as of January 1, 1960, we would become the Society of Wood Science and Technology. After the Secretary-Treasurer job moved to Ben Jayne, we decided that a moving headquarters was less than ideal, and we prevailed on FPL to let the society be headquartered there, with a volunteer acting as Assistant to the Secretary. Henry Haskell was that volunteer for the next five years and played a key role in working with industry and government attorneys to incorporate SWST as a not-for-profit organization. The Articles of Incorporation stated the purposes of the society as:

1. To foster educational programs directed toward professional advancement,
2. To promote research in wood science and technology, and
3. To provide a medium for the exchange of ideas and technical information relating to wood science and technology.

By the end of 1960, SWST had become an identifiable professional society; separate from FPRS, but not in conflict with it. We had about 170 members, enrolled by contact with those we considered qualified. We had a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to begin a visiting scientist program as a means of sharing our professional experience. Harking back to our concern for

definition by professional training, we had begun work on a grant to study education in the field, which was then as diverse as the members, and establish an educational basis for the study of wood science and technology. This is well documented by Everett Ellis (1984, 1999). We were off and running, but where to?

I noted that our profession is a child of war. As has the rest of the “baby boom” generation, the society has grown well and survived growing pains during the half century of its development. We have grown and matured, and have become both child and parent in the turbulent, globalized world that has developed around us. . “The times they are a changin’”; many new challenges lie ahead. It has been my real honor to have been part of the conception, birth, and nurturing of SWST. I speak for all the “founding fathers” when I thank all of you for your efforts to lead us into our second half century, and to Vicki for keeping it organized and productive.

As Hodding Carter said, “ There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other is wings.” I’ve told you about the roots; you supply the wings.

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