



## Over 40 Years of Trying to Encourage Women Into the HVAC&R Industry

On August 16, 1972, Andrew T. Boggs III, Executive Director of ASHRAE Society, wrote a letter to all chapter presidents stating the following:

*Gentlemen:*

*Your Society has been asked to consider activities which will interest women engineers in becoming active in our industry and also joining our Society.*

*A Committee has been established to look into this subject and as a first effort we are trying to determine how many women members we have in ASHRAE.*

*We have never segregated our membership, and in this day and age of computers we cannot tell by name whether the member is male or female. We all know that there are many instances where a man's first name sounds like a woman's and in some cases is spelled the same.*

*We need you help! Will you please complete the attached Questionnaire and send it as soon as possible to Mr. Morris Backer, a Director of the Society, who is in charge of this program.*

*Thanks so much.*

Our chapter president promptly filled out the questionnaire and mailed back our concise response: "Our chapter has 0 women members."

To me, that seems pretty amazing knowing that our chapter was one of the largest in society at that time. The fact that the letter started off with "Gentlemen" eluded to the fact that Society already knew all chapter presidents were men. The Central Oklahoma Chapter didn't have any woman members at the time of the letter, but apparently the call to action in the letter got Membership Chairmen Bobby Vermillion going because just two short months later, he landed our first female chapter member: Carolyn Rae Crawford.

Carolyn Crawford went on to become the first female Central Oklahoma Chapter President in 1984. Since no other chapter in Region VIII had a female president yet, she was also the first woman chapter president in all of Region VIII. I did a Google search for the "first ASHRAE chapter president" and couldn't find any other chapter that reported to have a female chapter president earlier than 1984. Maybe we were the first in all Society!?! I need to do some more homework on that potential fact. Dr. Faye McQuiston was our chapter president in 1981, the year that Carolyn Crawford was originally elected to "move through the chairs."

The Central Oklahoma Chapter elected our first female president long before Society did. Lynn G. Bellenger was the first Society-level female president, but she didn't hold that office until 2010.

Society, however, did have at least one female member long before our chapter did. Mary Engle Pennington (known as "The Ice Lady") was born October 8, 1872, attended the University of Pennsylvania in 1890 and earned her Ph.D. in 1895 with her study ultimately leading to refrigeration engineering and safe handling, storage, and transportation of food. She became a member of ASRE in 1920 and was elected ASRE Fellow in 1948. ASRE merged with ASHAE to become ASHRAE in 1959, thereby, in my opinion, making her the first female ASHRAE member as of 1920. She died in 1952 and was inducted into the ASHRAE Hall of Fame in 2007.



It's certainly understandable, knowing the cultural history of our country, that ASHRAE, being founded in 1894 as a society of engineers, would have a strong gender bias revealed in its membership. It is a little astonishing to me, however, how long that bias has continued. Even in early 1985, twelve years after the referenced letter, just before the CRC in Oklahoma City, what we would call today "Spouses Activities" were still listed as "Ladies Activities" in the preliminary literature. However, in the final published schedule of events for the 1985 CRC, the term "Ladies Activities" was changed to "Spouses Activities" no doubt due to Carolyn Crawford being president that year.

Today, over 40 years after our chapter got our first female member, our member database shows that we have 25 female members out of 345 total (7.2%). That's still very low. A 2011 study by the American Society for Engineering Education found women accounted for 18 percent of undergraduate students in engineering. This has to make you wonder what it is that keeps women from entering the HVAC&R industry in general and ASHRAE specifically?

In 1972, ASHRAE wanted to consider ways to interest women in entering our industry. What are your ideas? Your "letters to the editor" are encouraged. If you would like to see a scan of the original 1972 letter, go to:

[http://ashraecok.org/images/downloads/History/august\\_1972\\_letter\\_on\\_women\\_in\\_ashrae.pdf](http://ashraecok.org/images/downloads/History/august_1972_letter_on_women_in_ashrae.pdf)

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