

Hall of Fame: Harry Rountree

In 1992, our chapter created the Central Oklahoma Chapter Hall of Fame. The original inductee was William J. "Bill" Collins, Jr., better known as "Mr. ASHRAE." That made sense as no one in our chapter had more activity at all levels of ASHRAE than Bill. We have an entire book written about him that you can download from our website's history page. The next year, the chapter inducted Louis C. Nettleship. We also have an entire book written about him that you can download as well. In 1994, the chapter got after it and inducted three people into the Hall of Fame: Bobbie Vermillion, Faye McQuiston, and Harry Rountree. We don't have books written about these individuals, but I would like to highlight them in newsletter articles, starting with Harry Rountree.

Harry E. Rountree was a native of Okemah, Oklahoma, born in 1926. His entry into the HVAC field was a natural progression from his family's business. "My dad was a mechanical contractor, with a plumbing and sheet metal shop in Okemah," said Harry in an interview with B.H. Prasad in 1993. "I grew up in an environment of building construction that mainly had to do with the mechanical trades. So, I was drawn to that naturally and took those courses in college."

Harry graduated from high school in 1945 and enrolled as a mechanical engineering student at Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University) in Stillwater, Oklahoma. "One of my professors, Bill Irwin, taught one of the first classes in Oklahoma in heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration. It was one of the first such classes in the country, in fact. While at A&M, the Oklahoma Chapter (our chapter's name prior to 1965) started a student chapter, so I became active in ASHVE at that time." The American Society of Heating and Ventilating Engineers was the original name for ASHRAE when it was founded in 1895. ASHVE changed its name to ASHAE in 1954, and then to ASHRAE in 1959 when ASHAE merged with the American Society of Refrigerating Engineers (ASRE).

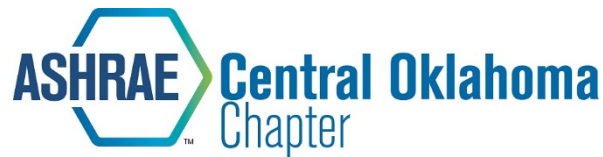
It was in 1948 when Harry and about eight other students agreed to participate in the new student chapter of ASHVE. One of their professors, Robert R. "Bill" Irwin, acted as the sponsoring faculty member. Professor Irwin taught the course in HVAC. His text? The ASHVE Heating and Ventilating Guide, better known as "The Guide", which was the predecessor to today's ASHRAE four-volume handbook series.

One of the first things the students did was invite ASHVE members from Oklahoma City to come to Stillwater for a presentation. In the meeting, John Spaan, who sold airside products, and Dick Swan, who sold Carrier equipment, spoke to the students.

The students must have been impressed with what they heard and learned about HVAC. Of the eight or so students in the chapter, at least four came to Oklahoma City and made careers in our field. Harry Rountree came to work for Carnahan and Thompson Engineering, headquartered in the ONG building in downtown OKC. Jim Millsaps also worked at Carnahan and Thompson. Bill Johnson was hired at Federal Corporation as a sales engineer. Bill Orr worked with the Carrier dealer and eventually launched his own contracting firm with Junior Harrison, Harrison-Orr.

In the spring of 1950, Harry hitchhiked from Stillwater to Oklahoma City, so that he could investigate job opportunities. He looked for "Carnahan and Thompson Engineering" in the phone book and made his way to their downtown office building. Since it was Saturday, there was a reduced crew working. Yes, back then, Saturdays were regular workdays for many. Harry talked to some staff, leaving his contact information. While exiting the building, he noticed Bill Collins' firm on the building directory. When Harry inquired in Collins' office, he discovered that the boss was not in that day. Harry soon received an offer to work at Carnahan and Thompson upon his graduation.

Harry's first project at Carnahan and Thompson was working on a remodel of the First Baptist Church building in Oklahoma City. He ran the loads on the structure and did the drafting for the plans. Harry's first seven years were spent in the office at Carnahan and Thompson, along with short assignments with Manhattan Construction, M.W. Kellogg, and Phillips Petroleum. After Harry got his engineering license, he was given the opportunity to be a partner at his engineering firm. For over 27 years, Harry was a principal in Davis, Robinson, and Rountree, later changed to Davis and Rountree.



Harry kept a log of all the projects he did, totaling over one thousand! About half were with Southwestern Bell Telephone. Harry would use telephone buildings as an example of how the use of buildings can change, thus altering heating, cooling, and ventilation requirements. When he first did his design work on the buildings in the 1950s, the main requirement was human comfort. "There were 100 women telephone operators on the 13th floor of the phone building at 3rd and Broadway. There was only heating, plus open windows and pedestal-mounted fans for ventilation in the office for comfort," Harry told Alan Loeffler in an interview in 2013. "Mechanical cooling came later. Then came the automatic switching equipment, complete with vacuum tubes and electronics which generated lots of heat. The need for operator comfort diminished, and equipment cooling requirements increased. Later still came the compact switching equipment with reduced space requirements. Then the telephone buildings had excess space to deal with. Technology changes over the years have made the HVAC engineer adapt also."

Davis and Rountree worked for architectural firms all over Oklahoma, designing systems for hospitals, schools, churches, projects for OG&E and ONG, university buildings on virtually every campus in the state, government office buildings, laboratories, and high-rise office buildings.

In 1984, Davis and Rountree were presented with the opportunity to join The Benham Group as managers of the mechanical and electrical departments. After serving in that role, Harry left Benham in 1991, and in 1992 opened a one-man firm, Harry Rountree Engineer, Inc. In his late sixties, Harry started slowing down, taking on less work from Architects. In the 2000s, he spent a few years working as a contract engineer for Frankfurt Short Bruza before retiring for good.

In ASHRAE, Harry is in a small, distinguished club – those who have served as Chapter President twice. Harry first served as president in the 1969-70 year (he received the Golden Gavel Award, which puts him in another small, distinguished club), then later, in 2006-07 when a need for leadership developed. Among the many ASHRAE honors he has received are ASHRAE Fellow, Distinguished Service Award, and Award of Merit, along with being in the Central Oklahoma Chapter Hall of Fame.

"I have stayed active in ASHRAE all through the years because I saw it as the technical vehicle through which I could learn more. As a side benefit, ASHRAE was also the group that all the people in the trade were attracted to. I became, and have remained, good friends with contractors, plumbers, pipefitters, and the refrigeration people who bid and install the work that I design. It has been a wonderful relationship," said Harry in his B.H. Prasad interview.

Harry had the reputation of a teacher and trainer, both of young engineers and of ASHRAE officers as they worked through the chairs. "As people rise through the chairs, us older heads who've already been there look over their shoulders and try to help them. They come to people like me for advice, and we're more than happy to help them. And we prod them along the way, to instill enthusiasm toward accomplishing goals such as winning the Golden Gavel." Such mentorship is something we need to better foster in our chapter today.

Harry E. Rountree passed away on January 22, 2017, having stayed involved in ASHRAE to the very end. At the time of his passing, he was our oldest living chapter member, and he was the member with the longest continuous membership: 64 straight years! Many of Harry's contributions to ASHRAE are reflected in our Chapter Honors and Awards list on our website.





Dusty Stoabs, PE, LEED AP
ASHRAE Central Oklahoma Chapter Historian



www.ashraecok.org

February 27, 2024