

Interview

INTERVIEW WITH JERRY LaRUE, CO-FOUNDER OF THE NWA



Editor's note: Jerry kindly sent in a picture of the house he built. Although he and Georgene were too bashful to send in a formal photo of themselves, the arrow shows the location where Georgene is pulling Jerry out of one of the deeper irrigation ditches.

Digest: You began the NWA 10 years ago. What was the purpose of doing so?

Jerry: Your question is far too generous regarding my role in the NWA. We had nearly 900 members and a very strong organizational nucleus the first year. It was successful because operational meteorological people felt isolated, with no employing organization and no professional society evincing any real interest about what they were doing, or about their future in meteorology. The NWA was formed to represent the interests of operational people.

Digest: You began from scratch, literally forming a national organization from the ground up. What was the process involved, and what were some of the major decisions?

Jerry: In 1974 Tony Tancreto, (then MIC, Boston, MA) Joe Rigney (then MIC, Portland, ME) and I were talking casually about our problems. We felt there was little opportunity to really express our concerns. The conversation got a bit more serious when we agreed to put up a total of \$1,000.00 to organize the NWA. Since I was stationed in Washington, D.C., it was logical that I do the ground work.

The first step was to incorporate. This required an organizational structure, by-laws and a statement of purpose. This had to be done in such a way that the IRS accept the NWA as a non-profit association.

Postal regulations were also investigated and a permit obtained. Meanwhile, a recruiting drive was organized. Key people were selected for various duties, addresses collected, and campaign literature printed. By early 1975 all was ready to go.

It was decided to notify in advance all the larger meteorological organizations about our recruiting drive. For the most part, the information was received in a neutral manner. One person argued that another professional society would "fragment the meteorological community." I am ashamed to admit this gave us pause. However, after due consideration we decided that from the operational viewpoint the community could hardly be more fragmented. Also, about this time, the AMS asked that we delay our recruitment drive: they wanted time to consider ways to provide more representation to operational people. After waiting about three months and hearing nothing further from the AMS, the recruitment drive was launched.

Digest: Who would you consider to have been most helpful, some people you feel deserve a lot of credit?

Jerry: There were really too many people involved in establishing the NWA in the first years to single out individuals. Also, there were many people willing to help but not called on. There is a real problem trying to utilize the talents of people on shift work. They are available during "normal business hours" less than 20 percent of the time. Further, 3 weeks may pass before they are available during these hours, and the term "available" may not be appropriate due to bad weather and deadlines. So the tendency is to utilize "day" workers. We resisted this temptation as much as possible, but when you really think about it, perhaps this was a large part of why operational people were no longer involved in the AMS. I hope the NWA will always keep in mind that the organization is for operational people and they have to be actively involved.

Digest: The NWA is obviously a thriving organization today. Based on what you have seen in the past 10 years, what do you think it has to offer?

Jerry: In setting up the NWA organization, we tried to meet the needs of the operational people in-so-far as we knew them. The NWA has changed to some extent in the past 10 years, which means we were not always correct in our initial evaluations. I hope the NWA will continue to change as events dictate in order to meet the needs of all people employed in operational meteorology.

Digest: If you had to start it all over again, what would you have done differently?

Jerry: For the most part, I think we did what we had to without any major mistakes. My one greatest disappointment was our failure to attract meteorological technicians. I spent 4 years in met-tech positions, and feel they have a lot to offer. Everything we did in organizing the NWA was done with an eye toward attracting met-techs, and in fact we recruited them more actively than "degreed" meteorologists. However, for the most part they viewed the NWA with the suspicion that they would not actually be included. I think it might be a good time to seriously renew the recruitment of met-techs. They now have an even greater need for a reliable representative association.

Digest: Many NWA members feel the AMS disregarded the role of operational forecasting; and a minor rivalry developed. Do you see compatability in the aims of the two organizations or should each focus on specific aspects of meteorology?

Jerry: I think most NWA members feel that the AMS does not adequately represent operational meteorology, nor the people who work in operations. There was no rivalry as far as the NWA was involved since we simply stepped into a void. If there was rivalry from the standpoint of the AMS, it was minimal since they could easily have put the NWA out of business from the start. I am aware that some individuals voiced some rancor, but as far as official relations were concerned, all were cordial and helpful. My personal evaluation is that a lot of credit has to go to Ken Spengler, Executive Director of the AMS for keeping things at a harmonious level.

The AMS is a very large organization representing the whole range of those involved directly and indirectly in meteorology. Many NWA members are also members of the AMS since their interests extend beyond the scope of operational meteorology. Other groups are involved in specific aspects of meteorology, and have formed separate associations. Thus I would

pose this question to the AMS: is their organizational structure adequate to represent all the interdisciplines which they have recruited into their society?

Digest: What would you like to see the NWA do now?

Jerry: I would like to see the NWA resume a monthly Newsletter. The membership needs to be kept informed, and a month is a long enough wait. I have to admit that initially the Newsletter may have contained a lot of "junk," and too much go-go-go, but I think that it served a good purpose.

Digest: How has retirement affected your views of weather forecasts? How do you react when hearing forecasts that don't quite fit the current situation?

Jerry: I live 50 miles north of San Francisco and 8 miles from Santa Rosa — a city of 85,000. My access to weather information is: 1) NOAA weather radio, 2) TV stations originating in San Francisco, San Jose, Sacramento and Santa Rosa, 3) AM Weather on public TV, and 4) Forecasts in the Santa Rosa newspaper by a private meteorologist. Of these, AM Weather is by far the best even though it comes on at 6:45 A.M. Additionally, it originates from Sacramento (about 100 miles away) and reception is not reliable. Next best are some TV weather presentations. Most are available in the evening, but one Sacramento station comes on at noon. The newspaper forecasts are up to 24 hours old, so they are a matter of history. I listen to NOAA Weather Radio once every two or three weeks for an update or if I have missed other forecasts.

Now, I am sure many are going to be surprised that I, a former NWS operational forecaster, should have information priorities like these. (Some will even say that my activities are such that I have no need of good current weather information. For those who have read this far and might read further, this is definitely not the case. I am engaged in commercial outdoor work.) The reason for these priorities is that the NWS has a very minor direct impact on weather information (including weather observations in this area). When I first arrived, the newspaper carried NWS forecasts. A little over a year ago, the NWS changed our zone so as to extend from over 75 miles north to over 75 miles south of San Francisco. Within that zone, average rainfall ranges from less than 15 inches to over 100, and maximum temperatures can range from over 100 degrees to 60 degrees on a summer day. The newspaper hired a private meteorologist to provide detail for a "localized" forecast. As for NOAA Weather Radio, there is no Nowcast; more than half the program is marine observations and forecasts; next day

forecasts (except in the evening) are omitted, or so abbreviated as to be useless; there are no probabilities mentioned; and no descriptions of "unusual" precipitation events are given. Finally, I am not sure yet what area the extended forecast covers. To be as generous as possible it might be said that numerical and automated processes have not made any improvement in locally disseminated NWS information. To summarize, weather information is available but I have to work for it. With so many sources, there are many different forecasts and I have to weigh each one. Interpretations by others can be quite varied with some extremely odd forecasts circulating. Sure sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Digest: How do you spend retirement?

Jerry: The first couple of years were spent building our home. That was in 1981-82. I am still not entirely finished. Most of 1983 was spent in landscaping and installing an irrigation system. Also in 1983, I decided to finish qualifying for Social Security since I needed only a couple of years. So, I started working as a carpenter, electrician and plumber as well as doing drafting, landscaping and irrigation work. There is no lack of work and I pretty well choose what I want to do. I enjoy the work and there is real satisfaction in seeing the final product for more than six hours. Please note: have hammer, don't travel.

Digest: Have you considered working as a meteorological consultant? Why?

Jerry: No. I had a very satisfying career as an operational meteorologist and think consulting work would be anti-climatic.

Digest: You worked at NMC for many years, years in which NMC was the focus of demanding and quality work — sort of the old "glory days." Now, field meteorologists interpret numerical progs as readily as NMC meteorologists did in earlier years, and there is talk of reorganization into super WSFOs with NMC taking a decreasing role. Additionally, computerization is becoming much more frequent and will continue. What is your view on these changes?

Jerry: Numerical prognoses and automation are facts of life in operational weather today. When I was in NMC, numerical progs were not all that great, and rather simple. That situation allowed operational meteorologists many opportunities to evaluate and improve on the progs. Now numerical progs are harder to improve and it is only a question of time until no real improvement will be possible by the forecaster. Then, the term "interpretation" will be the primary operational function. Every operational office in the NWS is presently interpreting the numerical progs for their local area and for different programs. However, I think an overall interpretation and forecast for the entire U.S. will continue to be a necessity.

There is a need for this by many people who aren't trained to interpret progs, or don't have the time. In addition, national centers will continue to be necessary for some programs such as severe weather and hurricanes. For these reasons, I assume there will continue to be a national center or centers.

Reorganizing the NWS WSFOs is dependent on automation. If AFOS works well, it is obvious that more forecasts could be successfully disseminated over a larger area than WSFOs are currently covering. While basic forecast programs could be issued from fewer super WSFOs, some of the service oriented programs such as hydro, agriculture and preparedness probably cannot be centralized to the same degree.

Digest: There appears to be an increasing trend toward private forecasting firms providing greater interaction with the public. What do you think of this trend?

Jerry: I don't think there is any question that private meteorologists are becoming dominant in public forecasting. I may be in the type of location where this has been first to occur. It may not be as obvious in larger cities with active NWS offices, or in rural areas where radio, TV and newspapers cannot afford the services of private meteorologists. The reason for this trend is because private meteorologists are filling a demand. The private meteorologists are offering either new or expanded services which have been discontinued or decreased by the NWS.

From my standpoint, I am receiving more weather information and at more convenient times and ways because of private meteorologists. If I had The Weather Channel on cable TV, it would be even better. I assume this is true for many people in the U.S., so the trend cannot be all bad. Certainly, the NWS is not in a position to reverse this trend, and in fact, I assume it will continue.

Digest: What is your opinion of a joint military-civilian weather organization?

Jerry: Many countries have joint military-civilian weather services. There is one major argument for a joint system and that is fiscal. There just is no question that combining functions would save a great deal of money in research, development, numerical centers and, probably to a lesser extent, in operational manpower. The main arguments against joint services are jurisdictional and political. I doubt a joint venture will occur.

JOBS IN WEATHER

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