

Keith Davis - honorary member

"I've always been an active member" relays Keith Davis, an honorary life member of Water New Zealand, who has worked for water and waste for the good part of his life, in many differing capacities. Having been a driving force in the inauguration of the Association and the events that led up to that point, he is probably the only surviving member of the Association that has a strong knowledge of Water New Zealand in its early working days. Speaking of the members at that time, Keith recollects, that "most of them would have been in their late 50s/60s when this was all started, so they'd be 90 or 100 now. But I was only in my mid-20s."

Keith had wanted to become a doctor, but as fate would have it, this was not to be: "Administration seemed to be my forte, although I was supposed to be a chemist. My dad got me a job where he worked, in the city council, in the school holidays and I liked the laboratory job. I thought, 'Aw, this is alright'. Also, financially mum and dad couldn't support me. We're talking about not long after the war. Things were pretty hard, and I worked in the lab in Titirangi...and then the job at the Drainage Board came up – researching into meat waste disposal, etc." It was in those very offices, at number 28 Quay Street in Auckland, that the Association came to be, and in fact, where many of the initial meetings were held. "That was where I was, the laboratory was up on the 3rd floor, and all the preliminary meetings were in that office. That's the original building there, in the year 1900. Just some slight modifications were made to it, but that is the same building. That's where it was all dreamed up, you might say. That's the guts of it and all of the meetings were there...they would come in at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, sit around and look at the pros and cons." [as per photo - Auckland Drainage Board]

It was Ron Hicks, the Auckland Drainage Board's chief chemist at the time, who first made contact with the Federation of Sewage and Industrial Wastes in the United States, and on a trip to California he took a look into the canning waste industry there and made some important contacts. He returned to New Zealand and started a partnering association. Keith and Ron worked together very closely over the next few years, starting the Association from the ground up. As Keith thinks back over those days he describes himself and Ron: "Ron Hicks belonged to everything. He was one of those people. He was the chief chemist, and I was the assistant chemist in those days."

It truly was a grass roots operation in those days. Keith describes his involvement at that time, "My job was to get around and see what sort of numbers I could drum up. What we did was to get around all of the major industries that we knew either had, or were likely to have, a water pollution problem due to their waste discharge. All of those primary industries that produced a lot of waste, we got all of their general managers or engineers or chemists, to come on board as members...and government departments. In those days there was a Pollution Advisory Council, there was a Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Department of Health, and we got them all to come on board to get a reasonable group together." And what was their preferred method of membership recruitment? It was all done "mostly by telephone, or by letter. I would do all the writing and Ron would do all of the signing, and if it all went all right he got the praise, and if it all went wrong I got the blame," he says, chuckling.

With regard to resources, Keith recalls, "We had nothing. We had absolutely nothing. Looking over the first minute taking book, he says, "I would do this at home, at night, for a few years. That's it, that's it...my grandfather gave me that, to take notes in. Yep, that was my handwriting. That's my old signature, K R Davis." [As per picture, top left] The first part of the book is in Keith's own handwriting, but as he flicks through the book, we see the typewritten minutes that came later. He recalls, "I still had my old typewriter...that was before computers. My wife would sometimes type up the notes of the minutes for me." Behind every great man is a great woman.

In terms of history, there certainly is a lack of information, mostly due to a fire that occurred in Mangare. The history documents were stored in a very ad hoc manner, as Keith describes. "When the journals came to New Zealand I would distribute them out to the individual members and then I got them to send them out direct because I didn't want to double-handle

them. I had a big enough job as it was. And then there was a gap. Somehow, something went awry and nobody got a journal and I complained and complained, then all of a sudden the whole lot came together and they were in 2 mail bags that were made in Sing Sing Prison – you know, the genuine mail bags that were made in the prisons. They were left on my front doorstep, where I lived in Henderson in Auckland. There was nothing else with them, just these two mailbags with all these journals in them. So I had to package them all up and send them out to the members. All the records that I left in Auckland...all the stuff that was sort of history, lived in those mailbags. They were left in a secure spot at the treatment works in Mangare...some say they got burnt, others say they were destroyed. And of course, after 30 or 40 years from that date, people were pretty vague about what exactly happened. But they were lost.”

Initially all Association meetings were held in Auckland. “They had decided to have the conferences and meetings at the location where the executive lived.” But there were occasions when Ron and Keith needed to get to meetings in other parts of the country, particularly to Wellington to drum up support with government agencies. “Ron and I were coming down to Wellington to meet up with some of the government department people, because at the time there weren’t any pollution regulations and the Pollution Advisory Council and trade waste by-laws were just being formulated – this was in the 50s. There was a huge amount of fog, just like it was this morning, here in Wellington. We sat around and waited and waited and waited. And then we suddenly realized that we would have to try and make contact with Wellington to say that we were going to be late and we ended up by killing the trip and going back to town and having to draw it up on another day. We never got those meetings off the ground sometimes...that’s why we always loved to have them in Auckland.”

From the stories Keith tells, there were certainly a few other hitches along the way, like when he was nearly accused of attempting to distribute a film that was unsuitable for public viewing. “We showed films at the meetings in Auckland, and one film I got from Canada, it was called, ‘The River Must Live’ and it was showing...the pollution by the paper mills in Canada and how it was destroying the salmon fishing industry. This film arrives at the new international airport in Auckland and I had to go and pick it up. The guy asked me ‘where was my import license?’ Import license? What import license? It’s just an educational film. Ok, I got past that barrier, then, ‘where was my censor’s rating? Has it been classified?’ And I spent hours arguing the point that that this was a technical film. After it had been shown, and it had done the rounds of Wellington and Christchurch, it came back to me to send off back to Canada. To the best of my knowledge it never, ever arrived. No one knows what happened to it. That was in the early 60s. But it was those sorts of things that helped to make it all come together.”

Another issue was the old ‘who did what’ and ‘who said what’ affair...“There were 3 Davis’s at the beginning. There was LS Davis, who was Ministry of Health, Dave Davis from Ministry of Works, and myself. That was another problem. I’d get a phone call saying, ‘Why did you say that?’ And I’d say, ‘Well, I don’t know what you’re talking about. But I presume it was something that must have been said by one of the others’.” Then there was the claiming of ownership on the very first logo to be produced for the Association, “there was an argument about this. I designed that. Somebody else wanted to take the credit for it, but actually it was copied from an old postage stamp...not that I told anybody else that.” [As per picture of logo, top right.] But it wasn’t all quarrels, not by any means. In fact the way Keith describes it, it was almost a bed of roses. “The other thing about it that I liked...we never really had any squabbles. The executive and committee all worked together. It made life a lot easier.”

What other things went amiss throughout the years? Well, Keith accidentally killed a brood of chickens. “In 1963/64 I was asked to look at the weed problem in Lake Rotorua. Yes, we’ll harvest this weed and make chick feed out of it. I killed all the chickens, didn’t I? You know why? The weed had taken up all of the arsenic out of the lake.”

For all this hard slog, there came a point where Keith just had to pass on his responsibilities to someone else. Having been directly and actively involved as a member as the secretary/treasurer for 14 or 15 years, even longer, he says he got to the stage “where enough was enough! In one way I can honestly say that I felt that I had done my bit early on. It was somebody else’s turn. I had far more important things to deal with, such as my wife’s

health." He was honoured at the Annual General Meeting in 1978 and was made a life member.

When I queried Keith on what he believed to have been the greatest achievements of the Association in the past 50 years, he adamantly replied, "One of its greatest achievements as far as I'm concerned, is the journal. It is internationally accepted. The Association is now producing a journal that is of international standing." Additionally he is happy with the progress made with "the establishment of the recent groups and good dissemination of information, through meetings and the running of courses and so on." The Association has become the central figure on all water and waste issues, "it's tops!"

So where does Keith see the future of the Association? Well, his view is that the Association needs to become more influential and take a stronger leadership role. The Association "has now come of age, so that it can stand up and be counted." There needs to be more uniformity. "I'm not saying the Association set up a laboratory or a research establishment itself, but it would look at where the need is, and come up with a set of standards," standards that could be utilised at a national level. He believes that while it is all very well to sit around and talk about the problems, and discuss the possible solutions, it is time for Water New Zealand to "take the bull by the horns...where you've got a lot of words, unless they're definitive or subjective, they mean nothing." In other words, it is time for action!

By Tina Helm.