

# St. Louis Chapter

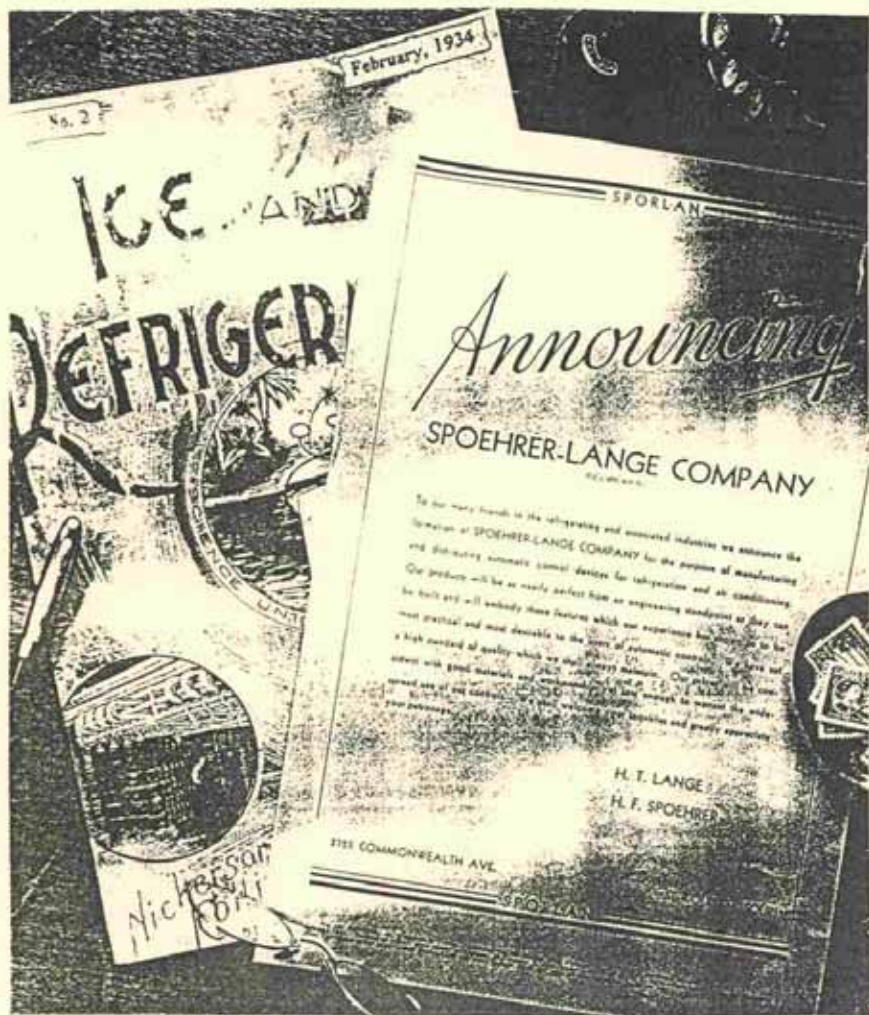
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF HEATING, REFRIGERATING AND AIR-CONDITIONING ENGINEERS, INC.

1990 CRC

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AN ASHRAE HISTORY

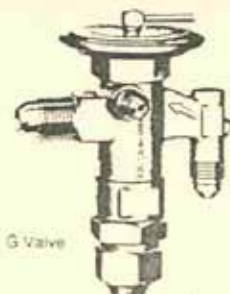
## SPORLAN VALVE COMPANY



H. T. LANGE



H. F. SPOEHRER



G Valve



Catch-All

# THE ASHRAE HISTORY OF A COMPANY

# **SPORLAN VALVE COMPANY**

## **Prologue**

What St. Louis company currently has the most members in the St. Louis Chapter of ASHRAE? What St. Louis company has provided seven Presidents to the St. Louis Chapter of ASHRAE? What St. Louis company received the most votes in a recent poll of the Governing Board to identify the St. Louis organization for which it would be most fitting to prepare a history for ASHRAE? Name one of the four St. Louis organizations that has furnished ASHRAE (or one of its predecessor societies) with a Society President. The response "Sporlan Valve Company" will get you four out of four!

There have been other histories of the Sporlan Valve Company, including the very brief one prepared in 1982 by St. Louis ASHRAE Chapter Historian Bill Norris as part of his "Brief History of Major Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Manufacturing Companies in the St. Louis Area." The present one will certainly draw upon the others but includes more on the relationship of Sporlan and its people to ASHRAE, both at the St. Louis Chapter level and at Society level.

## **The Beginning**

The official start of the Sporlan Valve Company was on New Year's Day, 1934, in 750 square feet of rented space in Maplewood, Missouri, at 3723 Commonwealth Avenue. The company started as the Spoehrer-Lange Company, named after the founders, Harold T. Lange and Hermann F. Spoehrer.

Lange and Spoehrer each held a degree in Electrical Engineering from Washington University in St. Louis. Graduating in June 1920, Lange returned to Washington University a year later as an instructor in Electrical Engineering. He then joined the engineering department in General Electric's St. Louis office, specializing in industrial controls. After his graduation in 1925, Spoehrer formed an electrical contracting firm with Sam Sachs, the S&S Electric Company. Today, operating as Sach Electric Company, the firm remains a successful contracting business in the St. Louis area.

The first event leading to the formation of the Spoehrer-Lange Company occurred in 1925 when an engineer of York Ice Machinery Corporation, a customer of General Electric, approached Lange with the idea of developing an electrically operated valve for controlling ammonia liquid. General Electric, however, rejected the idea because of the limited market. Lange, on the other hand, anticipated a future demand for the control and began work on the development of a motor-operated valve for ammonia systems in the basement of his home. After designing and building a prototype, he approached Spoehrer and Sachs, who maintained a machine shop in connection with their business, and the trio formed the St. Louis Motor Valve Company to manufacture motor-operated valves. Times were tough in the beginning. Lange stayed on at General Electric while Spoehrer and Sachs continued to operate the electrical contracting business. Spare time was spent working on the motor-operated valve. By 1926 the effort resulted in the marketing of motor operated valves that could automatically control the flow of refrigerant. Lange and Spoehrer bought out Sachs' interest and Spoehrer devoted full time to the

business while Lange continued to work for General Electric.

Another company involved in the air conditioning and refrigeration industry was the Alco Valve Company. Formed in 1925, Alco manufactured automatic expansion valves for ammonia systems. The owners of Alco suggested to Lange and Spoehrer that they consider designing and manufacturing a cheaper valve using the principle of the electro-magnet and selling it to Alco. The result was a compact and less expensive control. Although there have been modifications to the electro-magnet stop-valve originally designed by the St. Louis Motor Valve Company, the "solenoid valve," as it is most commonly called, remains one of the most widely used controls in the air conditioning and refrigeration industry of today.

In October 1929, the St. Louis Motor Valve Company sold its interests to Alco. Spoehrer and Lange became minority stockholders in Alco. Lange resigned from General Electric to assume full-time duties at Alco as Vice-President and Chief Engineer. Spoehrer was appointed Secretary and Treasurer.

Spoehrer and Lange cut the ties with Alco by resigning in December 1933. Each sold their stock in Alco and raised capital to finance the new company. The finishing touches to the 750 square foot of rented space for factory, offices, and shipping department were completed on New Year's Eve and the Spoehrer-Lange Company was ready for business on January 1, 1934.

### **Developmental Years**

The first year of business was not a "banner" year. A total of 792 assorted thermostatic expansion valves were sold. During the second year of business, annual production increased to 3800 valves. An even more dramatic increase was established in the third year when output reached 9200 valves.

Lange and Spoehrer had been favorably impressed with the community of Washington, Missouri with the availability of trained machinists, mainly German immigrants, and good transportation facilities due to its location on the Missouri River. In 1939, they decided to build a new plant there. At this time in the company's history, there were four sales engineers, two in the East and two in the Midwest. In addition, there were three manufacturers' representatives, on the West Coast, in the Southwest, and in the Southeast. A New York City firm handled export sales, which dated back to 1936.

In 1944 the name of the company was changed from the Spoehrer-Lange Company to Sporlan Valve Company. Sporlan had been the product name and part of the trademark since the founding of the company.

Continued growth made it evident that the building on Commonwealth Avenue could no longer adequately quarter all the departments and their employees. More space was needed and, in 1947, the company bought property on Sussex Avenue and built a building that provided office space, shipping/and warehousing and a repair department. Additional space was also needed at the plant in Washington, Missouri, and a 6000 square foot building was built to adjoin the original plant.

During the early 1940's, numbers of valves were returned as "defective" which had nothing wrong in either material or workmanship. Inspection showed that the valves became inoperative on systems because of dirt and moisture, leading to considerable interest in developing a filter-drier. Silica gel appeared to have the lead as desiccant with its wide use in the industry; however, the drier cores made using silica gel and a binder left something to be desired. Sporlan decided to proceed with the filter-drier project using activated alumina, which retained moisture at higher temperatures than silica gel, removed acids from refrigerants, and the core proved an excellent filter. The Catch-All was born.

### **Expanding into the Present**

In the 1950s and 1960s additional plant space was added to the original building and more equipment was purchased to increase machine shop capacity. When the original plant in Washington left no room for expansion in the early 1970s, an assembly plant was built on a nineteen-acre site in Washington. Expansions at the new plant were necessary in 1978, 1979, and 1986. By 1950 Sporlan was a supplier to most of the major manufacturers of air conditioning and refrigeration equipment with a customer list that included: Carrier, General Electric, Westinghouse, Airtemp-Div. of Chrysler, Frick, Hussman, Hill, Warren, Friedrich, and others. In the early 1950s, wholesalers were established in most of the major trading areas in the United States. Sporlan sales policy then and now was distribution through a "selective basis," limiting the number of wholesalers in a given trade area.

One thermostatic expansion valve bears special mention, the type 'G' valve (still in production today). This valve was of take-apart construction that could be easily serviced in the field. The type 'G' valve found widespread applications in commercial refrigeration and became the standard of the industry.

In 1960, the total number of employees in the St. Louis office was approximately 60 and the field sales force increased to 25. Sales of Sporlan products outside the continental United States have been important to the growth of the company. Sporlan Valve Co., Ltd., which began operation in mid-1962, was making an impact in the Canadian market by 1968. With the increased demand for U.S. technology and its related products as worldwide communications and travel have expanded, Sporlan export sales have grown significantly since 1968. The period 1968 through 1987 is but another important segment of the company's history. The economy of the United States experienced generally protracted periods of growth. There were several economic downturns...most notably the period from late 1974 through 1975. But through all of these periods, Sporlan grew; developed and introduced new products and refinements to existing products; increased the number of distribution outlets carrying the product line; and added people to the organization to plan for the future.

### **Hermann F. Spoehrer-ASRE Society President 1957-1958**

Hermann F. Spoehrer was a leader in the growth of the HVAC&R industry. He served on the Board of Directors of the Air Conditioning & Refrigeration Institute and later as advisor to the Board. He was also President of that organization's predecessor, the Refrigeration Equipment Manufacturers Association.

Mr. Spoehrer was Chairman of the St. Louis Chapter of the American Society of Refrigeration Engineers, and in 1957 was elected national President of ASRE. He was a member of the committee representing ASRE during the merger proceedings with the American Society of Heating and Air-Conditioning Engineers and subsequently served on many society level committees of the new organization, ASHRAE.

Hermann Spoehrer had a deep sense of civic responsibility and served many organizations in the Metro-St. Louis area. One of his favorite endeavors was Junior Achievement and he served for 20 years on its Board of Directors and four years as its President.

In 1968, Hermann Spoehrer passed away at the age of 64. The Governing Board of the St. Louis ASHRAE Chapter established the Hermann F. Spoehrer Memorial Award on March 8, 1974. Sporlan Valve Company sponsors this award in his memory to recognize annually a member of the St. Louis Chapter who has made meaningful contributions to ASHRAE, the St. Louis Chapter, and to the community. Since it was established in 1972, the following chapter members have received the award:

1974 Bruce L. Evans  
1975 John Dube  
1976 Werner K. Bauer  
1977 Erwin C. Hoelscher  
1978 Gordon Glunt  
1979 Harry J. Sauer, Jr.  
1980 James (Bud) Barry  
1982 Ronald H. Howell  
1984 William J. Coad  
1986 Richard J. Buck  
1987 Roger O. Zoellner  
1988 William K. Tao  
1989 Vincent F. Stanec, Jr.

### **William F. Wischmeyer-ASHRAE Board of Directors 1960-62&1969-72**

Two years after receiving his B.S. in mechanical engineering at Washington University in 1937, Bill Wischmeyer joined the Sporlan Valve Company as a field engineer. After serving in the Navy in World War II, he returned to Sporlan and became Chief Engineer and General Manager. In 1968, he was named Vice President and General Manager serving in that capacity until 1977 when he became President. In 1987 he acquired his present position as Chairman of the Board and Kenneth A. Ohlemeyer was named President. At the same time, the company also named co-founder Harold T. Lange as chairman of the board, emeritus.

William Wischmeyer's involvement with ASHRAE/ASRE dates back to 1948, and his service on the Standards Committee for thermostatic expansion valves. Since then, he has served on many of the Society's standing and technical committees, as well as a number of ad hoc presidential committees.

At the chapter level, Mr. Wischmeyer has held all of the offices in the St. Louis Chapter including serving as Chairman for the 1952-53 society year. From 1960-62 he was

elected a member of the ASHRAE Board of Directors. He then served on the Society's Nominating Committee from 1962-63, the Research & Technical Committee from 1962-67 (as Chairman 1964-65), and the Finance Committee for 1967-68 and again from 1970-72...to list but a few examples of his committee service to ASHRAE. He served a second term on the ASHRAE Board of Directors from 1969-1972. He is the recipient of ASHRAE's Distinguished Service Award and was made a Fellow Member in 1974.

With the support of ASHRAE displayed by its top management as illustrated in the previous sections, it is little wonder that so many of Sporlan Valve personnel, both from the St. Louis operation as well as the field sales divisions, have played such active roles in ASHRAE. The committee service is too numerous to detail. However, in addition to the major contributions to the Presidency of the St. Louis Chapter covered in the next section, eleven field staff have served as Presidents of other chapters of ASHRAE, ASHVE, or ASRE.

### **Sporlan and the St. Louis ASHRAE Chapter**

As indicated in the previous section, the support of ASHRAE by Sporlan Valve began with the founders of the company. Since Hermann Spoehrer headed the St. Louis Chapter of ASRE, six other Sporlan associates have joined the list of Chairmen/Presidents of the St. Louis Chapter of ASHRAE or of its predecessor societies:

1945-46 Hermann F. Spoehrer ASRE  
1947-48 William Carmody ASRE  
1952-53 William Wischmeyer ASRE  
1958-59 Frank G. Jaeger ASHAE  
1967-68 Edward F. Kounovsky ASHRAE  
1974-75 William J. Barbier ASHRAE  
1976-77 Richard J. Buck ASHRAE

### **"Back to the Future"**

Someone once said, "The past is prologue." Wholesalers have always been a very important part of the Sporlan presence in the industry. The concept of selective distribution - with some refinements to respond to changing marketing conditions - apparently has served Sporlan and its customers well over the years. The number of wholesaler outlets that serve the trade by carrying a stock of Sporlan products more than doubled in the past two decades. Original equipment manufacturers also remain a significant part of Sporlan's overall sales. The explosive growth of unitary air conditioning systems has stimulated expansion in the sale of both flow control and contaminant control products. Commercial and residential air conditioning have experienced sustained growth and with them, the market for refrigerant system components. The basic products of the Sporlan Valve Company should also hold the key to the future of the company.

With at least nineteen Sporlan personnel as current members of the St. Louis Chapter of ASHRAE, including the President-Elect for 1991, Donald E. Chura, the histories of Sporlan Valve Company and the St. Louis ASHRAE Chapter will continue to be interwoven.