

NESEA Pioneers, 1974-1980

They have been described as visionaries, pioneers, energy conservationists, engineers, political activists, back-to-the-land hippies, and dreamers. They are some of the people who came together in 1974 to create the New England Solar Energy Association. Over the years, the vision and hard work of these people has evolved into what is now the Northeast Sustainable Energy Association.

If there is one person to credit with the founding of the organization, it is probably John Schnebly who now works in Rensselaer, New York with local developers to create energy efficient housing. As a Peace Corps worker in the late 1960s in Panama he became convinced that "energy was going to be the major economic issue of our time." He went to Boston University, attended Harvard's Institute for Politics, and worked for the Interfaith Housing Corporation on urban renewal projects around the Boston area.

A Village Gives Birth to an Association

As his energy vision began to evolve, while working in Topeka, Kansas in 1973, he came across a copy of the Mother Earth News. In that issue was a story about Grassy Brook Village in Vermont, a community housing concept created by Richard Blazej. It was his dream to see a small community of energy self-sufficient homes in a quiet corner of rural America become a model for the rest of the country, if not the world. The village was never built (although the solar system was), but the people and ideas that came together as a result of working on the vision have more than made up for the lack of a realized community.



John Schnebly today

Schnebly visited Blazej in Vermont and was invited to a stockholders' meeting of the fledgling organization. He was also invited to work on the project. He moved to Vermont to help get Grassy Brook Village built. It wasn't long before he developed a circle of contacts in New England, people who were interested in and knowledgeable about energy efficiency and solar energy.

That early group "attracted architects, product developers, new agers, advocates, recycled hippies, writers, and everyone oriented to efficient-energy solutions instead of more centralized power plants," according to Schnebly. A number of people in that first group soon attended a conference in Fort Collins, Colorado called Solar Energy South. There, a group from New Mexico started the American section of the International Solar Energy Society.

This trip inspired Schnebly and a few others to start a New England group and they used the list New England attendees at the Colorado conference to get the ball rolling. In October of 1974, they held an organizational meeting at Leland and Grey High School in Townshend, Vermont and the New England Solar Energy Association was born.

Schnebly was voted the first chair of the board, with Bruce Anderson as vice chair, Jay Shelton as treasurer, and Betty Shaw as secretary. It is interesting to note that Blazej, who inspired much of this effort, declined to join this new board because he was too busy with the Grassy Brook Village project. But Blazej remained an instrumental advisor.

Schnebly notes that, from the beginning, there was "a leadership struggle." It wasn't the typical ego battle that plagues many organizations, but it was a struggle for vision and direction. At one end were those pushing for a technology focus for the organization, which would mean holding conferences and workshops, while there were other forces pushing the group to be more of a political action group. An effort was made to accommodate both groups.

Schnebly said that he tried to focus his energies on creating a business environment for individual and corporate investments. Others continued to put their efforts into political action. These two groups, with different agendas, worked together to put on the first Toward Tomorrow Fair at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in the summer of 1976. Thousands of people came to view the exhibits and to listen to educational presentations

Schnebly believes this 1976 conference gave the organization its first public image as a small enterprise of solar pioneers. To create more of a corporate image, the group held the Better Thermal Utilization Conference (BTU) in 1978 at the Hartford Civic Center. Amory Lovins, of the Rocky Mountain Institute, was the keynote speaker. This conference was a milestone for NESEA.

Schnebly saw the organization settle in as an organizer of workshops, educational conferences, and trade shows. He says that NESEA carved out a niche of keeping technologists in touch with each other and showing what works and what doesn't work in the real world. They did this by providing a showcase for innovative technologies at trade shows.



Drew Gillett at the
2000 Building Energy

Conference

When Schnebly moved to Colorado in 1979, he passed the baton to Drew Gillett, a professional engineer. He believes that Gillett helped transform the organization beyond the immediate circle of Grassy Brook friends to include a circle of people associated with Gillett, who came from MIT and industry, and who dealt with governmental issues relating to energy. As Gillett explains it, he became chair of the board because, "I didn't say 'No' quick enough at a board meeting."

Although Gillett didn't take the reigns until 1979 he was active in the organization prior to that. He recalls the February 1977 fire that destroyed the NESEA office in Townshend, Vermont and the subsequent move to Brattleboro, where the organization's headquarters remained until 1989.

The Mentor

There are many other people who have been part of NESEA over the years and many who have inspired the work of the organization. But one name seems to come up more than others and that is William Shurcliff. Shurcliff is now 92 years old and his hearing is not very good, but the memory and the mind of this Cambridge, Mass. scientist and inventor are still sharp.

Most of the founders of NESEA considered Shurcliff to be a mentor. He proved to be a valuable resource for those who were pioneers in solar energy and energy-efficient technology.

Shurcliff received a doctorate from Harvard in the mid-1930s and went on to work for the Polaroid Corporation. He then returned to Harvard where he says he worked with their "atom smasher" until it ceased operation in 1971. It was then that he went into solar heating. As a physicist, he had been working in light and optics and made a number of inventions, wrote books, and corresponded with key people in his field throughout the country.

In his book *Solar Heated Houses of North America*, Shurcliff profiled 300 homes. He also became interested in the fact that those who were working on solar energy projects were not writing down what they were doing, so he talked to people about details of their projects and chronicled his interviews. That became the book *New Inventions in Low Cost Solar Heating*. He also wrote books on related subjects such as air-to-air heat exchangers.

The inventor and scientist said he quit working in 1985. He now devotes his time to hobbies, writing to friends, and occasionally writing pieces for newsletters. Shurcliff seems to be a modest man, but a man who had a great deal of influence on the lives and careers of energy innovators who followed. He speaks humbly of his 100 or so inventions and said in a recent interview, "Most weren't worth a damn and I didn't try them out. I myself built nothing."

A Boston Chapter

While Gillett, Schnebly, and others were building their organization in Vermont, others in the Boston area came together for similar reasons. A Boston chapter of NESEA was formed by engineer Robert Smith in the mid 70's. Shurcliff was a mentor and inspiration to this group, comprised largely of engineers and those with ties to MIT.

The oil embargo of 1974 sparked Smith's interest in solar energy. Using his MIT engineering training, he decided that it was time to put the sun to use. He did some research and found out about the Vermont NESEA group. His motivation was "to learn about this business; the way they do it in a freezing climate."



Robert Smith today

He was in the Boston area at the time and realized that no one else was doing this kind of work there, so he subscribed to the NESEA newsletter and soon asked NESEA if he could start a Boston chapter. The chapter met at the MIT Faculty Club. Smith headed it and, as he describes it, "I ran this group like a dictator for a year or two, but got tired of running it alone." So they wrote bylaws and created a more formal structure in 1977. At that time NESEA became affiliated with the American Solar Energy Society, which was a member of the International Solar Energy Society.

Meeting attendance for the Boston group was generally 40 people and a speech on a relevant topic was presented at each meeting. As might be expected, most of the members were engineers and designers. They looked to William

Shurcliff for guidance and support during their early years.

Many members of this Boston group were doing solar installations and they were reporting the results of their work. One of the projects was an installation of solar hot water heaters for the Boston Public Schools. According to Smith, the school system ran it but they didn't know how to care for it and the project never took off.

Smith himself was involved in a project to design a hot-water heating system for the homes of 100 customers of New England Electric Systems. Smith describes the results as "a mixed bag of success and failure." The manufacturers who responded to work on the project were newcomers to the technology and everyone involved was still learning. The *Wall Street Journal* did a piece on the project and labeled it a failure. Smith says, at the time, "We thought it was black-eyed journalism." Nevertheless the article caught the attention of the Brookhaven National Laboratory and Smith was hired to evaluate a solar hot-water project for them.

The intervening years have not seen much of a change in Smith's passion for solar heating and energy conservation, but he is a realist who understands that, "Economic realities don't put solar energy at the pinnacle of the whole economy."

Smith and his Boston group maintained their ties with NESEA over the years. While they remained in the background, in terms of organizational work, the Vermont group forged

ahead.

Reaching Out

The work of Larry Sherwood, who in 1979 moved from New Mexico to work for NESEA in Vermont, Gillett, and many others led to the National Passive Solar Conference in 1980 at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. This conference was the largest of its kind ever held with 5000 registrations. There were four separate conferences held at the site including: an Active Solar Conference, Thermal Envelope Conference, Women in Solar Conference, and a Passive Solar Conference. Gillett believes that the proliferation of rooftop solar panels in western Massachusetts was the direct result of that conference.



Richard Blazej

Gillett compared the work of Sherwood to Johnny Appleseed. Sherwood traveled around from builder to builder showing them what kinds of solar and energy efficient projects worked and he was able to play a large part in bringing solar technology to New England. He later went on to become the director of the American Solar Energy Society.

After serving a few terms as board chair and working in collaboration with Sherwood, Gillett moved on to become a consultant and eventually struck out on his own with his Bedford, New Hampshire-based business offering integrated solar and mechanical/electrical consulting services for commercial, residential, and institutional projects. Reflecting on the strength and longevity of NESEA, he attributes the organization's success to embracing what he called "the big tent theory". This means getting the involvement of people from all walks of life, all technologies, all political persuasions.

Shortly after Gillett stepped down from his position as chair of NESEA, the organization was renamed the Northeast Solar Energy Association when it merged with the mid-Atlantic chapter of the American Solar Energy Society. The organization continued to evolve, grow, and expand its focus to eventually become the Northeast Sustainable Energy Association of today.

One thing is clear about the early history of NESEA. Its founders were pioneers with a vision. Their work, and their unique brand of genius, helped move the world a little bit closer to an understanding of the vital need for sustainable energy. The solid foundation that they built, grounded in the basic concepts of solar energy and energy conservation, will sustain the NESEA vision in the new millennium.

***This article, NESEA Pioneers, 1974-1980, appeared in the Winter 2001-2002 issue of the Northeast Sun. It was written by Richard Davis, a freelance writer. His work on this article was funded by Sunnyside Solar, Inc. of Guilford, VT, in memory of Richard Blazej.*