

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION AND REFINEMENT
How the System Dynamics Society Came to Be
Precursor conference-related events—the 1981 Conference in
Rensselaerville.

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The initial idea to hold a conference in North America exclusively devoted to system dynamics was first discussed in 1980 at the IEEE meetings held in Cambridge. We recall that Peter Senge, Alan Graham, and others had organized a special track of papers in system dynamics as part of section on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics. At an informal dinner held at the MIT Faculty Club, several persons attending this meeting floated the idea of holding a meeting exclusively devoted to system dynamics, much as had been done at the Geilo meetings in Norway several years before. It fell to John Morecroft, who was an Assistant Professor at the Sloan School and to David Andersen who was an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Public Affairs, University at Albany to follow through on this idea.

Our first worry was by what authority we could call such a meeting. So we drafted a letter to all the then major centers of system dynamics as listed in the System Dynamics Newsletter asking for sponsorship of the event. Our memory is that everyone we contacted agreed to sponsor the event. The final sponsoring organizations were:

Information to follow.

David Andersen located the site in Rensselaerville as the location for the conference because of its off-the-beaten-track location—a place where we could all meet to reflect on the field and share insights. We scheduled the event for the peak foliage season in the fall of 1981. We found as broad a mailing list as we could from the various sponsors and invited everyone we could. We didn't know if anyone would come or if we would run out of space at the site. In the end, about 100 participants showed up, just about exactly the limit of the number of beds at Rensselaerville. As logistical arrangements became greater and greater getting ready for the event, David Andersen asked the University of Albany for some help. Robert Quinn, director of a public affairs research center on that campus, offered the support of a young administrative assistant who was working with his center, Roberta Spencer. In a short while, Roberta was spending most of her time working on the conference.

This first conference consisted of 20 papers presented in plenary and 53 papers presented in parallel sessions. The printed proceedings ran to 350 pages and contained a wide variety of topics, broadly representing the field around the world. We recall that Ed Roberts presented a plenary talk that envisioned “The Third Wave” of researchers in System Dynamics. The second wave represented a small number of researchers who had come to know and work with system dynamics by working directly with Jay Forrester at MIT. Roberts saw at this conference a much larger wave of researchers who had connected to the field in multiple other ways, previewing the dawn of a larger view of the

field. Jean Lebel, who had been attending the system dynamics meetings sponsored by AFCET, gave a major address where he called for the creation of a “Transnational Society of System Dynamics.” He invited all present to come to Brussels the next year to attend the 1982 AFCET conference that was scheduled to have many papers from around the world on system dynamics.

The National Model of the MIT System Dynamics group was a major topic of discussion at this meeting. A young Peter Senge presented a paper on “Metanoic Organizations” (co-authored with Charlie Kiefer), indicating that he was starting to think along some new lines with his own work. European attendees, especially those associated with the AFCET conferences in France and Belgium was presenting a new set of ideas associated with non-linear dynamics, ideas foreign to most of the North Americans and destined to mature into a focus on chaos and complexity in dynamic systems. A paper by Jack Pugh and J. Werb on “DYNA-MITE: A Micro-Computer version of DYNAMO” marked the beginning on the personal computer era in system dynamics.

We recall that a young Michael Karsky injured himself in one of the soccer matches being played on the lawns. He was transported by car to a local farm house that happened to also be the residence of one of the last country doctors in the region. She treated his injury with skill and aplomb, creating one of the many memories from this conference. Another memory is associated with the very first page of the duplicated proceedings. It was a cartoon (perhaps from the New Yorker) showing a gypsy, Madam Olga, sitting in the window of a store front. Emblazoned across the window was the advertisement, “Your Future Simulated by Computer.” We recall Andy Ford wishing his paper, that could be cited in litigation on power generation court actions, had not been published in such a format.

Shortly after the conference was over, Roberta Spencer left her employment at the University at Albany to give birth to her son Dan. Many years later, after Dan was grown and off to school, she showed up to play another part in the creation of the System Dynamics Society.