

In the Beginning

The very first SSA meeting changed it all for the self storage industry

By John Dunlap

It was the meeting that changed everything in self storage. The year was 1976 and self storage wasn't even known by that name. But one man realized that he needed to talk to others in the "mini-warehouse" business if he was going to make things work in his own. So Buzz Victor, who had already decided to create a nonprofit organization in 1975 dedicated to the fledgling industry, felt the time was right to see if he could bring people together to share ideas and experiences.

And thus was born what is now known as the Self Storage Association Conference & Trade Show. But in 1976 there were no major hotels and huge turnouts of people, no large and impressive vendor areas. There was, however, a small group of 125 members of the American Mini-Warehouse Owners Association, which Victor had formed—and with good reason.

"It all came about because I had made some fairly critical mistakes in getting started in the business," Victor says. "And nobody else who I tried speaking to about what I might need to do to succeed was interested in talking to me. So, I decided that if I started a trade association maybe I would find some people who would be willing to talk to me!"

Victor started by checking yellow pages directories all over the country for listings of mini-warehouse owners and he was able to come up with 107 properties to contact. After a year of bringing in new members, Victor made a major decision to hold a two-day gathering in Denver, Colorado (where he lived), to see about finally getting people together to talk. He was nervous and slightly apprehensive.

On June 11–13, 1976, it all came together.

The Joy of Sharing

"About 40 people showed up and the first thing we did was all get up and introduce ourselves, as well as tell everyone about our connection to the business," Victor says. "Well, we all were beginning to sound alike—we all had facilities with 200, 300 or 400 units—and when we got about two-thirds of the way around a man stood up and said, 'My name is Tom Brundage, I'm from San Antonio, and I have



Buzz Victor back in the days when self storage as an industry was about to discover itself.

7,000 units.' We all just stared in amazement. We had never known anyone in the business on Tom Brundage's scale."

"And then what happened was incredible," Victor adds. "Everyone started opening up and sharing ideas. Tom Brundage said that he learned as much about the industry as he passed along to us. Everyone was helpful. Everyone was frank and heartfelt. It spoke to the quality of the people who were in the business—and I think are in this business today—very high quality, caring, responsible and intelligent."

"And that's the way it began. That first meeting set a tone. People were willing to talk and pass along information. And at every further meeting it continued in that kind of way."

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Bill Copeland spoke about the yellow pages, Mike Russell about zoning, Mike Rowe about security, Bill Ard about marketing and Tom Peppers about management. A board of directors was also chosen, consisting of Frank Blumeyer, Don Daniels (who later became president), Steve Gage (who also later became a president), Sig Groch, Peppers, Russell and Victor. A budget of \$13,500 was adopted for the first year.

What It All Meant

By the time the event was over, Victor had the answer to his questions, as well as a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm.

“Everybody came away from that meeting ready to get together again,” Victor says. “There was such an amazing amount of synergy and energy over those few days. Prior to that meeting there had been so much guesswork for everyone in the industry. There were no laws in place regarding how the industry should be run—no nothing. Everyone was pretty desperate for information.”

“It is because of that meeting and the growth of what now is the SSA (which originally was known as the Self Service Storage Association before becoming the Self Storage Association) that this industry even exists on the level that it does today,” he adds. “There was early work done to settle on legislation. Back then if something happened to a tenant’s goods we would have been responsible for it. The industry just wouldn’t have lasted long if that had continued.”

Victor points out that in the early years even the use of the term “mini-warehouse” was a negative and was primarily responsible for the shift to the term “self storage.”

“You had to build your business on industrial property because the zoning people didn’t want you in town,” Victor says. “It wasn’t the sort of business that you’d want to drive your father-in-law to look at.”

So now, even after a highly successful career in self storage and having been witness to the amazing growth of the industry, Buzz Victor can look back at those summer days in Denver in 1976 and smile contentedly.

“It really all started with that meeting,” he concludes. “The fact that so many people were willing to open up and share information really was impressive. It was remarkable, just remarkable.”

So, if you are walking around in Colorado Springs at the SSA’s 2010 Spring Conference & Trade Show and have some questions that need answering, just think of Buzz Victor and realize that there are people willing to help you find answers. That’s the way it was—and the way it should be. ❖