

INTERVIEW OF DOUG NELSON BY CAROL EAVES

What brought you to SKAL?

Good question. It's not so much as what brought me to SKAL but how we brought SKAL to us. In the early 70s a core group of N.J. travel industry people discussed SKAL and the New York SKAL Club and how we would like to see a New Jersey Club formed. Going into New York for their luncheon meetings were just inconvenient and took up too much of our work day although the New York SKAL Club did have several of our New Jersey travel executives as their members. We initially tried to follow start up pre-requisites through the New York club as they were the largest and oldest club in the nation but discovered that we were being stonewalled as they thought our club would dilute their membership. Then we turned to NASCUSA (now called SIUSA) and in May of 1977 our club was formally chartered. We started small with only 25 members but soon had 65, at our first dinner meeting and installation we had all 25 members attending with spouses. It was a gala celebration.

How long have you been a member of SKAL?

In May of this year it will be 37 years.

What was the most memorable event or experience that you have had during your years as a SKAL member?

To define one event would be difficult as there have been many. I would say ascending through the chairs to serve as President and then serving for two years as NASCUSA Rep was part of it. Then of course attending the many NASCUSA congresses in places such as Acapulco, San Juan and New Orleans and of course the world congresses in Jerusalem, Johannesburg and Taipei were certainly memorable events. I must mention that many of the congresses I attended were not as a delegate but as a Skalman along with many of our club members who were not delegates. If I can relate to one exciting set of events it was meeting the then President of the Isle of Jersey-Channel Islands Geoffrey Winchester in Jerusalem way back in 1986. There came this fellow in kilts sporting a Jersey nametag on his Tunic and as I had a New Jersey nametag on my jacket we stopped and chatted and agreed to meet with our wives for dinner. They were a delightful couple and at the end of the dinner we discussed the possibility of our two clubs getting together. Well it took two years and a lot of planning and then 24 of their members arrived on our New Jersey doorstep. We had a wonderful program arranged with dinners, sightseeing, a trip to New York and even Atlantic City. The leader of their group was the then Count de Carteret the current President. We found out that his ancestor Sir George Carteret was the co-founder of New Jersey back in 1702 along with a Lord Berkeley. More investigation proved that our current Governor Thomas Kane was a direct descendant of Lord Berkeley. We called the Governor and let him know of our guests and were immediately invited to the Capitol building in Trenton for a luncheon with him. On the way we stopped in the city of Carteret and met with the mayor and officials of the city. That evening onward to Atlantic City. It was a truly memorable day. Two years later a group of 15 of our club members went to Jersey to attend their Installation dinner. I had not planned on going as I had too much on my plate at the office. Our group left on Thursday for Jersey and on Friday morning I stopped early in a NYC barber shop for a haircut on the way to my NYC office. Seated next to me was the DSM/NYC of British Airways. I told him of our club going to Jersey but that I could not go. He said "Why not-I will have a positive space pass waiting for you at JFK for one of tonight's flights." How could I refuse? I left the office lunchtime and rushed back to New Jersey to pack including Black Tie and rushed out to JFK. Caught some sleep at the hotel where the event was going to be held and walked in unannounced surprising not only my club members but the Winchesters and the Jersey Club members who had visited our club. What a wonderful welcome I received. That night at dinner we proposed that our clubs become sister clubs. It is in my opinion what SKAL is all about. The next morning on Sunday I flew back to JFK. It was my shortest European visit. There are many more memorable experiences but I could fill too many pages.

Who was the most inspirational person you met because of SKAL?

I would have to say Joseph Neary a past President of the New York SKAL club and later Vice President of Region One. He personified SKAL and was nicknamed "Mr. SKAL" When we were putting our club together he offered guidance and attended many of our meetings. He and I attended many conferences together. Unfortunately he has passed on but he will always be remembered as "Mr. SKAL"

What words of guidance could you impart that incorporate your past SKAL experience with the current environment?

Well let it not be for me to impart guidance only that for 44 years in the Airline Industry I have always tried to keep my ear against the wall and interact with my fellow travel Industry friends. One of my sources has been certainly been SKAL.

Networking and sharing information has been paramount on keeping enlightened and keeping up with the times and trends. I cannot tell you how often SKAL has been beneficial with contacts in helping my sales and marketing efforts here and abroad.

I spent 38 years with KLM and 4 years with NWA and met with SKALEAGUES in Holland and other European Cities. Hoteliers, Tour Operators, Motor coach Owners and more. We passed on information and groups to one another which otherwise would have gone by the wayside.

While in New Orleans on a NASCUSA congress for example I was having lunch with some of my New Jersey colleagues in a Creole restaurant. Behind me I heard French being spoken. There was a French Nun, a lady and a gentleman. I asked them if they were enjoying New Orleans and the United States. They were enthusiastic in their reply and said they were leading a group of 35 French Catholic girl students on Spring break from Bordeaux. They brought the group every year to the U.S. I told them I was from the New York area and attending a SKAL conference. With that the gentleman jumped up and said he was a Travel Agent and a SKALEAGUE from Bordeaux assisting his wife, a teacher and the Mother Superior as a chaperone. His wife then asked me if I could help her finding a hotel reasonably priced hotel in NYC for their next years trip. They gave me their business card and when returning to New Jersey I called some hotelier SKALEAGUES in NYC and obtained a good rate for their group. That prompted them book their next group on KLM and several more in later years. That's what SKAL is all about.-doing business with SKAL friends worldwide.

Considering how our society and the Hospitality, Travel and Tour industries are changing so quickly, can you suggest a way to keep members more involved?

Change oh yes I have seen that in the travel industry for the last forty years. There is only one thing that is constant in our lives and that is change. In the airline industry bigger aircraft from propeller driven to jumbo jets. Look at the Boeing 787 its almost a flying city. How do you fill those monsters- mass marketing was the answer, internet direct reservations and frequent flyer programs. What happened to the Mom and Pop travel agencies-were they prepared for change? Cutting commissions being forced to go fee based and gearing more towards the corporate market. The large agencies made the change and the smaller agencies went by the wayside. It was a travesty. And look at the large number of U.S. airlines that went out of business since deregulation. Those carriers did not face up to change. The small upstart low fare carriers filled their voids by picking the fat off their carcasses like vultures. Now you pay to check a bag and are lucky to get peanuts instead of a meal. Look at how the remaining larger U.S. carriers which have had to merge in order to stay a float or in the air. They had to Change!

Can I suggest a way to keep members more involved. Only by attendance and participation. Network, listen and learn. Like any other organization you only get out of it what you put into it. It seems a shame to me that since I transferred to the Tampa Bay SKAL club in 2003 that I have seen a growing lack of participation from our membership. Meetings being cancelled due to lack of attendance. Reluctance to travel across the bay to Tampa for meetings and even a joint meeting with Orlando at Lego land when bus transportation was provided and only 12 of our members participated. What an embarrassment for our club. Other clubs have held meetings and Region Four conferences. At one of the last conferences in Calloway Gardens in Georgia. Only Russ Bond, his wife Nancy and I attended. How many attended Key Largo? only the delegates. I have been

by myself at Jacksonville weekends and Orlando Golf outings representing our club. That is "NOT" what SKAL is all about. Next year we are hosting the Region Four Conference. How can we expect to be supported in attendance by other clubs if our membership does not support theirs. Get involved Network, make SKAL contacts and keep updated. I was happy to become a member of our board for the two year term after I transferred into our club. I would have liked to go through the chairs again and ascend to Presidency but Life members are not permitted to do that.

What motivates you to attend meetings?

Although I do some consulting I am basically retired. I guess my head is still in the travel Industry after a lifetime with the airlines. Attending is one way to stay in the loop. Our club is very creative in organizing exciting and new venues at our meetings and the dinners are usually outstanding. I also like to socialize with our fellow Skaleagues and hear what's happening.

What direction/vision would you like to see our Tampa Bay SKAL club move in the future?

Well of course first and foremost is increasing our membership. That is essential. I do not want to overly praise my past N.J. SKAL club but a few years ago when we put together a presentation to become the SKAL club of the year, NJ came in third out of all the clubs worldwide. They were mainly selected because of interclub activity. They hold a yearly Region One Golf outing. They regularly have joint meetings with The NYC, Philadelphia, Albany, Hartford Atlantic City and Boston Clubs. In addition Have at least one overseas trip a year with their Airline Manager members providing the transportation. They have presented their New Jersey SKAL Banner to the Dublin Club, the Amsterdam Club, The Reykjavic Club, the Munich club, the Zagreb Club and others. Of course they have hosted several of these clubs in New Jersey just as we did with the Isle of Jersey Club during my tenure. Many global friendships and contacts have been made. In addition they hold a local travel trade show which is not only good for commercial reasons but also to recruit new members.

To conclude I believe in SKAL!

On behalf of our club, thank you Doug for being our first inspirational SKAL interview. Carol