Jinny Nathans: This is Jinny Nathans, the AMS archivist, and I'm here on January 8th, 2019 at the annual meeting in Phoenix. I am talking to Jack May, and he is going to tell us about his first AMS meeting.

Jack May: I'll talk about my first AMS meeting, and why I keep coming back. My first AMS meeting, I was just one year into my new job as Director of the Aviation Weather Center, it was my first AMS meeting and I was expected to go, so I went, and I found it was amazing. First of all the number of colleagues that I've had in my career who were there, and the Weather Service is a very small organization, you make lifelong friends in there, and it was always good to see these people, that was the social benefit of it. Then also, especially in the aviation world, I got to meet many of the people who were involved in the whole world of aviation weather, and not just from the National Weather Service perspective, but from the airlines, from the research community. All those people who are working to produce products that the Weather Service would either adopt, or otherwise do their own thing, or the users who would use the information that is being produced for them. So in the world of aviation weather during that period of time, which began in my experience in 2001 through 2007 as a AWC director, it was just wonderful to be able see how fast things were happening at that time, and I needed to come here in order to keep up. I retired in 2007 and what happened? I kept coming back. So I think this is my 18th in a row coming back to the AMS, and there's always something to see at the aviation, ARAM, it's called ARAM, the aviation part of the AMS meetings here.

JN: Now you told me before you were relatively advanced in your career when you went to the first meeting. Usually when I'm talking to people I'm talking to students who are going to their first meeting. So, talk about that a little bit?

JM: Well it was interesting, because my career in the National Weather Service, I was not all that involved in the science part of it. The way I look at it, during my career, there's the science part of it and then there's the public service part of it, and I was much more interested in the public service part of it, and I had always thought that the AMS meeting was a technical thing and I needed to know equations and things like that, so I didn't have that much interest. So it was my first experience, I said, this is different than what I've always thought. So that was my experience. Early in my career I was involved in the computer system that the Weather Service had called AFOS, midpoint in my career I became Deputy Director of the Weather of the East-Central Region of the National Weather Service and most of my activities had to do with human resources. The performance, staffing, discipline, union relationship, and that is not much discussed here, those sort of things. And then when I became AWC Director, I came to my first AMS meeting, and this is my 18th year in a row.

JN: So your first meeting was Albuquerque?

JM: Ooh, it was 2002. That might've been New Orleans.

JN: I think it was either New Orleans or Long Beach.

JM: Okay. I think it might have been Long Beach because I remember that one. I remember them all.

JN: Long Beach I think was the one where it rained almost the whole week.

JM: Oh, yes, I do remember that one.

JN: And in terms of the public service aspect, do you find that the content of the AMS meetings have changed to accommodate that?

JM: I was surprised when I got here to see that part. I think it's growing, but I was surprised to see that part was at least here, public response to warnings and things like that, and there's more of a presence of it with some of the activities, especially Weather Ready Nation and things like that. So if I had known about that back then I might have tried to lead in that area, but I was just too busy with that AFOS trying to keep it running. [laughter]

JN: Well, I could see that, computer systems.

JM: Right, and especially because the AFOS was the first computer system that the National Weather Service had, and it had difficulties getting stable, it took three or four years.

JN: Can you talk about that?

JM: It doesn't have anything to do with AMS.

JN: That's okay.

JM: Okay, alright, I'd be happy to talk about it. So I had an interest in the AFOS system because it made writing forecasts and disseminating forecasts a lot easier because I didn't have to type on a teletype system, exposing my age, so it made it a lot easier. And not only that, but the computer ran the weather wire where all of our forecasts were disseminated, so you had a product, hit enter, it's already queued, and I liked that. I wanted to help other people in my office grow to accept it because AFOS was met with a lot of resistance, because most of the time it didn't work. It would crash and you would lose 45 an hour worth of work and then you'd have to start all over again. So, it was not very popular, but whatever I could do to try to stabilized it as much as I could and also to help people accept it and use it, that was my interest.

JN: So when are we talking about?

JM: We're talking about, beginning by 1978, and in 1982 I went to the Eastern region headquarters of the National Weather Service and became what was known then as a Regional AFOS System Manager, and so I was guiding those that did what I did in Ohio, I was a facilitator between the National Weather Service offices in the eastern region and those who were in charge of the program at headquarters. And also trying to help find things that made it easier, issuing instructions for the region, etc., to make their job easier.

JN: So how long did it take to get the system really working?

JM: Well, I think it became operational, quote "operational" in '83. Pretty sure it was '83, and then after that, one of the things about my career in the National Weather Service is, I was very mobile. I would go where the jobs were opening, in fact I've always told people in the Weather Service it seems like the only way to get a promotion if you want to stay, you get a promotion if there's a vacancy above you, and you have to wait around for that, and then you have a chance. Or if you do something like you might go to a place where nobody else wants to go get a promotion that way, and then with every grade, the number of grades above you were fewer and fewer, and a lot of people wanted to stay stable, but I still wanted to move.

So after New York City, I went back to Cleveland as the Deputy Meteorologist in Charge, was there for three years helping my boss manage that office, and then I became the Meteorologists in Charge of the state of Kansas in Topeka. So I was there for four years. Then my boss who was my boss in New York moved to Kansas City and I then became the Deputy Regional Director of the central region, now we're talking 1992, and then 10 years later I became director of the Aviation Weather Center for a total of six years. But it's all really interesting because my undergraduate is in aviation meteorology, I went to a small school in St. Louis called Parks College of Aeronautical Technology, and we had a very large meteorology class, one of the largest that they ever had, we had nine. That was our class, it was very intimate. There were only 900 people in the whole school, and it was a very small little campus, very homey, on the east side of the river across the river from St. Louis. In fact I had dinner last night with a graduate, I had dinner on Monday night with another graduate, both from the meteorology program.

JN: That's really nice, that's great.

JM: So it's really interesting. I just find it fascinating and it was not intentional, but I graduated from an aviation school in meteorology and became Director of the Aviation Weather Center.

JN: Now were you a member of AMS but not going to the meetings for a long time?

JM: I was not a member of the AMS.

JN: Not even a member.

JM: I was not even a member, I didn't have the interest. You know what, I think I heard a rumor when I was going to school that they didn't want students. Now that might've been in the early '70s or something like that, because that's when I went to school, and whether it was true or not, it made an impression on me and I said why those people, if they don't want me then I don't want them, and so I'd always had that. And the other thing, because I was not very technical with regard to the science of meteorology, I found the articles in the BAMS over my head. So I was not interested.

JN: That's amazing, and then you went to eighteen meetings in a row.

JM: That's right, that's right! Because of the two things I mentioned, the colleagues that I've had from the past and all the people that do attend these things from the aviation community, and to see the latest science and the latest use of the information, because there have been some people

from pilots, for example, in fact Tim Minor from American Airline pilot is here right now, they give presentations on how they use the information that's being produced. That's a fascinating part. I'm very interested in the use of weather information.

JN: The interview that I did this morning was also someone who was talking about the very beginnings of turning government data into information that you could sell and that also started to happen right around the late '70s.

JM: Right, because the data became available, there was a lot more of it, and the ease of getting it improved greatly.

JN: Right.

JM: And so instead of doing a lot of the bottom work, you just take the information and parlay it and mold it and reformat it into something that helps people make their individual decisions. That sort of thing I'm involved in right now, because since I retired eleven years ago, I have worked for a company called AvMet Applications, Aviation Meteorology, and AvMet is a company the FAA has agreements with, when they need meteorological expertise they just go to them and say can you do this for us, can you do that for us? So I've been working a lot for them, almost full-time last year, and so it's been a lot of fun and I'm still interested in it and I'm still getting work.

JN: In away you've almost come full circle because you're doing the technical stuff again.

JM: Not really, I have to understand the technical, I am not really familiar with how the stuff is made, the aviation weather information, but I am very interested in how that could be shaped and formatted so that airline dispatchers, pilots and airport operations can then take that information and help them make decisions when they need to make them. So I am very interested in that part. I just say to the guys okay, tell me what you're going to give me, what does it look like and so let's shape it into something that helps people make decisions. So I get to have an influence on what the FAA does. The aviation weather world is really interesting because the FAA, as far as the Weather Service is concerned, the FAA writes the rules. "This is what we want." The FAA is the meteorological authority for the United States when it comes to air operations, weather information for airline operations, and I find I have more influence on the nature of weather information now than I did as Aviation Weather Center Director.

JN: That's really interesting.

JM: It's fun because I think I know how things should work, and so I do my best, and if I'm wrong they tell me that we try to get the best way.

JN: Sounds good to me. And when I fly I never worry about how the plane is flying, I just worry about the leg room.

JM: Well, the thing is is that I, for example when I came out here today, I'm an aviation nut, and so there's this program that tells you where your airplane is, especially compared to other airplanes, how high you are, how fast you're going, where you are, it updates every few seconds, and then I go look at the weather products that we distribute presently from the Aviation Weather Center of the National Weather Service and I look at the turbulence products, I look at the icing products, I'm looking at the wind products, I'm looking at the thunderstorm products, and I can see the pilot making decisions based on that, because they're learning about it now, which is what the goal is, weather information hidden under a bushel basket is not good.

JN: Right. And that sounds like with the whole spectrum of products that everything feeds into getting it right.

JM: And formatting it so that people can make the best decisions they can. The thing that we're finding out is that probabilistic weather information is becoming very important, because the probability of an event may not be consequential to one aviation user, but would be very consequential to another. Because their criteria, their tolerance is different. And so breaking up this information into smaller and smaller pieces so that it can be massaged into a decision aid or something is I think where we're going.

JN: That's very interesting. I'm going to stop recording?

JM: I was going to say one thing.

JN: Go ahead.

JM: One of the projects I'm involved in right now with the FAA is there are so many weather products that have developed over the last few years, it's now time to say okay, guys in the FAA, what are we all going to use so that nobody is using a set of weather information that is different than the other guy over here? And so that's the project that I'm involved right now so that we in the aviation community, in the FAA can say okay guys, everybody's going to use this set of data, so that as it changes everybody can see it change and we can all make coordinated decisions based on the same set of information. And that's going to be difficult, because everybody has their favorite, and the other thing is that if you change the nature of the information that one part of the FAA's using, they're going to have to make software and hardware changes in order to accommodate the quote "better," or the more common information that we all agree to use. And so that's going to be a very, I will be very old when all that comes to pass.

JN: Well, we'll have to see how that's going next year.

JM: [laughter] Right.

JN: We'll get together in Boston.

[break in recording]

JM: Okay, did I want to become a meteorologist from a child? No. I was always interested in weather because I love to play hockey. I wanted to know when the ponds were going to freeze.

JN: Where did you grow up?

JM: A lot of places, but mostly upstate New York. And then I started skiing and then I learned a lot about lake effect, because we lived in Rome, New York, where it has a lot of lake effect, and I wanted to know how much snow was going to be on the hill that weekend. And so that's why I was very interested. However, I went to school, to this aviation school, Parks College, and I started in aerospace engineering.

JN: Very different.

JM: That was 1971, and that was the year Congress voted down federal support for the supersonic transport.

JN: Okay.

JM: And my dormitory had a lot of aerospace engineer graduates, about to graduate, who were very upset about that, and they were wondering, now what do I do? I said, I'll find something else. And there was this meteorology program that had to do with aviation, and I said I think I'll do that. So that's how I transferred into meteorology.

JN: Very interesting.

JM: I thought you'd like that. [laughter]