

# National Training Laboratories at Bethel

NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science

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After Gould Academy's 1947 commencement at the end of June Bethel saw a new kind of group on the campus that caused much gossip and discussion around town. Cars parked along Church Street carried license plates from many, many states. As the new group's stay lengthened during summer, it became a common sight to see parties of 10-12 persons gather in clusters on the campus lawn in active discussions.

**Some of the ways NTL helped and changed Bethel:**

In the summer of 1947, Bethel people woke up to the fact that a whole new event was unfolding on the Gould Academy campus. Many NTL participants stayed in Gould dorms while staff rented houses or rooms in town. Leland Bradford, Ronald Lippitt and Kenneth Benne the founders who had been picked by Kurt Lewin (and who survived him to carry on his work) became regular summer residents in Bethel.

I was 12 years old in 1947. So I was one of the 200 to 300 locals who became daily NTL watchers. Participants had come from all over the United States and many foreign countries. Church Street was filled with a line of parked cars. (For kids, counting all the states on NTL cars was a major pastime.) "T-Groups"\* scattered themselves under the trees shading the main campus. Many of the overseas participants wore their native dress or as we thought, costumes. New people were all over the place up and down Main Street and when not meeting they beat it quickly to the swimming holes from Frenchman's Hole and Artist's Bridge to Songo Pond. NTL was everywhere. The town's closet peeping toms were having a field day keeping up with what was obviously to them a lot of "immoral" activity. Gossip in the restaurants became priceless. \* What was a T-group?

**BEFORE BETHEL**

**T-Groups - theory and development**

**Kurt Lewin, Ph D (1890-1947)** born in Mogilno in Prussia was the theorist in the science of psychology who conceived the notion of action research (to solve social problems) that led to T-Groups of discussion and decision making. After coming to MIT he became allied with Leland P. Bradford, Ronald Lippitt, and Kenneth Benne within the Research Center for Group Dynamics. This group received funding from the Office of Naval Research to set up National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine in 1947. Lewin died of a heart attack in February 1947.

**Leland P. Bradford Ph D** was the co-founder of the National Training Laboratory which he directed for twenty-five years. He was the first director of the Division of Adult Education of the National Education Assoc. He is the co-author of T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method: Innovations in Re-Education (1964).

Online sources are listed at the end of this chapter.

From the beginning, NTL was an economic boon to many local businesses. My family delivered milk throughout town and to Gould Academy. Normally, in the summer the academy was closed and the dorms were empty. Gould served regular meals in the dining room of the girl's dormitory and our milk business reflected that as a new benefit. Almost every storekeeper on Main Street prospered from NTL business. Yet, it is possible that Bethel lost more than \$100,000 in profits because it was a "dry" town from 1947 to 1955. Bethel was a "dry cultural island"; maybe a surprise to NTL's planners?

NTL's need for summer housing was the "bean seed" that grew into "Jack's (Bethel's) beanstalk" . Staff and some students/participants needed houses for the summer and the rental business took off. Residents moved out of their homes to campgrounds - NTL staff moved in. Most of the rental administration was handled through NTL staff and Wilbur Myers at Gould Academy; there were no real estate or rental agents involved at the beginning because Bethel had no such agents.

In summer 2010 Nancie Coan, NTL Administrator in Bethel for many years, told me that during NTL's peak years here, 65 houses were rented for NTL staff and participants. One year NTL rented Brown's Tourist Home (now Philbrook Place) except for one apartment where Eva Bean was living. Here NTL set up its Bethel headquarters for NTL administrators and staff from NTL's main headquarters. Another year NTL took over the entire Edwards/Conrad home (now Holiday House) and contracted with the Norseman and Sudbury Inns for lodging and meals.

In 1947 Bethel was served by the Maine Central Bus Line and the Grand Trunk Railroad. A fair number of NTL participants came to Bethel without a car – coming by rail or bus. Edith Seashore has told funny stories about her arrival by Maine Central bus that stopped at Cotton's Restaurant and Store near the junction of Main and Church Streets. Albert Cotton the proprietor assured her that leaving her bags on the front step was perfectly safe while she was finding out where to check-in and stay.

The following Bethel Citizen article explained what Bethel's new summer visitors were doing.

## **GROUP STUDY HUMAN RELATIONS AT GOULD IN 3 WEEKS SESSION**

June 26, 1947

More than 100 specialists in the field of human relations from throughout the nation are attending conference sessions at Gould Academy for experimentation and discussion on all phases of group dynamics. Educators, social workers and Government representatives are among the delegates to the three week conference, sponsored jointly by the National Education Association and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dr. Leland P. Bradford of NEA's Division of Adult Education and chairman of faculty, says the group "is trying to discover better methods of training people and to increase the productivity of groups".

Dr. Bradford is assisted by Dr. J.R.P. French Jr. from MIT's Research Center for Group Dynamics is Director of Research. While delegates consider problems of training and group interaction, a 30 man research team is studying the confer-



**1948—although an NTL staff group, this group could also easily have been a T-Group session. Many sessions of 8-10 people were held on the Academy's campus lawns. This one over looks the athletic field. The low quality of the image is due to its being copied from a microfilm of the Bethel Citizen.**

ence, which in itself is an experiment.

Dr. R.A. Polson of Cornell University, a member of the directing staff, said that a secluded place away from the distractions of city life had been desired and the local school's facilities fit the needs of the conference very well.

The seven-man staff in charge of the meetings includes Dr. Bradford, Dr. French, Dr. Polson, Dr. Ronald Lippitt, Research Center for Group Dynamics, MIT; Dr. Paul Sheats, director of Extension University of California; Dr. Alvin Sander, pro-

fessor of psychology, Springfield College; and Dr. Kenneth Benne, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Delegates have come from as far away as California and Louisiana to attend the sessions. Representatives of the YWCA, Red Cross, National Jewish Welfare Agency, parent-teacher associations and several State and Federal agencies are here. Institutions cooperating in the experiment are Teachers College of Columbia University, University of California, University of Michigan, University of Maine,

Springfield College and Cornell University.

According to Dr. Polson the conference sponsors are trying to find common skills for working with groups in education, industry and other fields. The morning meetings are devoted to “basic skills training groups”, which attempt to find common denominators in working with people. The emphasis of the conference is on training methods.

In the afternoon clinical discussions (will) dwell on particular fields of interest. They are carried as discussions rather than lectures. At these sessions delegates obtain ideas which they will be able to apply in their own lines of work.

Although the conference is in the experimental stages, Dr. Polson stated that it is hoped the venture will become an annual event. The results of the meetings will be reported in a number of technical journals.

Sensitive sound recording equipment has been installed in conference rooms to keep a record of conversations in the meetings. The reports and records will be organized for the study of conference procedure.

The sessions were preceded by several months of intensive research into the techniques and methods of studying the conference. Since January the research team has been working on conference procedure. Information which the researchers are gathering is divided into two parts. How groups may function more effectively and how leadership may be improved. The two-fold service will be useful to both conferees and conference organizers.

While conducting experimentation and research on human behavior, the delegates and faculty team from MIT administered a battery of tests and questionnaires to the group upon arrival. At the end of the conference on July 4, another series of tests will be given the conferees. The results of these examinations will be studies to determine the changes in the group during the three week period.

A similar group returned to the Gould campus in 1948. By this time it was known as the National Training Laboratories.

The Citizen’s report in 1948 had to say:

## **CONFERENCE LEADERS STILL AT GOULD ACADEMY**

July 8, 1948

The education conference which has been going on at Gould Academy for several weeks closed last week but part of the conference staff will remain at Gould through July. They are engaged in preparing magazine articles, books and motion pictures about the work of the National Training Laboratories on Group Development. This is the second year that the National Training Laboratory has held its conference at Gould Academy. The helpfulness of officers and staff and the admirable equipment of the Academy have been strong attractions. No less welcome



**William Bingham 2nd Gymnasium on the Gould Academy campus as it appeared in 1947. During the early years of NTL it served as the Registration Office and as the Friday night social center.**

has been the friendly interest of the citizens of Bethel. Early in June the Chamber of Commerce entertained Professors Benne, Bradford, Dickerman, and Zander of the Laboratory's staff at a dinner at the American Legion Home. At the opening session of the Laboratory, Bursar Wilbur Myers extended to the delegates the cordial welcome of Headmaster Ireland, who was in Cambridge for his son's graduation from Harvard Medical School, and spoke briefly about the history of the Academy and of the

town of Bethel. A few nights later Rev. and Mrs. Kingsley Hawthorne, Mr. and Mrs. Chester Briggs, Mr. and Mrs. John Carter, Mr. Myers, Mrs. Goggin and Mrs. Waterhouse of the Academy staff were guests of the Laboratory at an evening program in Bingham Gymnasium.

At this meeting Dr. Rachael Du Bois, a New York anthropologist demonstrated "group conversations" for which she is famous. The aim of these conversations is to help people who do not know one another, people of maybe different opinions, creeds, or races to become acquainted and have a good time together. They begin by sharing childhood memories of some simple topic such as bread.

Before they know it they are swapping yarns about Grandma's wonderful rolls, singing songs like "Cracklin' Bread" or dancing folk or dancing folk dances which celebrate a harvest feast. That night, for example, Mrs. Briggs made the delegates

mouth water with her recipe for New England brown bread and Mr. Carter showed them how New Englander's plant corn. Following this pleasant evening together Rev. and Mrs. Hawthorne invited Dr. Du Bois and some of her students to give a conversation in their home. Among the guests were Mr. and Mrs. John Howe, Dr. and Mrs. Gerald Kneeland, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Swift and Miss Gwendolyn Stearns.

The group conversations are only one of many ways in which delegates to the National Training Laboratory have been studying how people can live and work more happily and efficiently in many kinds of groups in which all of us associate: families, clubs, committees, conferences and so forth.

The Laboratory was sponsored by the National Education Association and the Research Center on Group Dynamics of the University of Michigan and aided by a number of other leading universities. Heading the faculty were Leland P. Bradford, of the National Education Association, Kenneth Benne of Teachers College of Columbia University, Siegmund Blansberg of the Connecticut State Interracial Commission, Gordon Hearn of Springfield (Mass.) College, Herbert Thelen of the University of Chicago, and Ronald Lippitt, J.R.P. French, and Alvin Zander of the University of Michigan. Among other university faculty members who were invited to the Laboratory to consult with delegates were Professors Robert Clark of Cornell University, Grace Coyle of Western Reserve University, Bingham Dai of Duke University, Edgar Dale and Max Goodman of Ohio State University, Watson Dickerman of the University of California, Howard Y. McCluskey of the University of Michigan, and Rose Snyder of the University of Chicago.

The hundred delegates to the Laboratory came from almost every state in the union. In addition there were seven from Canada, four from Puerto Rico, two from Hawaii and one each from the Panama Canal Zone and Holland. The organizations which they represent include business, labor, government, education, charities, and numerous civic, health and welfare agencies.

In recent years scientists have added atomic energy and numerous wonder drugs like penicillin to the discoveries by which man has extended his control over nature. But with the seemingly simpler job of learning how to work with his fellows, man has not progressed very far. So people are beginning to wonder what would happen if we applied to human nature the same scientific approach that has helped us to control Mother Nature.

The Research Center for Group Dynamics formerly at Massachusetts Institute

of Technology and now at the University of Michigan has been carrying on considerable research along this line. Members of the Center's staff, several of whom were at the Laboratory last summer and this summer, have been studying how people work in the many groups to which all of us belong.

For example, take committees. Many of us spend a lot of time in them but feel that much of the time is wasted. According to the Research Center any committee can operate more efficiently if its members follow seven simple rules

First tackle a couple of easy problems so the group can pick up momentum and gain confidence in its ability to make decisions.

Second, agree on exactly what it is they are trying to do.

Third, figure out what obstacles stand between them and that goal.

Fourth, decide which obstacle to attack first.

Fifth, make it clear that every member is free to toss in his two-bit's worth at anytime, with confidence that it will be received hospitably rather than laughed at.

Sixth, use the resources of every member of the committee; that shy guy may have the answer if he has the courage to speak up.

Seventh, every now and then take time to sit back and say, "How are we doing? What's the trouble with the way we are going at this? How can we do better?"

The Research Center and the National Training Laboratory have already worked out more successful ways to hold conferences, to conduct employee training programs, to work with community organizations, etc. All of these (formats) are simply special applications of certain basic principles for working with people in groups which is the primary concern of the Laboratory. Delegates to the Laboratory have made one discovery which has surprised them all. Each one thought his problems were different from anyone else's. But they have learned that whether they are businessmen, PTA committeewomen, teachers, clergymen or YMCA secretaries, they all face the same problem learning the most efficient ways to help people work out answers to their problems.

Delegates to the Laboratory have not spent all their time studying and practicing skills of working with people in groups. Most of them have made trips to the mountains and the coast and all of them have fallen in love with the climate and scenery which make Maine so deservedly famous as a summer vacationland.

## T- Groups

The following description of a T-Group was copied from one of the several Wikipedia articles carried on the Internet.

In 1947, the Office of Naval Research and the National Education Association created the National Training Laboratories Institute in Bethel, Maine. It pioneered the use of **T-groups** (Sensitivity or Laboratory Training) in which the learners use feedback, problem



**Gehring House with the entertainment wing which was added by the Gehrings but used by NTL as a conference room. Below Inside view—2008**



solving, and role play to gain insights into themselves, others, and groups. The goal was to change the standards, attitudes and behavior of individuals.

This type of training is controversial as the behaviors it encourages are often self-disclosure and openness, which many people believe an organization ultimately punishes. Also, a lot of the sensitivity training taking place uses excessive activities. The feedback used in this type of training can be highly personal, hence it must be given by highly trained observers (trainers).

There are a number of online sources about T-Groups and their use in organizational development. Some are referenced at the end of this chapter.

## THE SUMMER OF 1952

In 1952, I graduated from Gould Academy, had my driver's license and was able to drive to town in the evening. A number of the NTL staff brought their kids with them for the summer. For the town kids to mingle with the NTL families and enjoy Friday night dances at the Bingham Gymnasium, it was a chance to meet some really nice, different people. My best friends that summer were twins, Janet and Jim Fleet. Their mother, Beulah Fleet, was a staff member who had come with her kids from the University of Denver.

That summer we sampled everything that Bethel had to offer – swimming at Sunday River, dancing at the Top Hat in Hanover on Saturday nights, NTL parties



**NTL Staff meeting at the Gehring House in 1957. The room where they are meeting was originally the entertainment wing . Note the flip charts in the rear—a much used NTL meeting and T Group training aide.**

on Friday nights and raiding the kitchen for left over pies. The Fleets left Bethel at the end of the summer.

In 1988, I was retired from the Army and working as front desk manager at the Bethel Inn. Home having lunch at noontime, I got a telephone call from the front desk. There was a Mrs. Beulah Fleet asking for me; she was touring with a group that had stopped for lunch at the Inn. For about 30 minutes I had a chance to

catch up on 36 years. My 1952 summer “girl friend”, Janet, had married a doctor and was living in Georgia. All of this came to me through the auspices of NTL.

### **1955 NTL ACQUIRED THE GEHRING HOME FROM BINGHAM ESTATE**

In 1955 the National Training Laboratories was an operating laboratory of the National Education Association. By acquiring the Gehring property on Broad Street, the organization established Bethel as its physical summer headquarters. The Gehring home was converted into office, living and meeting spaces. However, Gould Academy continued to be used for T-Groups and administration.

### **1957 CHAMBER–NTL DISCUSS WAYS TO IMPROVE LOCAL ECONOMY**

In 1957, Bethel’s industrial economy, wood product mills, was in the doldrums. The chamber of commerce had formed an industrial search committee. Looking for some practical ideas in their quest for new jobs, the committee asked NTL for help.

The Oxford County Bethel Citizen, August 15, 1957 reported the following:

Recently an interesting meeting was held at Gould Academy for the purpose of discussing ideas that might help Bethel industrially and economically. NTL personnel included Dr. Leland Bradford and Dr. Ronald Lippitt (two of NTL’s founders) plus Dr. Priess, Dr. Pitkin and several members of a training group. Bethel

people were members of the original Industrial Survey Committee started by the Chamber of Commerce. One comment noted was that NTL people showed genuine concern for the town while only a short time before they had been considered complete strangers. All agreed that Bethel needed to be more progressive. Priority should be given to completing the (industrial) survey and getting it to Augusta so that the state would be aware of Bethel's interest to create local industrial development.

It was agreed that Bethel should go on record as interested in industry, dispelling the myth that we are a closed corporation unfriendly to progress.

Discussion about “what does Bethel have” that would attract an industrialist didn't result in overwhelming odds in our favor. Bethel's assets were listed as land, railroad, electricity, etc, but the tax rate was followed by (no comment).

### **1967 NTL INCORPORATES – NTL INSTITUTE for APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE**

For 20 years the National Training Laboratories had been a part of the National Education Association. After incorporation, NTL located its headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.

### **1979 – NTL RECEIVES BETHEL CHAMBER'S FIRST OUTSTANDING BUSINESS AWARD**

In 1979, at its annual awards banquet the Greater Bethel Chamber of Commerce announced that a new annual award for an outstanding Bethel area business would be presented. NTL was the first to be recognized.

### **1980 NTL INSTITUTE BEGINNING 34<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL SESSION IN BETHEL, JUNE 16**

Monday, June 16, will see the start of NTL Institute's 34<sup>th</sup> annual summer sessions in Bethel. The programs will cover a 10 week period, lasting until Aug. 24. For the first two weeks, sessions will be held at the NTL Conference Center on Broad Street, but in later weeks Gould Academy will also be used.

The NTL programs cover a wide range of studies, such as human relations training, organization development, team building, and many other aspects of personal and professional development. NTL's name is widely known and this year, as usual, the programs will draw participants from all over the United States and many foreign countries.

NTL welcomes persons from Bethel and the neighboring areas in the programs and makes a special reduced fee available to encourage such participation. For details, please phone 824-2151 or stop at the NTL office in Bingham Gymnasium at Gould Academy.

In the 1980's, the times began to change for NTL in Bethel. Bill Clough had become Gould Academy's new headmaster and Dr. Harry "Dutch" Dresser, his assistant. The academy planned for a summer school on campus and passed the word to NTL. In 1979 Richard Rasor saved The Bethel Inn from oblivion when he became the new owner. Looking to at first shore-up the inn's creaks and groans then modernize its facilities, Rasor worked out a deal with NTL for off-season (spring and fall) labs based at the inn and an agreement to hold summer labs in a new conference center to be built by the inn. In the 1980's, nearly one-third of the inn's summer guests were NTL participants. Every innkeeper in town competed mightily for NTL guests.

Dick Rasor and his architect, Larry Litchfield from New York, came up with a daring plan to build a new complex of modern guest rooms, recreational facilities with an indoor swimming pool and a conference center – all under one roof. This became Plan A. Almost as soon as rumor's of the new project hit Broad Street, there was opposition to this type of construction in the Broad Street National Historic District, despite the Inn being part of the District. The old guard and the town planning board must not have been party to the 1957 agreement which came from the joint committee of NTL and Bethel people that Bethel needed to show signs of being progressive. The Bethel Inn had already started taking reservations for the twelve new rooms when the inn's plan failed to be approved.

Larry Litchfield came up with Plan B which was the conference center building that exists (2006) on real estate joined by the Bethel Library, Northeast Bank and the Bethel Historical Society. When the new conference center opened in the last half of the 1980's NTL was already making preparations to expand their center on the south end of Broad Street, the former Gehring homestead. Known as "The Clusters" this new group of modest buildings became NTL's new Bethel campus.

## **2010 NTL BETHEL PROGRAM**

NTL's classes in Bethel have continued but at a noticeable reduction in numbers. For the 2010 summer program NTL administered its sessions from the Bethel Inn. Sunday and Monday, July 18 and 19, thirty-nine staff and participants registered for the current lab sessions at the Bethel Inn Conference Center. Par-

ticipants came from virtually all regions of the lower 48 and from Alaska. International arrivals came from the Netherlands, Germany, Oman and Canada.



**Christine Greenleaf at her office within the Bethel Inn—2010.**

Christine Greenleaf handled all the administration; she was the only link connecting a resident lab group with NTL headquarters in Virginia. Previously, labs in Bethel had an assigned lead staff member but not this year. In past years when NTL Bethel was based at the Gehring house, Christine said ten staff from NTL came to Bethel to administer summer sessions; the number shrunk to three and now Christine is the one.

Most of the current lab members were staying at the Bethel Inn with some staying at the Bethel Village Motel and others, mostly staff had rented houses.

Christine Greenleaf has been an NTL staff member since 1973 after she was hired by Nancie Coan.

In 2009 the NTL Gehring Conference Center property was acquired by a development company, Kennebec Land Co. of Coventry, Rhode Island.

(More to be added later: Bethel Inn Conference Center, Clusters at Gehring Place)

The Bethel Citizen : June 26, 1947; July 8, 1948; and June 12, 1980. Others to be added.

Bethel, Maine An Illustrated History by Randall Bennett

As online references can come and go, the best responses were from these search entries—“T-groups Bethel Maine” and for “Kurt Lewin”, “Leland P. Bradford”, “NTL Institute”; other search questions to use are “group dynamics and organizational development.