It’s hard to believe that it’s been 50 years since ATRA took its first tentative steps as a professional trade association. Since then there have been many changes — to cars in general, to transmissions, and to the repair business as a whole.

But one thing has never changed, from that very first meeting back in 1954. ATRA’s goal… its purpose… its raison d’être… remains unchanged: To promote a business climate that makes it possible for automatic transmission shops to become profitable… and remain profitable.

Any way you slice it, 50 years is a long time: I can remember working in ATRA members’ shops back in the late 70s and early 80s, and I’ve been with the association for 14 years. And as I sit here writing, I can’t help thinking: where did all the time go? Sometimes it seems so long ago… other times it seems that it’s all gone by in the blink of an eye.

Regardless of how you view the passage of time, there’s little doubt that, when you consider where it started and where it is now, ATRA’s growth has been phenomenal. In 1954, the only real benefit of membership was a reciprocal agreement to take care of other members’ customers if they had a problem while they were away from home. And back then, away from home meant “somewhere in southern California, far enough from home that it would be difficult to get back to the original shop.”

Shops from northern California joined ATRA’s ranks soon after, and then shops in other parts of the country formed their own chapters. Today, ATRA is an international trade association serving the automatic transmission repair industry, with members blanketing the US and Canada. And today’s members take advantage of dozens of benefits; benefits that the founding members could only dream about 50 years ago.

For a better perspective into the early years of ATRA and the changes that have taken place, you have to examine the archives and hear from the people who were there, all those years ago.

Those early pioneers of automatic transmission repair had a real passion for this industry. They had a vision of transmission shops working together, to create a sense of pride and professionalism, and to transform automatic transmission repair into an industry unto itself, instead of simply another part of “fixin’ cars.”

Throughout the year, we’ll revisit some of the old days, and see what it was that got a lot of those guys so fired up; fired up enough to form their own trade association. This is the difference between watching things happen and making them happen.

Of course, looking back inevitably leads to looking forward. So where exactly is the transmission industry heading over the next 50 years? A few months ago, I might have been willing to venture a guess. Then I looked at where we were just 50 years ago.

I don’t think the folks who started ATRA back in 1954 could ever have imagined where we’d be today, though they’d probably have made some interesting guesses. I wish they had, because it would have been intriguing to compare their predictions with our history.

And I could certainly make some predictions about where we’re heading. But looking back at how things have changed in just the past 10 years, I’m sure any speculation I made today would be laughable 50 years down the road. But there’s one thing you can be sure of: No matter where we end up at the end of the next half century, ATRA members will always be a few steps ahead, leading the industry into the future.