

Chapter 17:

Expanded Services, Larger Meetings

In the late 1970's and through the 1980's, the A.S.P. began to reach out even more actively to other scientific groups and to the public as its activities continued to expand. Working with amateur, professional, and educational groups, and making effective use of the national media, the Society has become a strong force in the improvement of science education and science literacy.

A good example of these efforts is the development of a series of information packets on current astronomical topics. The first of these independent packets was put together by the Society's staff in 1973, when there was tremendous public interest in Comet Kohoutek. This celestial visitor had been discovered quite early in its pass into the inner solar system and was at first predicted to be a very bright naked-eye comet when it came near the Earth. Although the comet eventually turned out to be much dimmer than expected, the Society was swamped with requests for information from the media and the public. A pamphlet of background and observing information was assembled and advertised to the public. Over 30,000 requests for the pamphlet were quickly processed, putting quite a strain on A.S.P. staff and local volunteers who were brought in to help.

Undaunted, the Society put together another packet in 1978, for the February 26, 1979 total solar eclipse visible in the northwestern United States and western Canada. It included a reprint of a *Mercury* article on the eclipse, an explanation of eclipses, and directions for photography and for safe observing. Again, there was strong interest in the packet and the staff began to realize how difficult it is for many teachers, librarians, and others to get reliable astronomy information.

Comet Kohoutek as photographed on Jan. 11, 1974. (Photograph courtesy of the Joint Observatory on Cometary Research)

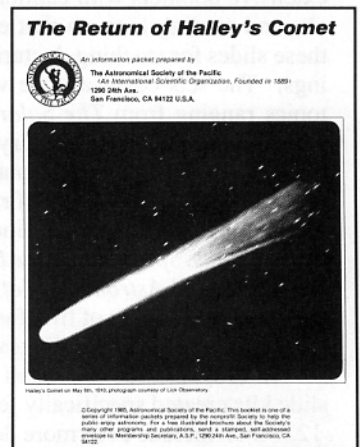
When Fraknoi became executive officer, a significant effort was made to assemble other packets on topics about which the Society received many inquiries. Among these was "Selecting Your First Telescope" (written by Sherwood Harrington), "Astronomy as a Hobby," "Introduction to Black Holes," "Astronomy vs. Astrology," and "Learning about Quasars." An extensive Halley's Comet packet was very popular in 1986. Recently, the staff has added a series of bibliographies and information sheets to the Society's publications, which have been sent to and duplicated by planetaria, amateur clubs, science museums, and teachers around the country.

Another area where the hiring of staff has allowed the Society to expand its work is the planning and sponsorship of lectures and lecture series on astronomical topics. While the Morrison Lectures continued to bring astronomical speakers to small colleges and amateur astronomy groups (eventually outside the Western U.S. as well), the Society began to look for opportunities to present lectures to larger and more general audiences.

The first such opportunity came in the form of a lecture series in San Francisco in 1972, co-sponsored with the City College of San Francisco and NASA's Ames Research Center. The series consisted of twelve lectures by noted scientists on the topic of "Cosmic Evolution," and was a great success; some 3000 people tried to get seats to the first talk. Since then, the A.S.P. has sponsored many public programs, including a weekend at Stanford University that drew over 800 people for a day of lectures by leading astronomers, and recently, a Centennial talk by Carl Sagan that brought 2000 people to Berkeley's Zellerbach Auditorium.

Although lectures have been a long A.S.P. tradition, the growth of the mass media in recent years represented a new opportunity to bring astronomy to even larger numbers of people. We've already discussed the A.S.P.'s syndicated newspaper column in an earlier chapter. In addition, for two periods, the Society had its own radio program in northern California. In the mid-1970's Reis hosted an interview program called "Perspectives on Science" on Pacifica

The A.S.P.'s most widely-distributed information packet, "The Return of Halley's Comet" was sent to many thousands of requestors in 1985-86.





Two group photographs of participants in A.S.P. summer meetings, showing well the change in number (and mode of dress!) of people attending. The portrait at left is from 1962; the one at right



is from 1988. (Both meetings were held in Victoria, British Columbia, so travel distance has largely been eliminated as a selection effect in this comparison.) (A.S.P. archives)

station KPFA. In the mid-1980's Fraknoi was producer and host of "Exploring the Universe," a weekly two-hour talk show on science on KGO-FM, an ABC affiliate in San Francisco. That program ended after a year and a half when the station was sold.

Fraknoi has also been a regular guest on radio talk shows in the San Francisco and Los Angeles areas, including 15 years on radio station KGO in San Francisco, appearing on the popular *Jim Eason Show* every six weeks or so for an hour of astronomy news and discussion. More recently, he has appeared on NBC's *Today* show and the CBS late night *Pat Sajak Show*, using the brief television segments to convey at least the flavor of astronomical research and exploration. Other A.S.P. officers and members, such as Directors Ed Krupp and Donald Goldsmith, have also made effective use of television, writing, hosting, or appearing on a variety of programs on public and commercial networks.

In addition, the Society has helped hundreds of reporters in covering astronomical stories or contacting astronomers as part of their coverage. The Society issues regular press releases on important astronomical developments and events, and makes its staff and leaders available at meetings and during the year to explain astronomical discoveries to the media. These days, a typical year will bring several hundred media calls to the Society's offices.

In the mid-1970's the Society began to offer a 24-hour astronomy hotline, with a recorded message of astronomical news. This was the first national astronomy hotline in the U.S. and still remains the only one specializing not in sky events but in news from the arena of astronomical research. For the last eight years the A.S.P. Hotline has been recorded every week by Sherwood Harrington and now receives over 10,000 calls each year.

Harrington, who joined the A.S.P. staff in 1981, has a B.A. degree from Amherst College and an M.A. in astronomy from the University of California at Berkeley. With a strong background in observational astronomy, Harrington has made very important contributions to the Society's efforts to expand its educational offerings and programs and, as the administration of the programs of the Society have taken more and more of the executive officer's time, has become the managing editor of *Mercury* as well.

Another crucial staff member in the expansion and refinement of the Society's educational offerings has been Janet Doughty, who serves as the A.S.P.'s graphic designer. With an M.A. degree from Stanford, Doughty began work at the Society as office manager, but her creative skills in editing and design soon made her an ideal choice for assistant editor of *Mercury* and for the graphic artist for the catalog and information materials the Society was producing. In recent years, after Apple Computers donated a desktop publishing system to the A.S.P., Doughty taught herself to use computer layout and design software that has enabled all the Society's publications to take on a more professional and eye-catching appearance.

The Society's annual summer meetings have expanded in length and scope as well. Although the early meetings of the Society involved many programs for nonscientists, by the 1960's and 1970's these meetings were primarily gatherings of professional astronomers to present papers and exchange ideas. There was occasionally a special evening lecture presented for the public; in 1977, for example, at the Pomona College meeting, Margaret Burbidge spoke on the Space Telescope. The 1977 meeting also saw an evening session of contributed papers by amateur astronomers. But as the Society's involvement with amateurs, teachers, and

the public grew, it was time for its meetings to provide more for these groups as well.

At the 1979 meeting at Sonoma State University, Fraknoi inaugurated some new features designed to involve the nonprofessional members of the Society. A special seminar for amateurs dealt with projects that could be carried out with small telescopes. And a full day was devoted to a series of nontechnical talks called "The Universe Unfolding," given by six professional astronomers. These drew a standing-room-only audience and were enthusiastically received, and such a series has continued to be a part of all subsequent A.S.P. meetings. Among the noted astronomers who have given nontechnical talks at A.S.P. meetings are Allan Sandage (whose work has been a cornerstone of 20th century cosmology), Frank Drake (who made the first scientific search for possible radio signals from extraterrestrial civilizations), and Owen Gingerich (the well-known historian of astronomy).

The 1980 meeting in Tucson was held jointly with the Western Amateur Astronomers, and a day-long workshop for educators was also held, dealing with astronomical activities for students in the primary and secondary grades. This workshop was such a success that it has been offered at all but one meeting ever since, often for credit from the university where the meeting is taking place. Between 100 and 200 teachers from around the U.S. and Canada come each summer to spend two to three days learning about astronomical discoveries, classroom activities, teaching resources, and computer software. The success of the A.S.P. workshops has inspired other groups, including the American Astronomical Society and the Western Amateur Astronomers, to try similar activities at their own meetings.

In 1987, the A.S.P. meeting (held in conjunction with six national amateur groups) drew over 900 people to Pomona College, an all-time record for a Society meeting. The Centennial Meeting held in Berkeley in 1989 came close, bringing over 800 scientists, amateurs, teachers, and interested laypeople for six days of meetings, workshops, tours, and celebrations. The staff and officers could look back to Holden's original hopes for Society meetings with some satisfaction, since these days "every person who takes a genuine interest in Astronomy" was indeed getting "a full return from the Society, either from its publications or from its meetings."

The success of the summer workshops for teachers led to another project which brought the A.S.P. together with several other astronomical groups. Teachers who took the workshops asked if there might be a vehicle by which they could keep in touch with the Society, and with new developments in astronomy. In 1984, with the help of a small grant from the V. M. Slipher Fund of the

The Universe in the Classroom. *The A.S.P.'s free newsletter for teachers provides information and activities that reach an estimated two million schoolchildren per year.*



National Academy of Sciences, the A.S.P. began to publish *The Universe in the Classroom*, a quarterly newsletter on teaching astronomy in grades 3-12. Each issue carries astronomical news, a classroom activity, and resources for teachers.

The A.S.P. staff expected that each year a few hundred teachers might write in for the newsletter and that information about it would spread slowly through word of mouth. Instead, the Society received 10,000 requests for *The Universe in the Classroom* during the first year alone. Articles about the project appeared in science and education newsletters and magazines, and requests continued to flood in, completely overwhelming the small budget that had been established for the program.

Once the need for such information in the schools became apparent, the newsletter project was quickly co-sponsored by the American Astronomical Society and the Canadian Astronomical Society, each of which saw an opportunity to help bring more modern astronomy to its nation's schools. The International Planetarium Society joined as a sponsor in 1987. Today over 21,000 teachers receive the newsletter and it has become one of the most influential sources of astronomy information for the schools. Many districts and planetaria duplicate the newsletter for local circulation, so that the information in each issue is being made available to an estimated two million students each year.

In 1988, the Education Commission of the International Astronomical Union held the first IAU Symposium on Astronomy Education in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Fraknoi was an invited speaker at this meeting and spoke about the newsletter project. As a result, astronomers in several countries offered to translate and distribute the newsletter locally, and copies have since appeared in Denmark, Brazil, Thailand, Malaysia, and Great Britain. (However, continuing Holden's and Burckhalter's tradition, still nothing has been heard from Afghanistan — although given the recent history of that country, their silence in the 1980's may at least be a little more understandable.)