

Chapter 15:

Mercury Magazine and the Challenges of Growth

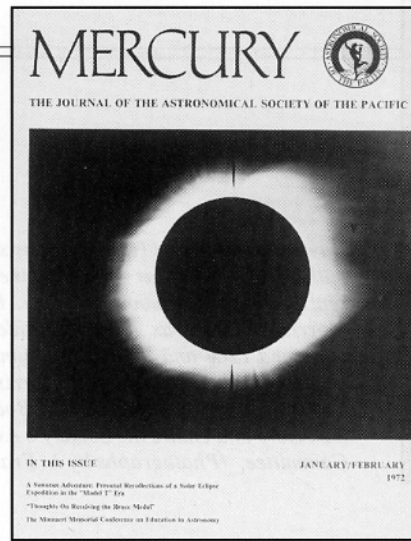
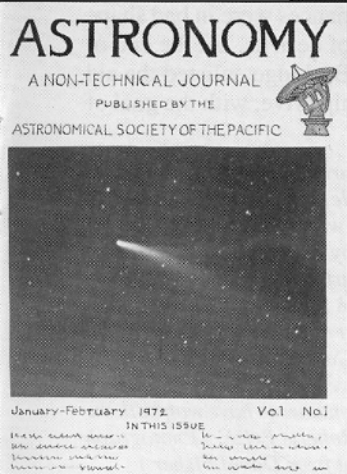
Salanave's first task was the creation of the new popular journal. After rejecting a number of names (including *Astronomy*), he proposed that it should be called *Mercury* — after the messenger of the heavens in Roman mythology who appears on the A.S.P. seal. In honor of the new name, noted astronomical artist Chesley Bonestell, who had contributed designs for the new magazine, even painted a Mercury landscape. Although it was never included in the magazine, the painting hangs proudly in the Society's San Francisco office.

The first issue of *Mercury* appeared in January of

Two mock-ups of possible cover styles for the A.S.P.'s new magazine, designed by reknowned space artist Chesley Bonestell. An early suggestion for the name was "Astronomy".



(The name Mercury was eventually chosen — in honor of the central figure in the Society's venerable seal — leaving the more generic name available for another magazine.)



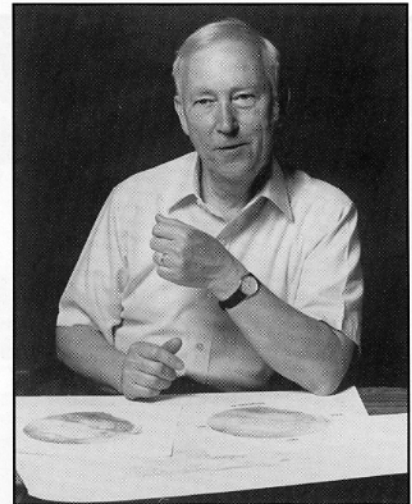
Mercury's first cover.

1972, and has continued as a bimonthly publication ever since. This first issue was 24 pages in length, and contained among other features an article on the 1923 solar eclipse in Mexico, personal notes about astronomers and observatories, reflections by Caltech astrophysicist Jesse Greenstein on receiving the Bruce Medal, and an editorial by A.S.P. President Harold F. Weaver, who played a pivotal role in making the suggestions of the Aims Committee a reality.

Weaver wrote: "Publication of this first issue...represents the most evident step in a series now being taken by the Society to provide better public understanding of astronomy." He pointed out the increased complexity of astronomical research with new developments in electronics and computers, and noted that "Our Society can make a contribution of far-reaching importance to the science of astronomy by interpreting the results of astronomical research for the nonspecialist. It is a task worthy of our strongest efforts."

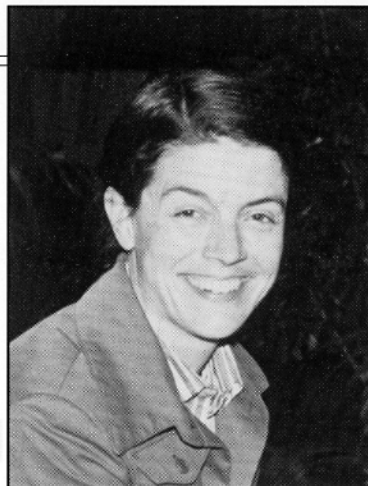
Mercury has earned the strong approval of Society members and other readers over the years, pioneering a number of features which would be imitated by other magazines. "Noted in the Current Journals", a column

Harold Weaver. Weaver was (and is) a pivotal figure in the A.S.P. during the second half of the 20th century. He served as a member of the Aims Committee, as President during the introduction of *Mercury*, as the Treasurer who oversaw the purchase of the Society's building, and in many other capacities. (Photograph copyright © 1987 by g. Paul Bishop.)





David Morrison and Nancy Morrison, co-authors of the popular "Noted in the Current Journals" column in Mercury. David Morrison served as A.S.P. President in 1983 and 1984 and has written numerous books in astronomy. Nancy Morrison is currently a member of the A.S.P. Board of Directors and chairs the Society's Awards Committee. (Photographs by A. Fraknoi)



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initiated by David and Nancy Morrison, keeps readers abreast of new developments as astronomers are just reading about them. "Astronomical Book Trek" (later "Astronomical Resources") reviews books, software, audio-visual materials, and provides indexes to astronomy articles in magazines such as *Scientific American* and *Discover*. "The Astrophysical Zoo" examines one interesting celestial object in some detail. And the *Mercury* "Photo Feature" displays new photographs from the world's leading observatories and from space probes in Earth orbit or among the planets. The standard reference on periodicals for librarians now recommends *Mercury* as "an essential magazine for school libraries."

By 1973, the A.S.P. was receiving such a good supply of general interest articles for *Mercury*, that the editor significantly curtailed the amount of space devoted to the more routine reports of Society business. In 1987 however, a new section, called "The Society Pages", was introduced to bring readers news of expanding Society programs and publications and once again to provide a place where news about Society leaders and members could find a home.

As expected, the new journal and the salary of the executive officer had a major impact on the Society's budget: in 1971 they led to a \$30,000 deficit, which was funded from the interest and dividends that had accumulated on the Society's endowment. The directors ap-

proved a 1972 budget with a deficit of \$18,000, and agreed to work actively on a membership campaign. However, by late 1972 Salanave reported that *Mercury* costs (printing and mailing) were running 50 percent higher than first estimated and that membership and other revenues had not risen sufficiently to cover the deficit. As one solution, the Society's Finance Committee was instructed to look into increasing the income from the Society's investments, but the financial problems caused by the expansion of the A.S.P.'s outreach programs would continue for several years.

Salanave resigned as executive officer in 1974, and was replaced by Richard Reis. Reis had received his Ph.D. degree in education from Stanford, and from 1971 to 1974 taught science education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He came to the A.S.P. with ideas for increasing services to members and the public, such as radio programs and traveling lecture series, as well as changes in the somewhat conservative format of *Mercury*. To finance these projects and the additional staff they required, in addition to improving the investment returns and probably raising dues, he proposed to work harder to find outside support from private donors.

During the next few years he initiated such fundraising efforts as the sale of A.S.P. bumper stickers (with slogans like "Black Holes are Out of Sight" and "Astronomy is Looking Up") and the "sale" of lots on the planet Mercury — in return for a donation, a person could "buy a choice parcel, complete with quitclaim deed and a photograph identifying the purchase, both suitable for framing." An ad in *Mercury* for July 1974 gave details and costs (making clear it was all in good fun), and readers were invited to share in "a flight of space whimsy." Nevertheless, the deficits continued.

By 1975, the Society's finances were in bad shape as the result of several years of deficits. At the end of that year President Geoffrey Burbidge enlisted the aid of all members in a membership drive, with the goal of



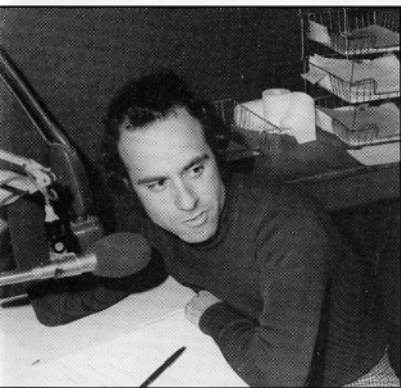
(From left to right): Margaret Burbidge, Geoffrey Burbidge, William Fowler, and Fred Hoyle, affectionately known as B²FH among astronomers. They wrote a pivotal paper in the 1950's describing the pathways by which stars synthesize the chemical elements. Margaret Burbidge won the 1982 Bruce Medal and has served on the A.S.P. Board of Directors. Geoffrey Burbidge was President of the Society in 1975 and 1976 and serves on the Finance Committee. William Fowler won the 1979 Bruce Medal (as well as a later Nobel Prize). Fred Hoyle is the only living astronomer to have won both the Bruce Medal and the Klumpke-Roberts Prize. (Photograph courtesy of William Fowler, print from David Fisher.)

adding 6,000 new members. Ads in *Mercury* set forth the benefits of membership, including book discounts and the beginnings of a mail-order catalog of astronomical items. Within a year almost 1,800 members had been added, though at the same time the deficit for 1976 was in excess of \$75,000. President Burbidge called special meetings of the Board in response to the financial crisis, and deep cuts were made in the staff of the Society and the size of *Mercury*. By 1977 the tide had turned, and the 1977 fiscal year ended without a deficit.

At the beginning of 1978 Reis resigned as executive officer, to take an administrative position at Stanford. At his departure he could point to several new developments for the Society, in addition to the various fund-raising efforts. Perhaps the most important of these was the establishment of the A.S.P. catalog, featuring astronomical books, slide sets, and other educational materials. This catalog has become one of the most important ways in which the Society now serves the international astronomical community.

Another project the Society could point to with pride was a weekly newspaper column on astronomy, begun in a San Francisco area paper in 1975, and syndicated nationally in 1976. Under the title *Exploring the Universe*, these 500-word columns each dealt with a single astronomical topic (such as the volcanoes of Mars, the discovery of Comet Kohoutek, or "What the Atoms in Your Body Were Doing Eight Billion Years Ago"). The columns were written in a popular style by Reis, Andrew Fraknoi, and Sherwood Harrington, with occasional guest columns by astronomers from around the country. A.S.P. members were urged to work at getting their local newspapers to carry the column, and at its height of popularity in 1979 it was running in seventeen papers in North America, from Alberta to Florida.

Unfortunately, interest among newspaper editors never reached the levels required to sustain long-term national syndication, and the column was reluctantly terminated in March of 1981. Still, the project reached millions of readers during its existence and also gave the Society's staff valuable experience in dealing with the media, which was to stand them in good stead during the next phase of the A.S.P.'s growth.



Richard Reis conducting his radio program "Perspectives on Science" in the mid-1970's. Reis was the Society's second Executive Officer. (A.S.P. archives.)

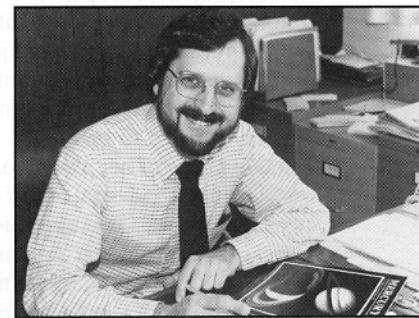
Chapter 16:

New People, New Awards, New Approaches

The Board of Directors chose Andrew Fraknoi to replace Reis as executive officer. Fraknoi, an instructor in astronomy and physics at Cañada College in California, held a B.A. from Harvard and an M.A. in astronomy from the University of California at Berkeley. He had been working for the A.S.P. already for several years, particularly as an editorial consultant and contributor to *Mercury*, and had a special interest in astronomy education.

Fraknoi has now served as executive officer for more than eleven years, and has helped the Society to grow and expand its endeavors in many directions, especially towards the greater involvement of teachers, amateurs, and lay people. Membership has doubled, and the financial state of the Society is generally much healthier. A strong emphasis has been placed on getting the Society and its work more widely known and extending the programs of the Society to be truly national and international in scope.

One interesting area of expansion has been that of awards. The Society had recognized astronomical achievement from its earliest years, in the form of the Bruce Medal for distinguished services to astronomy and the Donohoe Comet Medal for the discovery of a new comet. The latter had been discontinued in 1950 after the 250th medal had been awarded, but in 1968 the Board voted to create a new Comet Medal, to be awarded once a year "to an outstanding nonprofessional



Andrew Fraknoi, third and current Executive Officer of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. (A.S.P. photograph.)