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A LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER OF THE A.L.P.O.

My interview with *Sky & Telescope*, as reported on page 82 of the November, 1997 issue of that magazine, appears to have created an impression that I am unconcerned about the less "advanced" members of the A.L.P.O. except as providing needed financial support. At least such was the reaction of a couple of our members. If my 50-odd years of trying to encourage amateur observations with ordinary telescopes and accessories do not refute this impression, nothing I say here is likely to do so. The published interview is not word-for-word what I said, or rather wrote; but there are probably no serious changes in meaning, and the resemblance to the original was very close for *Sky & Telescope*.

However, it is true that the very great majority of the members of the A.L.P.O. do *not* contribute in any way beyond paying dues. A conservative estimate might be that 80 percent of them do not submit any observations to the Section Coordinators, do not correspond with any of the staff members, and do not participate in any of our programs and projects.

Are we failing to give them an opportunity to do more than pay dues and carry a membership card? I definitely think not. Many of the articles in the *Journal, A.L.P.O.* concern such matters as drawings of Venus, sketches of lunar domes, visual intensity estimates of features on Saturn and its rings, integrated visual magnitude estimates of the brightness of comets, and central meridian transits of the surface features on Jupiter. These are not the modern, "cutting edge technology" which we admire in the work of such "advanced" observers as Parker, Westfall, and Troiani. The great majority of professional astronomers would surely consider the kinds of observations listed above to be of very limited scientific value compared to what Parker *et alii* are doing. Indeed, an "advanced" planetary observer, who has sometimes been an A.L.P.O. member, accuses us of looking far more to the Nineteenth Century than to the Twenty-first. He considers that our Mars Section is the only part of the A.L.P.O. doing work of real scientific value.

Recent policies and actions would surely show that we do not share his opinion. The content of the *J.A.L.P.O.* has already been cited. Efforts have been made in recent years to improve and to streamline the Training Program–and yet a report at the 1997 Convention said that only three or four persons had enrolled themselves in it. There ought to be dozens! Some years ago the Journal included a series of "For the Beginner" articles. More recently, and in large part thanks to Harry Jamieson, the volunteer staff and the number of Sections have been increased. There should now be some project or program for just about everyone! For example, Historical Section and Computing Section buffs can do research at home or in a library, far from a telescope. We are always glad to hear from members about how to improve these services. In brief, members unable to do CCD imaging, micrometer measurements, high-resolution studies with large apertures, and so forth certainly have available other opportunities; they and we should be honest enough to admit that these activities will often be of less scientific value. It is disappointing to us when a member finds nothing to do beyond paying his or her dues, but surely we are trying to provide projects from which to choose.

It is not news that in many volunteer organizations (e.g., science clubs, churches, and fraternities) a small portion of the membership does almost all of the work. They have problems finding members willing to be officers. Thus the moral and financial support of the idle many makes possible the efforts of the productive few. It has been so in the A.L.P.O. over the years. We are certainly an important contributor to the success of an organization when we use our money to promote activities we consider important and valuable.

It is no pleasure to suspect that the A.L.P.O. will split in the future, considering the diversity of skills and interests. It will require a wise leadership to provide services considered valuable and worth supporting by both the few semiprofessional and the many less skilled, less affluent others. It may be worth remembering that the Compromise of 1850 held together a Union composed of badly disparate parts for only ten years. Finally, the Italian (U.A.I.) practice of regular bimonthly Bulletins by Section Coordinators is excellent. Worth imitating?

It would be wonderful to be able to say honestly in a future interview that every member does *more* than pay dues!

Walter H. Haas

A.L.P.O. Director Emeritus
October 4, 1997