Karl K. Darrow

PHOTO BY MITCHELL VALENTINE

William W. Havens, Jr.

A Chat with Darrow and Havens

To find out the problems of running the annual meeting, learn how it developed, and hear about the good old days, we visited Karl Darrow and William W. Havens, Jr.

Darrow has been executive secretary of APS since 1941. He would be well known to all APS members even if all he ever did was to write those superb introductions to each meeting bulletin. His erudition, wit, and skill with words are famous. In the years past he enlivened invited papers by asking the questions that no one else dared ask, and thereby clarified the points troubling the rest of the audience. He says he does not do this any more because "specialties have become narrower and more numerous" and a physicist "simply cannot embrace so much."

The custom of having invited papers as a regular feature of APS meetings was originated by Darrow. That was in 1941 when a general audience of physicists could expect to understand such talks. In an effort to revive the idea of "general-interest" papers, a few years ago APS introduced sessions under such a title. Havens feels they have been successful, and they will be continued.

The tough job of selecting authors and topics for invited papers is the responsibility of Darrow and Havens. They dispatch letters to physicists who are leaders in their fields and to heads of departments and laboratories, asking for suggestions. By now many people have gotten into the habit of sending unsolicited suggestions too. If a conference is being held on a special topic this sometimes leads to an APS session on the same subject. Darrow and Havens try to achieve a balanced coverage in physics.

Although the two secretaries can control the coverage of invited papers, any member can give a ten-minute contributed paper. Some people have suggested that the abstracts be refereed, but Havens feels that this is not worth the effort involved, especially since abstracts don't always convey the contents of the talk. The present APS Council feels that it's a good policy to let every member have his say.

Once the papers are in, they are grouped by subject. Then the organizers assign each session to a room whose size seems appropriate. Havens says they choose the wrong room sometimes but feels that their average is not too bad. He remarks, "Physics works on the star system. The stars draw the biggest crowd, but every once in a while you get a sleeper."

One such sleeper was the paper of Pound and Rebka five years ago, in which they measured the relativistic time contraction as a function of altitude. The Statler's Terrace Room overflowed with enthusiasts.

When the violation of parity conservation was found nine years ago, even the grand ballroom of the New Yorker was too small to contain the crowd. But it was the biggest room available.

The problem of small meetings in big rooms is almost as serious. The speaker is disconcerted and the hotel complains if the rooms look empty. (The meeting is a package deal so the rooms are included in the price.)

New York has been the most popular place for APS meetings since the society was founded in 1899. In fact, Darrow remarks, the original bylaws required that all meetings be held in New York. It didn't take the founding physicists long to change this rule; by 1902 there were meetings elsewhere.

APS established the custom of meeting with other societies long before World War II. Joint meetings with the Optical Society of America were held regularly until 1940. The Annual APS meeting, however, was usually held jointly with the American Association for the Advancement of Science at Christmas time. AAAS had a policy of moving its meeting around the country from year to year; APS usually followed unless the location was really out of the way for physics. Then in 1942, as a patriotic gesture, AAAS cancelled its annual meeting. APS decided to move its "Annual Meeting of 1942" to January 22, 23, 1943 (to avoid the disastrous combination of wartime and holiday train congestion). This first of many annual January meetings in New York was also the first joint meeting with AAPT. Although the conditions of wartime congestion have vanished, both Darrow and Havens believe that the members of APS prefer to have the annual meeting between semesters, rather than during the holiday period. At least the secretaries have never heard any complaints about the change.

(It is entertaining to read the program for that meeting 23 years ago. It included a retiring presidential address by P. W. Bridgman, a paper by Peter Debye titled "Recent developments in x-ray and electron diffraction," and one by Wolfgang Pauli on strong-coupling and weak-coupling theories of the meson field. The number of papers on nuclear fission was zero.)