

HOW PHYSICS TODAY HATCHED

David A. Katcher

[Editor's Note: David Katcher is the founding editor of PHYSICS TODAY. In June 1995, to my astonishment he called to extend to me—as he had to all of his successors—his best wishes on becoming the most recent editor. Since then, he's been to visit our new offices, other PT staff members have been to visit him, we've shared some meals, and we've been able to compare some of the issues that faced PT at its inception with those that it faces today—some of them never having gone away. With this our 50th-anniversary issue, we thought, what better way to celebrate our birthday than to reprint, on the next page, David's first editorial from May 1948, and to have him tell our readers how the magazine came to be.]

Fifty years? Hard to believe. . . .

Among the joys of physics is knowing physicists. In the absence today of any connection whatsoever with the field, I read the autobiographies that are sprouting and relive the heroics before teams and chunk physics (as Matt Sands called it) on big machines took over.

Fifty years ago, I was fortunate to find myself in the midst of physicists and at the periphery of physics. In 1947, after the atom bomb had vaulted physics into everybody's consciousness, some practitioners worried that the abysmal state of popular understanding of the subject was dangerous because important decisions on the future of the republic would be left to an elite. There was then the innocent notion that understanding leads to sensible choice. The logical conclusion was to educate citizens and, to avoid bowdlerizing the effort, target the "intelligent layman." That was the audience that would produce the intermediaries who would spread the good word. Simple and logical. A direct approach to a fundamental problem. But there was no model and the way forward was unclear. I had come in at a point when there was agreement on a need, but no agreement on quite what it was or on how to meet it.

My role in the startup of PHYSICS TODAY was to pick my way through the brambles. There were lots of ideas on what a new magazine might do. The core audience, as it turned out, would be physicists already being reached by the American Institute of Physics in one way or another. But there was no agreement between those who wanted to reach out and take the alchemy out of the science and a smaller but important few who wanted a quicker way to reach their peers than through the *Physical Review*.

I suspect that AIP was looking for a name science writer, like Waldemar Kaempffert of the *New York Times* or Steve White of the *New York Herald Tribune*. If so, those journalists shied away from the job—they had had experience with strong-minded and fussy scientists and had more freedom on what they could work on where they were. So the AIP looked at others more susceptible to the possibilities, such as me, with an undergraduate degree in physics, an interest in writing and experience in editing and producing technical reports and memoranda for the Naval Ordnance Laboratory (where I had worked from before the war until 1943, when I left to join the Army).

The first thing Harry Barton—the long-time director

of AIP, who had nursed it through the Great Depression and then the years of World War II—did was to have me visit a cluster of luminaries from AIP's member societies in both universities and industry. I believe that included George Pegram, George Harrison, Jim Fisk, Elmer Hutchisson, Sam Goudsmit, Joe Boyce, Karl Darrow, Phil Morse, John Pierce, Paul Klopsteg, Fred Seitz, . . . my memory begins to fail me. I was to get a sense of what was intended, and they were to get a feel for me.

This turned out to be—for me—an alarming exercise. Everybody wanted something different, ranging from palatable popular science to a version of *Physical Review Letters* (born many years later). In another dimension, I found a spread of desires from an AIP house organ to a review of abstracts of what was currently being published.

The more interested AIP seemed to be in me (though a "science writer," my respect for accuracy must have shown through), the less comfortable I grew. I knew I could never satisfy all those different visions of a physics publication. It ended—scientists believe in testing—by my being given my head under the benevolent and understanding supervision of Barton and the ever-ready availability of Dick Bolt, Goudsmit, Boyce, Morse, and Pierce as advisers.

In about six months, I worked up a dummy to demonstrate the approach, content and style I intended. There was some impatience with the delay, so we ended up publishing the dummy. We were off and running. All three of us. Myself, Sol Ehrlich, the art consultant with whom there was almost instant and ever-sympathetic communication, and Miriam White, whose connections with Los Alamos got us, for the first cover, the photo of Robert Oppenheimer's hat on some cyclotron plumbing as a silent icon of the magazine's name.

Bob Davis joined about a year later and eased the burden on me, and took over when I left in 1950. It was a great three years—we won an audience and some prizes. And now, decades later, it is gratifying to have had even a distant connection with the robust magazine of today.

The pleasures of deeper understanding, which comes with age, are balanced by a personal rue that there is no longer time to do anything about it. But this is mitigated by my having witnessed the evolution and growth of the publication I helped hatch a half-century ago. ■