letters

Recollections of Samuel Goudsmit's humor

Daniel Kleppner's Reference Frame about Samuel Goudsmit (PHYSICS TODAY, February 2009, page 8) brought back memories. Almost 40 years ago in the winter of 1969, one of us (Snyder), a postdoc at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, along with three coauthors, submitted a three-page article to *Physical Review Letters* announcing that interstellar formaldehyde had been detected with the NRAO's 140-ft telescope.[1] As a scientist and assistant to the director of the NRAO, the other of us (Howard) was in close communication with assistant editor George Trigg as the paper progressed smoothly through the *PRL* review process. Everything blew up around 5:30 one evening, when editor Goudsmit, en route home from the West Coast, read in the *New York Times* that the formaldehyde results had been leaked and picked up on the news wires.

We two spent about 30 minutes on the receiving end of a Goudsmit telephone barrage in which he said over and over that because of the newspaper leak there was no way that *PRL* could publish the article. Part of Goudsmit's problem was that the NRAO and Brookhaven National Laboratory were jointly managed by the same organization, the Associated Universities Inc (AUI). Goudsmit, whose *PRL* office was at Brookhaven, wanted to avoid the appearance of playing favorites in putting an NRAO discovery paper on a fast track.

At one point during the barrage, we made the mistake of noting that Trigg, who was much more understanding, had already locked the article in the *PRL* press. Goudsmit roared, "In that case, I'll jerk the article out and send through blank pages!" His anger eventually subsided after he realized that we had nothing to do with the *Times* leak, and he went ahead with publication.

A few weeks after the irate phone call, we learned that a professor from a prominent eastern university had heard about the discovery and had leaked the news to a newspaper reporter. In addition, Howard learned from someone who was listening to Goudsmit's end of the conversation that when Goudsmit slammed down the phone, he looked up, grinned, and said something like, "That'll hold 'em. Let's go get coffee!"

The article appeared in *PRL*,[1] with no further mention of Goudsmit's displeasure.

Reference

1. L. E. Snyder, D. Buhl, B. Zuckerman, P. Palmer, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **22**, 679 (1969).

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The Reference Frame about Samuel Goudsmit (PHYSICS TODAY, February 2009, page 8) was poignant and of particular interest to me because, among other things, it touched lightly on Goudsmit's elfish nature.

I was introduced to Goudsmit during the early days of the journal *Physical Review Letters*. Even then, *PRL* was known for being a difficult publication in which to get an article accepted and published. I told Goudsmit that despite the journal's reputation, I had never had an article rejected by *PRL*. He reached for his pen, took out an envelope as if to write on the back of it, and asked, "What did you say your name was?"

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A life shaped by John Wheeler

Seeing my name on a list of physicists influenced by John Wheeler, which appeared in the article by Terry Christensen (PHYSICS TODAY, April 2009, page 55), triggered a flood of stories no doubt colored by my imperfect memory.

One reason I went to Princeton University as an undergraduate was that I had read about a Professor John Wheeler suggesting that the atomic nucleus might take on the form of a doughnut. When I got there, I learned that Wheeler was going to give a novel type of course for freshmen. A group of us were asked a few physics questions by Wheeler, and those who answered correctly were allowed into the course. The first homework assignment consisted of standing for 15 minutes in front of the house that Albert Einstein had lived in. It turned out that we were to learn physics from the top down: For example, we were taught "$F = ma$" as a limiting case of special relativity. If I remember correctly, the department did not allow Wheeler to teach the course again. But I learned a lot; in particular, I learned to "never calculate without first knowing the answer."

One day Wheeler gave me a dollar and told me to go buy a kitchen sponge at Woolworth's. I am proud to say that a photo of that sponge would eventually show the physics community what spacetime foam looked like.

At the end of my sophomore year, I went home to Brazil. Two months earlier the country's military had seized power in a dramatic coup. One day, to my parents' alarm, I received an urgent telegram from Wheeler asking me to liberate his collaborator, the eminent Brazilian physicist Jayme Tiomno, from military arrest! How he expected a stateless Chinese teenager to accomplish that is unclear to me still.

Wheeler's inspirational mentoring of students is legendary. During my junior year, I had the privilege of doing research with Wheeler on the emission

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