

George Secor Stranahan

Born in Toledo, Ohio, on 5 November 1931, George Secor Stranahan died in Denver, Colorado, on 20 May 2021 of a stroke and complications following heart surgery. George was a person of many talents and interests—he was a physicist, educator, photographer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist—who had a major impact on theoretical physics through his role in the founding and development of the Aspen Center for Physics (ACP).

George had grown up with a strong interest in science. He majored in physics as an undergraduate at Caltech and received his degree in 1953. After service in the US Army during the Korean War, he enrolled at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) to pursue a PhD. He spent his summers in the late 1950s in Aspen. It was a splendid setting, with many outdoor activities for his free time. But in 1959, while working on his dissertation research, George realized, as he put it, “I cannot do physics alone. I have to have someone to talk to.”

That led, through several steps, to a collaboration in 1961 among George, Michael Cohen at the University of Pennsylvania, and Robert Craig, executive director of the well-established Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies (AIHS)—with much support from Michel Baranger at Carnegie Tech—to establish a summer research institute in Aspen under the auspices of the AIHS. George, one of the heirs to the Champion Spark Plug Company, raised funds locally, underwrote the construction of a first building, and covered initial operating expenses not covered by a grant from the Office of Naval Research and corporate and foundation contributions. As George had expected, the Aspen location made it easy to attract outstanding physicists to the ACP’s informal program beginning with its first summer in 1962, with important collaborations forming in the early years on topics in high-energy particle physics, formal field theory, current algebras, and the physics of neutron stars.

George made sure the visiting physicists experienced the attractions of the area, suggesting weekend hikes in the mountains, organizing family outings and picnics in remote locations, and cowrit-

ing (with me) a guide to the local mountains. He continued to lead and support the ACP through its incorporation as an independent nonprofit in 1968. He was its first president and chair of the board of trustees.

That same year, at the request of Robert Wilson, director of the National Accelerator Laboratory (now Fermilab), George underwrote the construction of a second “temporary” building—it was used until 1995—to accommodate people working on the lab’s design study for its experimental areas. Wilson had visited the previous summer and been impressed with the ACP’s atmosphere that promoted lively interactions and collaborations without the many distractions at home institutions. The ACP took over the new building in 1970 and was able to expand its activities over the years, from 42 participants the first summer to about 1000 a year in its current summer and winter programs.

George phased out his active involvement with the ACP after 1972 but continued to represent it in external interactions for many years. The center’s influence on the progress of theoretical physics has been recognized by the American Physical Society through its designation of the ACP as a Historic Site. George left a lasting mark on physics through his work with the ACP.

George completed his PhD in radiative neutron–proton capture in 1961 with Richard Cutkosky, had a postdoctoral appointment at Purdue University, and then joined the faculty at Michigan State University in 1965, where he received tenure. His other interests called, however, and unsatisfied with university life, he resigned in 1972 and moved permanently to the Aspen area to pursue those interests. He was a rancher for almost two decades, raising prize-winning Limousin cattle while engaging in numerous other activities.

Acting on his long-standing interest in improving lower-level education, George was instrumental in the founding of the Aspen Community School in 1970 and later the Aspen Science Center. The latter sponsors science programs for children in conjunction with the ACP and promotes lifelong learning about science.

George was an accomplished photographer for many decades. “As I look at my photos now,” he said in 2009, “I think



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that perhaps they are the serious work of my life.” Two books of his black-and-white photographs (and musings) were published; one, *Phlogs: Journey to the Heart of the Human Predicament* (2009), received a Colorado Book Award.

George was a natural entrepreneur. He started the noted Woody Creek Tavern, often associated with his friend the gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson, and later started the Flying Dog Brewery and Stranahan’s Colorado Whiskey. (The nationally prominent craft brewery and his Flying Dog Ranch were named after a painting he saw in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, after an aborted trek to K2, the world’s second-highest mountain.) George’s philanthropic and charitable activities, including the founding of several community foundations, are too numerous to mention. His impact was truly large in many areas.

Loyal Durand
Aspen, Colorado

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