



Obituary

Walter H. Haas, 1917–2015

Walter H. Haas, founder and long-time Director of the (US) Association of Lunar and Planetary Observers, passed away on 2015 April 6, in his 98th year.

Walter was born on 1917 July 3, and grew up on a farm in New Waterford, Ohio, USA. He became interested in astronomy at an early age, and local amateur John Chase kindly gave him a 15-cm Newtonian for practical observation. After graduating from high school in 1934, during the Great Depression, Chase offered the young Haas another remarkable gift: the choice between a year's free college tuition, or two months' study of practical astronomy at the residence of veteran lunar and planetary observer W. H. Pickering, in Mandeville, Jamaica. Haas chose to visit Pickering, and the die was thereby cast for his future specialisation. There was another result of that visit: in Jamaica, he met the woman whom he would later marry: Pickering's secretary, Beryl Godfrey. Indeed, the visit was so successful that Haas stayed in Mandeville for three and a half months.

Returning to the USA, Haas won a scholarship to Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, and gained a Bachelor of Science degree from Case Western Reserve University. He went on to do a Master's degree at Ohio State University. His thesis (the mathematical theory of the orbits of meteoroids) was supervised by Pro-

fessor Lincoln La Paz, who later would become strongly involved with the ALPO.

In 1941 Haas went to the University of Pennsylvania to work for meteor expert Prof Charles Olivaria, also the Director of the University's Flower Observatory. At that time, Haas was teaching US Navy personnel the theory of celestial navigation, as part of the war effort.

Haas went on to teach mathematics at the University of New Mexico from 1946–1950, where La Paz had lately become head of department. He then moved to Las Cruces to accept a position at the White Sands missile base, where he worked until 1954. After that, he worked at New Mexico State University (NMSU), but taught astronomy for a few years at what was then the Pan American teachers' college in Edinburg, Texas. Walter Haas and his family moved back to Las Cruces in 1962, where he was employed as a mathematician and computer programmer in the Physical Science Laboratory at NMSU, until he retired in 1983. He was still living in Las Cruces at the time of his death.

Walter Haas was a member of the BAA from 1943–'65, having been proposed by fellow countryman Hugh M. Johnson, and the Director of our Mercury & Venus Section, Henry McEwen. But as early as 1936 we can find Haas's first contributions to the Association, when together with Ed Martz he sent in a series of 23 drawings

of Mercury. Both had observed Mercury under good conditions, and their drawings appeared in a Section report written by McEwen.

Haas at that time was using the 10-inch (25cm) refractor of Mount Union College. His observations at the start of WW2 usefully filled some gaps in the records of our Jupiter Section. Haas also reported his wartime observations of Saturn, timing many transits of small features on the N. edge of the planet's S. Equatorial Belt, and thereby determining the equatorial rotation period (in the autumn of 1942) to be 10h 17m 44s, which is a little in excess of the planet's System I period. Many of his then records were made with the 18-inch (46cm) refractor of the Flower Observatory, and most of the time he was its only user. When our Saturn Section was revitalised in 1946 by Dr Alexander, the two exchanged so many letters that they constantly crossed in the post.

Haas was also intensely interested in the Moon, and like Pickering he sought evidence of change upon its surface. His lengthy four-part paper 'Does Anything Ever Happen on the Moon', published in the *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* in 1942, became a classic. During 1943, and after spending 1,500 hours at the eyepiece over three years, he announced that he and two others had caught 15 tiny flashes due to meteorite impacts upon the

Moon's surface. This was a controversial statement at the time, but Haas was fully vindicated more than 50 years later, during the 1999 November Leonid meteor shower, when amateur videotapes confirmed for the first time that such events really could be witnessed from the Earth. In the following year the ALPO was prompted to reprint the *JRASC* paper as a booklet.

Haas contributed observations to our Mars Section on and off over seven decades. All his observations were handwritten or drawn upon lined paper, as were his many letters, until he turned to email communication late in life. Today his original observations are archived in the Special Collections at NMSU. He had keen eyesight, and in the mid-1960s noticed that a small dark spot was apparently circulating around the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. This discovery predated the professional discovery of that circulation. The skies over Las Cruces proved very favourable for lunar and planetary work. Walter Haas was often able to follow Venus right through inferior conjunction when it was very close to the Sun, and was able to see the cusps extend to form a complete circle.

Right from the start, Haas organised a little group of observers around him. The group pooled their observations,



Selected copies of *The Strolling Astronomer* (*J. Assoc. Lunar Planet. Obs.*) showing the very first issue as well as changes of style and format over the decades.



Walter Haas in 2004 June at Upper Benefield, Northamptonshire. (Photo: Richard McKim)

and later published analyses in *JRASC* and in the now defunct US periodical, *Popular Astronomy*. Group work on all the bright planets appeared in print. In this way the nascent group resembled Robert Barker's 'Observing Circle' here in the UK, but after the war ended Haas judged that the time had arrived to try to start a proper lunar and planetary observing organisation in the USA. Thus the ALPO *Journal*, better known as *The Strolling Astronomer*, began life as a monthly duplicated typescript bulletin on 147 March 1, of which several dozen complimentary copies were posted by Haas to his correspondents.

Here we show the first issue and some later formats and cover designs.

The early issues of *Strolling Astronomer* have a marvellous fresh feeling to them, and its contributors were not constrained by the rigid and unimaginative refereeing that can sometimes stifle the creative process in other serials. Certainly there were some observations published which would now be regarded as dubious, but wide-ranging discussions were thereby stimulated, and many valuable reports were produced upon the combined observations of the contributors. Haas joked that if somebody wanted to write a paper about 'The Voracious Mosquito Compared to the Companionable Skunk as a Telescopic Accessory' then they were free to send in their manuscript. Many years later, when the ALPO *Journal* had become a lot more serious (but inevitably not quite so much fun), somebody finally did.

The ALPO quickly grew to have a membership of several hundreds, and in later years it broadened its scope to include solar, comet, meteoric and historical work. It also gained a large international following, and its membership would peak at over 800 in the 1960s. From 1956 it held an annual convention in conjunction with the Western Amateur Astronomers and the Astronomical League.

It was a fitting tribute to our Association that the ALPO was organised on the same Sectional basis as the BAA. Haas himself served as the first informal 'Recorder' for the Moon and Mars, writing long monthly accounts of the observational reports he had received. As the Editor of the *Strolling Astronomer* as well as teaching mathematics by day, and making his own observations by night, he must have kept very late hours. From New Mexico he used a long-focus 32cm Newtonian for most of his work. Haas constantly encouraged others, was good at spotting talent, and in this way several professional astronomers would

first cut their teeth as ALPO Section Recorders. He also introduced a number of US-based observers to the BAA, including the legendary Jupiter observer, Elmer J. Reese (who also turned professional).

Walter Haas came to the UK to see Queen Elizabeth's Coronation in 1953 June, visiting Percy Wilkins and Patrick Moore at the former's home in Bexleyheath as part of his astronomical programme, as well as the RGO at Greenwich in the company of Ewen

Whitaker. In London he was able to see Beryl again, and in November of the same year the couple were married in Mandeville, Jamaica. Beryl Haas was always known as Peggy, and in later years the ALPO would give awards for loyal service in both his name and hers.

Even in later life Walter Haas lost none of his mathematical proficiency, and he continued writing highly analytical papers for the ALPO *Journal* on such topics as the height of the atmosphere of Venus, long after he retired from the Directorship of the ALPO in 1985. After his retirement he continued to serve on the ALPO Board.

Walter Haas was proud of his family, and always wrote letters and Christmas cards containing news of them. Until his late 80s he lived in his own residence, with the daily assistance of his family and a carer. Haas visited the UK again in 2004, when it was the good fortune of my wife and myself to be able to welcome him to our home. Alas, he had a fall in London later that month, and the resulting fractured hip took a long time to heal, but he was still sending the BAA occasional results of his daytime Venus work as late as 2009. It was pleasing that he had rejoined the Association in 2004.

I think that Walter Haas charmed everyone he met. He was a modest and unassuming man, even though he was extremely talented and knowledgeable. Numerous amateurs turned to him for help and advice, and they were never disappointed. It was typical of him that he donated his complete personal set of the *Strolling Astronomer* (by then spanning seven decades) to the BAA.

The work of Walter Haas was recognised through numerous awards, including the Astronomical League's own award (1952), the Leslie C. Peltier Award (1982), the Western Amateur Astronomers' G. Bruce Blair Award (1955), and the Astronomical Society of the Pacific's Amateur Achievement Award (1994). He was an extraordinary astronomer who has left behind a real legacy in the form of the ALPO. Peggy Haas pre-deceased him, but Walter is survived by their daughter Mary Charlene Alba, their grandson and great-grandchildren, and we extend our condolences to them.

Richard McKim

New Honorary Members

Congratulations to the following, who have been members of the Association for a continuous period of fifty years at the start of the 2015–2016 session, and therefore now become Honorary Members:

	Date elected
Mr Stanley C. Paddock	1964 Oct 28
Mr Paul E. Fulford	1964 Nov 25
Mr Henry T. Jenkins	1964 Nov 25
Mr Anthony M. Nixon	1964 Nov 25
Mr Anthony M. Mickle	1964 Nov 25
Lt. Marc J. Small	1964 Nov 25
Mr Michael D. Waterman	1965 Jan 27
Dr Christopher J. Edge	1965 Feb 24
Mr Richard T. Rate	1965 Mar 31
Mr Peter J. Gates	1965 May 26
Mr Roy J. Hughes	1965 Jun 27
Dr Andrew T. Stokes	1965 Jun 30

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