

# UC Irvine

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ONE GOOD TURN

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# Letters

## Save the 100-inch

To us old astronomers, it is a crying shame to mothball the Hooker 100-inch telescope just because the Los Angeles light pollution and smog blank it out (September issue, page 203). It is a great telescope and was used to make many discoveries from the 1930's to the 1960's. I suggest that the Carnegie Institution of Washington make a present of the 100-inch to some group in Australia, Argentina, or South Africa at about 34° south latitude. There the mounting, designed for 34° north, could be installed with the polar axis facing south. With only minor modifications the old telescope could continue its career in the Southern Hemisphere, where there is plenty to be done.

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## FG Sagittae

FG Sagittae is one of the most remarkable objects in the sky. It is the central star of a planetary nebula and has changed from spectral type *B* in 1955 to late *G* or early *K* today. Page 309 of the October, 1984, issue states that FG Sagittae is binary; however, the star is actually single. There was a report of duplicity in the mid-1970's, but more recent studies, such as that reported by Ross D. Cohen and his colleagues in the July, 1980, issue of the *Astronomical Journal*, have found no evidence that FG Sagittae is a binary.

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## One Good Turn

This is surely too obvious to need saying, but people do change with time. And in later years, Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin (September issue, page 225) was enormously generous and encouraging to her younger female colleagues (including the present writer).

The only more obvious remark is that another astronomer who has been enormously generous and encouraging to those (again including the present writer) who followed on the trails she helped to blaze is the former director of Maria Mitchell Observatory, custodian of the Yale *Bright Star Catalogue*, and your reviewer, E. Dorrit Hoffleit.

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## Telescope Kit

As a teenager I built a very realistic model of the 200-inch telescope from a kit advertised in the January, 1949, issue of *SKY & TELESCOPE* (page 72). I still have the model, but it has deteriorated considerably. My attempts to purchase another kit by locating the original seller have been unsuccessful. I would be interested in hearing from anyone who has one of the kits or one of the assembled models, or can provide a lead in locating either.

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## Ritchey Biography

I am collecting material for a full-length scientific biography of George W. Ritchey (1864-1945), the noted American telescope maker and astronomer. I have seen nearly all his published scientific papers, and many letters that he wrote and received, but I would welcome any other letters, clippings, articles, reminiscences of co-workers, and the like. I am especially interested in hearing from surviving relatives who might have information about his family and early life.

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## God and the Eclipse

The review of Paul Davies' book *God and the New Physics* (September, 1984, page 229) prompted me to think again of certain evidence that could be utilized for the teleological argument for God's existence. And, as reviewer Denis Dutton says, the new evidence is no better than the old. However, for me the following are just reflections, as I am decidedly a skeptic.

On the Earth, eclipses of the Sun are very delicate phenomena. Sometimes the Moon is barely big enough to hide the Sun. The beauty of the corona and prominences is shown to maximum advantage but with tantalizing brevity and in eclipse paths so narrow that most inhabitants never see a total eclipse. How does it happen that these are the conditions on the only body in the solar system — as far as we know — inhabited by beings to whom concepts like beauty, rarity, and brevity mean something?

From some other worlds, solar eclipses are produced by bodies that appear much larger than the Sun in the sky, producing long, more frequent eclipses that however lack the brilliant coronal display. From yet other worlds there is nothing that ap-

pears large enough to hide the Sun completely. Furthermore, remember that the Moon is slowly receding from the Earth. In the past, before humans existed, the Moon was so large it covered the Sun in eclipses that were long but relatively unpleasing aesthetically. In the future, after the Earth ceases to be inhabited by people, the Moon will appear too small to cover the Sun.

What about transits of Venus? At present we are in a rare period when transits occur in pairs eight years apart, separated by intervals of more than a century. Most of the time, in the past and future, transits are singular. Note that the brief period of paired transits began not long before human beings developed the sophistication to predict and observe these events. By the time the pairings end, space travel may have become so commonplace that astronomical events may no longer be thought of in a purely earthly perspective. Why think much about the transit of Venus when you are going to Venus next week? On the other hand, by then war on Earth may have destroyed technological civilization, or an Orwellian high-tech society may have deprived people of the opportunity or inclination to do astronomical observing.

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## Sounds from Meteors

On page 388 of the November, 1984, issue, you carried a letter from Alan Paine and Dave Powell concerning sounds from meteors. Perhaps an account of a meteor I once heard will interest your readers.

My experience took place one night during the summer of 1929 or 1930 near Atlanta, Georgia. A group of us had climbed a ridge to watch a meteor shower, but we had very little success. As we started back down about 11:00 p.m., the ridge was bathed in light as a brilliant meteor passed overhead moving southward. Before it passed out of sight we were startled by a sharp, loud crack.

I would estimate that the meteor was visible for no more than two or three seconds. The sound reached us within one or two seconds — probably closer to one — after the meteor passed directly overhead. If the noise was a sonic boom, its quick arrival implied that the meteor passed no more than 1,000 feet or so above us, a seemingly improbable event.

The sound itself resembled the "crack" that a 30-caliber rifle bullet makes upon striking a heavy paper target, only louder. I would appreciate hearing from anyone who has had a comparable experience.

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