

THE MINOR PLANET BULLETIN

BULLETIN OF THE MINOR PLANETS SECTION OF THE
ASSOCIATION OF LUNAR AND PLANETARY OBSERVERS

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EDITORIAL: THE MINOR PLANET BULLETIN AT 50

With this issue, the *Minor Planet Bulletin* and the Minor Planets Section of the Association of Lunar and Planetary Observers commemorate their 50th year. (Official founding was in mid-1973.) At this milestone for our field, we are extremely fortunate to receive a continuing retrospective from the Founder, Professor Richard G. Hodgson. Commensurate with this milestone, Professor Frederick Pilcher, Minor Planets Section Coordinator since 1982 (formerly titled as “Recorder”) shares in this issue his recollections “A Lifetime with the Asteroids.” Professor Pilcher’s essay is a treasure trove of thoughts that are most gratefully received.

As an *MPB* subscriber since Volume 1 (and Editor since Volume 10), I simply note the personal and professional pleasure of interacting closely with these individuals over an entire half-century. But the greatest pleasure and satisfaction comes from connecting with and encouraging new and seasoned observers worldwide. It is simply “giving back” for the encouragement I received as a student entering the field. The enterprise of the *Minor Planet Bulletin* would not be possible without the dedicated volunteer service of Associate Editor Brian Warner, Assistant Editor David Polishook, and the diligence of our Producer Pedro Valdés Sada. Gratitude also to Melissa Hayes-Gehrke as the Distributor, with a hearty nod to past Producer Bob Werner (35 years of service) and to the late Derald Nye, Distributor and benefactor for 37 years.

Above and beyond the names above, the true credit for success of our endeavor goes to the observers who fill these pages with their observations that fuel the science of understanding these small worlds. May the passion and curiosity of their study never end.

Richard P. Binzel, Editor

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE MINOR PLANET BULLETIN

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The founding of the Minor Planets Section and The Minor Planet Bulletin are recollected, including their earliest sense of purpose and aspirations.

Early in 1973 the Association of Lunar and Planetary Observers (ALPO) under the leadership of its Director Walter Haas decided to establish an Asteroid or Minor Planets Section. In the year or two prior I (and I suspect several others) had been urging formation of such a section. I was delighted to receive Walter’s invitation to head it up as Recorder – the position now titled as Coordinator. (I had previously been Mercury Recorder.) In those days the then-known smaller, non-comet, non-satellite Solar System objects were called “asteroids” and “minor planets” interchangeably in English. Americans tended to use “asteroids” more frequently; Eurasians inclined more to “minor planets.” Thinking more globally, and influenced by the publication *Minor Planet Circulars*, I chose the name “Minor Planet Section.” Under the old astronomical definition of the time (prior to the 2006 IAU revision) anything that orbited the Sun and was not a comet could be properly called a planet – size did not matter. You will note this steady usage of “planet” in Section papers.

Shortly after becoming Recorder, I decided if we were to stimulate member interest, we needed to make reports not only in the *Strolling Astronomer* (*Journal of the A.L.P.O.*), but also rapidly and frequently in a separately subscribed section journal. In the latter, appeals for observations of individual minor planets, and resulting observations of seldom-observed, or long lost, or newly-found objects could be rapidly reported and discussed. By 1973 May 30, a letter offering subscriptions to ALPO members was circulated. I chose to call the new section journal the *Minor Planet Bulletin* (“*MPB*” for short). The name and initials would not conflict with any existing astronomical institution or journal. Volume 1, Number 1 of *MPB* appeared as a quarterly in 1973 July. The rest was exciting history!

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Copies of the new journal were circulated not only to ALPO members, but to *Sky & Telescope*, J.U. Gunter's *Tonight's Asteroids*, where its existence was reported to a much wider circle of readers. From the very beginning free copies were always supplied to the Astronomisches Rechen-Institut in Heidelberg, West Germany, so that the articles could be entered into *Astronomy and Astrophysics Abstracts* for consultation by readers around the world. In like manner, we freely supplied copies to Brian G. Marsden, Director at the IAU Minor Planet Center (MPC). I was determined from the start that we do serious, high-quality work, and that we take ourselves seriously. (If you don't, no one else will either!).

Reactions to the first issue were warm and generous. Dr. Joseph Ashbrook, *Sky & Telescope* editor, praised the project, but took exception to my suggestion that asteroids should be checked for possible satellites when at highly favorable oppositions. To him such a search was a waste of time since their gravity fields would be far too weak to retain them. I remained firmly in the "let's look" camp. (From my childhood, I had a fantasy that minor moons might be possible. Of course, 243 Ida's moon Dactyl would not be discovered for another decade, and their discovery was always very helpful as a means to determine the mass of the system. Subsequent discovery from Earth today requires far larger telescopes than I then imagined. Brian Marsden, then MPC Director, was always very helpful supplying ephemerides and other news for the *MPB*. On occasion we met in Cambridge. About 40 subscriptions rolled in, mostly from individuals but also including some universities and colleges. But from that point, we were underway!

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Interested readers in the history of the Minor Planet Section and *Minor Planet Bulletin* will find longer recollections in Hodgson (2013; *Minor Planet Bulletin* **40**, 1-4) and Hodgson (2013; *The Strolling Astronomer* **55**, No. 2, 36-40). Portions of the text printed here are drawn by the author from his previous published recollections.]

A LIFETIME WITH ASTEROIDS

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Asteroids have been a part of my life for seven decades, moving forward from being an aspiring amateur astronomer, to observatory builder, to methodical observer, and dedicated collaborator seeking to advance lightcurve studies. I have been part of the Minor Planets Section for all of its 50 years, with the honor to serve as Coordinator (originally titled "Recorder") for the past 40 years, and continuing.

In my later years I have realized that, no matter where I grew up, or who the important people in my life may have been, I would have been drawn to asteroid studies. Something very fundamental in my character matches me with the asteroids. I was born, to use a phrase coined recently by Alan W. Harris, an "asteroid nerd."

As a small child I was fascinated just by looking at the moon and stars, and knew about the planets and how they moved around the Sun. At the age of ten one of my teachers gave me her college level astronomy textbook, Robert H. Baker's "Astronomy." This book contained tables of the sizes, distances from their primaries, and periods of revolution for the nine planets and 28 satellites then recognized. Within a few weeks I had memorized, and still remember, all of the numerical values in these tables. In the next two years I read several other books on astronomy, and by the age of twelve knew the basics of all the major classes of astronomical objects known at the time.

My parents gave me a subscription to *Sky and Telescope* magazine starting with the November, 1949, issue. Baker's book taught me the names and numbers of the first four asteroids. The January, 1950, issue of *Sky and Telescope* published the first of their continuing series of ephemerides of bright asteroids coming to opposition. I made no effort to look for them in the sky, but still remember learning the names and numbers of the asteroids in that first list, 1 Ceres, 3 Juno, 516 Amherstia, and 532 Herculina. In the next several years I had memorized the names and numbers of all of the several tens of asteroids published in their lists. I didn't know anything else about any of them, and didn't try to look for any of them in the sky.

At the age of about fifteen, my uncle took me to visit the Perkins Observatory, then still located in Delaware, Ohio, a short distance north of Columbus. In the library there was a pre-war edition of the *Astronomische Nachrichten* that contained a list of more than 1000 asteroids and their orbital elements. A treasure trove had opened. I copied down their names, numbers, absolute magnitudes that provided approximate sizes, and semimajor axes, but not the other orbital elements whose meanings baffled me. Each asteroid became more than a name and a number.

Later, having decided to major in physics and be only an amateur in astronomy, I went on to college and graduate school. In 1962 I was offered an assistant professorship in physics at Illinois College, Jacksonville, a four-year liberal arts college at that year having an enrollment of about 550 students. When the next year the department was enlarged from one to two faculty, I was able to add a liberal arts level course in astronomy to the curriculum, reenter