

THE
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THE SOLAR PHYSICS DIVISION

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INTRODUCTION

The centennial year for the AAS, 1999, marks the 30th anniversary of the founding of the AAS Solar Physics Division (SPD). The purpose of the SPD is the advancement of the study of the Sun and the coordination of solar research between astronomy and other branches of science. In this chapter we examine the motivation and the events leading to the formation of this organization, which serves the professional needs of solar astronomers and solar physicists in North America. We also outline the more important activities of the SPD over the years and how they reflect changes in the field of solar physics, including changes in the relative emphasis on the astrophysical and geophysical sides of the subject.

FOUNDING OF THE DIVISION

The origins of the SPD can be traced to an initiative in the mid-1960s to organize a series of special AAS meetings devoted to solar physics. The idea for these meetings originated in early 1965 with suggestions made by Henry J. Smith, the chief solar physicist at NASA headquarters and formerly on the staff of Sacramento Peak Observatory, and by Leo Goldberg of Harvard College Observatory, then President of the AAS and a distinguished solar astronomer himself. Smith had been disappointed in the small turnout of solar astronomers at AAS meetings.[1] He had found that several solar astronomers were abandoning the AAS for other organizations because of the crowded schedules of AAS meetings, the tendency of the AAS to meet in the eastern U.S. while the majority of solar astronomers lived in the western states, and a general lack of appreciation of solar astronomy among other astronomers. In April 1965, at a meeting of NASA's Solar Physics Subcommittee, Smith proposed that NASA-funded solar physicists meet periodically to discuss their research. In the discussion that followed, Goldberg suggested as an alternative that the AAS sponsor an annual meeting on solar physics,* "perhaps as a first step in establishing a section for solar physics." [2]

Goldberg, as AAS President, was reluctant to raise this possibility directly with the AAS Council himself because several of the Council members were already concerned that increasing specialization was threatening the unity of astronomy. He felt the suggestion would be better received if it came from solar astronomers outside the Council. Similarly, Smith believed that such a suggestion would be better received from an observatory director rather than from a Washington bureaucrat like himself.[1]

*From the earliest stages of planning which led to the formation of the SPD, the term "solar physics" was used to describe the field, with the intent of being more broadly inclusive than the term "solar astronomy."