

THE INDUSTRIAL PHYSICIST

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EDITORIAL

Comets and Stars

As I drove into the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico just after dark one evening in early April, I almost ditched the car. There, splashed across the inky sky, was the distinct signature of the comet Hale-Bopp, seemingly pointing to nearby Cloudcroft, home of physicist Alan Hale, one of the two men who first sighted the comet. I tried to imagine what it would be like to discover something so visible and spectacular. Many scientific discoveries are quietly important, but Alan Hale's name is on something that is literally blazed across the sky.

In Cloudcroft (population 600), the next day—5 April—was declared “Comet Hale-Bopp Day,” and there was a ceremony at The Lodge, where I was staying. Hale had been quoted in the press as complaining that there were not enough jobs for scientists, and pointing out that he didn't have a job. I asked him if he would accept a decent offer and he said he would consider it, but would prefer to stay in Cloudcroft. He seemed to be doing fine autographing copies of his new book, *Everybody's Comet*, and promoting his fledgling Southwest Institute for Space Research. But what happens when the comet fades from memory? Here is a scientist who gained the ultimate recognition for his discovery but is uncertain of its rewards.

Back in March, when I arrived at my hotel for the meeting of the American Physical Society in Kansas City, there was a band in the lobby, complete with excited cheerleaders. As I walked through the phalanx, I held my head high and allowed myself to pretend they were pleased to see me. But no, despite

the fact that physicists were arriving from all over the world to share their latest findings, the crowd was waiting for something entirely different. A rangy youth in white sneakers stepped out of the elevator, a college basketball player from Tampa, Florida, and the crowd went wild. His earning potential was probably more than that of a dozen of the arriving physicists combined. But it seemed ironic that the work of some of these physicists would have greater long-term impact on our lives than the relatively short-lived career of this superstar athlete.

A small group of us at the APS meeting did try to organize some press coverage for the first batch of industrial physicists to be elected fellows of the APS (see story p. 37), and we succeeded in staging a press briefing. We were not sure, however, whether our efforts resulted in any public recognition for these industrial physicists, although the next day *The Wall Street Journal* did have a story on Len Cutler and his work at Hewlett-Packard on atomic clocks.

Data from the recent AIP salary survey (see story p. 22) indicate it is getting harder even to get appropriate rewards: salaries for industrial physicists are losing ground against inflation. If this trend continues, it certainly is disturbing. While I don't expect tomorrow's schoolchildren to trade picture cards of industrial physicists, I do feel that creative people who come up with useful discoveries deserve both recognition and commensurate rewards.

Ken McNaughton
Associate Publisher

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