JOSEPH ASHBROOK

Astronomer-Editor
1918-1980

Joseph Ashbrook started to observe variable stars in 1932, and joined the AAVSO in 1936, while he was an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University.

He was particularly interested in methods of observing, and in stars difficult to observe. Eclipsing binary stars were among his favorites. Joe published information, finder charts, and light curves on a large number of these stars. These materials formed the core of our eclipsing binary committee's program.

Joe had a phenomenal memory for astronomical facts and references. He was like a walking library, guiding many of us in tracking down obscure references. It seemed as if he read and retained everything.

This friend of the AAVSO, who served in the Council for several terms, will be greatly missed by all.

The following comments were made by C. A. Whitney at a memorial service for Joe.

J. A. Mattei

I don't know whether his family remembers the morning of October 7, 1966, but at 4:45 AM the third-quarter moon was well up in the sky and the air was a bit hazy. Joe was out in the yard of his home, looking up, taking the measure of a ring around the moon by estimating its position among the stars. His result was no surprise because these rings had been measured many times before with instruments, but Joe enjoyed being able to do it with the naked eye, and he wrote a short article encouraging others to try it, too.

He enjoyed research that led to a number. I suppose there was something concrete and specific about a number that appealed to him --

*the time of an eclipse of a moon of Jupiter

*the precise period of a variable star

*the time required for the axis of an eccentric orbit to rotate once in space.

And I suspect that the number that pleased him most was the rotational period of Mars - the length of its day - which he got to a few thousandths of a second by going back a century into the old records.

Joe's Ph.D. thesis work at Harvard was one of the first attempts to use Cepheid variable stars to explore the structure of our galaxy. He focused on a chaotic region that he dubbed the "archipelago of Cassiopeia," and he proved that the technique could be a valuable one.

In his preface to the thesis he said:

"It is therefore evident that the Cepheid variable, and variable stars in general, will in future years play an increasingly important part in galactic studies. It will never again be possible, as an authority in the field did in 1937, to write a book on galactic research in which variable stars are mentioned only twice."

He was right, of course, and when I tracked down the book he referred to, I found it had been written by one of his thesis advisors.

Joe was co-discoverer of a comet that he had photographed from Arizona one night in 1948. For a few days it was known as "Comet Ashbrook," but then word came from South Africa that Cyril Jackson had independently photographed it 13 hours later, so it became Comet Ashbrook-Jackson, and it has been back four times since then.

Years later, Joe described the appearance of a comet on a discovery photograph as that of a "fuzzy caterpillar." He was that way: at once precise and bemused, seeing things in a slightly different way.

Joe always seemed to be one up on us. (And not only on us -- on the Nautical Almanac as well. He found at least one mistake in it.) If we sent him an article that we thought he would find interesting, he would send back a thank-you note and refer us to another article. As one person has said, Joe not only seemed to have read everything, he remembered it as well.

Joe edited the best astronomy magazine in the world, and while he worked as editor he also contributed 158 installments of a bi-monthly column he called the "Astronomical Scrapbook." His first column opened this way, and it was typical of many of the later contributions:

"How much confirmation do you need to place an observational discovery beyond any reasonable doubt? This is the important and disturbing question raised by the story of a satellite of Venus, which at one time was confidently accepted as a member of the solar system. No fewer than 33 observations of it by 15 different astronomers were recorded during the 17th and 18th centuries....Yet nothing can be more certain than that no such sizeable satellite exists."

He then proceeded to march the skeletons out of the closet.

Joe also enjoyed problems such as the youngest visible moon and the faintest visible star. In one article he wrote:

"There are cases of experienced observers who are able to see in small telescopes stars some two magnitudes fainter than the average observer can. About twenty years ago, Dr. Luigi Jacchia, with the 6-inch refractor of the Bologna Observatory, habitually observed stars down to magnitude 14.3."

Then he added:

"Although the observatory is in the heart of a large city, Bologna is famous for the inadequacy of its street lighting."

Few people have done as much for amateur astronomy as Joe did. It was typical of him that his preface to the Smithsonian Star Atlas emphasizes the potential uses of the atlas by amateurs.

His articles continually pointed out interesting projects, and he not only encouraged observing projects, but also often spent hours collating and reducing data that had been sent to him by his readers.

I'll never forget the sight of Joe as he ferreted through the library on the track of some arcane fact -- perhaps exposing the foibles of a past astronomer or uncovering a remarkable observation, but always helping us to stay honest and not take ourselves too seriously.

And helping us to see the surprising and delightful curiosities that surround us.

C. A. Whitney