

NARRATIVE HISTORY OF THE ASTRONOMICAL LEAGUE

By Chuck Allen

The year 2023 marked the seventy-seventh anniversary of the Astronomical League. During those seventy-seven years, the League has grown to nearly 23,000 members and has exceeded the magic threshold of 300 member societies. Its fortunes have truly proven to be those of amateur astronomy itself, and preservation of its rich history is important. The following is a narrative history compiled from 1996 to 2023 with the help of countless League members, League member societies, and related organizations. It is the product of scores of interviews and exhaustive examination of newsletters, published articles, minutes, financial records, correspondence files, club websites, online resources, and historical archives.

First Stirrings. The first meaningful attempt to organize amateur astronomy societies took place in the Midwest in 1935 when Edward Halbach and (Mr.) Luverne Armfield of the Milwaukee Astronomical Society cobbled together a dozen midwestern clubs called the American Amateur Astronomical Association and linked its constituents with a common newsletter. At AAVSO meetings during that period, Halbach met the famous Dr. Harlow Shapley, Director of Harvard College Observatory and famed participant in the Shapley-Curtis “Great Debate” about the nature of the spiral nebulae on April 26, 1920. Recognizing the significant role played by amateur astronomers in public education and astronomical discovery, Dr. Shapley avidly supported the Milwaukee group’s effort to create a national amateur organization. The AAAA lasted a couple of years, but the project, financed personally by Halbach and Armfield during Depression years, proved too costly. Shapley remembered their attempt, however, and that would prove critical to the events that followed.

Tent Talk. In 1939, a similar plan hatched in the east. The Amateur Astronomers Association of New York organized a three-week exhibition at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The event was the brainchild of Charles A. Federer, Jr., Secretary of the AAANY and volunteer editor of *The Sky* magazine, a joint publication of the AAANY and the Hayden Planetarium where Federer often lectured. The publication was proving a bit too expensive for the planetarium, so Federer and his wife, Helen, shortened the publication to reduce cost.

The last two days of the exhibition were reserved for an amateur astronomers’ meeting and, despite drenching rain, over 300 people, including Dr. Shapley, attended. On the first day, Federer and Shapley found themselves sitting in a tent, in the rain, discussing the problems of Hayden Planetarium’s *The Sky* magazine and their mutual interest in forming a national body of amateur astronomers. The following day, on August 20, 1939, with Shapley and Federer present, amateurs met to discuss the formation of a national body of amateur astronomers. Federer took an informal leadership role, and the group agreed to reconvene at Pittsburgh’s Buhl Planetarium the following summer.

Thanks to their mutual friendships with Harlow Shapley, Halbach and Armfield of the old midwestern group and the Federers of the eastern group came together in Pittsburgh in 1940 with the common goal of creating a national presence for amateur astronomers. That Pittsburgh meeting featured an "Astronomical Widows" group to occupy the wives of delegates who were, at that time, predominantly male. Charles Federer was named Chairman of the Committee on Permanent Organization and was the first person to refer to the nascent body as a "League." Once again, their work could not be completed during the time allotted, so the group planned to meet again, in July 1941, in Washington.

Early in 1941, with the Hayden planetarium still concerned about the cost of publishing *The Sky*, Dr. Shapley convinced the Federers to move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where they could help Harvard College Observatory's Bond Astronomical Club with its own magazine, *The Telescope*. Charles resigned as Secretary of the AAANY on September 30, 1941, and took the job in Cambridge. Together, Charles and Helen merged *The Sky* with Harvard's own publication, *The Telescope*, to found *Sky & Telescope* magazine. They published their first issue in November 1941. Charles would go on to serve as Editor in Chief for 33 years, and Helen, a devout amateur astronomer, eclipse chaser, and mirror grinder, would serve as Managing Editor, for 16.

During the summer of 1941, just before the Federers moved to Cambridge, the amateur groups met again, as planned, at Washington's famous inauguration hotel, The Willard. The "Astronomical Widows" group from 1940, however, had vanished. Female delegates, many of them committed amateur astronomers like Helen Federer, chose to participate in substantive meetings. In so doing, females gained for themselves prominent and critical early leadership roles in League history—something not seen in most organizations of that era.

Three years of constitutional wordsmithing concluded in Washington. The "Amateur Astronomers' League of America" was set to commence operation when ten societies ratified the constitution, and, by the last week of November 1941, thirteen societies had ratified. Historical records of the Milwaukee Astronomical Society and the Popular Astronomy Club show that the following societies joined the Association as charter members: The Milwaukee Astronomical Society, the Popular Astronomy Club, the Missouri-Southern Illinois Observers, the Madison Astronomical Society, the Amateur Telescope Makers of Chicago, the Amateur Telescope Makers of New York, the Amateur Astronomers Association of Pittsburgh, PA, the Amateur Astronomers Association of Rutherford, New York, the Astronomers Guild of Jamestown, NY, the Norfolk Astronomical Society, CT, the Eastbay Astronomical Society, CA, the Long Island Astronomical Association, NY, the Louisville Astronomical Society, KY, the Metropolitan Astronomical Society, NY, the New Jersey Astrophysical Society, the Amateur Astronomers Association of New York, and the Detroit and Warren Astronomical Society.

Margaret Back, Secretary of the Detroit and Warren Astronomical Society, invited the newly formed AALA to hold its first official convention in Detroit in 1942.

On December 7, 1941, however, the world changed. The proposed 1942 Detroit meeting was scrubbed due to gas rationing, and, for the second time, a newly formed amateur astronomers' organization sputtered, this time lost in the fog of war.

Post-War Revival. After World War II ended, Margaret Back and the Detroit and Warren Astronomical Societies reprised the Detroit convention plan and arranged a 1946 meeting at the Cranbrook Institute of Science in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

At the Cranbrook meeting, with new clubs in attendance, Federer reopened the Committee on Permanent Organization with a view to re-drafting the old 1941 AALA constitution. The new document set dues at 15 cents per year (\$2 in today's dollars), changed the body's name to "Amateur Astronomers League," and, rather oddly, rejected a controversial anti-astrology provision. Terms of office were kept short—at one year—to allow members of both the midwestern and eastern groups fair access to early leadership. As in 1941, the new League was, by the terms of its charter, to commence operation upon ratification by 10 societies.

On November 15, 1946, the Astronomical Society of Maine (Portland) provided the tenth signature. The Amateur Astronomers League was born anew, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of war...this time to stay. The League's first official convention was scheduled to take place in Philadelphia in 1947. For convention planning purposes and as a compromise between the two groups, Dr. Shapley was named the first (interim) president of the AAL. Other interim officers were Ed Halbach, vice-president, Margaret Back, secretary, Mabel Sterns, treasurer, and James Rothschild, executive secretary.

On July 4, 1947, the first official Amateur Astronomers League convention opened at Philadelphia's Franklin Institute. There, the League elected its first permanent officers for the 1947-48 term. Shapley's friend from AAVSO days, Ed Halbach, leader of the midwestern group that had tried to form a national organization 12 years earlier, became the League's second, and first elected, president. Also elected were Charles Federer, vice-president, Margaret Back, secretary, Carl Price Richards, treasurer, and James Rothschild, executive secretary. Helen Federer, co-founder of *Sky & Telescope* along with her husband Charles, would become the League's third president one year later.

At the 1947 convention, two important changes were made. Charles Federer proposed that the League create a regional structure, a format that was adopted and still exists to this day. Initially, two regions were established, the North Central Region and the Northeast Region. Importantly, Council also voted to change the name of the eight-month-old organization to simply "Astronomical League." By the time members left Philadelphia, the nascent League claimed 1,568 members in 31 societies and \$67.52 in its treasury (\$780 in today's dollars). A third region, the Northwest Region was added late in 1947, and, in 1948, the League added a Middle East Region and 46 member societies across the nation.

Mabel Sterns incorporated the League under D. C. law in January 1948, and went to work with Grace Scholz (later Spitz) to create an organizational newsletter called the

Astronomical League Bulletin. The first issue, dated September 1949, was a four-page mimeographed document that was mailed to each club and to each at-large member.

Growing Traditions. League conventions began to exhibit consistency, most being held on college campuses and some taking advantage of eclipses. Delegates at the 1951 meeting in Chapel Hill, awakened by the banging of a mallet at 4 am, proceeded as a group to nearby Piney Prospect to glimpse an annular sunrise but saw only a brightening Carolina fog. At the Chapel Hill banquet (banquets being a traditional convention feature since 1948), the League presented its first Astronomical League Award to Albert H. Ingalls for his extensive writings on telescope making. Rapid growth continued over the next year with the League reaching 64 member societies by 1952. Two new regions were approved at Chapel Hill—the Southeast Region and the Mid-States Region. A seventh region, the Southwest Region, was approved at the 1953 Dallas convention.

In 1954, Madison delegates took a four-day bus tour to Michigan's northern peninsula where they were treated to a spectacular total solar eclipse. By that time, the League had grown to 77 member societies. Late in 1954, the Great Lakes Region became the League's eighth region.

The 1954 Madison meeting proved to be significant for another reason. Twelve years earlier, in 1942, a 27-year-old woman in Pittsburgh had lost her husband. In approximately 1950, during a medical checkup, her doctor handed her a slip of paper listing the names of five organizations and told her to become active in one of them. Among the five names on the list was a local astronomy club. Taking her doctor's advice to heart, Wilma Reiland Cherup joined the Amateur Astronomers Association of Pittsburgh. She learned to build telescopes, got heavily involved with club activities, and started attending League conventions. At Madison, in 1954, she was elected Executive Secretary at a time when the League was growing like a weed. Wilma went on to become the longest serving officer in League history, serving as Executive Secretary for 23 years (1954-77) and heading League Sales for 15 more, finally retiring in 1992. For nearly four decades, her home address, 4 Klopfer Street, a triplex townhouse in a semi-commercial district in northeast Pittsburgh, was recognized throughout the nation's amateur astronomy community as the League's *de facto* headquarters. She handled dues payments, membership inquiries, mailing lists, and membership rosters.

The League's Council established permanent boundaries for its eight regions at the Seattle convention in 1955. Two years later, the League announced a contest to rename the *Bulletin*. The winning entry, *Reflector*, was suggested by Louise Kleinman of the Louisville Astronomical Society, earning her a book prize at the 1957 Kansas City convention. The name *Reflector* first appeared on the masthead of the September-October 1957 issue. At Kansas City, the League also voted to distribute the magazine to each individual member of League societies.

Fabulous tours became standard fare at League gatherings. In 1955, Seattle delegates were ferried to Vancouver Island for an observation at the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory, and the 1956 Miami meeting featured the League's first international foray—a

four-day boat cruise and visit to Havana as guests of the Cuban Navy and Dr. Jose Carlos Millas, Director of the Cuban National Observatory.

Rise of the Juniors. In the early 1950s, junior astronomy societies began springing up like dandelions. Spurred by the atomic age, the advent of television, completion of Palomar Observatory's 200-inch Hale telescope in 1949, the launch of Sputnik on October 4, 1957, Bell Telephone television science specials like *Our Mr. Sun* (1956) and *The Strange Case of the Cosmic Rays* (1957), and the 1957-58 International Geophysical Year, young people suddenly accounted for a quarter of League convention delegates. *Life* magazine covered 12 junior talks that "stole the show" at the Seattle convention in 1955, an event attended by members of 13 junior societies.

To highlight the interest in science in the late 50s, consider the public Mars opposition observation conducted by the Texas Astronomical Society of Dallas on September 7, 1956. The event drew 35,000 people, an astonishing crowd that snarled traffic in the region and had people waiting in line for two to three hours to get a view of the red planet.

Dr. Clarence E. Johnson served as the Chair of Junior Activities for the League from shortly after the organization's inception until 1957. His dedicated service to juniors earned him the League's most prestigious accolade, the Astronomical League Award, the following year. The year 1957 also saw the birth of the League's ninth region, the Mountain Astronomical Research Society (MARS). Initially, MARS consisted of four Colorado clubs and one in Wyoming. Only the far western states lacked coverage by a League region, many clubs there joining the Western Amateur Astronomers instead.

The organization continued to expand at a pace. By 1958, the League boasted 7,000 members in 110 senior societies and 21 junior societies across the land. A new Member-at-Large category was created and quickly gained 33 members not affiliated with League societies.

Nowhere was League growth more evident than at the First Nationwide Amateur Astronomers' Convention held in Denver in 1959. A joint convention of the League, WAA, ALPO, and AAVSO, the event attracted more than 600 amateur and professional astronomers...so many that the group photograph had to be published in four sections!

In May 1961, Chandler Holton, the new Junior Activities Chair, created the Advanced Junior Certificate which was awarded to young people who observed and sketched the entire Messier catalog, logged observations for a year, read and reported on six books and ten astronomers, learned the Greek alphabet, interested others in astronomy, and engaged in extensive public outreach. Two special service awards, called A. L. Junior Awards, were given to Daniel Kleinman and J. Richard Gott III of the Louisville Junior Astronomical Society in 1960 and 1963, respectively. Gott and Gary Ross later co-chaired the League's Junior Activities Section and published a League *Manual for Junior Activities*.

Yet another total solar eclipse brought the League to Orono, Maine, in 1963. While a rainstorm dashed the hopes of campus observers, luckier attendees enjoyed limited

success atop nearby Cadillac Mountain. The weather was, perhaps, a harbinger of trouble to come, for the late 1960s brought an end to widespread junior participation. The end of the Space Race, the Vietnam war, political and civil unrest, and a massive increase in suburban light pollution conspired to draw youth away from amateur astronomy. The loss was all too evident by the early 1970s when many junior societies, so tremendously active in the 50s and 60s, had become indolent...most of them collapsing altogether.

Comet Ikeya Seki generated excitement in 1965, and the Schlitz Circus Parade nearly engulfed that summer's unusually festive Milwaukee convention, an event reminiscent of the 1961 Detroit convention conducted arm-in-arm with 18,000 square dancers. The Milwaukee meeting was one of the last conventions heavily attended by juniors with over 50 high school students participating. It was also one of the last conventions where all attendees wore dresses or coats and ties—a societal norm up to that time. Despite its upbeat atmosphere, however, the Milwaukee conclave ended in tragedy. Yerkes Observatory hosted a League observation on July 3. While this writer, then 17, was enjoying a stunning image of Mars through the great 40-inch f/17 refractor, 73 year-old Floyd Shirey of Dallas walked through the dome slit onto a rooftop catwalk. In the darkness, he lost his way and fell quietly to his death.

Observing Programs, the IDA, and the Trust Fund. In 1966, the League approved its first formal observing program called “Messier Observe,” and, on January 19, 1967, Cathrine Delaney of Pittsburgh became the first person in League history to receive a League Observing Program certificate for her Messier observations. That Messier Observe program was only the beginning. It was destined to be the first, and most popular, of over 80 League Observing Programs to be developed over the next half century.

The issue of light pollution made its first appearance on a League agenda at the 1969 Council meeting and reached the pages of *Reflector* in November 1970. Indeed, 1970 became a watershed year in the battle for darkness. The skies seemed to disappear everywhere at once and many amateur observatories disappeared along with them. Key League members, Tim Hunter and future League President Bob Gent, would both lead the new International Dark Sky Association in its battle against this existential threat to not only astronomy but to wildlife and human health.

Needing long-term financial solutions, the League established a Trust Fund in November, 1970. Starting with just \$1,000 in convention proceeds and private donations, Trust Fund principal would grow to \$500,000 over the next 53 years, its annual interest supporting special League projects.

The Feud. After 1970, stresses on the hobby increased. Just two years after winning the space race, the Apollo Program began losing public support and, by 1971, 115,000 NASA engineers had lost their jobs because of cutbacks. A key figure in the creation of the League, Dr. Harlow Shapley, died in December 1972. Comet Kahoutek went bust in November 1973, erasing what might have been a redeeming public moment for amateur organizations. These events put some pressure on the League which was looking for ways to increase its dues beyond the then-current \$0.25 per club member.

In August 1974, Robert E. "Bob" Fried was elected League president. Bob was skilled at photoelectric photometry and wanted the League to become more research oriented. To that end, he proposed abandoning the newsletter version of *Reflector* in favor of a color-covered technical journal called *Reflector: Journal of the Astronomical League*. With Charles I. Gale editing, the *Journal*, modeled after the *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, emphasized technical articles rather than League news which could be conveyed by letters to club ALCors. He felt the *Journal* would justify a needed dues increase.

The move to a technical publication proved controversial, however, and was strongly disfavored by Wilma Cherup, Russell Maag, and Frank Cecil who felt the lack of a traditional newsletter would damage the League's relationship with its clubs. Simultaneously, an internal dispute erupted among League officers in 1975 over the choice of a *Journal* publisher. One of the publishers threatened to sue, emergency executive meetings were held, and a minimal legal settlement was effected privately and without Executive Committee approval. These disagreements resulted in a contested election for president between Bob Fried and Rollin Van Zandt in 1975. The run-up to that election produced claims of censorship and improper electioneering by others. Both sides were well-intentioned but had different views of what was best for the League. Van Zandt defeated Fried in the 1975 election and, three months later, *Journal* editor Charles I. Gale resigned. The November 1975 issue of the *Journal* was delayed, and Stephanie Fox, a technical writer by profession, was appointed in his place. She published the long-delayed issue in February 1976.

In December 1976, a decision was made to revive the *Reflector* newsletter for club members and to continue publishing the *Journal* as a benefit of Members-at-Large. President Van Zandt was concerned that this created a "dues dichotomy" with MALs receiving greater benefits. Bob Fried continued to support the publication of the *Journal*.

The tribulations of 1975 and 1976 were ameliorated almost immediately. Rollin Van Zandt was adept at bringing people together. Indeed, after Van Zandt's two one-year terms, Bob Fried returned to the League presidency in 1977. Van Zandt took over as *Journal* editor and, in December 1977, *Reflector* was renewed as a traditional League newsletter. Ultimately, the *Journal* proved too costly, its overruns taxing the League treasury, so it was discontinued in 1980.

The disagreements of the mid-70s were quickly forgotten. Comet West became one of the century's great comets in 1975-76, and the League set an all-time attendance record of 667 at its 1976 Kutztown convention. At that meeting, however, a significant Council debate erupted over a proposal to move the League from society memberships to all-individual memberships with much higher dues. Many felt that the move to individual dues would destroy the club-based system adopted by the League and cause the League to fail from a lack of individual members willing to pay the higher dues. Extra Council sessions were needed to resolve the debate, and a move to 100% individual dues was rejected as unduly risky. The current dues system had allowed the League to grow to 8,000 members in 164 societies, and no one wanted to tamper with that. The purse strings were tightened,

however, and the League began preparing and adhering to a formal budget in 1977.

A tenth region, the Western Region, was created on March 1, 1978. With that action, League regions covered all 50 states for the first time. The Western Region was not intended to compete with the Western Amateur Astronomers, but, rather, to avoid having to turn down Western clubs that sought League membership.

“Cosmos” and Comet Halley. The 1980s brought another massive surge of growth and success. In 1980, the League initiated its National Astronomy Day Award, currently sponsored by Sky Publishing Corporation, and then rode the tidal wave of interest in astronomy generated by Carl Sagan's blockbuster television series, *Cosmos*, which ran from September to December 1980. The League unveiled its popular Herschel 400 Observing program and, at ALCon '80 in Dallas, presented the first Leslie Peltier Award to its namesake (posthumously) in recognition of his contributions to observational astronomy. Even more significantly, the League entered the computer age in 1980 with the purchase of an Apple II computer with 48K RAM for use by Executive Secretary, Don Archer.

In 1982, David Clark and the League's Southwest Region held their first Texas Star Party, drawing over 440 amateurs and quickly earning a place among the elite of American star parties.

With Comet Halley's arrival in 1985-86, telescope and magazine sales skyrocketed, idle amateurs reactivated, and League events were infused with new blood. Fred Schaaf published a four-page insert, *Dark Skies for Comet Halley*, in 11 consecutive issues of *Reflector* from February 1984, to August, 1986, while the comet cast its magic dust on the League and its members.

At Tucson in 1985, the League introduced a new national recognition for League service, the G. R. "Bob" Wright Award. The very first plaque was presented to Barry and Carol Beaman for their extensive editorial efforts and long-term organizational efforts on behalf of the League's highly successful and active North Central Region.

At the Baltimore convention in 1986, Council passed a By-Laws proposal extending the terms of president, vice-president, and secretary from one year to two with the secretarial term to end in the interim years between the elections of the president and vice-president. Council also passed a resolution permitting use of Trust Fund interest to cover League projects. That Trust Fund, under the care of Trustee, Betty Hasson, had reached a new high of \$13,304, and, by 1990, the League family had reached 11,000 members in 174 societies and was increasing its benefits to members at an unprecedented rate.

President Ken Willcox announced his first League eclipse trip to the Kona Coast of Hawaii in July 1991. His professionally acclaimed trips took members to centerlines in Bolivia (1994), India (1995) and Mongolia (1996) and, in 1996, he organized the first League Southern Star Party, providing members with affordable southern sky observing high in the Bolivian Andes.

In 1991, Chuck Allen proposed a new National Young Astronomer Award which was approved in 1992. The first award was presented to 17-year-old Blake Warren Thomas of New Mexico on July 17, 1993, at Madison, Wisconsin. Judged by professionals and open to American students, NYAA grew rapidly with the generous support of Scott Roberts of Meade Instruments Corporation and later of Explore Scientific. Scott has arranged to provide beautiful telescope prizes to NYAA winners since 1994. Winners and runners-up also receive expense paid trips to League conventions. After 31 years, the program still draws one to two dozen exceptional research projects, virtually all of them of International Science and Engineering Fair quality.

In May 1992, Jim Fox produced the first in a series of informational "Astro Notes," and the League began offering both StarGate BBS access and liability insurance options suitable for some larger clubs. Fox was elected president of the League later that fall. It was he who moved League Council meetings to the day before the opening of each national convention, a practice that endures to this day.

At the San Antonio convention in 1995, the League broke through the magic barrier of 200 member societies for the first time with 12,339 members in 206 clubs. By then, the Trust Fund had swelled to a record \$50,000.

From 1992 to 2000, League membership continued to grow, and, in 1996, Chuck Allen began collecting historical materials as part of a League 50th anniversary historical research project. That effort culminated in his article entitled, "A Golden Celebration," in the May 1997, issue of *Sky & Telescope* magazine. That anniversary, which was celebrated in conjunction with the League's 50th convention at Copper Mountain, Colorado, saw the League reach 13,400 members in 212 societies. Just one year later, in 1998, League rolls swelled to 15,000 members.

Following his visit to ALCon '98 in French Lick, Indiana, national television personality Jack Horkheimer (the "Star Gazer"), a huge supporter of the League, elected to sponsor two new youth service awards, the Horkheimer/Smith and Horkheimer/D'Auria Awards. Winners receive generous cash prizes (\$1,700 and \$1,000 at this writing), and the Horkheimer/Smith winner receives a trip to the national convention. In 2008, a Horkheimer/O'Meara Journalism Award was added for 8- to 14-year-old writers, and, in 2009, a Horkheimer/Parker Youth Imaging Award was added, both awards providing substantial cash prizes as well. The awards are supported by the Horkheimer Charitable Fund which was created following Jack's death in 2010. Wilma Cherup, who devoted her entire adult life to the League and who still holds the record as the longest serving officer in League history (23 years as Executive Secretary), passed away that same year at the age of 95.

The New Millennium. The arrival of the 2000s brought several substantial changes that vastly improved League services and benefits.

Beginning in 2001, the Council approved the appointment of National Observing Program Directors to oversee the League's Observing Program Division. Dr. Aaron

Clevenson and Michael Benson were appointed in 2001. Later, Dr. Al Lamperti, Lt. Cmdr. Cliff Mygatt, Dr. Maynard Pittendreig, and Marie Lott joined Aaron Clevenson in that role. They established the League as the nation's certifying organization for master-level achievements in telescopic and binocular observing. They created a master progression in the visual programs with levels including Observer, Master Observer (10 programs), Advanced Observer (15 programs), Master Observer Silver (20 programs), Master Observer Gold (30 programs), and Master Observer Platinum (40 programs). Each level was designed to include up to five core requirements. Members achieving Master Observer status receive plaques if they attend the national convention. A Binocular Master Observer Award was created in 2017 requiring completion of eight out of nine binocular observing programs. In 2020, a Master Imaging Award was added requiring completion of 10 programs or groups of programs using only imaging.

Another key event in League history occurred quite by accident. In December 2003, the *Reflector* editor position fell vacant, and President Bob Gent took over the role on a temporary basis. Understandably overwhelmed by this new and difficult task, he made a phone call to Executive Secretary Jackie Beucher expressing the need for assistance. The phone call occurred just as Jackie's brother, Chuck Beucher, walked in for a visit. Overhearing the conversation, Chuck, who had experience publishing American Automobile Association California's monthly magazine, said, "I can help." And did he ever! As Design Manager, Chuck turned *Reflector* into the beautiful glossy magazine that we enjoy today and stayed on Board as Design Manager for more than four years.

Bob Gent spent much of his second term as president in Italy where his wife, Terrie, an Air Force colonel, was stationed. This left Terry Mann in effective charge of day-to-day issues involving the League for considerable portions of Bob's last term and for her own two terms as president. Terry has now joined Jackie Beucher and Wilma Cherup as one of the three longest serving officers in League history. Their work highlights the enormous contributions that women have made to the League since the earliest days when League co-founder Margaret Back, second League Executive Secretary Grace Scholz, and third League president Helen Federer played critical roles in the League's development.

One of Bob Gent's prime emphases was the opening of a national office, and, in early 2005, after decades of operating out of the homes of Executive Secretaries, the League found space and opened its national office in Kansas City, Missouri. The League hired a National Office Manager, Mitch Glaze, and two coordinators to maintain rosters and mailing lists, conduct elections, answer mail, handle League sales, and archive records. Mitch serves the League ably to this day. The League Council held its annual meeting in the newly opened national office during ALCon '05 in Kansas City, but not without a small, if marginally expensive, hiccup. Bob Gent and Terry Mann plugged their laptops into an extension cord, and a power surge instantly fried both of their computers. Consistent with the location of its new national office, the League re-incorporated in the State of Missouri on September 5, 2006. Soon after, President Terry Mann pushed hard for League Sales to go online, and her vision was realized when Vern Raben transitioned the League Web site to a Drupal platform capable of handling an online shopping cart.

One of the first challenges faced by the League after opening its national office was the financial crisis of 2008 which caused astronomy club membership to wane nationwide. As a result, the League lost nearly a third of its club-affiliated members, dropping temporarily from 18,000 to 13,000 members. Over the next 12 years, however, the League recovered virtually all of that loss, reaching more than 18,300 members in 304 societies by 2020.

The second decade of the new millennium saw three conventions suffer a bit from low attendance, one convention losing \$11,000. The stresses that clubs experience when hosting conventions were addressed as early as the 2002 Council meeting when the idea of holding expos in three rotating locations, all hosted by League-appointed convention officials, was discussed. Expos such as those held in Tucson and Casper have traditionally been well attended events and the establishment of Expos at three base locations was considered a way to encourage vendors to participate and to avoid clubs having to re-invent the wheel with each new convention. This plan had drawbacks. Fixed expo locations lack new tour opportunities and involve repetitious travel to the same locations. The idea was never pursued.

The League had music at one convention—Dave Eicher’s Astronomy Magazine Blues Band which played during the League banquet at the 2012 Lincolnshire (Chicago) convention. A few objections were voiced over the sound level, causing some consternation by the band, but the vast majority signaled their approval, so Dave and his excellent musicians played on.

ALCon ’15 brought about League contribution to support the donation of \$400 library telescopes to clubs in each of the League’s ten regions and to a Member-at-Large. Recipients then place the telescopes in local libraries.

Reflector Editor, Ron Kramer, proposed creation of a new International Region of the Astronomical League (“IRAL”) at the ALCon ’16 Council meeting. The proposal called for no per-club dues, \$7.50 per member dues, a minimum of 10 members, no voting rights (because the League is a U.S. corporation), and access to digital *Reflector* only. At the same meeting, the League also adopted a new laser policy for use by member clubs.

The following year, the first of two great American total solar eclipses in the new millennium provided the centerpiece for ASTROCON ’17 in Casper, Wyoming. The event drew more than 50 vendors and record convention registration of 950, breaking the previous convention record of 667 at Kutztown in 1976 and the all-time joint convention record of 800 at Claremont, California, in 1987. League Sales enjoyed one of its most successful conventions ever, largely because of Bill Bogardus’s idea to sell eclipse postcards bearing a Fred Espenak stamp. All 1,000 of the post cards sold.

Meeting at ASTROCON ’17, the League Council adopted a conflict-of-interest policy for all Council members and began concerning itself with Website security after finding that the League Website was being subjected to between 30 and 40 attacks each day.

Some humor marked the extremely successful and well-attended Minneapolis

convention in 2018. One slot had to be filled at the last minute when a scheduled speaker traveled to the wrong Hilton hotel, and much to the frustration of some members, one of the event's vendors was heard to vocally oppose the idea of a sun-centered Solar System.

Passages and a Pandemic. From 2018 to 2020, the League was beset by multiple personal tragedies. In November 2018, Bill Bogardus died of cancer just three months into his term as president. In March 2019, past-League and IDA president Bob Gent died suddenly at his home. In May 2019, League secretary Bryan Tobias lost his home in a fire and had to discontinue his duties. President Ron Kramer, who took over for Mr. Bogardus, was unable to run for president in 2020 due to health problems. And Nina Chevalier, who served as interim League Secretary in 2019 and as Lunar Observing Program Coordinator, passed away after a short illness in 2020.

There was a bright spot amid these difficulties. In July 2019, mere months before the arrival of COVID-19, the League's convention featured an international cruise—the first since its 1956 convention cruise from Miami to Havana. Prior to his death, Bill Bogardus had dreamed of building a convention around a cruise. Following up on that vision, Maynard Pittendreigh organized ALCon '19 with a hotel-based Council meeting, banquet, and Kennedy Space Center tour in Titusville, Florida, followed by a 3-day excursion to the Bahamas aboard Royal Caribbean's cruise ship *Mariner of the Seas*. All program and youth and adult award presentations took place aboard the ship which enjoyed a smooth sail to Nassau in beautiful weather. Maynard even managed to provide a Space-X launch during the land portion!

Consistent with the convention's move to foreign shores, Ron Kramer reinforced the League's need to advance its new International Region to broaden its reach. The League placed new focus on diversity with panel discussions at ALCon '19, introduction of a new Observing Program emphasizing the constellations of other cultures in 2020, and development of the Williamina Fleming Imaging Award open to female League members 19 and over in 2021.

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the League, and indeed by everyone in the world, was the arrival of the devastating and lethal COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. The crisis necessitated postponement of ALCon '20 in Albuquerque, the first canceled convention since World War II. With the virus still raging, ALCon '21 had to be postponed as well. Fortunately, the pandemic did not have the dire effect on the League or on amateur astronomy that many had anticipated.

Not wishing to go two years without a convention, the League decided to conduct a three-day virtual convention in 2021. Terry Mann and Chuck Allen co-chaired the event and Don Knabb assisted with creation of the ALCon '21 Virtual website.

COVID-19 lockdowns brought a surge of interest in astronomy, an activity that can be pursued individually, outdoors, without exposure to others. Telescope companies were inundated with orders, some experiencing 400% increases in demand. League Observing Program participation boomed. The advent of virtual meetings increased contact between

the League and its members to record levels, tightening the League's relationships with its member societies and their officers and ALCors. Key League figures were invited to give out League door prizes and offer programs as co-hosts on Explore Scientific's *Global Star Parties* which were held four times a month and drew anywhere from 6,000 to 19,000 visitors each night. With Explore Scientific's assistance, and that of its owner, Scott Roberts, the League began conducting its own monthly Live Events drawing over 5,000 views at each session. As a result, League membership soared to a record high of 23,000 members in 2022.

Triumph of the Observing Programs. From their inception 53 years earlier, the League's Observing Programs had, by 2020, grown to become the most robust and comprehensive observing program offered by any astronomical organization worldwide. Over that half century, 62 different program coordinators and five national program coordinators under Aaron Clevenson's leadership and that of the four other national directors worked tirelessly to create and offer some 86 different Observing Programs covering every observing regimen imaginable. Indeed, by 2020, more than 16,075 award certificates, most with program pins, had been issued to 5,628 *different* League members—an astonishing participation rate of nearly one-third of the entire League membership. The Observing Programs may well be the greatest single benefit offered by the League to its members, second only, perhaps, to the nationwide friendships that are developed through League participation.

New Bylaws. A committee headed by Chuck Allen undertook to revise the League's badly outdated Bylaws in 2019. Due to COVID delays, the new Bylaws, upgraded, updated, and modernized, were reported to the membership on December 1, 2022. They were unanimously approved and went into effect on September 1, 2023. In addition to scores of other changes, the new Bylaws corrected a long-standing voting imbalance between member societies and independent members, altered Trust Fund rules and composition, and corrected a badly flawed election procedure.

Looking Ahead. The League can look back with justifiable pride on nearly eight decades of voluntary contributions to amateur astronomy. Those decades have seen convention visits to 29 states and two foreign countries, development of scores of Observing Programs with master progressions, opening of a national office, creation of five prize-sponsored youth award programs, professional upgrading of *Reflector* magazine, successful eclipse and southern sky trips, ongoing regional activities and star parties, provision of new group insurance benefits, support for the library telescope program, creation of a new International Region, efforts to diversify its membership, and advancement of friendships around the world. Mostly, though, it looks back on its success as the world's largest pure astronomy organization—an organization created and run by amateur astronomers for amateur astronomers and for the many professional astronomers who support our goals.

As stewards of the League, however, we cannot rest on our laurels. We must look ahead. We must find new ways to improve the state of amateur astronomy. Surely this was the goal of the men and women who, more than eight decades ago, worked through many

formative conventions and a world war to bring America's amateur astronomers together as a family. This goal confronts us with six major challenges: recruiting new leadership, engaging young people, diversifying our membership, fighting light pollution, involving member societies in League programs, and adapting to a virtual world and changing times.

Five generations of tireless volunteers helped the Astronomical League celebrate its diamond anniversary in 2021. Now we need a new generation of volunteers. Give us your time, your ideas, and your expertise and help us prove to the world of amateur astronomy that diamonds truly are forever.

This document was compiled by Chuck Allen in 1996-97 and 2019-23 based on his review of (1) an extensive collection of convention brochures, Bulletins, Reflectors, articles, photographs, minutes, legal documents, and correspondence files requested from more than 20 past national and regional officers, editors, and program activity chairs in 1996-97, (2) interviews conducted with multiple current and past national and regional officers and activity chairs in 1996-97 and 2019-21, (3) all-time digital Reflector archives (1954-2003) and archived League officer listings (1946-73) provided by National Office Coordinator, Mike Stoakes in 2020, (4) interviews and copies of Reflector provided by Jim Fox in 2021, (5) documents and membership data provided by National Office Manager, Mitch Glaze, in 2020, (6) online scans of Sky & Telescope articles about League conventions, (7) online scans of Stardust, a publication of the National Capital Astronomers, (8) information provided by John Goss following his review of post-2002 era Reflectors in 2020, (9) Milwaukee Astronomical Society website history pages,

and (10) online biographies. Materials referred to in items 1-5, above, are archived in the League's National Office or are in the possession of the National Office Manager.