

U.S. Science in Session

Washington, political capital of the nation since birth, last week became the scientific capital as well.

To the city came 6,000 of the nation's scientists, from some 59 disciplines, to stimulate each other, exchange ideas, talk the night away and generally enjoy the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science—sometimes called "the World Series of Science."

Known familiarly as the "Triple-A-Ess" and jocularly as the A³S, the association is the world's largest federation of scientists and their societies. Some 110,000 members of the American scientific community are members. The AAAS, in addition to "hard" scientists, takes in physicians, engineers, teachers, students and laymen.

This year's theme, "How Man Has Changed His Planet," was addressed, directly or indirectly, in some 1,750 papers. The broad picture that emerged was of man, grown ever more dominant over his small but pleasant planet, altering his homestead in myriad ways, many of them to man's own detriment.

This issue of Science News is devoted largely to the AAAS proceedings. Next week, this magazine will carry further coverage.

The annual meeting is the oldest activity of the AAAS, and is held each year at a different city in North America—Montreal in 1964, Berkeley in 1965, Washington in 1966 (every eighth year), New York in 1967. It is traditionally held during the week between Christmas and New Year's to allow professors and teachers to attend.

The AAAS grew out of the exploration of the West in the 1830s and 1840s. Geological surveys of the virgin lands led to formation of the Association of American Geologists in 1840.

In those days, scientists were called "natural philosophers," and a man could keep abreast of many fields and study several in depth. The geologists had welcomed to their meetings papers on non-geological studies. Future direction became apparent at their 1847 meeting when 37 papers were read—only nine dealt with geology.

The next year, meeting in Philadelphia, the group formed the AAAS. One of its first actions was to set up a committee to ask the government to include scientists in every major expedition to the West. This problem never ends—at the 1963 meeting Nobel laureate Harold Urey criticized the plan to send three astronauts to the moon instead of including a trained geologist.

It is hard to imagine another forum in which an astrophysicist, hearing a paper by a zoologist, would change his life's work in an attempt to invent the airplane. This happened at the meeting of 1886, when Samuel P. Langley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and noted for his solar radiation studies, listened to a paper on bird flight. It led him to suspect that immovable surfaces could be supported in motion by the lifting power of the air. He risked a considerable reputation on this "crackbrain" idea. Although the Wrights beat Langley to successful powered flights, his theoretical work contributed greatly to their success.

Such interdisciplinary cross-fertilization is still an important aspect of AAAS meetings.

In addition to its meetings, the AAAS uses various other means to serve its purposes, defined as "to facilitate cooperation among scientists, to improve the effectiveness of science in promotion of human welfare, and to increase public understanding of science."

From its Washington headquarters, the AAAS publishes the widely read and influential weekly Science. In recent years, with the role of the government in science so large, the publication has added a section of news on science and public affairs.

Although the AAAS as a whole does not take stands on matters of public controversy, it provides a powerful sounding board for members. The 1966 session included a day-and-a-half session on the "utility of the construct of race." In 1963, the Committee on Science in the Promotion of Human Welfare issued a report on "Science and the Race Problem." Designed to refute attacks on scientific grounds on the Supreme Court school desegregation decision, the report held that purported evidence on the inferiority of the Negro "is quite irrelevant."

Other wave-making subjects considered include birth control; the morality of changing man's biological inheritance by genetic manipulation; and how much man should be allowed to pollute the air with chemicals and space with millions of wire needles.

On such matters, some members believe, providing a forum for ideas is not enough; the association should come out strongly for one position. Many scientists feel otherwise—that "Science," and 110,000 members might well be gauged as "Science," should not attempt to take over decision-making in essentially political and moral fields.

SCIENCE NEWS

SCIENCE NEWS LETTER

Vol. 91

January 7, 1967

No. 1

E. G. SHERBURNE JR., Editor

Watson Davis, Director Emeritus, Editor, 1922-66

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The Weekly Summary of Current Science, published every Saturday by SCIENCE SERVICE, Inc., 1719 N St., N.W., Washington, D. C. 20036. NOth 7-2255. Cable Address: SCIENTSERV.

Subscription rate: 1 yr., \$6.50; 2 yrs., \$11.50; 3 yrs., \$16.50. Special trial offer for new subscribers only: 39 weeks, \$3.43. Ten or more copies in one package to one address, 12½ cents per copy per week; single copy, 25 cents, more than six months old, 25 cents. No charge for foreign postage. Change of address: Three weeks notice is required. Please state exactly how magazine is addressed. Include zip code.

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Printed in U.S.A. Second class postage paid at Washington, D. C. Established in mimeograph form March 13, 1922. Title registered as trademark U. S. and Canadian Patent offices. Indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Abridged Guide, and the Engineering Index. Member of Audit Bureau of Circulation.

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