

Henry Albers

As we now take a moment to reflect on the life of Henry Albers, it is right and fitting that we do so in this particular room at a meeting of those faculty members most concerned with the welfare of Vassar College. Henry was a devoted citizen of Vassar and an enthusiastic participant in meetings like this one. He would have been the first to concede that his enthusiasm was sometimes excessive, and that his contributions occasionally failed to move the discussion forward. Before more than one meeting, he was known to make a note to himself on his copy of the agenda, which read, in large block letters: “shut up.”

Fortunately, Henry was seldom able to repress his concern for the College or his dedication to faculty governance. He served on all major committees (except FASC) and most minor ones as well.

For example, he led a committee that eventually got telephones in faculty offices, another that lobbied for establishment of an academic computing center, and another that constructed our present system of Post Tenure Review. It was Henry Albers who introduced the motion on the floor of the faculty, which passed by a vote of 100 to 2, moving that Vassar College accept coeducation. Henry was a caring mentor and although fundamentally compassionate, had a somewhat prankish sense of humor—unfailingly directed at the most pompous targets in sight.

Henry arrived at Vassar in 1958, to find an astronomy program that had been recently absorbed by the physics department, and that was suffering neglect after the retirement of Maud Makemson. For the next 31 years, with incredible energy—he sometimes taught 7 courses a year—Henry built the astronomy program into one double in size (two tenure lines) whose 19th century facilities have been replaced with a 21st century observatory.

For a remarkable stretch of 20-some-years, Henry and Bob Stearns, with considerable grace, alternated chairmanship of the joint department of physics and astronomy.

Henry's research was on red giant stars in the southern Milky Way and on the structure of the Small Magellanic Cloud. An impressive series of 7 NSF grants supported his six trips to Chile to make spectroscopic observations, as well as his sabbatical collaborations at Minnesota, Leiden in the Netherlands and the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh.

As I close these remarks, it is also right and fitting to note Henry's admirable ability to disengage from his life at Vassar. He regularly spent college breaks as the resident astronomer on luxury cruise ships. Every May, he would celebrate his last class by sharing a jug of wine in the retreat with his regular lunchtime group. (Always in the faculty commons, which another of Henry's committees in the 1980's had saved from the dread fate of becoming administrative offices.) He would grade his finals as

soon as they came in, clean his office, attend graduation, and depart for Cape Cod for the summer.

When it became time, in 1989, he moved into retirement with relish. He continued his hobbies of gardening, painting, and choral singing, but also immediately began work as a math and science volunteer in the local public schools on the Cape. He completed his final scholarly work, his edition of the Letters and Journals of Maria Mitchell, in 2002. Henry Albers died on March 29, 2009.

Respectfully submitted,

Fred Chromey

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