History of Rocketry and Astronautics

Michael L. Ciancone, Editor

AAS History Series, Volume 33

IAA History Symposia, Volume 22

American Astronautical Society

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AAS History Series, Volume 33
International Academy of Astronautics Symposia

Front Cover Illustration:

David Lasser (1902–1996), American spaceflight visionary, was one of the founders of the American Interplanetary Society (later known as the American Rocket Society) and author of the first English-language book (in 1931) on the use of rockets for human spaceflight. (See Chapter 8 for more details on the life and career of David Lasser).

(Photo Credit: Mrs. David Lasser).

History of Rocketry and Astronautics

Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth History Symposium of the International Academy of Astronautics

Houston, Texas, U.S.A., 2002

Michael L. Ciancone, Volume Editor

Rick W. Sturdevant, Series Editor

AAS History Series, Volume 33

A Supplement to Advances in the Astronautical Sciences

IAA History Symposia, Volume 22

AAS Publications Office
P.O. Box 28130
San Diego, California 92198

Affiliated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science
Member of the International Astronautical Federation

First Printing 2010

ISSN 0730-3564

ISBN 978-0-87703-558-9 (Hard Cover)
ISBN 978-0-87703-559-6 (Soft Cover)

Published for the American Astronautical Society
by Univelt, Incorporated, P.O. Box 28130, San Diego, California 92198
Web Site: http://www.univelt.com

Printed and Bound in the U.S.A.

Chapter 8

David Lasser
An American Spaceflight Pioneer
(1902–1996)*

Michael L. Ciancone† and Amelia "Mimi" Lasser‡

Abstract

David Lasser was one of the founders of the American Interplanetary Society (later known as the American Rocket Society) and author of the first English-language book (in 1931) on the use of rockets for human spaceflight. His involvement in the fledgling spaceflight movement was short-lived as he moved on to pursue a distinguished, if turbulent, career in the labor movement. In lieu of an oral history, Mr. Lasser provided his recollections on the pioneering days of rocketry and his thoughts on mankind's destiny in space. This article provides an overview of Mr. Lasser's life and accomplishments as an American spaceflight visionary, along with a compilation of the information that he graciously provided.

Long before the first astronaut launched into space, visionaries foresaw the possibilities of the rocket. David Lasser was one of those visionaries. Although

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* Presented at the Thirty-Sixth History Symposium of the International Academy of Astronautics, 10–19 October 2002, Houston, Texas, U.S.A.

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‡ Rancho Bernardo, California, U.S.A. [Editor's note: Mrs. Lasser passed away on 26 June 2005.]

his involvement in the nascent spaceflight movement in the United States was brief, he left an indelible impression on future generations that would follow the dream of spaceflight.

Figure 1: David Lasser. Credit: Mrs. David Lasser.

Lasser was born on 20 March 1902 in Baltimore, Maryland, to Russian immigrants Leonard and Lena Lasser. He dropped out of high school at an early age to help support his family. When the United States entered World War I, an underage Lasser volunteered for the American Expeditionary Forces and saw action on the battlefields of Europe. Following his discharge from service in 1919, Lasser took advantage of funds available to disabled veterans (he was gassed during the Argonne offensive) to pursue a college education. Despite the absence of a high school diploma, Lasser began studies in electrical engineering at the Newark College of Engineering, while simultaneously pursuing his high school diploma through night school. After one year at Newark, he applied for

admission to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, from which he obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering management in 1924. Following graduation, he held a variety of jobs, including a position with New York Edison (from which he was fired for protesting the dismissal of several employees on the basis of time-motion study results) before landing a position in 1929 as managing editor of Hugo Gernsback's *Science Wonder Stories* magazine.

As editor of *Science Wonder Stories* (which merged with *Air Wonder Stories* in 1930 under the title *Wonder Stories*), Lasser sought to raise publishing standards by encouraging writers to develop stories with a more scientific, rather than fantastic, basis. In addition, he took it upon himself to investigate the possibilities of using rockets to travel into space. Convinced that spaceflight was technically feasible, Lasser and several writers formed the American Interplanetary Society (AIS) in 1930, which he served as its first president. The AIS founders saw spaceflight as a means "to enlarge man's intellectual and spiritual life." To reflect growing interest among its members in the design and launch of rockets, the AIS changed its name to the American Rocket Society (ARS) in 1934. In 1963, the ARS merged with the Institute of Aeronautical Sciences to form the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA).

Lasser also saw cooperation in space as an opportunity for uniting mankind. In his 1931 annual report to the AIS, Lasser indicated that "the solution of interplanetary problems is too large to be localized in any group or nation." He foresaw "the building of the first space ship only as a joint effort of a united earth." Lasser joined Robert Esnault-Pelterie, the noted French astronautics pioneer, in a 1931 letter to Hermann Oberth calling for the formation of an International Commission for Astronautics. Although their call went unheeded, the concept was forerunner to the International Astronautical Federation (IAF) that formed in 1950.

As an outgrowth of his earlier investigations, Lasser wrote a popular, yet scientific, account of the history, current state, and future applications of rockets. Unable to find a publisher, Lasser and several colleagues published *The Conquest of Space*, at personal expense, under the imprint of Penguin Press (no relation to the current imprint of the same name).[1] This was the first English-language book of speculative non-fiction to address the possibility of spaceflight (the British edition was published in 1932 by Hurst and Blackett).

In this book, and in reports to the AIS, Lasser foresaw many of the commercial, scientific, and military potentials of the rocket. Although the idea of spaceflight was viewed with considerable skepticism in the science and engineer-

[1] Recently reprinted, with an introduction by Arthur C. Clarke, by Apogee Books, Burlington, Ontario, Canada.

ing communities at that time, which was less than 30 years after the Wright brother's first aeroplane flight at Kitty Hawk, the book inspired more than a few people. The noted science fiction author, Arthur C. Clarke, acquired a copy as a child and later reflected that it represented "one of the turning points of [his] life."

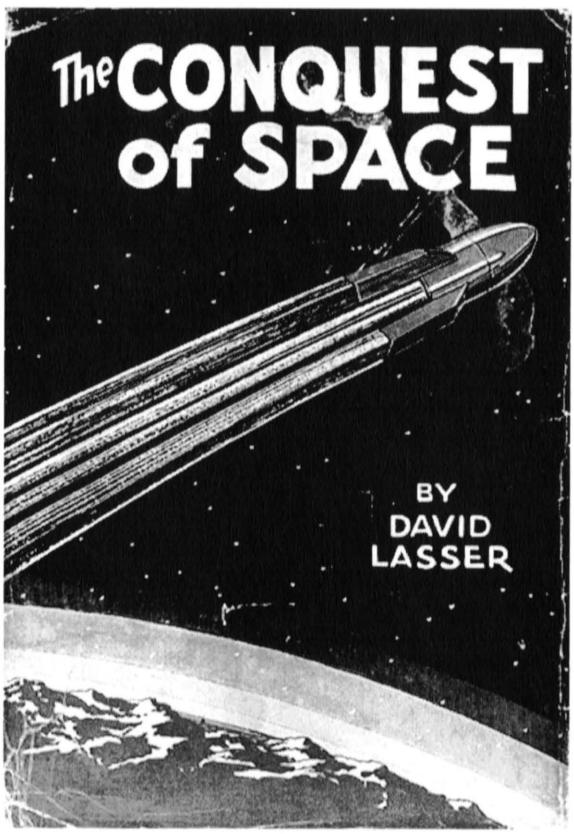

Figure 2: *The Conquest of Space*, 1931.
Credit: From the collection of Michael Ciancone.

Lasser's interest in spaceflight, however, was soon overcome by national and world events. During Lasser's employment with Gernsback, the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression. Lasser felt strongly that "unless we solved the problem of the unemployed, all else would be academic." Gernsback became unhappy with media reports of Lasser's activities on behalf of the unemployed and encouraged him to join their ranks. As a result, Lasser left his position with *Wonder Stories* and resigned from the AIS in 1933 to form a local union for the unemployed that went national in 1935 as the Workers Alliance of America (WAA) with Lasser as its president.

Although he held socialist beliefs, Lasser was strongly anti-communist. He resigned from the WAA in 1940 due to the growing influence of communist factions attempting to gain control of the WAA and formed a non-communist group called the American Security Union. With war raging in Europe once again, Lasser proposed to President Franklin Roosevelt the formation of a large program to provide the unemployed with the skills and training needed to support the industrial effort. Roosevelt accepted Lasser's proposal and asked him to join the program as a consultant. Although Congress accepted the President's proposal, they blocked Lasser's appointment as a special consultant with one congressman denouncing Lasser from the floor of the House as "not only a radical but a crackpot with mental delusions that we can travel to the moon." After a period of unemployment, Lasser took a job as a labor consultant with the War Production Board, which he held for the duration of the war.

Following the end of World War II, Lasser wrote *Private Monopoly—The Enemy at Home* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945) to publicize his views on the relationship between big business and the federal government during the war. This did little to endear him to big business and its political influence. In 1948, W. Averell Harriman asked Lasser to join his staff in implementing the Marshall plan to rebuild Europe and counter the communist influence in the European labor movement. Although Lasser served in a temporary capacity for three months, Congress again blocked his permanent appointment due to his earlier involvement with the WAA, which the FBI had listed as a radical organization.

In the face of adversity, Lasser persevered and continued to play a significant role in U.S. labor history. From 1950 until his retirement in 1969, he served as economics and research director for the International Union of Electrical Radio and Machine Workers. Throughout his career, Lasser persisted in efforts to clear his name and in 1980 received a letter of apology from President Jimmy Carter for being "treated unjustly."

Lasser always maintained an abiding interest in the future of humanity—this was a common theme in all of his endeavors. In a 1978 letter to Lasser, Harriman wrote, "your life represents the best in humanitarianism and in Americanism." Lasser's efforts on behalf of both the space movement and the labor movement provided inspiration and hope for many.

When Lasser witnessed the televised landing of *Apollo 11* on the Moon, with family and friends, he humbly indicated that his contribution to the effort was brief and not particularly vital—history will surely remember him otherwise.

The world lost a spaceflight pioneer and international humanitarian when David Lasser passed away on 5 May 1996.

An Interview with David Lasser
by Michael Ciancone with Mrs. David Lasser
1994–95

Mrs. David Lasser prepared the following information, in consultation with David Lasser, in response to a series of written questions provided by Michael Ciancone. The information was contained in a series of letter responses in January–February 1995. At the time, Mr. Lasser was in poor health and had declined to participate in an oral history interview due to physical limitations related to his health condition. Mrs. Lasser graciously coordinated responses with Mr. Lasser and researched existing records to locate his responses to similar questions that had been posed by other interviewers or included in published articles, as noted. The Lasser archives are maintained in the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California at San Diego under the direction of Ms. Lynda Claassen.

- **WHEN AND WHY DID YOUR FAMILY IMMIGRATE FROM KOVNO, RUSSIA?**

Leonard Lasser and Lena Joffe were married in Riga (now Latvia) in 1885. Lena Joffe was descended from a long line of rabbis who traced the family back 600 years. According to tradition, rabbis' daughters married rabbis in Russia; however, with the rising incidence of pogroms, Lena's father acquiesced in permitting her to marry Leonard Lasser. He gave them $75 and sent them to America three months after their wedding.

Leonard Lasser may have come from Kovno, which is known today as Kaunas, the capital of Lithuania.

- **HOW MANY SIBLINGS DID YOU HAVE? WERE YOU A CLOSE-KNIT FAMILY? WAS EDUCATION ENCOURAGED IN YOUR FAMILY?**

David had five brothers: Herman, who, when David was born, was old enough to be David's uncle; Michael; Harold; Benjamin; and Martin. Matilda, who throughout her young life was second mother to the boys, was the only sister.

The family had a reunion every year until Lena Lasser died at 95. Thereafter, all the brothers, their families, and Matilda held periodic reunions. The last was to celebrate Ben's 90th birthday. (Nick Kotz is Benjamin's son. His mother divorced Ben when Nick was very young. She married a prominent doctor in the District of Columbia who adopted Nick when he was young.)

Education was the primary influence in the Lasser family, encouraged and stimulated by his mother. All the boys, except Ben, had some college. It is not possible to determine how many were college graduates, except of course, David. All the boys worked their way through college with possibly some grants. Martin, the youngest, attended MIT for two years and then had to leave to enter a TB sanitarium. He later became an engineer for ESSO. Herman was an engineer; Michael, who died young from TB, was with a New York public relations firm; Harold was an accountant; Benjamin, who did not attend college, sought a career in sales.

Lena Lasser was a leader in Jewish welfare work in Newark, New Jersey, for many years as a founder of the Hebrew Maternity Aid Society and a member of the Volunteer League of Beth Israel Hospital, among other philanthropic activities. She had wanted David, among her sons, to be the one to become a rabbi. On one occasion David told her, "Mother, I think perhaps I am." (Rabbi in the sense of a scholar and seeker of truth.)

- **WHAT IS THE STATUS OF YOUR SON, DANIEL? DO YOU HAVE ANY GRANDCHILDREN? GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN?**

David's son, Daniel, graduated from Western High School in the District of Columbia, became a first lieutenant in the Air Force in the Korean War and has a career in computers. He and his wife have no children.

- **WHO INSPIRED YOUR EARLY VIEWS OF SPACE TRAVEL AND ITS LIKELY EFFECTS ON THE HUMAN RACE?**

Lasser was especially fond of H. G. Wells.

- **SEVERAL BIOGRAPHIES STATE THAT YOU STUDIED AT MIT. WHAT DEGREE DID YOU RECEIVE?**

Lasser's degree was a BS in engineering management. (Verified by call to MIT, 1994)

- **WERE THERE FEELINGS OF ILL-WILL UPON YOUR DEPARTURE AS EDITOR OF *WONDER STORIES*?**

Lasser's current recall was: "I was not aware of any ill feelings and he [Gernsback] had plenty of people ready to take my place."

The following from an interview of Lasser by Ernest B. Furgurson, *Baltimore Sun*, 1980, gives a perspective on Lasser's dismissal:

> As an editor, Mr. Lasser was living in the fertile Greenwich Village of the 1920's. It was fertile both politically and artistically. He started helping out at a settlement house down his street, trying to do something for unemployed Italian workers. And about that time, two anarchist Italian workers, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were accused and convicted of murder in Massachusetts. The Sacco-Vanzetti case excited many young American intellectuals, among them Mr. Lasser. He dates his involvement in socialist politics from that time. He started going to lectures by Norman Thomas; he took part in the League for Industrial Democracy, became a Village spokesman for the jobless, then was asked to chair the city effort. He headed delegations of the unemployed to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia at City Hall. And shortly after the crash of 50 years ago, when his science fiction publishers saw his name in the papers a few times, they called him in and said, "**David, if you're so concerned about the unemployed, why don't you join them.**" [bold emphasis added]

- **DID YOU CONTRIBUTE ARTICLES TO ANY OF THE GERNSBACK PUBLICATIONS UNDER AN ASSUMED NAME?**

Lasser can no longer recall, but he doubts it.[2]

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[2] Lasser and David H. Keller wrote a two-piece story titled "The Time Projector" that appeared in *Wonder Stories* Vol. 3, Nos. 2 and 3.

- **WHAT WERE YOUR MOTIVATIONS FOR FOUNDING OF THE AMERICAN INTERPLANETARY SOCIETY? WAS IT PERHAPS DUE TO YOUR CLOSE INVOLVEMENT WITH THE FLEDGLING SCIENCE FICTION INDUSTRY, OR WAS IT DUE TO SOME LINGERING INTEREST AS A RESULT OF YOUR TECHNICAL TRAINING AT MIT?**

About his technical training at MIT, Lasser says: "Opened up the whole idea that what exists is only a part of what actually exists which still evades us."

Applying scientific inquiry to science fiction, Lasser urged his writers to "allow yourself one fundamental assumption—that a certain machine or discovery is possible—and then show what would be its logical and dramatic consequences upon the world..."

—Interview with Lasser by Eric Leif Davin in *Fantasy Commentator* 37 (1987)[3]

Science fiction prompted Lasser's inquiry into the means for space exploration. When he became convinced that the rocket provided such means, he founded the AIS to promote his and his colleagues' belief. At first, the AIS set about promoting rocket research by merely reporting about international developments in astronautics in a monthly bulletin, which Lasser turned out personally. Very soon, however, society members became enthusiastic about the idea of building their own rockets.

> Young people, especially those who are born into generations where space flight is an accepted fact, should realize that fifty years ago a small band of enthusiasts had to try first to convince a cynical, even scornful public that space flight by the rocket was actually possible.
>
> —"A Letter from David Lasser" in *Astronautics and Aeronautics* (May 1981)[4]

As a field of endeavor for the individual experimenter, the early rocket scientists, including Robert Goddard, carefully avoided speculation on the future of their work. Lasser felt the scientists needed a group of lay supporters to champion their cause in order "to spark the country into believing that space travel was feasible."

- **HOW MUCH INTEREST IN SPACE EXPLORATION EXISTED AMONG THE PUBLIC AT LARGE WHEN YOU FORMED THE SOCIETY? HOW MUCH OF THIS INTEREST DO YOU ATTRIBUTE TO THE PREVIOUS 30+ YEARS OF GROWING INTEREST IN SCIENCE FICTION?**

"At that time, Americans thought of rockets only in conjunction with July 4th. Science fiction was for the weak-minded, and the idea of putting men into space was as bizarre as the idea of air travel had been a few decades earlier, and teleportation is today."

—"Delusions of a Crackpot" by Ann Jolley in *Bernardo News* (30 May 1981)

Serious, widespread consideration of the possibility of space travel does not precede 1957, the year the Russians orbited the first earth satellite, *Sputnik*.

"The eleven men and a bride who formed AIS were mostly fiction writers who turned out space epics for *Wonder Stories*, a pulp magazine. They blithely predicted space stations within fifteen years, moon landings within twenty and flights to the stars before the century ended. The public regarded them all as 'wild-eyes', 'moony' and 'crackpot'."

—*Saturday Evening Post* (21 July 1956)

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[3] pp. 4–19 ff. Davin included this interview in *Pioneers of Wonder—Conversations with the Founders of Science Fiction* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999).

[4] pp. 94–95.

- **WHY DID YOU WANT TO EXPLORE AND SETTLE SPACE? DID YOU THINK THAT PEOPLE WOULD EVENTUALLY FORM "NEW WORLDS" THAT WERE BETTER THAN THE ONE HERE ON EARTH?**

"In 1930, the goal of my colleagues and I was not merely to travel into outer space. Rather, as explorers and writers we wanted to use space travel to enlarge man's intellectual and spiritual life. In *The Conquest of Space*, I envisioned the first manner space vehicle as being built by an 'International Interplanetary Commission.'

Perhaps one day, through space endeavors, we will be able to see more clearly our true place in this vast universe and acquire what may be called a 'cosmic perspective.' Who knows, space travel may prove to be the vehicle to unite the knowledge, wealth, and energies of nations for peace and the future benefit of all peoples."

—"A Letter from David Lasser" in *Astronautics and Aeronautics* (May 1981)

- **WAS ANYONE OTHER THAN THE HARD-CORE GROUP OF SCIENCE FICTION FANS INTERESTED IN SPACE EXPLORATION? IF SO, WHOM? ANY POLITICAL LEADERS? ANY HIGH-RANKING GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS?**

In 1920 the Smithsonian Institute had published Dr. Robert H. Goddard's classic treatise, "A Method of Reaching Extreme Altitudes," in which Dr. Goddard proved through his own experiments the soundness of Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law—"for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." "If this was so," he said, "a rocket could travel to outer space; it could, indeed, propel a pound of magnesium to the moon, where the flare would be visible to telescopes on the earth." In 1929, publicity over one of Dr. Goddard's early rockets attracted Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh, who, in turn, aroused Daniel and Harry Guggenheim, the aviation-minded philanthropists, to support the professor's labors.

—*Saturday Evening Post* (21 July 1956)

In 1980, in his greetings to the AIAA on its 50th anniversary, Arthur C. Clarke recognized Lasser as "the author of the first book in the English language to explain that space travel wasn't just fiction." He went on to add, "My encounter with *The Conquest of Space*, soon after its publication in 1931, was one of the turning points of my life—and, I suspect, not only of mine."

- **DID THE MEDIA TREAT SPACE EXPLORATION AS A SERIOUS ENDEAVOR OR MERELY AS AN ADOLESCENT DIVERSION? HOW ABOUT THE PUBLIC AT LARGE?**

Lasser quotes G. Edward Pendray, the first vice-president of AIS and Lasser's good friend, "We believed generally that a few public meetings and some newspaper declarations were all that would be necessary to bring forth adequate public support for the spaceflight program."

The press failed the founding members of AIS. Until 1941, the society never had more than 300 members at one time. Their first public meeting only fueled their delusion. Lasser said although they had only 12 members, they rented the cavernous 1,000-seat auditorium of the [New York] Museum of National History for the purpose of presenting Robert Esnault-Pelterie, a French engineer involved in rocket experimentation. As an added attraction, they planned to show excerpts from a German film, *The Girl in*

the Moon. The headline from the *New York Herald* the following morning tells the story: "Riot Guard joins 2,500 at Film Flight to Moon."[5] The early AIS abortive firings made the society an object of ridicule for the forever-skeptical press. After one such experiment, in which the rocket never got off the ground, the *New York Times* observed: "Mars, or perhaps it was Betelgeuse or some other star, was spared an unwelcome intrusion yesterday morning."

—"David Lasser—Pioneer Space Man" in *IUE*[6] *News* (2 April 1970)

• **WHAT GOT YOU INTERESTED IN ROCKETRY AND SPACEFLIGHT?**

Lasser responded to this question in a speech before the Lions Club, Stoneridge Country Club, on 28 October 1982. This is a more complete response than other statements that appear in earlier articles by Lasser, or in interviews.

As you probably know, the dreams and hopes to ascend into space and to go amid the stars has been a part of our humankind ever since we were able to think. And even the savage in his desert or jungle would look up at the night sky, peopled with gods, and hope he might some day be among them.

My first direct connection with spaceflight came in the mid-1920s when I became editor of *Science Wonder Stories* and, from time to time, stories involving trips to other planets or worlds were submitted for publication.

What troubled me about most of them, was not so much the story content, which generally involved some civilization much different than our own, but rather, the means used to get the characters to the Moon, or Mars or some far distant star.

My policy, as editor, was to try, as far as possible, to insist that, while the stories be imaginative, they have some scientific credibility.

Finally, after rejecting one story for its utter incredibility, I decided to do some research on the past history of stories involving spaceflight. To my surprise, I found that such stories or myths went back thousands of years. We can remember, for example, the myth concerning the Greek youth named Icarus, who tried to ascend to the Sun with only a pair of wings glued to his shoulders. But, as he rose higher, the heat of the Sun melted the glue and he fell to his death in the sea. The moral, obviously, was that man should not attempt to invade the heavens, since they were the special provinces of the gods.

Other stories used the back of giant birds, as transport, or cannons to shoot off to the Moon, or chemicals that nullified gravity and permitted the heroes to whirl off into space.

Actually, as I have indicated, it appeared true that the means of propulsion was incidental in most of these stories, even though, if it was not thought out carefully, it did interfere with acceptance of the story itself.

While I thoroughly enjoyed seeing the fine movie, *ET*, and Mrs. Lasser and I went twice, it was tantalizing to wonder how *ET* got here. As

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[5] 28 January 1931.

[6] International Union of Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers, Washington, D.C. This article was published shortly after Lasser's retirement.

in *ET*, the main purpose of these stories was to satirize our civilization or paint a picture of one that was more perfect.

Some of the authors were well known and popular, such as Edgar Allen Poe, Cyrano de Bergerac, the immortal Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, et cetera.

To my surprise, I found, in a few stories, that the means of propulsion was the rocket. Going into the rocket question further, I found that it too had a long history. It has been used in great celebrations and in warfare for hundreds of years; and who can forget "the rocket's red glare" in our national anthem.

It finally dawned on me that, here in the rocket, this ancient and time worn instrument sitting around waiting for us, we had the means to take us into space and to the planets!

Pursuing this matter, now eagerly, I found that in the Soviet Union, Germany, and France, there had been experiments on the rocket with spaceflight in view. In our country, however, the only rocket activities were carried out by a university professor, Dr. Robert Goddard. But his funds and activities were only directed to improving weather forecasting by sending up rockets to what was called "high altitudes."

Now, quite excited, almost unbelieving by these findings, I called a meeting of my writers and suggested we form an organization to promote the means to travel into space and to the Moon and planets.

The proposal was adopted enthusiastically and, with great optimism, we named our organization the American Interplanetary Society. I was named as president.

- **DID THAT INTEREST EVER CEASE?**

No and it was actively pursued after Lasser retired.

In 1983 the City of San Diego planned to change all street lighting bulbs to high-pressure bulbs—lights that officials at Palomar Observatory said significantly interfered with their 200-inch Hale Telescope. Lasser urged the mayor and other officials to convert to low-pressure bulbs in order to preserve the telescope. To settle the matter, he suggested that the City Council appoint an impartial commission so that all the facts could be determined.[7]

During the 1980s Lasser worked on a book that was not completed. He said, "In it I try to take the reader to the farthest reaches of space and into the innermost parts of the smallest bits of matter." In 1980, he taught a course titled "Cosmic Adventure" exploring Dr. Carl Sagan's "Cosmos" TV series. And in 1992, the Continuing Education Center (CEC) in Rancho Bernardo (an affiliate of San Diego State University) created a special annual program to honor David Lasser, one of the founders of CEC, an officer in early years, and an instructor at various times. The David Lasser Annual Lecture features a distinguished lecturer from the academic, political, or scientific fields.

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[7] Lasser and other opponents were successful in convincing city officials to use sodium lights.

- **WHAT WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES BEHIND ESNAULT-PELTERIE'S WITHDRAWAL FROM HIS SPEAKING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE AIS? RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY OF THE AIS?**

"Ironically, the featured speaker apparently developed cold feet at the last minute about being associated with the society's 'crackpots.' He pleaded a bad cold, and Pendray read his article in his stead. The switch from Pelterie to Pendray was too much for some members of the audiences who begged the latter for the Frenchman's autograph."

—"Delusions of a Crackpot" by Ann Jolley in *Bernardo News* (30 May 1981)

"The reluctance of scientists to join with the lay space buffs was dramatized," Lasser recalled, at one of the first public meetings of AIS. Robert Esnault-Pelterie, a French engineer, prepared a speech for the meeting about the requirements for spaceflight and then, failed to appear.

—"Space Views Stand Test of Time" by Cliff Smith in *San Diego Union* (23 June 1980)

- **WHAT WERE THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO YOUR SELECTION AS THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE AIS?**

"It should be of interest that the dozen or so who joined with me in founding the AIS were not scientists. While I had an MIT degree, most of them were authors for *Science Wonder Stories*, the magazine that I edited. Their full-time occupations were as lawyer, accountant, mechanic, newspaperman, operator of a plant nursery, et cetera. The one woman was a newspaper columnist."

—"A Letter from David Lasser" in *Astronautics and Aeronautics* (May 1981)

"I spent six months of my own time researching the topic (Space Could Be Conquered) and consulting with the experts. I concluded that it was possible," Lasser said.

—Interview of David Lasser by David Hart in *Times Advocate* (4 May 1981)

"Now, quite excited, almost unbelieving by these findings, I called a meeting of my writers and suggested we form an organization to promote the means to travel into space and to the moon and planets. The proposal was adopted enthusiastically and, with great optimism, we named our organization the American Interplanetary Society. I was named as president."

—*Fantasy Commentator* 37 (1987)

- **WERE YOU THE SOLE AUTHOR OF *THE CONQUEST OF SPACE* OR WAS IT A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT WITH OTHER AIS MEMBERS?**

"The book was published through the joint financial contribution of Ed Pendray, Nathan Schachner (another of the AIS founders), and myself. The Penguin Press, as the publisher, was our creation."

—"A Letter from David Lasser" in *Astronautics and Aeronautics* (May 1981)

One of Lasser's mathematics professors at MIT urged him to pursue a graduate degree in mathematics with a view toward joining a university faculty. *The Conquest of Space* may represent Lasser's pursuit of such further study on his own.

- **HOW WAS THE BOOK RECEIVED BY PROFESSIONALS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC? WAS IT CONSIDERED SCIENCE FICTION OR SPECULATIVE NONFICTION BY READERS?**

"To demonstrate some support for the book's theme from the scientific community, I was able to get H. H. Sheldon, Chairman of the Department of Physics of New York University, to write a foreword. While Dr. Sheldon endorsed the idea of a rocket voyage into interplanetary space, he observed bluntly, 'Most people do not take the rocket seriously,' and 'few are enthusiasts.' Moreover, he added, 'There are those who are satisfied that the rocket as a mode of propulsion is ridiculous and that all rocket enthusiasts are mental defectives.' He was generous when he declared, 'Mr. Lasser has brought into the book the enthusiasm and vision that activates scientists and inventors.' Then, he added, carefully, that I had 'written like a scientist off his guard at the moment'."

—"A Letter from David Lasser" in *Astronautics and Aeronautics* (May 1981)

The *New York Times* book reviewer commented that ". . . the book cannot but capture the imagination of a reader interested in science. After the capture he will find that he has unconsciously absorbed many principles of elementary physics and thus considerably added to his stock of useful knowledge."

—*New York Times* Book Review (10 January 1932)

The book was also favorably reviewed in *Books, The Saturday Review of Literature*, and *The Boston Transcript*. It was noted as well in the science-fiction community by C.A Brandt (*Amazing Stories*, November 1934)—by then, it was long out of print.

—*Fantasy Commentator* 37 (1987)

- **HOW MANY COPIES OF *THE CONQUEST OF SPACE* WERE PUBLISHED?**

Lasser made two statements regarding this:

"I think that with the donations to libraries we were able to exhaust the first edition[8] of 2,500 copies."

—Remarks by David Lasser to Los Angeles Chapter, AIAA, 16 June 1982, Airport Marine Hotel, Los Angeles, California

"Then, I wrote, *The Conquest of Space*—the first of its type in English—but publishers laughed at me and finally I financed it myself. It sold out all 5,000 copies and the Japanese, German, and Russian governments bought 12 copies apiece. . . . Washington wasn't interested."

—"'31 Book Called *Sputnik*'s Shots" in *Washington Daily News* (18 November 1957)

This statement was made 25 years earlier than the other statement, and it may be reasonable to presume that Laser's memory was much better in 1957 than in the 1980s.

- **WHAT TECHNICAL CONTRIBUTIONS DID YOU PROVIDE TO THE SOCIETY?**

Lasser wrote a monthly bulletin for the AIS reporting about national and international developments in astronautics. As president of the society he published articles in *Scien-*

[8] Only one edition is known to exist.

tific American,[9] the *Popular Book Corporation*, *The New York Herald Tribune*,[10] and *Nature* magazine.[11]

Robert Goddard wrote to Lasser in August 1930, "I wish to express my appreciation of your well-written article, which I saw in the *New York Herald*...." In another letter to Lasser, Goddard was critical of Lasser's inclusion in the [AIS] bulletin of an abstract of G. Edward Pendray's report on the German rockets.

Today, some of Lasser's contributions and perhaps those of other writers to the bulletin may be considered more theoretical than technical. Lasser sought to form an Advisory Committee composed of men of the same standing as Robert H. Goddard to create a greater public interest in work such as Goddard was doing. Copies of the Goddard correspondence were published in Volume Two of *The Papers of Robert H. Goddard* by E. Goddard and G. Edward Pendray (eds.), McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970.

There is no record of Laser's membership in other technical organizations.

- **WHAT ANECDOTAL INFORMATION DO YOU RECALL ABOUT THE OTHER FOUNDERS AND NOTABLES, SUCH AS PENDRAY?**

On 24 July 1969, Pendray sent Lasser the following telegram:

"On this day of safe return from first manned lunar landing, all honor and credit are due you for your early and perceptive contributions toward that unprecedented feat. The generation which witnessed this week's historic events must count itself rarely favored. Regards and congratulations."

—"Space Views Stand Test of Time" by Cliff Smith in *San Diego Union* (23 June 1980)

"The formation of AIS followed, by just six months, the October 1929 outbreak of the nation's worst and most prolonged depression. As it worsened, year by year, lasting until 1941, the major concern of most Americans was simply to have a home with sufficient food and clothing. They were not disposed to use time, money, or energy on the question of Moon travel. It actually required inspired and dedicated leadership by Ed Pendray and his colleagues, doggedly pursuing its aims to maintain the organization through those difficult years."

—"A Letter from David Lasser" in *Astronautics and Aeronautics* (May 1981)

In 1980, during the AIAA 50th anniversary meeting, Lasser and Pendray visited after many years. A couple of years later, the Lassers joined the Pendrays for lunch at the Princeton Inn in New Jersey and visited with them in their retirement facility close to Princeton. Pendray and Lasser reminisced about their pioneer space careers and their other career pursuits for the last time while Lasser visited Pendray in a New Jersey nursing home in 1988.

- **DID YOU EVER MEET ROBERT GODDARD? HERMANN OBERTH? WERNHER VON BRAUN?**

Lasser believes he met Robert Goddard, but does not have any specific recall.

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[9] "The Future of the Rocket," Vol. 144, No. 3 (March 1931), pp. 164–166.

[10] "Guggenheim Financial Aid for Goddard Rocket Study Gives New Hope to Man's Efforts to Conquer Gravity" (13 July 1930).

[11] "By Rocket to the Planets," Vol. 18, No. 5 (November 1931), pp. 275-278 ff.

- **WHAT WAS THE TURNING POINT IN GOING FROM A GROUP OF "STARRY-EYED" WRITERS TO A MORE TECHNICAL GROUP? WAS IT A PLANNED EVOLUTION OR MERELY HAPPENSTANCE?**

From the *Saturday Evening Post* for July 1956:

In 1931, the Pendrays visited Europe and observed the German society's Raketen-flugplatz—their "rocket flying field." The Pendrays were overwhelmed. "As we stood by their test stand and heard the indescribable roar of a liquid-fuel motor, we knew we had a mission in life," Mrs. Pendray said.

The Pendrays brought their excitement back to New York. "The American society," they said, "should build rockets, not just talk about them." This novel theory attracted young engineers, but quickly shuffled out the fiction writers, who had little interest in reducing their epics to crude hardware.

> In 1934, the name was quietly changed to the American Rocket Society. As the society's publication explained it, "In the opinion of many members, adoption of the more conservative name, while in no way implying that we have abandoned the interplanetary idea, would attract able members repelled by the present name."
>
> And eventually, the society was to attract a sizeable membership, particularly as interest in rocketry mounted during the 1940s. Lasser cites two major reasons for this: The society was founded just after the Great Depression began. People were not much interested in interplanetary travel when problems here were all consuming. With greater prosperity came greater interest in other matters. Also, World War II brought the development and use by the Germans of the terrible V-1 buzz bombs and V-2 missiles against London. It was obvious that missiles would be important in the future."
>
> —"David Lasser—Pioneer Space Man" in *IUE News* (2 April 1970)

- **WHY DID YOU LEAVE THE ORGANIZATION? ALTHOUGH IT HAS BEEN REPORTED THAT YOU DEPARTED AS A RESULT OF GROWING INVOLVEMENT WITH THE UNEMPLOYED, IT IS NOT CLEAR WHETHER YOUR DEPARTURE FROM THE AIS WAS ABRUPT OR A PLANNED AND SMOOTH TRANSITION.**

It was in 1934 that Lasser began his fulltime commitment to the labor movement, which finally brought him to the IUE. He had maintained his position with *Wonder Stories* while building the Interplanetary Society, but in 1933 was suddenly fired for helping to organize a demonstration of unemployed workers.

"The boss told me," he recalls, "Lasser, since you like the unemployed so much you can join them." Lasser resigned as president of the AIS and founded the Workers Alliance of America.

—"David Lasser—Pioneer Space Man" in *IUE News* (2 April 1970)

Lasser has always demonstrated a considerate and caring attitude toward people, and it could be assumed that he did everything possible under the circumstances to provide for a "smooth transition." He has praised Pendray's abilities and effectiveness in carrying on the work of the AIS many, many times. And his relationship with Pendray was amicable always.

- **DID YOU MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH YOUR FORMER COLLEAGUES IN THE AIS? IF SO, WITH WHOM? DID YOU MAINTAIN MEMBERSHIP IN THE AIS/ARS?**

Lasser was elected a Fellow in absentia in 1955 when all past presidents of the American Rocket Society were made Fellows automatically. In 1981, he was reinstated as a Fellow member.

- **DID YOU KEEP ABREAST OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FIELD OF ROCKETRY AND SPACE TRAVEL AFTER YOU LEFT THE AIS? WERE YOU EVER TEMPTED TO BECOME INVOLVED ONCE AGAIN?**

Lasser maintained his interest in rocket development over the years, but during his active career felt his work with the labor movement had fulfilled a more urgent need.

As soon as he retired, however, and had fulfilled several foreign assignments on behalf of the American labor movement under the aegis of the AFL-CIO and the U.S. State Department, he resumed his study of space-related fields. This included considerable examination of the different theories of the origin of the universe and the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics, relativity, and cosmology. He traveled to meet with astrophysicists at CalTech, Princeton, MIT, Lowell Observatory at Flagstaff, Arizona, and others. He had the privilege of working with Eleanor Helin of the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena in an overnight session at the 200-inch telescope at Palomar Observatory. The Schumakers invited him to join their search for asteroids at a smaller Palomar telescope another time. He also spent an afternoon meeting with Russian astrophysicists residing in San Diego and working with Americans.

His study over the past 25 years was primarily related to a third book he planned to write to be called "The Cosmic Adventure." In 1981, he proposed that AIAA involve children in a sustained membership in the Institute that would enable "us to communicate with them for the next fifty years."[12]

- **IN LIGHT OF YOUR LATER ACTIVITIES, DID YOU VIEW SPACE TRAVEL AS A MEANS TO UTOPIA?**

In 1970, Lasser said, "The recent successful flights to the moon prove that man can develop the technology to do nearly anything he wants to do. I would now like to see us apply the determination we used to reach the moon toward solving the range of problems that confronts mankind—problems such as hunger, the housing shortage, poverty, air pollution, curing the dread diseases that are still with us, the threat of over-population. The solutions to these and other problems are within our reach—if we make the commitment."

—"David Lasser—Pioneer Space Man" in *IUE News* (2 April 1970)

In 1980, Lasser described his plans for a third book to be called 'The Cosmic Adventure." He said, "In it I try to take the reader to the farthest reaches of space and into the innermost parts of the smallest bits of matter in the process of exploring the meaning of our existence. I think we need a kind of cosmic religion to which all people can relate. If we had that we might solve more of our problems here. But, we have been a little arrogant. We are still acting like spoiled children or half-civilized. I would like to see us mature to our proper place in the universe."

—"Space Views Stand Test of Time" by Cliff Smith in *San Diego Union* (23 June 1980)

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[12] Letter from James J. Harford, dated 27 August 1981.

- **HAVE YOU EVER DESIRED TO ACTUALLY TRAVEL INTO SPACE?**

As a space pioneer, Lasser realized that the actual trips into space were for the next generation. His only published statement on this appears in an interview by Jean White, *The Washington Post* and *Times Herald* (8 August 1955): "I think we old-timers should have first chance."

- **ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC ABOUT MAN'S FUTURE PROSPECTS OF SPACE TRAVEL?**

Excerpt from remarks by Lasser to Los Angeles Chapter, AIAA, 16 June 1982, Airport Marine Hotel in Los Angeles, California:

> In the last generation, our nation and the world has been greatly enriched by the tremendous accomplishment in space made possible by you and other members of AIAA. And it has been suggested that in the few minutes I have we might together peer into our computers, crystal balls and imagination to see what the future might hold.
>
> I am sure that you here tonight are so much better equipped than I am to deal with that problem, that it might be presumptuous for me to appear to instruct you. I am sure that you are already hard at work on all aspects of where and how we are going next, hoping when you are ready the money to do it will be available.
>
> Important advances, I am sure, are on the way in fuels, designs, materials, objectives, including even the establishment of colonies in space and means to establish communication with the life that must exist somewhere in that vastness.
>
> However, there is one specific development that I would like, with your permission, to deal with. Today we have these huge space ships carrying two or three astronauts. If past experience is any guide, all the improvements that lie in the future, will make possible both smaller space ships or more passengers or both. I may be bold to suggest that within the lifetime of your children there will be developed what might be called a "sky bus" designed to carry a large number of passengers. Moreover, "weekend in space" might become a favorite and unforgettable means to "get away from it all." The importance of this for our future, I venture to suggest, could become very great.
>
> Today, increasingly, on every continent, communities and countries are being torn apart by bitter contests for power based on differences in language, color, nationality, religion and social and political systems. We have no better example of this than the two wars that have recently dominated the news—in the Falklands and Lebanon. Thousands of young men and many thousands of citizens have either been killed or turned into homeless refugees.
>
> If one were to look down from space upon our little earth, he might get an entirely different prospective from that on the TV screen on these conflicts. From a few million miles away the scene of all this destruction and bloodshed might appear as a lonely little ball in the vastness of space, fragile and helpless, slowly turning as it moved on its appointed circle around the sun.

If present trends continue, it is possible that by madness or miscalculation, man's deadliest weapon might be unleashed. Then, in a moment, the hundreds of millions of years of our slow climb to humanity might be wiped out. Seen from space, the earth will be like a lifeless, burned out cinder moving through an indifferent universe. On the other hand, if we manage to survive, that "space bus," bringing tens of thousands of people to a rendezvous far from earth could achieve great popularity. A generation that grew up space-minded from their childhood could create, from that new prospective, a sense of community of mankind, sharing a common destiny on this little earth. With this new enlarged viewpoint, future generations might hopefully revolt against those who would try to confine them into narrow, airtight prisons of intolerance, to further their reckless and selfish ambitions.

And so, as a possible conclusion to this hopeful portrayal, we might one day look down from our "space bus" to the earth, proudly sailing on its course. And, attached to it, would be a great banner inscribed with only a few words: "For peace and democracy—Humanity United!"

- **LASSER'S COMMENTS ON THE V-2 ROCKETS, *SPUTNIK*, THE INTERNATIONAL SPACE PROGRAM, ETC. ARE CONTAINED IN THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT FROM A SPEECH HE GAVE BEFORE THE LIONS CLUB, STONERIDGE COUNTRY CLUB, ON OCTOBER 28, 1982.**

Actually, the great world war served as a means for great development of the rocket. The German missile V2 was a powerful and deadly weapon and at the war's end, the plans and surplus supplies were turned over by the Germans to us.

Now, to get to the period after the war. The idea of space travel via the rocket was now pretty generally established and in the last 37 years the successes have been astounding, particularly between the U.S. and USSR, where a fierce competitiveness has raged.

Last Sunday's *San Diego Union* contained a long detailed story on those developments and I will not repeat them. I suggest you read or reread: "*Sputnik*: It Woke Up America!" The article recounted that it was only 12 years after the war that had devastated the Soviet Union, that it put Yuri Gagarin into space in a little machine called "Sputnik." Circling the earth in 89 minutes, he opened the space age. In the 25 years since then we and the Soviets have not only traveled to the Moon, Mars, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn, but *Voyager II* is passing outside the solar system into the vast empty spaces to the nearest star.

And, we can say that what we have done up-to-date is only a springboard for an amazing future in space. After a successful series of Sky Labs, we are now ready to build a permanent station in space that can carry on production of materials that require weightlessness. New drugs will be produced, a telescope will be built beyond the blanket of air that covers our earth. And commercial companies are now beginning to move into space on their own. The great difficulty today is the conflict raging between the space lobbies to get a greater share of the monies available and the question

in these days of large government deficits how much will be made available.

There is a tendency in the White House to cut funds that are not designed for our national defense or for commercial purposes. In the final analysis, what happens in space in the next few years will depend upon the interest and attitude expressed by the public. The commercial use of space is bound to increase tremendously. Special companies are being created for that purpose. One firm is offering paying customers a trip into the wild blue yonder and we can expect soon to hear the appeal to the business community: 'Drop the burden of your cares. Take the space bus and spend a weekend on the weightless moon!'

As to the direction we as earthlings should take towards space, there are many practical considerations and some that, although not material, may be more important. It is said, for example, that the 1492 voyage of Columbus in discovering the Americas, not only opened this new world for exploration, but freed men from the mental prison that had encased them for a thousand years. The doors were opened to the refreshing breezes of the Renaissance. From that beginning came the enormous advances in the arts and sciences, philosophy and social and economic development.

Today, however, our little earth is torn apart by ferocious struggles between peoples with different social and economic systems, different religions, languages, nationalities. There is no problem separating peoples, no matter how trifling, that cannot be built into 'do or die' issues by ambitious and self-serving groups.

Above all, we stand on the edge of oblivion from madness or miscalculation if man's deadliest weapon were unleashed. And if we were in space when it took place, and we looked down on our tiny earth, it would be like a burned out cinder, drifting helplessly through an indifferent universe. Or, to put it another way, we have as much importance in this universe as does a grain of sand on the La Jolla beach.

However, that same view of the earth from space could create an entirely new approach, what I call the 'Cosmic Viewpoint', by a new set of values on our relationships on earth. A generation that grew up space-minded could develop from that new perspective a sense of the community of humanity, sharing a common destiny on this little earth.

It is as if we were a dozen people on a lifeboat on an endless and stormy sea. To save ourselves and grasp the opportunities opening to us, we need to draw together as one family, disregarding irrelevant differences and revolting against those who would try to separate us into struggling groups, prisons of intolerance, for their reckless and selfish ambitions.

We know now that our sun is but one undistinguished member of a family, consisting of over 100 billion others in our Milky Way Galaxy, and there are perhaps a hundred billion such galaxies in our universe. And who knows how many universes there may be. In our galaxy alone, there may be innumerable suns with planets containing life that may be as far in advance of us as we are of the ant. The wonderful picture, *ET*, gave us a glimpse of such a creature. And, if we should discover such life, or be discovered by

them, we could take the lesson from a child and hold out our hand in friendship.

Let me close with one of the things that may happen: to ascend to the skies in that 'sky bus' filled with people from all nations and below us, sailing proudly would be our earth. And attached to it would be a banner, miles long, with only a few words: "For Peace and Democracy: Humanity United."

- **DID YOU ENVISION DURING THOSE EARLY YEARS THAT MANKIND WOULD REACH THE MOON IN YOUR LIFETIME?**

The Southern California Sections of the AIAA and the *Apollo 11* astronauts invited Lasser to their 25th Anniversary Commemorative Banquet held 20 July 1994. Neil Armstrong tried to make it, but his plane in New York developed engine problems. The plans to introduce David Lasser to Neil Armstrong were aborted. Allan Bangs, a spokesman for the event commented: "We got him to the moon but couldn't get him to Los Angeles."

Lasser and Armstrong failed to meet, but Lasser will always cherish Armstrong's log of *Apollo 11*, which recorded, hour by hour, the exciting events of what has been recognized as the greatest single step in human history—a trip to the Moon. The log describes the launching: "Watching is a worldwide television audience and an estimated million eyewitnesses. Standing three and one-half miles away on the sand flats or seated in grandstands are half the members of the United States Congress and more than 3,000 newsmen from 56 countries."

Lasser's vision "to use space travel to enlarge man's intellectual and spiritual life" was realized on 16 July 1969.

- **WHAT WERE YOUR THOUGHTS WHEN *APOLLO 11* ASTRONAUTS LANDED ON THE MOON?**

Lasser viewed the landing with relatives and friends. From the very beginning, they shared his confidence that the mission would be totally successful. He praised President John Kennedy and his advisors for their leadership and determination in making sure the United States was first on the Moon.