

The LAAS History Detective

Episode 3

Lewis Chilton



Before the 1926 founding of the organization that would become known as the Los Angeles Astronomical Society, an earlier club had formed in the city and then disappeared. Why did the LAAS succeed when the earlier club did not?

In 1925, high school student Charlton Chute addressed this question when he noted that members of the earlier, short-lived astronomy club came to the meetings to listen to a lecture, sometimes highly technical, learned little and often didn't return. Chute presciently observed that no club could exist for long with a passive membership and only a few active leaders. In his view, a successful club was comprised of an active membership whose leaders encouraged and promoted the making of astronomical apparatus as a way of keeping its members interested and involved. Chute was convinced that the construction of a telescope by each member's own hands should be the organizing principal of the new club. And once a member completed a telescope, it was the club's further responsibility to promote its useful work in astronomy. Thus, telescope making was the *raison d'etere* for the new club's existence. *

On November 4, 1926, the very first meeting of the future Los Angeles Astronomical Society was held at the new 5-story Los Angeles Central Public Library at 630 W. 5th Street. The club was without a name, but it was decided by a vote to call it the Telescope Makers and Amateur Astronomers, a name that was changed by the next meeting in December to the Amateur Telescope Makers Society of Los Angeles (ATMS-LA).

Meetings were very formal and business-like in those days. The social mores of the era dictated that gentlemen wore suits, ties and hats. You wouldn't have seen any tee-shirts, tank tops or Hawaiian shirts. (Were they even invented yet?) Surviving records fail to show that any women were present.

During the first meeting, an *ad hoc* committee was formed to create a ballot of officers, with nominations from the floor. The following positions were created and filled for the first year, 1926-1927.

President: John Avard Gayton, born 1893, Lacona, N.Y.; education: University of Rochester, N.Y., class of 1916 with a Spanish major; moved to Los Angeles c. 1917; occupation: business traveler to Latin America as a rep for a Los Angeles canner and distributor of fruit and fish; removed to Providence, Rhode Island c. 1942; died 1968, Lynn, Massachusetts.



Vice-President: Charles Carroll Waggoner, M.D., born 1883, Pennsylvania; medical training: University of Michigan Homeopathic Medical School, Ann Arbor, 1907; died 1928, Los Angeles, Calif.

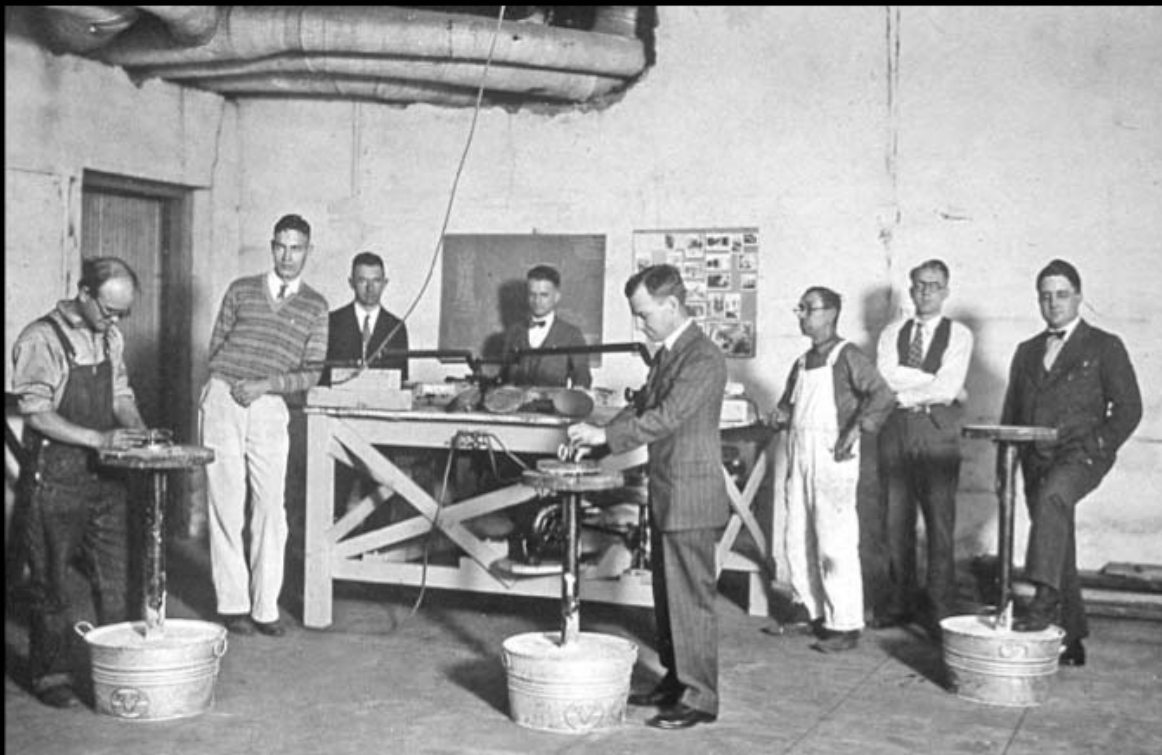
Secretary: Frank Mergenthaler, born 1886, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; occupation: attorney; died 1971, South Pasadena, Calif.

Treasurer: David Parks Bradbury, born 1901, Missouri; occupation: accountant; died 1946, Los Angeles, Calif.

Librarian/Corresponding Secretary: Charlton Foster Chute, born 1906, Peru, Indiana; education: Long Beach Polytechnic High School, 1925; UCLA, 1929; Univ. of Chicago, 1935; died 1985, Norwalk, Connecticut.

Custodian: James Harvey Herron, born 1886, Oleander, Alabama; founder, Herron Optical Co.; died 1960, Los Angeles, Calif.

I was fortunate to obtain a 1920 passport photo of President Gayton taken for his frequent business trips to Central and South America, but I couldn't find individual photos of the other officers. However, some of them appear together in a group picture published in the *Scientific American* series, "Making Your Own Telescope - Book 1," 1955 printing, p. 350.



Optical Shops of the Amateur Telescope Makers Society
- late 1920s

In the photo above, from the LAAS archive, Jimmy Herron is at far left in the dark bib overalls or apron. The tall gent to his left, whose elbow rests on the mirror grinding-

polishing machine, appears to be President Gayton whose height exceeded six feet. (This machine appears in the 1955 printing of "Amateur Telescope Making – Book 1," p. 164.) The gentleman working on his mirror in center foreground is believed to be Secretary Mergenthaler, and the gentleman at far right, whose foot rests on a cement-filled washtub, is thought to be Treasurer Bradbury. Perhaps further detective work will confirm their identities, as well as to identify the others in the picture.

On June 26, 1929, the club incorporated as the Amateur Telescope Makers Society. The six signatories to the Articles of Incorporation were John A. Gayton, William F. van Atta, Frank Mergenthaler, Ernest A. Letcher, Dr. George H. Ferguson and James Herron. On June 13, 1934, an amendment to the original Articles of Incorporation was filed changing the name again to the Amateur Astronomical Society. President Newton C. Millikin and Secretary Harold P. Figueroa signed the document. This latest name change provided no hint of the club's telescope making heritage but does offer a clue into its evolving mission and perception of itself in 1934. We'll explore this further in a future installment. **

* I wish to thank Thomas R. Williams, Ph.D., Houston, Texas, for access to his paper, "The Early Years of Amateur Astronomy in Los Angeles – Conflicts and Contradictions," that he presented at the American Astronomical Society, History of Astronomy Division, meeting in Long Beach, California in January 2013. Any errors of fact or omission that may be found in this installment of the 'History Detective' are mine and not his.

** I also wish to thank LAAS member Herbert Kraus for making available to me a copy of the Society's Articles of Incorporation and Amendments. Herb served on the Board of Directors from 2007 to 2012 and as treasurer from 2008 to 2011.

Next time: Laying the Groundwork for the LAAS - Amateur Astronomers Past

