

# Phoxphyre: The First SF Con

\$1.50





November 24, 1983

Dear Reader;

Welcome to the first compilation of material for the Philadelphia in 1986 Bid Committee's Phoxphyre Project.

That was the mandatory plug, since Philadelphia in 1936 is the parent organization for the Phoxphyre Project. However, the Phoxphyre Project is NOT intended as a means of publicizing our bid. We think that it's too important for that.

So what is Phoxphyre, already? Okay, the Phoxphyre Project is our attempt at writing what I call a "subjective" history of early fandom. A history that isn't concerned so much with facts: names, dates, and places, as it is with how it felt to be there, a part of the newly born hobby of science fiction fandom.

There's only one way to do that. Ask the folks that were there. And ask them quick, cause there aren't that many of them left. We are. In fact, that was how the Project got started. Yoel Attiya suggested it at a meeting of the bid committee. Get to First Fandom while they were still around, ask them about the early days, and get it down on paper.

Everybody liked the idea. In fact, we liked it--and like it--so much that we plan to continue it win or lose in the Site Selection. Our target date is the 1986 Worldcon, wherever it's being held, so that we can present the finished work to fandom as a Fiftieth Anniversary present.

You see, almost fifty years ago, in October, 1936, a group of SF fans from New York did something did something that SF fans had never done before. They travelled to another town, Philadelphia, for the express purpose of meeting with other SF fans. It was the first SF con ever held.

We picked that first con for a couple of reasons, not just because we are a Philadelphia group but also because the '86 Worldcon is effectively the fiftieth anniversary of ~~that~~ event, as the first item to cover in Phoxphyre.

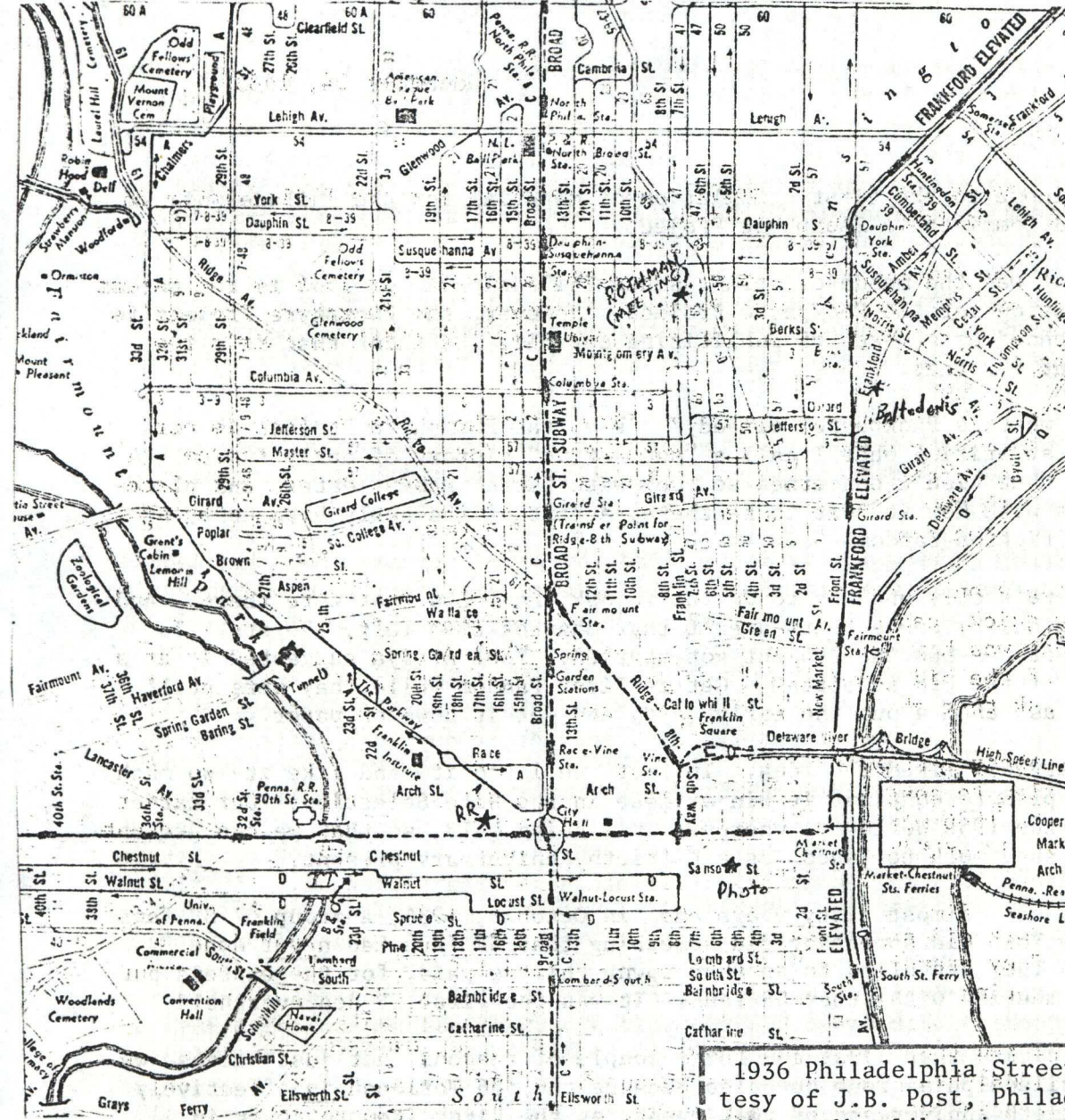
As of this date, we've managed to get material from almost everyone who attended. We're still hoping for something from Donald A. Wollheim and William S. Sykora. John B. Michel, a major figure in the period, has, unfortunately died.

Incidentally, those suspicious looking people on the front and back covers are most of the attendees. The picture was taken at that convention. From left to right:

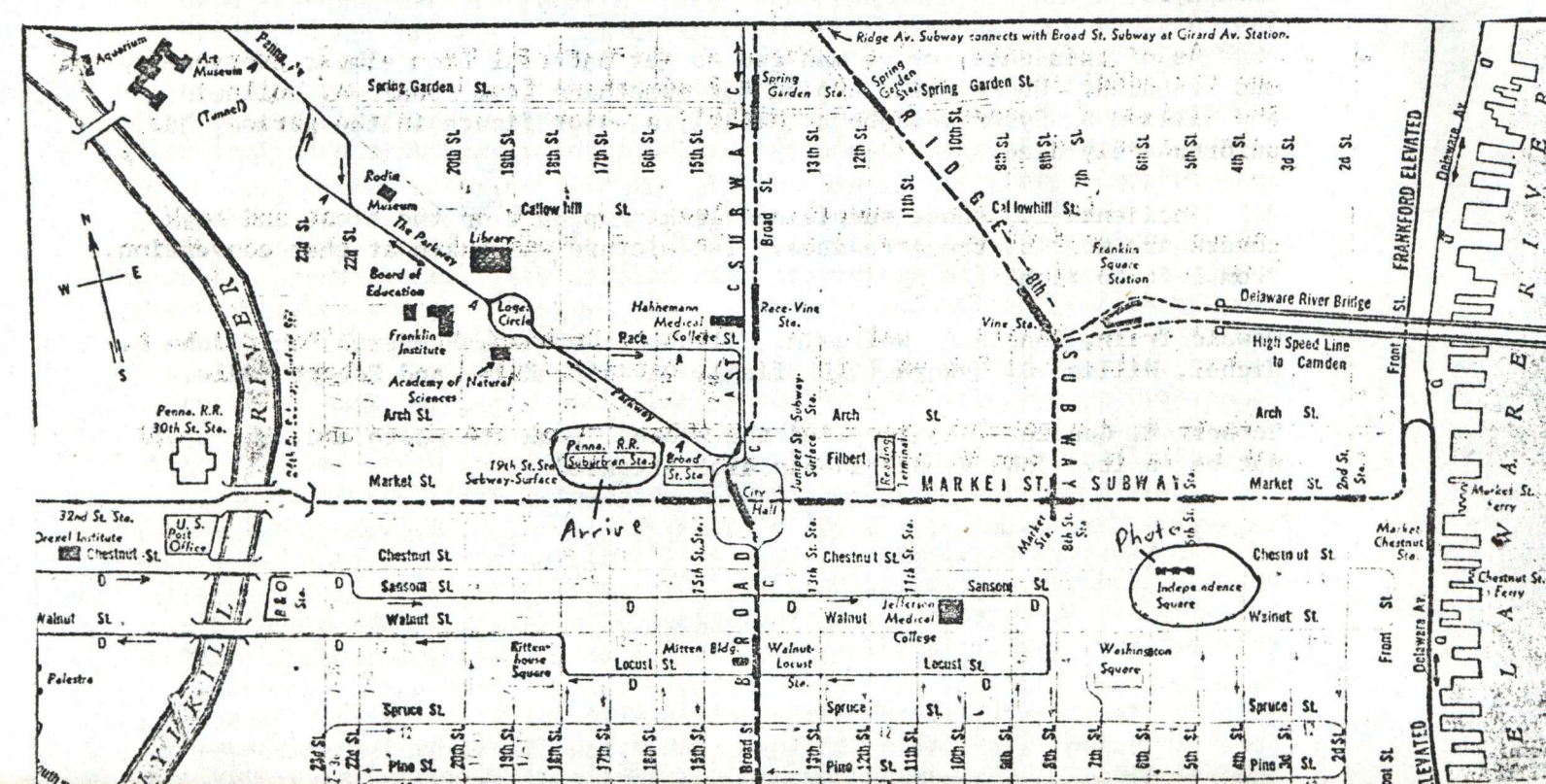
Oswald Train, Donald A. Wollheim, Milton A. Rothman, Frederik Pohl, John B. Michel, William S. Sykora (with flag), David A. Kyle, and Robert Madle.

Herbert E. Goudket (who supplied the photos) took the photo and, so, could not be in it. John V. Baltadonis also attended.





1936 Philadelphia Street Maps courtesy of J.B. Post, Philadelphia Free Library Map Librarian





## MEMORIES OF THE FIRST CONVENTION

by

Milton A. Rothman

Some details of the first science fiction convention are as clear in my mind as though they were still in the process of happening. However, much of the event has faded into dim shadows. One thing I am clear about is where the event took place. It happened in my house. That is not something I could forget.

Let's go back to the beginning. In 1935 I got the idea of starting a science fiction club in Philadelphia. At that time Charles Hornig, editor of Wonder Stories, had conceived the Science Fiction League, a national organization for fans. By sending in a modest sum, one received in return a certificate of membership. I still have mine. It is a nicely printed document, with elaborate design and calligraphy and it reads: "At a Directors Meeting held in New York City, New York, in the United States of America, the Science Fiction League has elected Milton A. Rothman a member of this League. In Witness whereof, this Certificate has been officially signed and presented to the above. (Signed) Charles Hornig, Ass't Secretary." And, typed in at the bottom: Member No. 34."

Furthermore, one could obtain a charter to form a local chapter of the League, which I proceeded to do. The charter, alas, has vanished, but my memory has not. The origin of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society was as a chapter of the Science Fiction League. The League faded away in time, but the PSFS continued its independent existence.

The original members, besides myself, included Raymond Mariella, Robert Madle, and John Baltadonis; Ossie Train, I think, came along somewhat later. Mariella dropped out of SF after going to college. He became a chemistry professor and most recently was Executive Director of the American Chemical Society. John Baltadonis became an art teacher. Ossie Train and Bob Madle remain active fans and collectors to this day. I am no longer very active in science fiction, but still write. After completing a massive chemistry text, I am now trying to write fiction once more. Curiously, doing the textbook does not seem to have damaged my fiction style.

The first convention happened when a group of fans from New York decided to pay a visit to Philadelphia. The year was 1936. I don't remember the date. I was 16 at the time, just graduated from Central High and entering my first year at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science (where I majored in chemistry for two years). I was very young, inexperienced, and very impressed by the visitation of the New York contingent. They were a little older, on the average, and vastly more sophisticated.

We met at my home (my father's house, to be exact), at 2113 N. Franklin St., near 7th and Diamond. The neighborhood was, at that time, in somewhat better shape than it is now. It was never a rich neighborhood, and I remember Jack Speer asking me, a few years later, where the nice neighborhoods in Philadelphia were. I couldn't tell him, being at that time completely unaware of places such as Overbrook and Chestnut Hill. Wynnefield was the nicest neighborhood I knew.



At any rate, my house -- an ordinary 3-story Philadelphia row house -- had a living room barely big enough to contain 10 or 11 people. The record is a trifle obscure about exactly how many people met at that first convention. Fred Pohl's autobiography *THE WAY THE FUTURE WAS* contains a photograph showing eight people: Ossie Train, Don Wollheim, Fred Pohl, John Michel, Will Sykora, Dave Kyle, Bob Madle, and myself. John Baltadonis took the picture, making a total of 9. Another account adds the names George Hahn and Herbert Goudket to the roster. Perhaps they didn't get into the picture. (Curiously, I cannot for the life of me identify the background of that photo. It shows a brick wall with a large white doorway, or are they pillars? It is possible we were touring the area around Independence Hall. That would be a logical place to take visitors, although in those days the open area north of Independence Hall was not in existence.)

I must dispute Fred Pohl about the location of the first convention. In *THE WAY THE FUTURE WAS* he states that the meeting took place in the bar owned by John Baltadonis' father. (In those days we called it a saloon.) Fred clearly is remembering a concatenation of the first two or three Philcons. We did hold one in the back room of the Baltadonis saloon, and there were 20 or 30 people there, including a number of AUTHORS. I remember putting on a painfully amateurish marionette show involving a Martian. That was probably the second Philcon. But the first was in my living room.

That was how I got to be chairman. I had no idea it was going to happen, but when the meeting started Fred Pohl (or perhaps it was Don Wollheim) proposed that as a courtesy to me as host I should be named chairman of the convention. I was dazed by the honor.

Unfortunately, I have absolutely no memory of what we talked about. I cannot even take refuge in senility. Fred Pohl can't remember, either, and he was official secretary of the meeting. Furthermore, he has no idea what he did with his notes. Things do tend to get lost over the years, what with moving about from one place to another. We didn't have filing cabinets in those days. I didn't even have my own typewriter until three years later.

The chances are we talked about what the clubs were doing and made plans to have another convention the following year.

My major impression on looking back is that we had no idea what we were getting into. There was probably no idea in our minds during that summer of 1936 that this small meeting was going to be the first of an ever increasing series, that the Philcons would routinely attract hundreds of fans, that the Philcon would be one of dozens of local cons, and that the worldcons would draw thousands, requiring a modern convention center to contain the six or eight parallel sessions.

We also had no way of knowing that Fred Pohl was going to become FREDERIK POHL and that Don Wollheim was going to become DAW. I just was aware that this bunch from New York contained some very smart guys, some highly interesting characters, some very articulate talkers. That's what attracted me to them. Funny, we spent a lot of time thinking about the future of the world, but there was no way us to guess what the future of each of us was going to become.



One thing we had in common: we all started out wanting to write. That was inevitable. After we spent a certain amount of time doing nothing but reading, the urge to start creating something of our own becomes irresistible. Some of us succeeded better than others.

Of the original group at the first convention, one became an important writer, and another an important editor and publisher. Another (Dave Kyle), has considerable accomplishments in the writing and editing department, although I doubt it is his major source of income.

As for myself, I wrote my most important story when I was 19 and as far as fiction was concerned it was downhill all the way after that. (After 45 years I'm still collecting royalties on HEAVY PLANET; it's like money in the bank.) Aside from a few stories, most of my writing has been non-fiction: numerous science articles, about 50 technical journal papers, and 6 science books of various kinds. I do not make a living from writing, but find that it is one of the activities I like best. So I'm back to trying fiction again. Hope springs eternal, and it'll be something to keep me occupied when I retire from 9-to-5 next year.

One other point: of the original group only one is now dead, to the best of my knowledge. Statistically, I would expect two or three out of the eleven to be dead by now. We would appear to be a long-lived bunch, a fact that is commensurate with the other qualities possessed by that small, innovative group that came together in 1936.

(Milt Rothman's cover letter)

August 1, 1983

Dear Lew:

I am enclosing a few pages of memories of the Convention of 1936. It's not much. Nobody bothered to write down what happened, except for the secretary of the meeting, and he lost his notes. I have no photographs, since I didn't even have a camera of my own at that time. But it does set the record straight about where the meeting was held.

I hope it will be of use, and I look forward to seeing the compilation of all the reports when it is finished. Let me know if I can help in any other way.

Sincerely yours,

Milton A. Rothman



FREDERIK POHL:

(typed on stationary from a hotel in Kyoto)

26 August 1983

Dear Lew Wolkoff:

I'm sorry to take so long to answer your letter, but I just got back from a trip to (as you probably can guess) Japan and China.

I'm even sorrier to say that my memory of that first con is practically blank. All I remember clearly is that we met in the saloon belonging to the father of one of the Philadelphia fans (John Baltadonis?), which was unused for any other purpose because it was a Sunday.

What I do remember vividly (though not in any detail) is the marvelous sense of adventure and pioneering we felt, getting on that train for the desperate expedition into the unknown. As far as I know, none of the NYC contingent had ever met any of the Philadelphians--in fact, I'm not sure any of us had ever met any fan from outside the general New York City area, though we'd corresponded with a good many even as far away as England.

And certainly we had no idea that such an event would be repeated very often--much less that con-going would become a way of life for thousands.

I assume you're already contacting Wollheim and Kyle. Johnny Michel is dead. I've lost touch with Sykora (though he surfaces at conventions once in a while) and Hahn (who was in Paris last I heard--years ago). I do have an address for Herb Goudket somewhere if you need it; Don Wollheim and I had lunch with him a couple of years ago.

No, I never found the minutes--there's not much hope I ever will.

And, yes, you may use the photo from THE WAY THE FUTURE WAS. I don't know where the original is--I may not have got it back from Ballantine. Can you use the print in the book or should I start searching?

Bests,

Frederik Pohl

6 October 1983

Dear Lew:

Well, I've studied your questionnaire and, alas, my memory isn't hardly jogged at all. I just don't remember the train ride, the meeting at the railroad station or the "convention" itself--and the parts that I thought I did remember turn out unreliable. (I was sure we'd gone to John Baltadonis' father's bar, but I ran into Milt Rothman at the Worldcon and he says I was wrong, that was a different convention.)

I remember clearly a Philcon a couple of years later, maybe 1939, because Cyril Kornbluth and I got silly-drunk on Dirk Wylie's applejack and stole a couple of elevators to race. It was in some sort of rented hall, no one there but us sf people on a Sunday.

I've looked for the original of the group photo without success, and am very much afraid it's in storage. When I moved from a thirteen-room house to a three-room apartment I put masses of books, papers, etc. into a storage warehouse--they're still there in New Jersey, where I can't get at them.

Bests,



The following excerpts are taken, with permission, from The Way the Future Was: A Memoir by Frederik Pohl (Del Rey, 1978).

"Evidently there were specimens of our own breed in other parts of the world. We had linked up with them through fanzine and letter, but we hungered for the personal contact. And so, one Sunday in 1936, half a dozen of us got on the train for Philadelphia and were met by half a dozen Philadelphia fans, and so the world's first science-fiction convention took place. Considering the historical significance of the event, it is astonishing how little I remember about what happened there. It's no good looking for the official minutes, either: I was the secretary who took them, and I have no idea where I put them. Philly fan John W. Baltadonis's father owned a bar, and we met in one corner of it for the business part of the session. Robert A. Madle and Oswald Train were part of the Philadelphia contingent, and I still see them pretty regularly at sf conventions; so was Milton A. Rothman, who published several stories (some of them with me) under the name of Lee Gregor before deciding to devote his time to nuclear physics. From New York were Johnny Michel, Don Wollheim, Will Sykora, Dave Kyle, and myself."

"The last convention I went to had four thousand people in attendance, and it was by no means the biggest sf convention ever. There must be a hundred of them a year in the United States, and maybe another hundred here and there in the rest of the world. But that was the first."

(page 54)

The cover photo for this work appears in an insert section that follows page 144 in the Pohl book. It is captioned, as follows:

"8/9ths of total attendance at world's very first science fiction convention

Philadelphia, 1936

"From left to right: Ossie Train, Don Wollheim, Milton A. Rothman, the Author, Johnny Michel, Will Sykora, David A. Kyle, and Robert A. Madle. The other 1/9th of the assembly is taking the picture. His name was John Baltadonis."

#### At the Movies

Current movies included "Anthony Adverse" starring Frederic March, "China Clipper" with Pat O'Brian, and "Swing Time" with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Shirley Temple's new movie, "Dimples" opened in Philadelphia on October 23.

Recent popular films included "Charge of the Light Brigade" starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland and a remake of "Romeo and Juliet" with Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer in the title roles.



## OZZIE TRAIN:

Yes, I attended the first science fiction convention back in 1936. I had been in Philadelphia for slightly more than a year--I arrived here October 3, 1935--and things were very exciting to me. At the age of 21, I was probably the senior member of our group. Though maybe Charles Bert was a little older than me.

Some of the details of that day are a little dim after all these years--after all it was 48 years ago! On October 22, 1936, a group of us met the New York gang at the old Broad Street Station in center city, just across the street from City Hall. The station is no longer there, and neither are most of the buildings on both sides of Market Street. If one were suddenly transported from the year 1936 to 1983 via time machine, he wouldn't recognize the place at all. Only City Hall is the same. Anyway, we met them at the station, and most of us met each other for the very first time. I remember Dave Kyle running onto the platform with his coat on backwards, sporting a droopy black mystache (sic) and a floppy black hat, shooting a cap gun. After reading Fred Pohl's account in his book THE WAY THE FUTURE WAS, I am sure his figures are wrong. He says the total attendance was nine, but I am sure there were at least as many from his own group of New Yorkers, and probably more than that from Philadelphia. There may have been that many involved with the little group in the picture reproduced in Fred's book. I am surprised that Pohl doesn't mention Herb Goudket, Donald A. Wollheim and John B. Michel. I remember being fascinated with Herb Goudket's camera--he was getting the unheard of number of thirty six shots to a roll! I have often wondered what happened to those photographs he took that day. Another New Yorker Pohl neglected to mention was Harry Dockweiler, who later became an agent under the name of Dirk Wylie. William S. Sykora was busily plugging the International Science Association and was carrying a banner all day bearing the huge letters ISA. All of us had a great time roaming the city and seeing the sights.

Charles H. Bert, another Philadelphian, was also present part of the time, as were John V. Baltadonis, Robert A. Madle, Milton Rothman, Raymond Mariella. John J. Newton a friend of Madle and Baltadonis, who also knew them both in high school, is pretty sure he was present. To this day John is one of my closest friends. William Pearlman came all the way from Baltimore to attend. I have no idea how he learned of the meeting, but he did turn up--and again in 1937, and maybe several times after that. And Harvey Greenblatt may have been there too, of this I am not sure. Harvey left the club a couple of years after this to attend college. He served in the army in World War II, with distinction and was a genuine war hero. He knocked out a German tank single handed, and two weeks after being awarded the bronze star for this he was killed in action in France. He was the only PSFS casualty of World War II, though about 95%--make that 99%--of the membership served.

I did not attend the actual meeting. In those days I was working in a center city restaurant and had to be at work in the early afternoon. They wouldn't let me have the day off. I was a little late for work, but I got away with it. In those days if one had a job, any sort of job, no matter how much or how little it paid, one hung onto it. The Great Depression was just about at its lowest depth.

Milton Rothman was chairman of this first convention, and Frederik Pohl secretary. Since no funds were involved, there was no treasurer. The program if it can be called such was probably a general discussion.



The most important bit of business, aside from declaring it was a convention, was the planning of a similar affair in New York for the following year, in February.

The weather? It was beautiful, sunny, mild and absolutely perfect.

In the Mundane World

The biggest news item was the Presidential Election of 1936, FDR and Landon:

1. Landon attacked Roosevelt for the potential of foreign entanglements that he saw in New Deal trade policy and promised to try to avoid European wars.

2. Father Coughlin, a right-wing radio preacher, was running his own candidate in the hope of throwing the election into the House of Representatives.

3. Political analysts reported that Black voters were shifting from their historic support of the Republican Party to back FDR.

A related story were the charges that Democratic bosses in a number of cities were giving WPA jobs to political cronies and supporters, rather than the needy.

Housewives in several cities were protesting the high food prices that resulted from Roosevelt's farm policy.

In October, 1936, the new "China Clipper" airships were just beginning their trans-Pacific flights.

Work continued on the Mount Palomar Observatory telescope.

Wallace Simpson began divorce proceedings so that she would be free to marry Edward VIII of England.

Russia threatened to end its neutrality in the Spanish Civil War, charging that Germany and Italy were aiding Franco. Madrid was bombed.

A report on economic problems and rising prices in Germany cited Chancellor Hitler's anti-Semitic policies as one of the causes.

The Yankees beat the Giants in six games to win the World Series.

The Philadelphia weather report for the weekend of October 24-25, 1936, was partly cloudy, but clearing towards Monday. High temperatures were in the mid-50s.



8/27/83

Dear Lew:

Sorry about the delay in getting back to you re 1936 Philcon. My recollection of attendance is:

NY all but George Hahn. I know he wasn't there. He was a correspondent of mine & had visited me a week or so earlier, which accounts for the confusion. I am also quite certain that Bert and Mariella were not there, altho they were active members of the PSFL at the time. This is verified in Fred Pohl's The Way the Future Was. He includes a photo of the first con and mentions that there were nine present.

Here are a couple of addresses: (not given in the interest of privacy)

(Wait a minute! Just checked the Pohl book and he has forgotten Herb Goudket -- so there were a total of 10 there. I will try to see if there were any writeups of the con in the fan press to verify all this. But I feel that this info is accurate.)

(Further discussion of addresses follows.)

Sincerely,

Bob Madle

Oct. 12, 1983

Dear Lew--

At long last, here is the article. Frankly, when writing it, I forgot to refer to your list of questions. But it is interesting that most of them were answered anyway.

Where will this material be used? I would be interested (very much so) in reading the other articles. Who has submitted articles so far?

As far as writeups in fan mags: there must have been some. Fred Pohl was editor of The International Observer and they were putting together an s-f issue. Maybe it appeared there. Wollheim was a columnist for Wiggins' The Science Fiction Fan. Maybe there. But I don't think it was played up to any great extent wherever it appeared. Maybe someday I can dig out my old fan mags and try to find it.

People occassionally mention the First Convention -- but not often. I have no picture of the con -- I'm glad Pohl had that one he used. Herb Goudket took lots of pictures, but who knows where he is? Try DAW on this or check NY phonebook.

Did I think conventions would become 6000+. Ha, ha!!

Best,

Bob Madle



## THE FIRST SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION

As we all know, Hugo Gernsback started AMAZING STORIES in 1926. In 1929, because of a still-mysterious bankruptcy, he lost AMAZING and, one month later, he started SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, immediately followed by AIR WONDER STORIES, SCIENCE WONDER QUARTERLY and SCIENTIFIC DETECTIVE. Always, from the beginning, he injected reader interest in his magazines through readers' departments, cover contests, promotional activities like Science Fiction Week and a campaign for s-f movies. Then in April, 1934 WONDER STORIES (the combination of SCIENCE WONDER and AIR WONDER), Gernsback made an announcement that, for importance to, and impact on, S-F Fandom, has never been equalled. This was the formation of THE SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE, an organization formed with the purpose of drawing together into one large organization all those whose hobby and interest was s-f. This organization did more toward the formation of a unified Fandom than any other single fact, before or since.

Milton A. Rothman, Philadelphia's active fan and demon letter-writer of the time, gathered together enough names to apply for a charter as Chapter No. 11 and several meetings were held in 1935. (Present were Rothman, Raymond Peel Mariella, Paul Hunter and Charles Bert.) But the club almost immediately faded into inactivity only to be invigorated in October, 1935 when the first "reorganization meeting" was held. (Present were Rothman, Mariella, Oswald Train, John V. Baltadonis, Robert A. Madle and several others, who never showed up again.) Jack Agnew and Harvey Greenblatt joined at the next meeting and the PSFL was, at last, well-underway.

Two months later, club members were amazed when Rothman received a letter from Charles D. Hornig, Managing Editor of WONDER STORIES, that he and Julius Schwartz, editor of FANTASY MAGAZINE, the fan magazine of its day and perhaps, the greatest of them all, were going to visit the PSFL! Talk about the Gods descending from Valhalla! And, in a never-to-be-forgotten meeting, descend they did! Hornig told the group of the great plans he had for WONDER and the SFL. The February, 1936 issue was on the stands at the time. Unfortunately, the April, 1936 issue would be Gernsback's last -- but the SFL carried on under the new publisher and the new title, THRILLING WONDER STORIES.

Over in New York City and environs, Gernsback's announcement of the SFL had caused a bee-hive of excitement. Several chapters were formed, the largest of which was the Brooklyn SFL, headed up by Member #1, Georges Gordon Clark. Among some of the members were Frederik Pohl, Donald A. Wollheim, John B. Michel, and William S. Sykora. It so happens that Wollheim had been having a running-feud with Gernsback over the payment for his short-story, which had appeared in the January, 1934 WONDER STORIES. He didn't get paid for it and he contacted other writers who also hadn't been paid. The upshot was a lawsuit against Gernsback who had to pay up. They also did what they could to destroy the SFL in NYC which resulted in Wollheim, Michel and Sykora being expelled from the SFL. Can you imagine! Being expelled from a magazine organization!

To make matters short and without going into too much detail, William Sykora's club was THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC ASSOCIATION, which had been formed with the express idea of making scientists out of s-f readers. As such, it was intended to be a scientific experimenters' club. But with the entry of Wollheim, Michel, Pohl and others, it became an s-f club, pure and simple. And it was this group who, in October, 1936 decided to visit the



members of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society. (The PSFL had just changed its name to the PSFS, but was still a chapter of the SFL.)

As with the visit of Hornig and Schwartz ten months previous, this was a red-letter day for Philly fans. It was a beautiful Sunday morning in October, 1936 (the 22nd, to be exact), that a group of PSFS members (Milton A. Rothman, Oswald Train, John V. Baltadonis and Robert A. Madle) convened at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station to meet the group of ISA members (Donald A. Wollheim, John B. Michel, William S. Sykora, Frederik Pohl, David A. Kyle and Herbert Goudket). Although Sam Moskowitz, in his monumental history of fandom, states that George R. Hahn was present, this is not so. Hahn was a correspondent of Madle's and had visited him in Philadelphia several weeks prior to October 22nd which, apparently, accounted for this inaccuracy. There were ten present, although Frederik Pohl in "The Way the Future Was" states there were nine. He forgot Herbert Goudket, a fan friend of Will Sykora's, and the earliest pusher for amateur s-f movies that I know of. Goudket stayed active for only about two more years, while all of the others retained their activity for many years, some to this very day.

This was a historical meeting, so far as fandom goes. Fandom in 1936 was extremely small with only about 100 active fans comprising it. Here, together at one time, were 10 of them and they included most of the leaders of Eastern Fandom. Donald A. Wollheim was the leading fan of his day. He was involved in just about everything: club membership, letter-writing to professional magazines, intensive correspondence, fan magazine publisher and writer, feuder extraordinary and had even sold a story to a professional magazine, much to Gernsback's sorrow. John B. Michel had won a plot contest in WONDER QUARTERLY in 1932, had had letters published in the magazines, was a fan magazine publisher and the political presence of the group. William S. Sykora had been an s-f reader since SCIENCE WONDER STORIES and was firmly convinced that Gernsback was correct in his theory that s-f readers would become scientists. He was President of the ISA; Wollheim and Michel were his Lieutenants. But, even at this point, he was afraid that s-f fans would take over the ISA, destroying his dream of a science-oriented club. (This did happen.) Frederik Pohl was a fairly new fan who had sold a poem to AMAZING STORIES and had just been made editor of THE INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER, the publication of the ISA. David A. Kyle had had letters in the magazines, had just recently moved to New York City from Monticello, N.Y. and had joined up with the ISA group. Kyle had obtained instant fame when he had a story accepted by WONDER STORIES which was scheduled to appear in the June, 1936 issue. As mentioned earlier, the April issue was the last under Gernsback. Dave still talks about having the tear sheets of the story and the illustration by Schneeman. The story later appeared in Wollheim's STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES for February, 1941. (It was titled "The Golden Nemesis" and was illustrated by Kyle, based on the illustration by Schneeman.) Herbert Goudket was an oldtime s-f reader who, as mentioned before, was an amateur movie enthusiast and had great ideas of fans producing their own movies. The ISA did later take movies of fans and fan meetings. (Will Sykora still has these but, despite negotiations between him and FIRST FANDOM, he has never released them.)

Of the Philadelphia group, Milton A. Rothman had been a demon letter-writer to the magazines. (His earliest letters had appeared under the name Milton S. Rothman. He later adopted "A" as his middle initial for "Arcot," one of John W. Campbell's heroes.) He was President of the PSFS,



wrote for fan magazines, and even had a dozen rejection slips from the professional mags. Oswald Train was an old-time fan who had recently moved to Philadelphia. He had written an entire test for the SFL (to become a First Class Member you took a lengthy test) and had had several stories published in his hometown newspaper. He also had the best collection of any of the Philly group, although all were collectors. John V. Baltadonis and Robert A. Madle had been friends since the first grade and became s-f fans together by discovering WONDER STORIES. Baltadonis was the artist and Madle was the editor and together they had already published several fan magazines. Their first, in 1935, was carbon-copied and the latest was the FANTASY FICTION TELEGRAM, a hektographed magazine. Also on the staff were Rothman, Train, and other PSFS members. Both Baltadonis and Madle were super-active at this time and corresponded with literally scores of fans. They were also contributors to many other fan mags of the day.

This, then, was the group that met on that momentous morning in October, 1936. The group spent several hours seeing the sights of Philadelphia. Discussions ran rampant, for when before had anything like this occurred? Principal topics of discussion were the ISA, the new THRILLING WONDER STORIES and its effect on the SFL, fan magazines (the fanmag era was just beginning), Hugo Gernsback, Charles D. Hornig, F. Orlin Tremaine (ASTOUNDING's editor), H.P. Lovecraft (who had recently been visited by Wollheim), and so on.

The small group then went to Milt Rothman's home where an official meeting was held. Donald A. Wollheim made a motion that the meeting be designated as The First Science Fiction Convention, and so it was. It was further decided that this would be just the beginning. The World's Fair was going to be held in NYC in 1939 and it was agreed that a "World" convention would be held in conjunction with it. Of course, the World's Fair wouldn't know anything about it. Then, at the instigation of Wollheim, the group went one step further. In order to start the World Convention machinery moving, a small conference would be scheduled for NYC in February, 1937. (This 1937 Conference was held in Long Island City and attracted a "throng" of about 30 attendees.) Late in the afternoon, the NYC group wended its way back to the train station, and the Philly group sat around and talked of the wonders of the day, never realizing what they had wrought and how important in the history of science fiction this day would become.

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### The Comics

A chunky practical joker named "Curley" was Popeye's chief rival for Olive Oyl's hand.

Buck Rogers was using a memory probe on beings from a double star system.

Flash, Dale, and Zarkov had just escaped from underwater men and were converted back to air breathers. Now they were fighting Ming's airships.

The Dragon Lady was holding Terry Lee prison after a brief escape.

"Tarzan and the Mayan Goddess" was a feature in the Philadelphia Bulletin.

Alexander Bumstead was a pre-schooler nicknamed "Baby Dumpling."



Almost all of the material in this work was collected in the form of letters from the attendees. To help jog their memories--it was almost fifty years ago, and to make sure that we asked everything we wanted to ask of everyone we could reach, we put together a set of questions. The next two attendees, John V. Baltadonis and Herbert Goudket, responded very much to that questionnaire. To make their answers clear, we're putting in the questionnaire on this page.

1. What was your reaction when you first heard the idea of a convention; i.e., of one group of fans travelling to another city to meet a second group of fans?
2. (New York attendees) What do you remember of the trainride to Philly?
3. What did you think when the two groups met at the station?
4. What do you remember about the various members of your own group at the time?
5. What were your impressions on meeting the members of the other group?
6. Did you do any group sightseeing in Philadelphia?
7. Are you familiar with the group photo that appears in Frederik Pohl's The Way the Future Was? If so, do you remember where it was taken and if anyone (other than the photographer, of course,) is missing from it?
8. What do you remember about what happened at the meeting?
9. Why did you decide to elect officers for the meeting? How was the election run?
10. Do you remember anything about plans being made for any future conventions? For the 1939 Worldcon?
11. What were your thoughts on the way home after the meeting?
12. Were there any specific post-meeting activities that both groups participated in?
13. Did you realize at the time the importance of what you all had just done?
14. Do you have any materials related to that first convention (pictures, reports from fan publications of the time, minutes or notes as to what went on at the meeting)? If so, may we use them?
15. Did you ever expect SF conventions to grow into the 6000+ affair that this year's worldcon was?
16. How many times since 1936 have people asked you about that first SF convention?



HERBERT E. GOUDKET:

October 15, 1983

Dear Mr. Wolkoff:

Have received your letter of the 13th concerning our recent conversation about the first SF convention of 1936.

To be very honest with you, upon due reflection there is very little that I remember of the convention. Although I was active in the Queens group for several years after 1936, some time about 1940 I dropped out of participation in SF fandom, although I continue to read SF (until the present).

I will try answering your questions by number (but mostly they will be negative):

1. The idea of meeting other groups (other than the Queens group..the ISA) was very exciting.
2. No recollection of the trainride.
3. No recollection.
4. Contact was maintained with members of our group for quite a time. We actively met at Sykora's home on a regular basis.
5. No recollection.
6. Believe we visited Liberty Hall.
7. Have the photo that is reproduced in Pohl's book. Upon searching around after our telephone conversation, I found it as well as another similar photo, the only variation being that the members were arranged differently. I will have duplicates made of both photos for you shortly, as I also found the two negatives, which will make it a little less expensive.
- 8, 9, 11, 12, No recollection.
10. No real recollection, but was this the Newark meeting of which I have memories, as well as photos. I also have photos of some SF meeting which Campbell and Weisinger were present.
13. I never realized the importance of this meeting. Elaborately we called it a SF convention, although attendance was relatively limited.
14. The photos (enumerated in 7) will be forthcoming.
15. I am truly amazed at the growth of SF conventions and fandom.
16. The only time this came up was when I had lunch with Fred Pohl and the Wollheims in 1977. This was prior to the publishing of Pohl's book, and I showed him some material I had which included the picture he published. Pohl incorrectly attributes this photo to someone else, and leaves out the fact that I was the ninth person there.

If you wish, I can write about how it was to be a fan in the 1930s. As I mentioned to you, I started reading magazine SF in 1926, was a member of the Scienceers (first group), was a friend of Allen Glasser and Mort Weisinger (both now deceased) who were members of that group and in their



way early SF fans. I picked up being an active SF fan (after the second reincarnation of the Scienceers, which met in Weisinger's home) in joining the Queens group (ISA). The Queens group "sponsored" the first American rocket mail in 1935...the same time that the American Rocket Society was doing rocket experiments. I have photos of both events.

Will close this longish letter, which I hope will be helpful. Can you give me Pohl's present address (other than that of his publisher), as I would like to get in touch with him.

I just noted in your question 3 you do not mention who this fan was. Perhaps I knew him.

Very truly yours,

Herbert E. Goudket

October 17, 1983

Dear Mr. Wolkoff:

By now you have probably received my earlier letter. I regret that I could not supply you with more detailed information about the SF convention. It goes to show how fallible our memory is and that I did not realize the significance of this convention.

I am having 8 X 10 enlargements made of the two negatives of the group of eight, with the ISA flag. Unlike having color prints made, delivery of the prints will be about two weeks or so. Hopefully you will have the prints in time for Philcon.

Concerning the 1936 Convention, a thought occurred to me that you might be able to get further details of it from William S. Sykora. He was a moving factor in setting up the convention, as well as being very active in SF fandom at that time.

I last heard from him about two years ago, and hopefully he is still around. His address was /address deleted for sake of privacy/.

Very truly yours,

Herbert E. Goudket

/Mr. Sykora was contacted about submitting material. Unfortunately, he was not interested in participating./



Dear Lew:

I shall try to respond to your questionnaire as accurately as possible. But, be forewarned - I cannot vouch for the authenticity of my recollections, as the mind does play tricks as the years go by (what am I saying? ...as the minutes or seconds go by, at times!). I wish that Bob Madle were with me right now, because I remember that Bob had just about total recall when it came to things scientific, and if something did not come back to him right away, with the proper jogging and interaction of another fan, he'd achieve 100%.

To the questions, then:

1. I don't recall the particulars as to when I first "heard" of the "convention." Our group (PSFS) held regular meetings both at Milt Rothman's and at my house. Most of the meetings were at 1700 Frankford Ave, as I had a large isolated (from the rest of the house) room, with its own street entrance. Bob and I used to meet daily on matters re SF (latest mags, books, correspondence, etc.). But, I believe that Milt Rothman corresponded with one of the NYC group (Michel?), and that they proposed visiting our chapter of the Science Fiction League. So, it probably came up at one of our meetings. (I'm not sure how often we met at that time, but I feel sure it was more often than once a month ... more likely, we met weekly.)

3. My memory is very hazy on this, damned near opaque, in fact. I don't remember if we met at the Frankford Junction, North Philadelphia Station or 30th Street. Probably the N. Phila sta. I do recall being excited at the prospect of meeting with sf fans, especially such well-known ones. I recall, also, being impressed with their ages, or apparent ages. They looked more mature than any of us, with the possible exception of Ossie Train, who was young looking for his age. These NY fans were out of their teens, f'gosh! sakes! (also, they wore felt hats!)

4. Again, I don't trust my memory, but I think those present included Jack Agnew, Bob Madle, Milt Rothman, Ossie Train and me. Bob and I were like sibling rivals ... each trying to outdo the other (we'd deluge the SF mags with letters, and keep count on who had the most published; we'd enter into correspondence with sf fans all over the world - I had a lengthy correspondence with Ted Carnell in England, Nils Frome in Canada, even an Australian correspondent ... we read each other's mail, etc.). Jack Agnew was Bob's younger cousin, who Bob encouraged to read SF, and to join the SFL. Ossie was a thoroughly nice human being who kept us in touch with the real world. Milton was our scientific expert. If any of us had trouble with "scientific" concepts used in sf, Milt would patiently explain contradictions, possibilities, paradoxes, etc.

5. Some of the impressions are voiced in 1 above. Basically, I was impressed with the fact of their coming to visit with us (it started the Philcons that evolved), their comparative maturity, their longevity in the sf field (some had started to read sf in the 20's!), and their comparative fame.

6. The only sightseeing that I was involved with was the trolly ride to my house with the group and then the walk to Milt Rothman's house for the meeting. We stopped at my place first to show them our meeting place, etc. Then we walked as a group to Milt's.



7. I am not familiar with Pohl's book. It might have been a picture that I took.

8. Only that we talked about the usual fan stuff: the SFL, the ISA, fan correspondents, future meetings, etc.

9. I do not recall this.

10. Only that this had been a good thing and that there should be more in the future, perhaps one that could be attended by fans from all over the country.

11. That it was a great experience.

12. I don't remember.

13. It was significant and important to us as a memorable event, but I don't think that any of us PSFS members attached any particular importance to the meeting. Certainly, we did not think of it as an historic event, the first of many SF Conventions to come.

14. Long ago, I turned over to Bob Madle for safekeeping, my large collection of sf magazines, fan publications and other incidentals. Every so often, I come across some recent magazines and correspondence (late 30's and early 40's), but I do not have anything but an imperfect memory left of the event.

15. Never. Science fiction fandom in those days was a comparatively esoteric gathering of what the outside world would have called "nuts, loonies, stargazers, etc." if they had been aware of our existence. Literary circles classified SF in the same category as westerns, spicy detectives and romance mags, except they were not considered to be as well written.

16. Prior to 1943 (when I went off to WWII), I had discussed the meeting several times with other participants, correspondents, and fans that I met at subsequent meetings. After 1946 (return to Phila), no one, except yourself.

Well, Lew, I hope that this has proved to be of some help to you.

I still don't know when the Philcon will be held this year, or when .. yes, you did say it was to be at the Franklin Plaza. But, if I find out in time, I hope to attend and to have the pleasure of meeting with you.

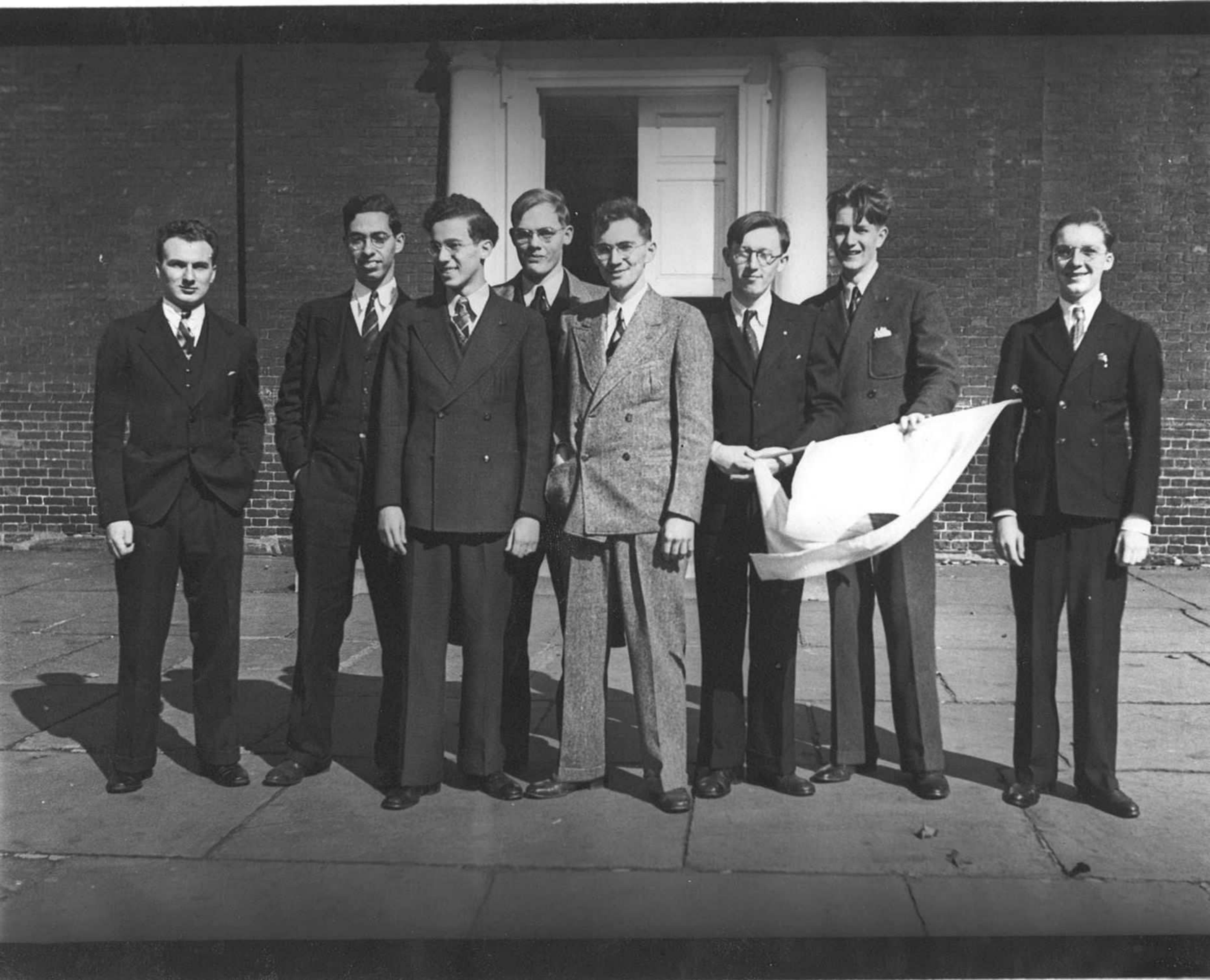
I hope your project is successful, but I don't envy you the work you have put into this and the work that lies ahead.

SForever!

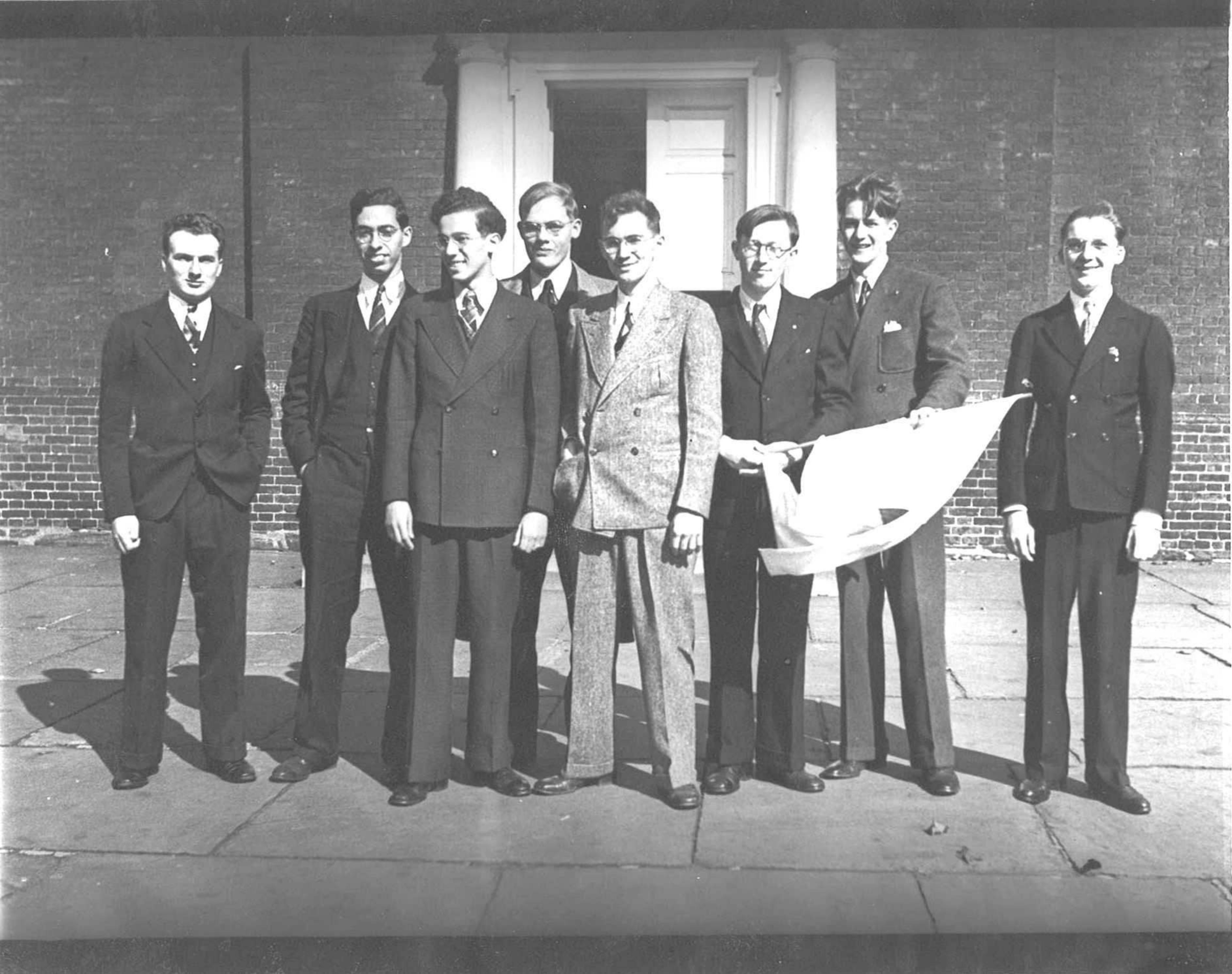
Sincerely,

John V. Baltadonis











/Received 12-9-83. This material follows the questionnaire's format./

1. I'll back track a little here. I lived in western Pennsylvania - Barnesboro in Cambria County. In mid-1935, I knew I would be coming to Philadelphia and corresponded with Milt Rothman for a few months before coming. Finally got here in October, 1935. Met Milt after two or three days, later on Baltadonis, Madle, Mariella, Bert, Agnew, etc. Before the meeting in 1936, I may have exchanged a couple of letters with Don Wollheim. But it was exciting to know I would meet him, and others. The meeting wasn't announced as a convention before hand. And I had to leave before the formal meeting to get to my job. Some of the boys may have had the convention idea in mind - Milt told me next day it was called a convention.

3. We all had a great time when we met at the station. For the first time I met fans from someplace other than Philadelphia. We really got acquainted and some of the group have been friends of mine ever since.

4. I know definately that Madle, Baltadonis, Rothman were there. Probably Mariella and Bert. John Newton thinks he was there, but not sure - he was in 1937 for sure.

5. Needless to say, I was impressed favorably upon meeting the group from New York. I was of course most familiar with the name of Wollheim, and was really pleased to meet him in person at last. About the others, the only familiar name to me was Will Sykora.

6. Yes, we all took a tour of the sights in Central City, all that morning. The Parkway, etc. I stayed with the gang as long as possible, and had to go to work in the middle of the afternoon.

7. Yes, I am familiar with the photo in Pohl's book. I am not sure where it was taken - possibly someplace in the center city streets, possibly outside the establishment of Baltadonis's father. But I would rule out the latter, because I worked in center city, and I don't recall going to Columbia and Frankford Ave. - it seems to me I went straight to work while in center city. Maybe not, I am hazy about this. But the building in the background doesn't look familiar. And who are the people behind our group? They probably were just people on the street.

8. And, I still say Pohl is wrong in his figure of nine. I know definately Dave Kyle was there. And Herb Coudket, for as I said before I was impressed by his camera that took 36 shots to a roll of film! And I am pretty sure that Harry Dockweiler (he was also known as Dirk Wylie) was too, for he and Wollheim indulged in some horseplay - I am about sure it was Harry and Don - on the Parkway. And later, William Pearlman from Baltimore turned up - he was there in 1937 also. Oh, I just noticed that Kyle is in the photograph. There may have been others from New York. There were more than five New Yorkers there!

9. As I didn't get to the actual business end of it, I am not in a position to say anything.

10. Yes plans were made for a meeting in Newark(?) in 1936. No mention of the world convention of 1939, I am reasonably sure, was made at this time.

11. My thoughts, the rest of the day, were regret about having to work!



I hated to miss anything.

12. I don't know. Probably a gab-fest.

13. No. This came later.

14. I don't think so. I will look around though, just maybe I do.

15. No. Even ten years later I didn't think it would grow as big as it did.

16. Many times.

Lew -

This is what I came up with now. Much of it is a repeat of my earlier statement. Maybe it will help you.

One more thing - but not about 1936. At the next two or three conferences - maybe even four - we fed the gang attending. They were held on Sundays, and on the Saturday we - Madle, Baltadonis, Rothman, and I - shopped for bread and sandwich makings. And I made stacks of sandwiches that soon melted away. I have never seen this mentioned anywhere, and it is probably forgotten. But the boys can verify this.

And thanks again for getting Baltadonis to come to the conference! That, to me, was the high spot, for we used to be very close friends.

Ozzie



The following is a partial transcript of an interview conducted at ConStellation on September 5, 1983. (Material not related to the 1936 convention are not excluded.) Subject of the interview was Dave Kyle, (DAK), ConStellation Fan Guest of Honor. The interviewer was Lew Wolkoff (LHW) of the Phoxphyre Project.

DAK: Here I am with no external stimulus, and no one to say, "No, it wasn't Richard Roe, it was Dick Doe." No sensoring mechanism. I think the best thing to do is to assume that everything I say is subject to some kind of change. You can listen, and you can use it as my reminiscences, or you can use it as feedback for other people to say, "No, I think Dave is wrong. There weren't twelve people there. There were eighteen, or whatever."

LHW: We'll send you a transcript of this tape to check. I think that's the least that I--that we can do. So that we know it's right.

DAK: Probably the only way that I can get into that frame of mind of the latter part of October, 1936, is to start with September, 1936.

Relating to the first science fiction con, out of my speech--here we are--I'm going to quote from the Fan Guest of Honor Speech that I made yesterday. That's because I've written this down specifically, and I don't have to fumble around.

"Back in the autumn of 1936, a handful of young men representing all that was best in science fiction fandom, decided that they would gather together as a group and go to Philadelphia for that Sunday and meet with the fellows from the neighboring city. The New York group was politically conscious, and it was the time of national political conventions and of Presidential elections. And that's how the term 'convention' came into being."

"We held a formal meeting. We said, 'let's call ourselves a convention, a science fiction convention.'"

"Fine, how about the first science fiction convention?"

"Well, let's be logical, precise, magnanimous, and let's be the first Eastern Science Fiction Convention."

"So there it was. Which suggestion was mine, I don't know. Considering the size of the meeting, a scant dozen or so in that Sunday-closed barroom of Jack Baltadonis's father, we were much like the Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia 160 years earlier in that every one of us was a participant back then. We had conflicting ideas, like that old convention, although we were bound together by that one interest. And we were destined for fannish immortality. Whatever that may be."

Now, that's out of my speech. Now, how did we--how did I happen to be on the scene for this? Having come out of high school in 1936, I spent the summer working in a dog track as a--handling dogs and earned some money. And with some assistance from my parents, I went to New York, and I attended an art school on 23rd Street and 5th Avenue in the Flatiron Building. And I took up residence in the YMCA on 23rd Street. Because for a number of years I'd been in correspondence with other science fic-



tion fans--mostly through the acquaintance of their letters in the reader's department, "The Readers Speak," in Wonder Stories, I had people in New York who were in this newly developing fannish community. Fandom, of course, was just developing in that decade. And I went to New York, and I went to the "Y," and I started looking up the people that I knew.

And I immediately made contact with those who were meeting as the ISA, that's the International Scientific Association. The ISA met out on Long Island and was an amalgam of science fans and science fiction fans. Willie Sykora, William S. Sykora, represented somebody who thought that science was the important part of the organization, and then there were others, represented by Don Wollheim, who was our senior by a number of years because he was in his twenties, he represented the science fiction side of the interest of ISA. And also members of the group were--Fred Pohl was in the group, in the ISA. Dick Wilson, Harry Dockweiler, who also would--had other names. He was known as Martin Dale, and he was known as Dirk Wylie. In fact, he became a professional whose name was Dirk Wylie. We met on Sunday afternoons. We had discussions on science or science fiction. A magazine was published called the International Observer, which had a mixture of science articles and science fiction articles. And I was very much at home with this group.

So, within a short period of time, that would be a matter of six weeks, I had become close friends with these fellows, who were mostly teenagers. And we were filled with the enthusiasm of science fiction. We had a very small group of devotees; those who knew about science fiction were small in number. We knew about the group in Philadelphia, and it was decided that we would go down--say for a weekend--and get together and have a joint meeting and expand our personal relationships. The New York group in cooperation with the Philly group for our serious and constructive fannish activities. Now that was how I happened to be there and that--so far as I know--it was a meeting that was hardly planned far in advance.

What we talked about were--as I recall, there was some serious discussion on the ideas that some of the New York group like--John B. Michel was in the New York group, and he was--John Michel was sort of the political mentor of the group. For the times it was radical; an examination of the utopian ideas expressed by communism and socialism. It would be pretty tame stuff today because it was--we weren't talking about Russian Communism, we were talking about the idealistic communism the Marxists were talking about. So I'm sure that there were political discussions, which the Philadelphia group wasn't interested in.

I think that, actually, we fell back to the base rock interest of science fiction itself. We talked about Wonder Stories and Amazing Stories and Astounding Stories, but I don't remember anything earth-shaking. It was a sociable meet. We considered ourselves serious young people, but we really didn't have any agenda that I can recall. Although, perhaps, Michel and Wollheim might have had. But, to me, it was a social occasion filled with the excitement of knowing other people who were interested in these wonderful things that I was interested in.

The idea of a convention was kind of facetious, you know, it's kind of a fun idea. We were very much like fans today in that we believed in fun and games. We really--we were adolescents in many ways. With adult attitudes, but the adolescence kept coming through. We were kids, and we were having a good time. But unlike, perhaps, our counterparts in that society,



we weren't roaming the streets or raising hell without--mindless hell. We were very much mind-oriented, and--if anything--it was what you might call "juvenile hell-raising." In good spirits. And the--that was the kind of spirit it was in in 1936 at that first convention, a meeting of two parts of a family, and we treated each other as intimates. We were close friends because we shared this interest in common.

One thing that I remember that was frivolous, for example, I remember--now, this might not have been 1936. This might have been '37 or '38 because it was the beginning of a couple of other meetings which passed into fannish history without any particular name attached to them. So, maybe it wasn't 1936.

But I remember that I had an overcoat, and I put it on backwards. And I had a felt hat--everybody wore hats in those days--like Indiana Jones. Well, not everybody, but most of us did--like Indiana Jones. And I had a black paper mustache that I had on my lip then. And somebody stuck a "Buck Rogers" pistol in my hand. With my overcoat on backwards, I struck a pose: pistol in the air and wild look on my face. And I was dubbed "The Purple Bat."

Later, I had a letter published in Wonder Stories signed "The Purple Bat." I would paste a little paper purple bat onto the bottom of my letters so that I would be identified, like a ransom note. And I remember that one of my letters, "The Purple Bat" letters, was published in Wonder Stories when I had my own letter under the name of David A. Kyle.

Bob Madle, to this day, recalls it. He'll say, "Hiya, Bat! How's 'The Purple Bat' today?" Harking back to a time, almost fifty years ago, when one brief moment--I did something on the spur of the moment. A picture was taken--I have the picture around someplace, and that was the kind of frivolous thing that we did. At least that I did.

The group from New York also carried a flag. I think Gernsback's sister, Frances--there, you see, I remember her name, I think it's Frances. Sykora made up the flag. It was sort of a triangle with rounded corners, rounded sides, in three parts with three different colors, and a letter on each of those three different parts: I--S--A, the International Scientific Association.

I guess or suppose you would say that we thought of ourselves as representing the ISA, meeting with those who represented the PSFS. So, come to think of it now, it would seem that the idea of a convention, using that appellation, "convention," was really not as--without as much lack of merit as I first would think. So, I guess the ISA met the PSFA--the PSFS, the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society. So, in a way, the more I think about it, it was a representation of the two clubs. Of course, the facts that the delegates of the two clubs constituted practically the entire membership of the two clubs was interesting. It was really the clubs themselves meeting.

I remember that the meeting place was--could be described as prosaic. I remember that the barroom--it might have been a room off the barroom--or it might have been an upstairs room. I remember it was kind of like a little hall which could handle a dozen people or so without any problem. I don't know who chaired it. I think it would be one of the Philadelphia group, probably Bob Madle. And from Philadelphia? If I had the picture,



I could run through all the names, but I know that Ozzie Train was there, and John Baltadonis, and Jack Agnew, and Robert Madle. I don't remember if Miltie Rothman, Milton A. Rothman, was present or not, but he was so prominent in the field. He wrote as many letters, it seemed, in that period of time as Forrest J. Ackerman being published in Wonder Stories that--I think there was another fan out of Philadelphia called, I think his name was Raymond Peel Marilla or Mariella....I believe Peel was his middle name, Mariella. He wrote as many letters as Forry, as Milton A. Rothman, but I don't remember meeting Mariella. He might have just been a typewriter fan. I might have met him, but he made no impact on me if I did meet him.

LHW: He gafiated about that time. He went on to be the Executive Director of the American Chemical Society.

DAK: Is that so? Isn't that interesting?

LHW: He lives down in Virginia, someplace.

DAK: For goodness sakes! I'd like to look him up; just to get his reminiscences of the old days.

LHW: I have his address someplace. I'll send it to you.

DAK: Don't lose track of me, and send me his address.

Now, I wasn't too--I didn't--I sort of went roughly over the first convention. I don't think I have any specifics to add. It was, of course it's obvious that we had no money so we could not stay in hotels. We didn't sit around the bar and drink because that would--that cost money. And we were not drinkers. Our idea of drinking--if we drank--was a half-pint bottle that got passed around, and we drank it because that was de rigueur, the thing that teen-agers did. It wasn't very far away from the days of Prohibition. What others might have to say, I'd be very interested in hearing or reading. That would further stimulate my thoughts. I haven't thought about it myself, except in a general way.

LHW: May I ask you a couple more questions? It's just about eleven o'clock.

DAK: Okay.

LHW: Okay, let's see. I've got some notes here. We discussed what happened at the meeting. There were officers. As a matter of fact, Milt Rothman was, in fact, the chair, and Fred Pohl was the secretary. You mentioned that. Unfortunately, the minutes disappeared years ago. Do you remember why you decided to elect officers?

DAK: We were conscious of organization. The ISA had officers that were elected, and that was the thing to do. When a couple of fans got together, they--in those days, they organized themselves. As I say, the tenor of our activities was always serious. We were not always serious, but the tenor of what we were doing, we thought, was serious.

LHW: Do you remember any--what were your--do you remember what were your first impressions when you got off the train--at Thirtieth Street, I expect, and saw Milt Rothman, and Jack Agnew, John Baltadonis, et cetera, for the first time?



DAK: It was--in my recollection, it would be that I was meeting people that I already knew. I hadn't seen them for a long time, at that time, but I didn't have a sense of meeting somebody strange and having to get to know them. I was meeting people I already knew, although I had never seen them before. The novelty, of course, was in seeing them for the first time in person. And seeing their physical characteristics for the first time. But the sense behind it all was one of intermingling. There were a couple, of course, that I probably didn't know, but I had heard from--heard of. So even they were sort of known.

LHW: Do you remember what else you did in Philadelphia besides going to the meeting? There's--the picture that appears in Pohl's The Way the Future Was has a bunch--has all or most of you standing outside, and--but the recollections we have so far is that nobody is sure--do you remember what you toured of the city?

DAK: No, I don't. I remember that we walked. Our--in those days we had, as I say, limited funds. It's not like today. We weren't affluent. In those days we did a lot of walking. We'd sit down and talk over something like a cup of coffee or something of that sort. It cost just 15¢ then.

There is some confusion that you might straighten out. You see, the groups met more than once. The '36 meeting, of course, the first one, that one is, of course, the focal point of this tape. But there was more than one meeting, and there are photographs which have been identified with one meeting when, actually, they are photographs from another period of time. That ought to be sorted out. For instance, as an example, maybe that ISA flag might not have been 1936, or maybe it was 1936. There was a photograph of sort of an informal group where everybody was together--everybody except the person who took the photograph, who--I think it was Jack Agnew or Johnny Baltadonis. I think it was Baltadonis, and he wasn't in the picture, but everybody else was. I think that was the original convention. That was the first meeting.

LHW: That's the one that Pohl published as being the first meeting.

DAK: And then was the other one with the ISA flag. I don't think that was the same time. I think that was a year later. Or a month later. Or whenever it was. That has to be sorted out. You don't recall offhand?

LHW: There was a meeting in '37, and there was a meeting in '38, and then there was the '39 Worldcon.

DAK: When was the '37 con? In the Spring?

LHW: I think it was held the same time.

DAK: It was held in the Fall?

LHW: I think so. Do you remember at the '36 meeting if you talked about having future meetings?

DAK: Oh, yes. That I exactly remember. We were so excited and pleased with our newfound relationships. What we talked about was that the next meeting would be that the Philly group would come to New York. I don't know what ever happened, but I figure that was the topic. Now, Philadelphia would come to New York. /Which happened in early 1937./



LHW: The records are a little vague as far as how--as far as when the original motion was. Is it possible that, at that first meeting, the idea of a national--of a national or a world convention was brought up?

DAK: The idea germinated there--not really. We didn't see ahead as far as the national or the world convention, but the fact that we called ourselves a convention, and the fact that we limited it--and I have a feeling that I was the one who suggested "Eastern." Somebody else can make the claim, but I do think that I suggested "Eastern"--because in my mind, at that time, I recall that what I was thinking of at the time was: "This is Eastern, and now we have an opportunity to have another convention and step up to--to national or what have you, American or something, and spread its appeal over the other areas." So, yes, it was very definitely--I recall that, at least I was thinking, "Well, this is the beginning of a series of things," but I did not see that--I didn't have the goal in mind or foresee the possibility of a world convention within a few years.

LHW: Did you ever think it was going to get to the size of this small city that's meeting in Baltimore, now?

DAK: No, of course not. No, that was beyond our wildest imaginations. I really have no clear picture of that world convention. It was expected to do--to be--in those times what I saw--it would be getting together with fans and inviting some professionals to come and talk about what they were doing and discuss it with the fans, and that was what we found in 1939. A lot of professionals--and those we invited--were fan-writers. That is, not fans. Most of them were non-professionals writing. The step between non-writers and writers, in many instances, was small, really a matter of age. Writers were in their twenties or thirties, and the enthusiasts were in their teens. So not--just a step behind the writers. So that we--what was being visualized, at least by me, in 1936 was a gathering with more fans, whom I would know through correspondence. In other words, a meeting of my friends, although over a larger area yet, and some professionals who we had known from the magazines. That it should evolve into a gigantic weekend of science fiction entertainment was the farthest thing from my mind.

Naturally, our resources were smaller at that time. If somebody happened to have an 8 mm print of some science fiction movie--it usually turned out to be something like The Lost World with Wallace Beary. That was one of the very early genuine science fiction movies. And, also, because it was silent, and we didn't have any problem with the equipment. Just have a small projector and show it. It could very well--The Lost World could very well be the first science fiction movie shown at a science fiction gathering.

Metropolis was also a favorite, but it was not readily available in the United States. It was some time before I saw Metropolis.

LHW: Okay, not that I want to cut this short, but you said that you wanted to be over /at the Convention Center/ at eleven, and it's twenty after. Two last questions. First one is--it was suggested by one of the people that's working on this--how many times since then, especially in the last few years, have people asked you about the first convention? Things that were going on back then. Youngsters like me, I mean.

DAK: Well, that's a tough question to answer because I'm usually the one that's out there trying to get people to recognize that there is a history, and that those things going on in the past--and there've been changes.



There's an evolution in fandom and an evolution in conventions. And many times, maybe more--most times, I'm the one who initiates it; who says, "Gee, it isn't like it was ten years ago. The contrast with 1939 or 1936 is such-and-such." So I guess my answer to your question is that whenever it's raised--whether it's raised by someone to me, or whether I raise it to someone else, it's always of interest.

LHW: It is now. That's why we're doing this.

DAK: And, of course, my audience is selective. I won't raise it unless it's somebody who, I think, is going to be interested. Those who attend this convention, of the--let's say 8,000--of the 8,000 at this convention, how many would be interested in this? I would say that--I would guess that eighty percent of the people would be interested to a little degree or to a great degree. Those who would be interested to a great degree, the degree that you are interested, would be small. I guess that's the end of it, then.

LHW: Okay, the only other thing I have is would it be possible to get--you said you had--any material? Would it be possible to get some of it? If nothing else, a picture of "The Purple Bat?"

DAK: It's possible, but I don't have my stuff--

LHW: Well, I don't mean now.

DAK: Oh, yeah, sure, yes. I know it's someplace around. I have a picture of "The Purple Bat" 'cause I came across it a couple of years ago, and that's stuff you don't just throw away. I won't throw it away.

Okay, so the picture. Ordinarily, you ask for something like that, I would probably go through the same soul-searching and think about it. /Kyle had recently lent a historic fannish document to someone who had misplaced it./ But you're right. What I should do--see the picture you can reproduce, and it looks like the picture that--the original picture.

LHW: Well, I thank you very much for this interview.



The Current Proazines  
October 1936

Amazing Stories October, 1936 (bimonthly)

cover by Leo Morey

Uncertainty by John W. Campbell, Jr. (part 1 of 2)

The Council of Drones by William K. Sonnemann

(second of a series set on Venus, said to be quite good)

Six Who Were Masked by Henry J. Kostos

The Human Pets of Mars by Leslie F. Stone

The Outpost on Ceres by Lloyd A. Eshbach

Astounding October, 1936

cover by Howard V. Brown

Godson of Almarlu by Raymond Z. Gallum

(about an alien sleep-teaching a child)

Positive Inertia by Arthur Purcell

The Time Entity by Eando Binder

The Saphrophyte Men of Venus by Nat Schachner

Nightmare Island by Douglas Drew

(Drew is a pseudonym for Gordon K. Salter)

The Double World by John W. Campbell, Jr.

(an article about the Earth-Moon system)

Infinity Zero by Donald Wandrei

(bizarre thing about the universe being eaten away)

Flight of the Typhoon by Clifton B. Kruse

The Incredible Invasion by Murray Leinster (part 3 of 5)

(an invasion from another dimension; pubbed in an Ace Double  
under the title The Other Side of Here)

Astounding November, 1936 (on the newstands by the date of the con)

cover by Howard V. Brown

The Eternal Wanderer by Nat Schachner

The Path by Raymond Z. Gallum

Red Death by John W. Campbell, Jr.

(an article about Mars)

The Last Selenite by A. Macfadyen, Jr.

Dynasty of the Small by John Russell Fearn

Macklin's Little Friend by H.W. Guernsey

(by Howard Wandrei; Earth-present story about a man persecuted  
and killed by a tiny alien)

The Thought Web of Minipar by Chan Corbett (by Nat Schachner)

Anton Moves the Earth by Ross Rocklynne

The Incredible Invasion by Murray Leinster (part 4 of 5)

Thrilling Wonder Stories October 1936 (second issue as "Thrilling" Wonder)

(a very pulpy bi-monthly)

cover by Howard V. Brown

Shadow Gold by Ray Cummings

Cosmic Quest by Edmond Hamilton

Man-Jewels for Xothar by Hal K. Wells

Rhythm of the Spheres by A. Merritt

Liquid Life by Ralph Milne Farley

(an intelligent filterable virus)

The Microscopic Giants by Paul Ernst

(an explorer finds humans who walk through rock)

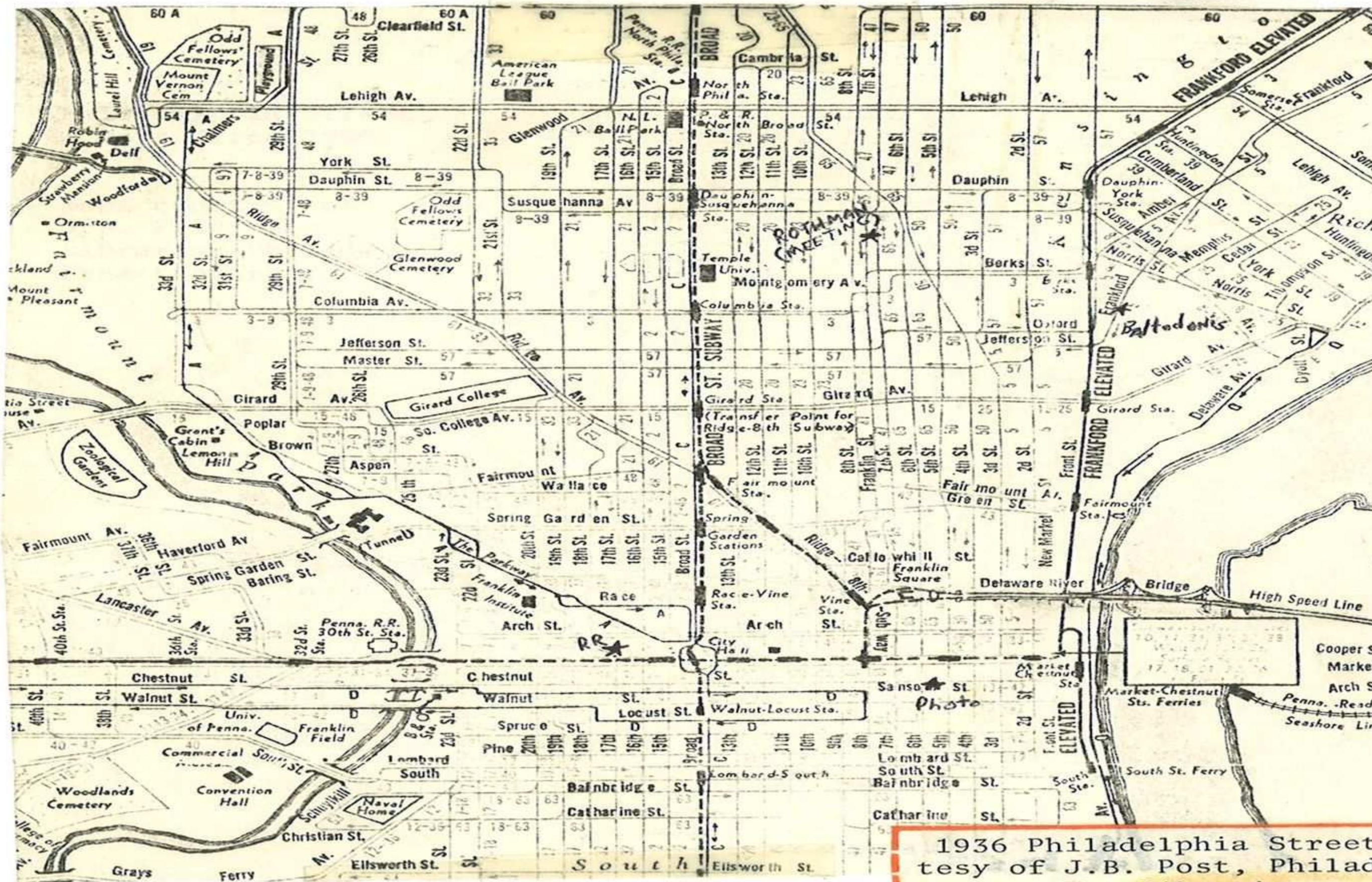
The Metal World by Max Plaisted

(episode 2 of the "Zarnak" comic strip)

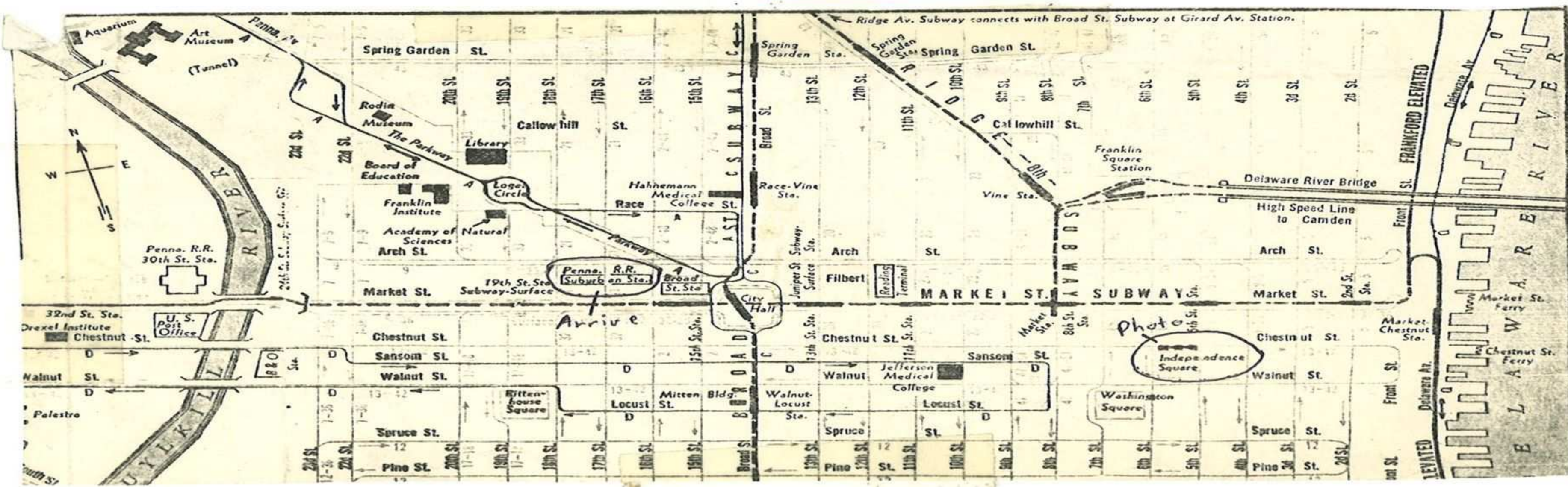
Dictator of the Atoms by Arthur J. Burks

many thanks to Mark Owings for graciously supplying the above information





1936 Philadelphia Street Maps courtesy of J.B. Post, Philadelphia Free Library Map Librarian





JOHN J. NEWTON:

Dec. 29, 1983

Dear Mr. Wolkoff:

Received your questionnaire yesterday and spent most of the time till now trying to recollect what went on some 47 years ago.

First of all, I remember starting to read and collect science fiction about 1933. Once started, I had to try and find those issues I had missed. I remember going to a grocery store at the northwest corner of 5th and Cumberland streets where Milton Rothman's parents had been for some years. He (Milton) had some back issues of Amazing monthly and Quarterly in the window. That hooked me.

My first connection with the Phila. Science Fiction group was in my last year at Northeast High School. I met John Baltadonis who told me that he had some friends that met and would I like to meet them. If my memory is right, we met at Bob Madle's house and the idea of a convention was brought up.

As I had finished High School in June 1936, still during the Depression, my concern was to find work of some sort. I was lucky enough to get work at 37½ cents an hour, that I'll always remember, and when the first SF convention came on Oct. 22, 1936 there was a chance for me to work for half a day helping to take inventory. That is probably why I was not in the picture. Looking at the picture in Pohl's book, I am almost convinced that is me over the left shoulder of Johnny Michel. Getting there late. One of the things I had bought after getting a job was to buy a new hat exactly like that.

I did not meet the group at the station but did meet them later on. I remember talking with Wollheim and I believe Kyle. Thinking back, my thoughts are that the New York group first brought up the idea of meeting next in N.Y. To me, this was out of this world, meeting others interested in SF, also going to N.Y. for the first time in my life.

I suppose none of us realized at the time the importance of this meeting but were thrilled with the thought we had started something. Over the years, with a growing family, I had drifted away from all except Ozzie Train and Bob Madle, occasionally attending a convention. Your phone call and letter have aroused a feeling that has been dormant much too long. Hope this has helped you and hope to hear more about this.

Sincerely,

John Newton



What I remember of the trip to Philadelphia is very vague. The decision had been made to go there. Wollheim, the inspirer of the event, invited as many of us as he could to attend. We gathered together at the Penn RR Station on 33rd and 7th in Manhattan and took a train to Philadelphia. I believe there were about a half dozen of us: Wollheim, Michel (I'm sure), Pohl, myself, perhaps Walter Kubilius, and very likely one or two more. It was a beautiful day. It was certainly not winter or late fall because I remember I wore a jacket and that no coat was required.

We came out of the station in Philadelphia roughly about noon, give or take an hour. I was hungry but I was also from a poor family and had only a few cents in my pocket. Being a teen ager and a skinny growing boy as well, I wondered how I could talk my fellows into stopping for a meal at an inexpensive restaurant, especially since Wollheim, who lead us, did not seem the least inclined towards anything as mundane as food. Especially not when a momentous occasion was about to occur.

After a moment's conference between Wollheim and Michel, a decision was made to move in a certain direction to take the elevated subway (sounds like a contradiction). As we walked, I saw a familiar sight ahead of us. A Horn and Hardart nickle automat! That, at least, I could afford. "Let's go there!" I said, eagerly. Wollheim frowned. He checked his watch. After a brief discussion, it was agreed we had enough time to eat. So we stopped for food. I believe that, after the meal, Wollheim made a phone call for directions.

We took the subway. I remember us waiting on the platform. When the train pulled in, I could not help comparing it with the New York subway. The seats and seating arrangement remain a haze. I do recall that it cost more than a nickle to get on. At least a dime! The subway, then a walk, and we were at our destination: someone's home. It may have been a ranch because we were brought to a room with one of its two entrances opening out to a yard. I recall meeting some strangers. I think Milt Rothman was there. Perhaps Bob Madle. There may have been a writer or two. I know Wollheim mentioned that some very important people were present.

The room where we met had been set up for a meeting. There were chairs facing a (folding?) table up front. At the rear of the room were one or two folding tables upon which fan magazines and some pulp SF magazines were neatly spread out.

I recall nothing of the speeches. There seemed to be some emphasis about the importance of the event, perhaps that for the first time two different fan groups had bothered to meet.

As the meeting wound up, my bladder felt as if it were about to burst, and, being shy, I wondered whom to ask where the bathroom was. Fortunately, everyone stood up, the meeting supposedly being over. I noticed a boy, perhaps 9 or 10, looking over the fan magazines on the rear tables. Desperation overcame my shyness, and I asked him where the bathroom was. He directed me down a hall to another part of the building. When I finally returned, I found the meeting room vacant. NO ONE WAS THERE! NOT EVEN THE BOY!

I did not know what to do. Surely, they would return from wherever they were? It did not occur to me to open the door to the outside and look through. Rather at a loss what to do, I spent my time thumbing



through some of the magazines.

Suddenly the outside door opened. In walked Wollheim followed by Michel. They looked at me with surprise.

"Where the hell were you?" Wollheim demanded angrily. "We looked all over for you. They took pictures of those of us attending the meeting."

I explained to him why I had been gone.

"It's too bad you missed the picture taking," he said.

"But I am here now. Can't we take another one?"

"It's too late," I was told. The one who had taken the pictures was already gone, they said.

That was my experience at the meeting. That is why I did not appear in the group pictures taken of the event. Since most of the people reminiscing about the event depend upon the picture, my name is always omitted, the little man who was but wasn't there. I hope that someone who HAD been there, the host in particular, will remember enough about the happening to confirm the details I have presented and thus prove that I had been there.



Up to this point, all of the material in this collection have been reminiscences made long years after the fact. This is not the case for what follows. Rather, they are fanzine reports written at the time, the very first con reports written. The materials are from the collection of Sam Moskowitz whose help is greatly appreciated.

"The Phantascope" by Donald A. Wollheim from THE PHANTAGRAPH, November, 1936, page 2:

"The first science fiction convention in history was held in Philadelphia October 18th. It was arranged for by the International Scientific Association. Present were many famous fans, including Rothman, Sykora, Michel, Baltadonis, Oswald Train, Madle, Bert, Kyle, and others. Plans are being made for a really pretentious convention in New York February 21st."

"Fanfarade" by Donald A. Wollheim from THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN, October, 1936, page 1:

"The first Science Fiction Convention in stf history was held October 18th in Philadelphia. It was arranged for by the New York Branch of the International Scientific Association. Present were Milton Rothman, Sykora, Michel, Baltadonis, Oswald Train, Robert Madle, Pohl, Herbert Goudket, Charles Bert, David Kyle, and others. A committee was formed to arrange the next and more pretentious gathering of all fans East of the Mississippi next year."

"Trouble in Paradise and Other Short Stories" by Edward J. Carnell on page 9 of NOVAE TERRAE, December, 1936-January, 1937 (British fanzine):

"Americas (New York) beats Leeds in holding the first science fiction convention, when members from the ISA in New York visited fans in Philadelphia on October 18th. Don Wollheim, William Sykora, Herbert Goudket and John Michel were entertained by Milton Rothman, John Baltadonis, David Kyle, Robert Madle and others although the main business... (the story concludes on page 19)... was the arrangement of a fully planned Second Convention to be held in New York on February 21st 1937."

/Note: the story appears to have been to Carnell by Wollheim.

/Note: Since all earlier dates that I had seen set the convention after October 20th, I had assumed that the actual date was the 25th. It seems that I was wrong, and I apologize. LHW.

The final report and certainly the longest appeared in the January, 1937, issue of THE INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER on pages 26-7. I have attempted to keep the original typing style.



## THE FIRST SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION

**A**LL YOU STF FANS IN by John B. Michel moved quickly to effect neighboring towns, in tiny hamlets, in gigantic metropolises, in lonely homes far out on the prairie -- beware! A new menace has arisen on the horizon -- a new scourge to put fear into the bold hearts of men and women. For the NYB-ISA is coming! To you and to you and to you! To you who have felt safe and complacent heretofor, to you who have never felt more than the days normal anxieties -- well may you blanch and cower. Well may you go through each day with a sinking heart, with lowered spirit and with a chill, clammy terror clutching at your very vitals. Well may you turn into hopeless neurotics, eying fearfully every face passing your windows, freezing at every footstep outside your door, fainting in sheer horror at each ring of the doorbell.

Why this lengthy warning? It's really very simple:

On the 18th of October last, the NEW YORK BRANCH of the ISA started out for the West Bronx and ended in Philadelphia. Of course, you shouldn't take me too literally. The NYB had planned to seek out the haunts of the Bronxites, but only on my own tentative suggestion at an earlier meeting. My humble suggestion for an outing was of course scornfully howled down. For long hours the West Bronx, Newark, and assorted towns in New Jersey fought it out with Bear Mountain, Coney Island, and points, North, South, East, and West. Philadelphia won. It was mentioned once, and once only, and it won -- because someone (I think it was Don Wollheim) blossomed out with the brilliant idea of a Science Fiction Convention. No further argument is recorded. Don and myself were appointed by Chairman Sykora to a special Convention Committee.

With his usual efficiency, Don

our plan and within the week had arranged with Milt Rothman of Philadelphia to have a delegation of local fans meet us. The following Sunday at the incredible hour of eight in the morning the NYB-ISA was moving rapidly out of New York, Philadelphia bound.

The Quaker City gave us a cordial welcome in the persons of Messrs Rothman, Madle, and Train. We all had breakfast in the station cafeteria and without further ado, Milt and the boys took us in hand and began showing us the town.

For some hours we wandered over the principle parts, seeing the many points of interest. Independence Hall was forever honored by having the names of the NYB members inscribed in its visitors books. We got our amiable photographer, Herb Goudket, to snap the entire group standing outside the Hall. (Anyone desiring copies can get them from Goudket, who'll quote prices on request. Please enclose return postage.)

The hour approaching noon, it was proposed that we take lunch in one of the Automats. As usual, when away from home, the NYB dined quickly but thoroughly. We then proceeded by way of the quaint Philadelphia subway to Rothman's house. Here the crowd broke up temporarily, Pohl and Wollheim accompanying Madle to his home to view his collection. The rest of us remained to see Milt's laboratory and collection of stf mags and books, both of which held us absorbed for about an hour, when refreshments were served -- and tasty, too. The absentees returned shortly after, bringing with them John Baltadonis. They too partook of refreshments, and, to the accompaniment of much gurgling and not a little munching and crunching, the business of the day came at last to hand.



The session was a most interesting one, lively throughout. Milt Rothman was unanimously elected Chairman of the Convention. Fred Pohl being Secretary. We then settled down to cross talk and discussion lasting about two hours and proving extremely interesting. Tongues wag as easily in Philadelphia as they do in New York. Just before the meeting was adjourned to Milt's laboratory, the members decided upon a date for another Convention next year (details of which you will learn shortly through the mediums of fan and professional stf magazines) and also decided to notify the stf magazines of the occurrence of the First Convention -- thus beating England to the draw. Incidentally, if the composition of the letter appears jerky when you read it in the magazines, don't be surprised. It was composed to the accompaniment of jollity and was-sail and also an exposition of the ancient art of shooting crap on the floor of Milt's lab.

Knowing our interest in stf collections and printing apparatus, John Baltadonis invited us en masse to his house before we entrained for New York. Accordingly we proceeded thence, making the night air of the Quaker City resound with ISA tunes and renditions of melodies dear to our hearts by the ISA quartet -- Will Sykora, Fred Pohl, Dave Kyle, and myself. It may be that we made the air hideous, but at least we let the town know we were there.

At John's house we saw his stf collection, a small but enviable one, several of his talented illustrations of stf stories, and the printing press, on which it is said future Fantasy Fiction Telegrams will be printed. The size and general unwieldiness of John's press were all that saved it for him, for Don Wollheim and myself had no sooner set eyes upon the thing -- an ingeniously foot-powered 5 x 8 -- than we had begun

contriving fiendish schemes for its furtive removal to New York. The next best thing would have been to steal all the "E's" from his type-cases, but a sudden decision to return immediately to New York thwarted this monstrous plot.

Negotiating Philadelphia's El system was no path of roses. However, we arrived with little more than our nerves shattered at the Pennsylvania Station, where, after a snack at another automat, we entrained for N.Y.C.

Arriving back at Bagdad-on-the-subway shortly before midnight, it was deemed not too late for a Meeting after the Meeting, so we footsore travelers dove into the nearest soda emporium, ordered (in lieu of our customary "Science Fiction Specials") ice cream sodas, and dissected the events of the day. We weren't surprised to find ourselves highly pleased with the excursion. After all, palling around, if only for one day, with a bunch of kindred souls was a darn pleasant experience.

Some of them joined the ISA, too.

The First Science Fiction Convention has become a fact; now we can look forward to the next, which will be amply publicized in advance. It will be held in New York, in the early part of February. Read your stf mags, amateur and professional, for the next month and get all the details. Here's hoping we see you all.

So let the welkin ring, the sirens scream, and the cannon roar. And don't get overexcited to receive the following telegram, delivered (the NYB-ISA will see to it) shortly after daybreak:-

"NYB-ISA of New York arriving at such-and-such a time. Please be home."







