



Donald Holcomb

November 8, 1925 – August 9, 2018

Donald Frank Holcomb died, in Ithaca, New York, on August 9, 2018. He was a fellow of the American Physical Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He also served as a NATO senior visiting fellow in Oslo, Norway in 1962; as a Guggenheim Fellow at the University of Kent, United Kingdom in 1968-69; and as a Science Research Council visiting fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, in 1978. He was director of the Laboratory of Atomic and Solid State Physics from 1964-1968, and chair of the Department of Physics from 1969-1974 and 1982-1986. He served as a faculty-elected member of the Cornell Board of Trustees during 1976-1981. He was president of the American Association of Physics Teachers in 1987-88, and received its Oersted Medal in 1996 for “notable contributions to the teaching of physics”.

Don’s physics research involved spin resonance phenomena, metalinsulator transitions in disordered systems, and non-stoichiometric transition metal oxides. He trained 16 Ph.D. students, several postdoctoral associates, and had productive collaborations with colleagues in Norway, Scotland, USSR, and South Africa. He was an active leader in physics education, and proponent of physics education research. He was instrumental in setting the pedagogical agenda for key courses at Cornell, and was part of a national debate about best practices in physics education. With co-author Philip Morrison, he wrote a textbook for non-science students entitled “My Father’s Watch: Aspects of the Physical World.”

His service to the university was commendable: In addition to his leadership roles, he was a notable presence at University Faculty meetings during very trying times in the 1960s and 1970s. Don had a talent for identifying and concisely summarizing the pertinent points in complex issues, in a way that brought opposing factions to a common understanding.

Don was born in Chesterton, Indiana. He grew up in Wood River, Illinois, attended DePauw University, and served two years in the US Navy. He subsequently earned a Ph.D. in physics from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign on the subject of Nuclear Magnetic Resonance in Alkali Metals. He came to Cornell in 1954 as an instructor in physics. He became an assistant

professor in 1956, associate professor in 1958, and a full professor in 1962. He retired, and became an emeritus professor in 1995.

Don was passionate about the outdoors, with a particular fondness for cross-country skiing. He was an ordained elder and choir member of the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca. He had a clear style, sporting distinctive string ties. For many years, he was involved in a notorious car pool with fellow physicists Bob Silsbee and Bob Cotts, where they drove an automobile which was largely held together by ingenuity and wishes. He made real human connections both in the Physics Department, and in the larger community.

Don was a loving husband and father. He married Barbara Page in 1950, and had three children, Douglas, Jane, and Nancy. Barbara passed away in 1998. He was close with his children, his six grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

Written by Erich Mueller, John Reppy, and James Sethna