



The Athenaeum—Fifty Years Young

by LEE A. DuBRIDGE

We owe a great debt to Allan and Janet Balch, who provided \$500,000 so that Caltech could have the finest faculty club in the country — the Athenaeum — and to Gordon Kaufmann, the architect who made their dream a reality. Allan Balch was a New Yorker who earned part of his way through Cornell University by working in the college blacksmith shop. It was there that he met Janet Jacks, a young lady from California who brought her riding horse into the shop to be reshod. The Balches moved to California in 1896, and he became a Caltech trustee in 1925, serving as chairman of the board from 1933 until his death in 1943. Janet Balch was

active in social and civic affairs, including in addition to Caltech the Los Angeles Symphony and Scripps College.

The original governing board of the Athenaeum consisted of Balch as president, and a group of distinguished friends of the Institute — historian William B. Munro, Walter Adams of Mount Wilson, Max Farrand of the Huntington Library, trustee Henry Robinson, and associates Albert B. Ruddock and James Page. The chairman of the House Committee was a brand-new young assistant professor of economics, Horace Gilbert. The other members were Mrs. Balch, Mrs. Josephine Hixon, Edwin Hubble, Mrs.

Donald O'Melveny, and Earnest Watson.

According to a letter Watson wrote Gilbert in July 1930, the composition of this committee was cause for consternation. He said, in part:

Help! Succor! Assistance! Our dear Athenaeum has turned into a women's club overnight. Women are to enjoy all the privileges of the club. Women are to live at the club if they so desire. Women have been put on all the committees. Women, to the number of three, have been added to our House Committee. With both you and Hubble gone for the summer, what is a poor, scared bachelor like myself to do? I

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shall be outnumbered, outtalked, outvoted, and completely cowed before you even have a chance to return.

Apparently, a few years later things had worked out to Watson's satisfaction, for a 1937 Athenaeum bulletin listed no women as members of the House Committee. That, too, was a temporary situation, and for some years now women have again been on the roster. In fact, the current chairman of the committee is a woman.

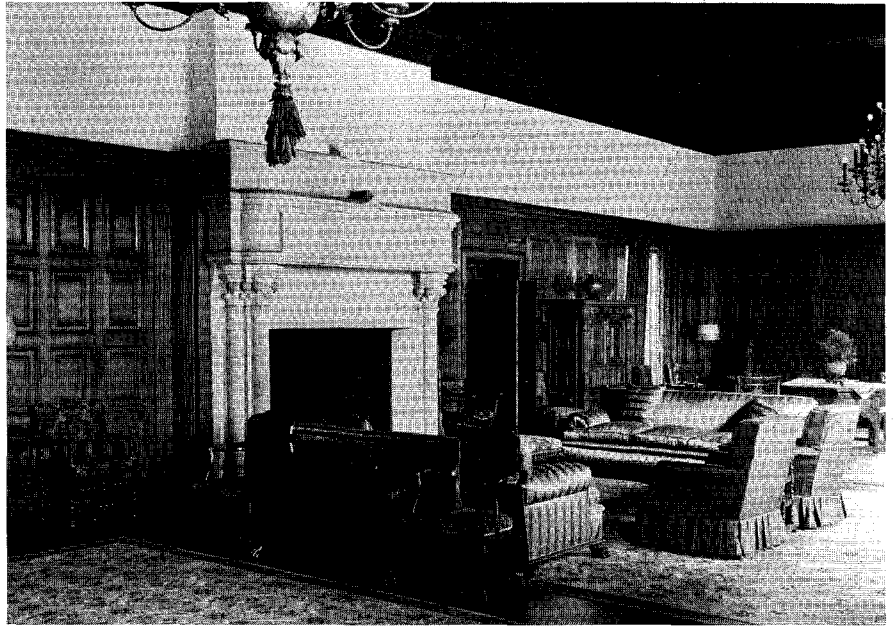
Changes have taken place in other areas of Athenaeum management as well. In 1930 lunch cost 50 cents, dinner 75 cents, and a single room could be had for \$2.00 per night. By 1937 price increases were regretfully announced: lunch 55 cents and dinner 85 cents. Many faculty members were reluctant to join the Athenaeum when they realized that there would be monthly dues, so — as a come-on gesture — dues for them were suspended for the first year. For some time thereafter they were only \$2.00.

The first dinner for Athenaeum members was held on October 30, 1930. On November 4 there was an afternoon reception for undergraduate students and their friends, but for many years afterward no undergraduate — except for student waiters — ever saw the inside of the club again.

Among the other early celebrations was a dinner for Associates, a series of weekly lectures, and on February 4, 1931, the big Einstein dinner. Attendance that evening was limited to Associates and their wives, and the guests and press made much of the fact that three Nobel Prizewinners were on the program — Millikan, Michelson, and Einstein — and in addition astronomers George Ellery Hale and Edwin Hubble.

Charming as the Athenaeum was from the beginning, it was not without problems. Engineering professor Robert Daugherty used to recall that at Millikan's request he spent most of the evening of that first dinner in the basement trying to get the furnace to work. Not much later a door had to be installed at the head of the stairs leading from the lobby to the basement "in order to reduce the drafts and the flies."

The 1930s were difficult for the Insti-



The main lounge of the Athenaeum as it has appeared at three different periods in the last 50 years. Some of the furniture from the very first version (above) is still there — the octagonal table, the fire screen, and a pair of settees, for example — and pieces of the original rugs are still in use in Dabney Lounge. The tassels have long since been removed from the chandeliers. The hallmark of the lounge for most of its existence was its magnificent carpet, the Royal . . .

tute financially, and many a graduate student teaching assistant received his pay in the form of room and board at the Athenaeum instead of in cash. Several of these students took over a round table in the main dining room, and they were decidedly choosy over who should sit there. Being fond of Richard Tolman (then unmarried), they elected him an honorary member of their group. The round table boys also paid a lot of attention to the ladies they saw at the Athenaeum — mostly faculty wives — and they established a scale of pulchritude for them. At the top of the list was Luddye Michal, wife of the distinguished mathematician Aristotle Michal, and the unit of beauty was named the Michal in her honor. Unfortunately, the students felt it was much too grandiose to fit many of the ladies, so 1/100th of a Michal — a Kopek — was developed and applied to others. It is reported that certain of the ladies were even rated at a small fraction of that. No doubt

they had beautiful minds.

The Athenaeum has, of course, had its ups and downs, some growing out of budgetary problems and some out of differences of opinion. Some managers have been more efficient than others. The quality of food has oscillated from barely acceptable to superb. Improving the dining room's noise level by the installation of carpeting on the floor and acoustic tile on the walls and ceiling made a gracious room even more gracious. And, after years of struggle over both principles and practicalities, a liquor license was procured. At last the surreptitious pre-dinner sherry parties in the upstairs suites could be abandoned in favor of openly consumed cocktails or wine from the well-stocked cellar.

Now at the age of 50, the Athenaeum has become not only a Caltech tradition but one of the best clubs in southern California — and, as always, surely rating several Michals on anybody's scale. □



... Meshed rug in the picture above. Measuring $47\frac{1}{2}$ by $28\frac{1}{2}$ feet, it had to be turned under along the south wall to fit into the room. The story is that the rug was over a century old when it came to Caltech, having been woven for the palace of a Persian nobleman in the city of Masha. When that city was threatened by Bolshevik uprisings, the rug

was smuggled out of the city, eventually was acquired by P. G. Winnett, president of Bullock's, and in due time was presented to Caltech. The portraits on the south wall are of Mr. and Mrs. Balch. Time and traffic finally caught up with the whole room, and in the early 1970s it was redecorated. Below, the Athenaeum lounge today.

