

Remembering John S. Toll

I joined the Physics Department in January 1960 as secretary to Dr. John S. Toll. I had been interviewed by Ed Stern and Roy Anderson for a position in Solid State Physics, but when I was introduced to Dr. Toll he thought the Chairman's Office was a better place for me and he was absolutely right. To this day I am grateful that John Toll hired me. It was the beginning of a career in Physics that would never have been possible without his leadership, support and trust.

At the time the Physics Building was a two story structure and with the rapid increase in faculty and students space was tight, then as now. When you entered the Main Office you were confronted by a large counter and the office factotum, Mrs. Lillian Belt. She was a character and not shy to reproach students and faculty alike for wearing what she called Jesus sandals, or telling a visitor like John Wheeler: "I don't know you from Adam". She had been running the front office for many years and Dr. Toll tolerated her.

The Main Office still had a switchboard for telephone connections within the Department, much as in a hotel at the time, and not infrequently Dr. Toll would call from his office "I have been disconnected", a fate shared by faculty and staff throughout the Department. Immediately behind the counter Maggie Huber handled student records, there were Mrs. Belt's and my desk and somewhere a place for students who helped with filing, typing and mail distribution. When I needed a place to interview a potential secretary or student assistant Dr. Toll would offer his office.

Working in the Main Office was exciting and fun. Usually, Dr. Toll came early with a cheerful Good Morning to us all. Sometimes, however, by the time we showed up, he was already working at his desk and after a while would disappear through the back door taking with him a fresh shirt and a shaving kit from one of his desk drawers. He had worked all night except for perhaps a few hours' sleep on a cot in the attic. We knew about this cot because it once disappeared during a clean-up operation and it took some time to get it back.

Dr. Toll would dictate reports and correspondence for hours, it was rapid and flawless. I learned quickly that one had to bring several pencils and an extra stenography book for dictation. The books filled up in no time and pencils ran blunt. Dr. Toll would then offer one of his own, but sometimes they had the distinct markings of having been chewed on. I'm sure he never realized it. He concentrated on his letters and reports which were perfect at first try. He also dictated research papers and I vividly remember the many letters to Dear Gunnar, his research collaborator, Professor Källén at the University of Lund in Sweden. Not necessarily knowing how to write the Greek letters and even less how to write the equations, these letters were a challenge. In addition, I still felt somewhat insecure about English words and once asked him "what is a Rossborough"? He laughed so hard I had to join in. He was, of course, referring to the Rossborough Inn. Dr. Toll was always cheerful and inspiring, praising and thanking everybody and we simply loved working for him.

There was the weekly administrative caucus where he met with the Associate Chair, Howard Laster; the Chief Engineer, Harry Kriemelmeyer; Thurston Griggs, in charge of student operations, and me. All departmental issues and ideas were discussed, problems addressed and resolved. We were a team working with an incredibly resourceful, self-effacing and truly unique leader.

And there was Physics Tea, a tradition Dr. Toll brought from Princeton. It was a splendid idea. Tea was made every afternoon using hot plates, aluminum tea pots and paper cups. It was the place where students and faculty intermingled in a type of camaraderie that was simply astounding.

Another institution was the Toll Loan Fund. Dr. Toll set up a checking of several thousand dollars to be available for students in need. For foreign students, who came with little or no funds, it was a god-send. Dr. Toll gave me the check book with authority to write checks as needed and as I saw fit. It was this trust in people that in turn instilled a tremendous sense of responsibility and loyalty toward him. When he left the Physics Department to accept the presidency of the University of New York at Stony Brook, he left the account behind so funds would still be available to students in need.

I owe Dr. Toll so much. Just like the beginning of a great Department of Physics at the University of Maryland, my personal success and ability to introduce many accounting and administrative improvements were based on his example, his leadership and the generosity of his ever present support and trust. Thank you, Dr. Toll.

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