

# DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

## Remembering WBFIS, the Father of SETI

It grieves me to report the passing of a legend, and an honored friend. I have been informed by his son Bert that Professor Philip Morrison, co-author of the world's first serious scientific paper on SETI, passed away quietly at home on Friday, April 22, 2005. He was 89 years of age.

Dr. Philip Morrison, Institute Professor and Professor of Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was a distinguished theoretical astrophysicist and a pioneer in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence through radio communication. He authored scores of books, produced television documentaries, and lectured tirelessly around the world, despite the physical limitations imposed upon him by post-polio syndrome. In one of his many roles as a science educator, Dr. Morrison served on the board of advisors for the television science series "NOVA." In another role, he was columnist and book reviewer for *Scientific American*. In yet a third, it was Phil Morrison who chaired NASA's early study groups on SETI.

Along with most of the bright young physicists of his generation, Phil Morrison spent the war years working on the Manhattan Project, the development of the first atomic bomb. Unlike many of his Los Alamos colleagues, he went on to become a staunch pacifist, anti-war activist, opponent of nuclear proliferation, and a co-founder of the Federation of Atomic Scientists (later known as the Federation of American Scientists). I asked him, just a few years ago, if he regretted his wartime activities.

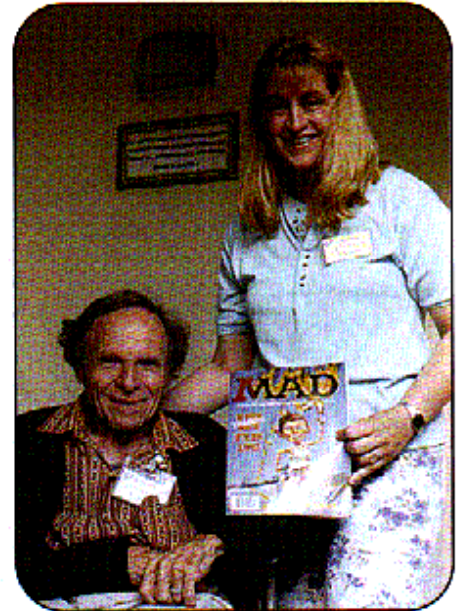
"On the whole, no," was his paradoxical reply. "At the time, we believed Germany was close to developing an atomic bomb. Even when they failed to do so, ending the war with Japan remained a priority. The regrettable bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did bring that conflict to an end, and saved countless tens of thousands of lives on both sides. My only regret is the dark period that followed."

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Undeniably one of the patriarchs of SETI, Professor Morrison had long since gone inactive on the ham bands when in 1959 he coauthored "Searching for Interstellar Communications" in the British science journal *Nature*. His boyhood interest in amateur radio had motivated his interest in exploring the feasibility of microwaves for interstellar communication. During SETI's Golden Age, he inspired a whole generation of engineers and scientists, including the founders of The SETI League, to think beyond human limitations.

On a personal note, my own SETI interests were motivated by following in Phil Morrison's footsteps (albeit from a distance of 30 years). As an electrical engineering undergraduate at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, I had the privilege of operating W3NKI, the campus ham radio station Phil had founded three decades prior. From Carnegie Tech, Phil went on to earn a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. Many years later, so did I. Phil encouraged my SETI League efforts from the start. He did me the great honor of writing the jacket blurb for my hypertext book *Tune In The Universe!* (copyright © 2001, ARRL), contributed generously to The SETI League of his time and financial resources, and over the years became a close friend and mentor.

Phil Morrison is remembered as much for his modesty as for his energy. Nearly a decade ago, on November 7th, my wife Muriel and I happened to be in Cambridge MA, where I was to interview that year's crop of outstanding MIT and Harvard graduate students. We rang up Phil's wife and longtime collaborator, the late Phylis Morrison, and asked if we could get together. She immediately suggested their favorite Japanese restaurant, where we met, dined, and talked until closing time, whereupon Phil insisted on picking up the check. From the restaurant, the four of us went to the Morrisesons' modest Cambridge flat, where we proceeded to sit up half the night, engaging in one of the free-wheeling and intellectually stimulating conversations for which the Morrisesons were noted.



Phil Morrison and the author's wife, Muriel Hykes, share their favorite technical journal, at a BioAstronomy Conference in Italy in 1996.

A week later, having returned home, I began working on an essay which was to include a mention of Phil and his contributions to the art and science of SETI. In order to get my facts straight, I thumbed through my well-worn copy of David Swift's *SETI Pioneers* to Phil's biography and was shocked to read his date of birth—November 7, 1915. We had spent the whole evening of his 80th birthday together, and neither Phil nor Phylis had said a word about it!

I rang up Phil, and asked, "Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday?" He replied, "Because if you had known, you might not have come."

My last telephone conversation with Phil Morrison occurred seven weeks ago, as I write this, following the death of my own father (they were of the same generation). I expressed concern for Phil's health, and we made plans to celebrate his 90th birthday, next November 7th. A father figure to many of us, Phil Morrison's death leaves a void that can never be filled—but I feel compelled to try. When I grow up, I want to be just like Phil Morrison. 73, Paul, N6TX