An Unfinished but Closed Chapter in AAVSO History

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Abstract In thirty years of service as the AAVSO's director, Janet Akyüz Mattei left an indelible mark on the organization. The AAVSO underwent nearly continuous expansion of services to members and to the professional community of variable star astronomy during her tenure. Under her leadership, the association flourished and became recognized internationally as the leading variable star organization. Unfortunately, the final recognition that was richly deserved by Mattei, a retirement in which to enjoy the fruits of this effort, was denied her by her sudden illness and passing.

1. Introduction

My task here, one which I cherish, is to place Janet Akyüz Mattei in the historical context of the AAVSO, an organization she led as Director for over thirty years. By way of introduction, I should reveal something of my biases as a historian in this case. It is literally impossible to understand the history of a thirty-year career without reading her files, and I have not done that. After knowing Janet so well for most of those thirty years, it would be impossible for me to describe this as anything more than personal reflections on the life of a dear friend. I have elected to place Janet into the context of the AAVSO in three separate periods of its ninety-six year history, periods of roughly a decade each.

2. Beginning her career (1974–1984)

I will never forget sitting for a few minutes in the dark on a bench in the Maria Mitchell Observatory having a pleasant discussion with a charming young Turkish girl about her experiences in the United States up to that time in 1969. However, when I learned a few years later this same young girl was replacing Margaret Mayall as the AAVSO Director, my first reaction was one of stunned surprise, in fact dismay. Janet was fairly invisible to me as a rank and file member during her first five years. Thus, at the time I was first elected to the AAVSO Council in 1978, I was somewhat negative about her as the AAVSO Director. My attitude would soon change.

I have had to rely on others to tell me about that first five to eight years of Janet's tenure as the Director. I am grateful to Janet's close personal friends and confidants, Dorrit Hoffleit and Martha Hazen, and to Charles Scovil, George Fortier, and Marv

Baldwin, the first three AAVSO presidents that Janet worked with as director, and to John Bortle, an outstanding observer, all of whom generously shared time and their thoughts with me.

Anyone who has had the unique experience of taking over command in any organization, large or small, can likely imagine the feelings that Janet must have had on the first day after she took control of the keys to the office at 187 Concord Avenue in Cambridge. She had worked in the AAVSO office for less than a year. Of the individuals she knew there, only Margaret Mayall and Dorrit Hoffleit could have seemed like friends that she could rely on for help. That thought no doubt gave Janet an uneasy feeling. Furthermore, the way things ran then, as now, the AAVSO's officers did not spend a lot of time helping the director with her work. Furthermore, interest in variable stars was increasing both among observers and among the professionals, so both the observations from amateurs and the questions from professionals were coming in faster than ever.

Margaret Mayall, Hilde Luft, Janet Mattei. 1973 AAVSO Annual Meeting celebrating Margaret's retirement. *AAVSO Archives.*

Those first few years must have seemed like a nightmare for Janet. During the day she was in the office responding to calls, answering questions, and plotting data by hand. In the late 1960s, Margaret initiated coding of all current observations on punched cards but the work was going slowly and made no real contribution to the daily work in the office. Indeed, Margaret had continued to plot all incoming observations manually, with a pencil on paper, so she could respond to questions that arose about specific AAVSO program stars, mainly the long period variables. Janet attempted to follow in Margaret's footsteps in this way, but she also spent many nights at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory (SAO) computing center

attempting to debug programs to plot the punched card data as light curves.

If Janet had any reservations about how to perform her job, it was not evident from the way she handled things from the start. In a 1975 letter to Marv Baldwin, Janet opened with a very cordial introduction and her thanks for all past efforts, a few other pleasantries, and then urged Marv to get things done "with a lot of hard nosed arm twisting." Marv characterized this as typical of Janet's style for the rest of her career.

Following in Margaret Mayall's footsteps was not made easier by the fact that a transition from the Old Guard to a new order in the AAVSO was increasingly being demanded by some members. An example of this pressure, which had arisen well before Margaret retired, can be seen in the movement for increased member communications that was in progress as Janet became director. An informal newsletter, *Variable Views*, published by AAVSO member Carolyn Hurless from her Lima, Ohio home, was very successful in promoting communication among some members but was completely outside headquarters control and not always appreciated there. An aggressive group of members—the "Fairfield Four": Clint Ford, Charles Scovil, John Bortle, and Wayne Lowder—decided that the AAVSO needed several new types of more formal communication with its members. They undertook two new publications—*The Journal of the AAVSO* (JAAVSO), and the *AAVSO Circular*—both of which were edited, printed, and distributed from the Stamford Observatory in Fairfield County, Connecticut. Thus, neither Margaret, nor Janet as her successor, had complete control over the content of these off-site publications, though both reserved the right to review any publication that bore the AAVSO logo.

The Journal of the AAVSO (JAAVSO), edited initially by William and Florence Glenn, did fill a very real need. However, as a technical journal claiming to represent the Association to the variable star community around the world it was a constant source of concern for Janet. The *AAVSO Circular* edited by John Bortle was welcomed for its monthly feedback by many members who were interested in cataclysmic and irregular variables, but the problems for headquarters were the same.

When the Glenns resigned as editors of the JAAVSO in 1974, Janet had her first opportunity to begin dealing constructively with the problem created by these initiatives. After the AAVSO Council appointed Charles Whitney to the journal editorship, Janet began gradually to move activities related to the journal into headquarters. Production of the first JAAVSO issues at headquarters in Cambridge took place in 1975, and has been handled there since. Janet used the opportunity to replace the JAAVSO editor successfully to begin the major changes needed in headquarters staffing and organization, a process that continued throughout her tenure as director.

The "Fairfield Four" were also responsible for initiating the preparation of the *AAVSO Variable Star Atlas*, a project that was sorely needed, but again outside the ability of the limited headquarters staff to monitor or manage. In addition, the

atlas project precipitated another crisis when AAVSO Treasurer Richard Davis resigned in a mid-term dispute involving handling of the Atlas. His resignation created a vacuum that Newton Mayall filled for a few years. However, Newton over-supervised Janet, stretching their relationship to the breaking point. Janet handled this effectively by recruiting Ted Wales as Treasurer.

The main point I want to leave you with here is that there was an enormous amount of turmoil under the placid surface that was the public face of the AAVSO in those days. The ever-smiling, charming young Turkish girl turned out to be just as tough and politically savvy as anyone involved, and she needed to be just that.

After I was elected to the AAVSO Council in 1978 and started learning what the Director's job was all about, I came to value Janet's contributions to the organization ever more highly. I will never forget the trip from The Espousal Conference Center in Waltham, Massachusetts, to Logan airport after the 1980 Fall Meeting.It was my first ride in a car with Janet driving, and a hair-raising experience is the only way to characterize it. On that wild ride I first learned to appreciate Janet's concerns for the future, her desire to make the AAVSO her career, and her uncertainty about whether AAVSO would work to keep her. She expressed her concerns about the need for a permanent and much larger headquarters. She was already planning for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the AAVSO, an event that was still five years away, and hoped to have headquarters settled in a new building before then. This was, to say the least, an ambitious and challenging goal for someone with her limited experience—entirely characteristic of Janet.

Janet also faced some fairly intimidating technical challenges as well as the early administrative and political problems. One type of request from professional astronomers for technical support seemed to her to offer exceptional opportunities, coordinating observing programs with orbiting observatories. Professional astronomers managing orbiting observatories needed both predictions of events in cataclysmic variables (CVs) and real-time alerts when a brightening did occur. With some help from John Bortle, Janet quickly became skilled in predicting eruptions. By recruiting observers to provide real-time alerts and by making herself available to receive their notification calls at all hours of the day and night, Janet fashioned an active support program that continues to function well to this day. Her success in this program was largely responsible for the increased awareness and acceptance of the AAVSO within the professional community that we now enjoy. France Cordova announced to the world at the 1979 AAVSO annual meeting that an SS Cygni maximum that had been predicted by Janet, and then detected by AAVSO observers, had been observed in X-rays—the first time the observation of X-rays coincided with a transient event in a visually observed astronomical object. No one who was present will likely forget the electrifying excitement felt by proud AAVSO members, most of all by Janet, when that announcement was made.

AAVSO Headquarters continued to process current monthly observations, and to enter all the backlogged observations. The project experienced short term but frustrating delays with new computer programs and data entry technology.

Progress was slow and the work was tedious. It would be difficult to over-estimate the frustrations that Janet felt most of the time. Progress was being made nearly continuously, but not fast enough to satisfy some members. Even more frustrating must have been the routine and crushing expectations from some members that nothing would change from the way that the AAVSO had always been under two prior directors. That expectation could be seen in constant demands that the next edition of the long period variables report be published while Janet was still struggling with the detailed editing of the data and with automatic plotting of the long period light curves.

As Janet became more successful with the data management programs, boxes of computer cards piled up in the office. Stacks of boxes served as partitions, supported impromptu tables, blocked daylight from coming through the windows and gathered dust. Then, just before the Spring meeting in 1984, a fire broke out in the apartment over the AAVSO office at 187 Concord Avenue. Fortunately for the AAVSO, there was no damage downstairs, but the event served as a wake-up call for the Council as it met in Ames, Iowa, that spring. When the Council realized that its most precious assets were thousands of pieces of paper that were decaying in wooden filing cabinets and thousands of boxes containing punched paper cards, it was clear that would have to move to a more secure location to preserve those assets. At the same time the Council decided to accelerate the magnetization of the data contained on all that paper so it could be duplicated and preserved. This plunged the staff into a long campaign to upgrade computer systems to bring all data processing and plotting into headquarters to support the accelerated program, and employment of additional staff in offices that were already overcrowded. The goal, to complete the data entry and validation of all the archived data (1911–1967), seemed achievable in a short period given this renewed commitment of resources.

With some coaching from Janet, Clint Ford gave the word that a search for new quarters should proceed on the basis of finding a permanent headquarters building that he would purchase and donate to the Association. At that point Janet was leading the organization across an important bridge in its history as well as in her own.

3. Freed from the past? (1985–1994)

As soon as she got the word from Clint, Janet solicited help from 2nd vice president Keith Danskin, who soon located an ideal property at 25 Birch Street, in Cambridge. Adjacent to the offices of *Sky & Telescope* magazine, and still comfortably close to the Harvard College/Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatories, the building was the right size and retained the identical postal code. Clint visited the building, agreed it was the right choice, and negotiated the purchase. However, as the negotiations for the mortgage and the purchase of the property were in their final stages, a dispute broke out in the Council that threatened the entire plan. President Ernst Mayer was strongly opposed to any transaction that obligated the AAVSO to

a mortgage even though Clint signed a separate contract with the AAVSO agreeing to fund the mortgage payments. Mayer refused to sign the mortgage papers at the last minute. Janet had to arrange for other officers to replace Mayer at the closing. The incident precipitated Mayer's effective resignation from the presidency; he eventually resigned from the association completely, a tragic loss of a brilliant observer. Thus the Headquarters building acquisition was not without its cost in human terms.

In the following year, Janet and an AAVSO committee dedicated the headquarters building as the *Clinton B. Ford Astronomical Data and Research Center* as part of the AAVSO's 75th anniversary celebration. Professional and amateur astronomers attended from all over the world. The celebration was a fitting climax to Janet's dream of over six years. The dedication speaker, Dr. Ricardo Giaconni, director of the Space Telescope Science Institute, accepted this assignment because of his admiration for Janet, and the AAVSO's record of contributions to X-ray and orbiting observatory astronomy. It should be noted that the previous year, 1985, was the last year that U.S. observers contributed over half of the total observations for the year. Under Janet's leadership, the AAVSO evolved slowly into an international organization.

1986 Finance Committee meeting at the new AAVSO Headquarters, 25 Birch Street, Cambridge. From left: Treasurer Ted Wales, Jeff Lant, Mark Malmros, Secretary Clint Ford, Vice President Keith Danskin, Director Janet Mattei, President Tom Williams. *AAVSO Archives.*

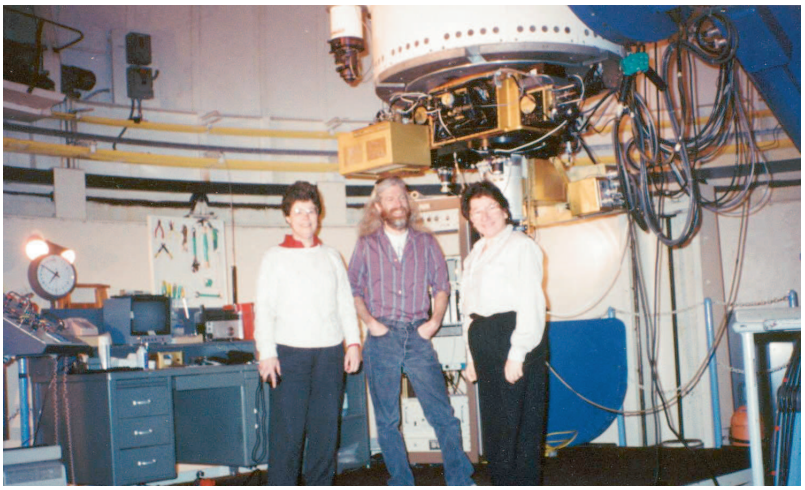
The following year, AAVSO members became aware of Janet's growing international stature in several ways. First, she served as one of the professional organizers of an IAU Colloquium on professional and amateur cooperation in astronomy. During that Paris meeting, the Société Astronomique de France awarded Janet their Gold Medal for her international leadership in variable star astronomy.

Janet was invited to the Leiden Observatory immediately after the Paris meeting to address the Dutch astronomical society. It was evident by 1987 that Janet was an international celebrity, at least in variable star astronomy. This soon led to an invitation from the Belgian astronomers who offered to organize the AAVSO's first international meeting in Brussels. By the time that meeting took place in 1990, the international observations amounted to two-thirds of the annual total added to the AAVSO's now truly international variable star observation database.

It was also in this period that we held our first recent joint meetings with the American Astronomical Society, first in Columbus, Ohio (1992), and then in Berkeley, California (1993). These joint meetings were scheduled to give AAVSO members convenient access to professional astronomers who were practicing CCD photometry and mark the advent of CCDs in AAVSO observing.

Fund raising continued to be a crucial issue to which Janet was forced to devote time and energy. She led a fund raising effort in the Council, published monographs as a means of promoting more gifts to the AAVSO, and even took on the *Hands-On Astrophysics* educational project as another way of enhancing our cash flow. Clint Ford's unfortunate death in 1992 created the prospect of an inheritance, but did not relieve the AAVSO's financial problem in the short term.

After Clint's death, one of the things that became possible, however, was that Janet was freed to initiate a detailed look at what the future held for the AAVSO—the first time such a detailed planning exercise had been undertaken on the Association's behalf. The Futures Study, in effect, marked Janet's final release from the past and turned her gaze to the enhancement of AAVSO research and services to its membership.



Janet Mattei on right, with Priscilla Benson and Steve Howell, at an observing session to obtain AAVSO CCD finder charts—Kitt Peak National Observatory, February 1993. *AAVSO Archives.*

4. A mature leader (1995–2004)

The changes that Janet led in the AAVSO in her third decade as AAVSO director are more apparent and do not require much elaboration. One of the things that stands out is the extent of her maturity as a leader. She led the AAVSO in that third decade in ways that were somewhat unimaginable for anyone who had been around for the previous two decades. The AAVSO survived a period of short funds while waiting for the Ford inheritance, delayed for several years by a legal challenge to his estate. Outside recognition came to Janet through many avenues. She was elected to the board of directors of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. Two prestigious awards were given to her—the Van Biesbroeck award of the American Astronomical Society (1993), and the Jackson-Gwilt medal and prize of the Royal Astronomical Society (1995).

Many changes in the AAVSO were made possible with grant funding that flowed as a result of Janet's increased stature among variable star astronomers. Consider, for example, how quickly AAVSO moved into the internet with very modern and up-to-date web-based utilities funded substantially from grants. Of course we had to have the technical horsepower on our staff in Headquarters to scale those mountains. What is amazing about all that, though, is not what skilled staff like Aaron Price can do, they work wonders. The fact is that Janet was able to employ them, and reacted quickly and supportively to their suggestions. Our capability is enormously enhanced as a result. The pace at which Doug West was allowed and encouraged to move into Near-IR photometry is another clear example, as are the growing numbers of CCD observations in our database. Things could not have happened this quickly in earlier years; it is a clear reflection of Janet's growing maturity as a manager that they happened at all. The most amazing of all such projects is the program of chart modernization. Janet may not have been too happy with the way that successful project emerged, but by now she was wise enough not to stand in front of a train that was long overdue.

However, the best example of Janet's maturing management skills was the AAVSO involvement in high-energy astrophysics through the cataclysmic variables programs, and then through our rapid movement into the gamma-ray burster program. In a very short period of time, Janet got the grants, allocated the funds to the purchase of necessary equipment, facilitated the professional and amateur cooperation, and watched the results finally begin to flow. There is a certain comfortable irony to the fact that Janet had just come home from what had to be, for her, a very satisfying meeting. Our second high-energy astrophysics workshop with NASA and our third major international meeting, this time a "Pan-Pacific" meeting in Hawaii, occurred shortly before she learned of her illness that was ultimately fatal.

5. An unfinished but closed chapter

The "unfinished but closed chapter"—what do I mean by that? Well, in the final

analysis, it was Janet's own insecurity that prompted her continuous striving for perfection, a striving that at times brought things nearly to a halt in headquarters because she would not allow others to complete tasks like the final editing and approval of the journal. She was never able to overcome that feeling that she had to be perfect. It was this striving that got so many good things done so well, but there is a terrible price one pays for that insecurity in the later years of life. In a very large measure, Janet's work at the AAVSO was already done; she was successful beyond anyone's prediction, including her own at the time she was employed as director.

There is still much to be done on past problems and so many new opportunities. But that is not what I mean by "the unfinished but closed chapter." If you have never experienced it, you may find it hard to imagine the tremendous satisfaction that one feels when handing over the keys to an office, and walking out for the last time, knowing that you have achieved a great deal doing the best that you could. For Janet it might not be overstating the case to say that it was the best that anyone could have done. That she was never able to step back, to retire, and be acknowledged for her achievements, to receive the final accolades for all that went into her wonderful career—that, in my humble opinion, is the real tragedy of her premature death, that she was not allowed to draw that chapter to a close herself.

It was Janet Akyüz Mattei, that charming energetic determined young Turkish girl we hired in late 1973, who put the AAVSO into high gear. No one who has ever taken a ride in a car with Janet driving could miss the metaphor involved, but what a wild and wonderful ride this past 30 years has been. May she finally rest in peace with the certain knowledge that her outstanding achievements as the leader of the AAVSO over that thirty-year period cannot and will not be forgotten.

6. Acknowledgements

In addition to assistance from individuals named in the text above, I would like to acknowledge very helpful conversations with Mike Mattei, and with Charles Whitney, with thanks for their time and for freely offering their views in response to my questions.