



Leonard James Ashby

Founder and First President

by Richard S. Bell

Students at Kalamazoo College wanted to continue learning about the universe around them after taking a one-semester astronomy course in the winter of 1936. To that end they formed the Kalamazoo Amateur Astronomical Association (KAAA). It turns out that was only part of the story. It has recently been rediscovered that the true founder and first president of the KAAA was a gentleman by the name of Leonard James Ashby.

The story of rediscovering our organization's origins began on Earth Day in 2017. The KAS shared views of the Sun and sold Eclipse Shades during a celebration in Bronson Park. At one point in the day a lady walked up to our booth and said that her grandfather was the founder of our group. I was skeptical, because I faithfully accepted the story of K-College astronomy students establishing the KAAA in 1936. Thankfully, I took down the information she provided, but I forgot to ask for her name! Some time went by before I searched for additional evidence to support this person's claim.

Thanks to the Internet, I was able to find some background information on the life of Mr. Ashby. The most valuable find came from the July 1945 issue of the *Kalamazoo College Alumnus* newsletter (page 8). Here's what it says:

Ex-Professor Dies

Leonard James Ashby, research physicist at the University of Michigan who taught at Kalamazoo College from 1921 to 1924, died in Ann Arbor on June 12. Ashby, an assistant professor of physics during his tenure here, was founder and former president of the Kalamazoo Amateur Astronomy Association. A son, Frederick Ashby, is an ensign in the navy.

This certainly supports what I was told in Bronson Park, but I still wasn't 100% convinced. That changed after I looked through some old issues of *Prime Focus* graciously donated by long-time member Phyllis Buskirk in June 2019. The inside cover of the July 1970 issue has some background information on the newsletter and the Kalamazoo Amateur Astronomical Society (as we were known at the time). The last paragraph briefly covers the history of the organization. One line reads as follows:

Its history dates back to 1936 when it was organized under Leonard Ashby, the Society's first president.

There you have it! Three different sources clearly state that Mr. Ashby was the key figure in starting our group in 1936. Now that this was confirmed to my satisfaction, the next step was to learn more about his life. The best way was to somehow locate the woman I met in Bronson Park two years prior. After doing some more cyber sleuthing, I found an obituary for Ellen Rood Ashby, the wife of Ashby's son Frederick. Ellen was also the daughter of WMU physics professor Paul Rood. Paul was a one-time member of the KAAA, and Rood Hall was named in his honor. Fred and Ellen had four children, one of whom is Cathy McMinn, who resides in the Delton area. She seemed the most likely candidate, so I found her home address and wrote her a letter. She enthusiastically responded and confirmed she was

the woman I met in Bronson Park. In the months ahead, she provided me with a tremendous amount of information on the life of her grandfather.

Leonard James Ashby was born on December 1, 1891 in Oldham, Lancashire, England and later moved to Southsea, Portsmouth. His parents were Richard Ashby and Jane Taylor. Leonard had two siblings, a brother named George Oswald Ashby and a sister named Ethel Gillies Ashby. George was [killed in action](#) in France during World War I on July 20, 1916. Ethel married a gentleman named David S. Houston. They would go on to have one son, named in honor of her fallen brother.

In his youth Leonard apprenticed himself to a textile mill operator, and from 1903 to 1913 he studied nights and in his free time at the Oldham Technical School. In 1911 he won a scholarship to Manchester University and continued between terms his studies at the Oldham Technical School. In 1912 he won a medal, one of 20 so honored in an empire contest, called in English phraseology the Whitworth Exhibition. His Bachelor of Science degree, with honors, in engineering was obtained from Manchester University in 1915.



Leonard and George Ashby in uniform.

Ashby enlisted in the British army in 1915 and by 1917 had become a lieutenant of the Royal Corps of Signals with service in France. On leave, he visited one of his former professors at Manchester University, who suggested that the school of mines in the Royal Navy was looking for someone with his training. The professor suggested a visit and application for transfer. Transfers from one branch of the service to another in wartime is evidently difficult to effect, and especially so in the British military and naval establishments. However, after his interview with naval officers, his application slid through without a hitch, and he soon shed the army's khaki for the navy's blue. *"I wouldn't have gotten it,"* he said in an interview with the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, *"if the navy hadn't wanted it. In England the navy is considered the senior branch and it gets whatever it wants."* From then until the end of World War I and in fact until 1920, Ashby designed mines, and supervised manufacturing operations when the industrial concerns got into difficulties.

Ashby married Nona Gwendoline Wormald, of Oldham, in Crowborough, Sussex on January 15, 1916, during a leave. (On their marriage license under the heading "Condition," Leonard was listed as "Bachelor," while Nona was a "Spinster." It was a different time.) Nona was born on December 31, 1888 on Gamston Road in West Bridgford, a town in the Rushcliffe borough of Nottinghamshire, England. Her parents were Frederick Wormald and Emma Pawson. Perhaps their mutual interest in the same sport brought them together. Both Leonard and Nona were Olympic-class fencers. Apparently, they even qualified for the Olympic Games, but Leonard was wounded (stabbed) during practice and unable to compete.

The happy couple immigrated to the United States in June 1920. Cathy McMinn, granddaughter of Leonard & Nona, has a receipt for Mrs. Ashby's passport from Thomas Cook & Son. It is dated May 31, 1920 and she paid £10. They likely traveled to the New World across the Atlantic via steamship. Settling in Kalamazoo, Ashby applied and obtained an appointment to the faculty of Kalamazoo



Ashby (and his wife, Nona) were both Olympic-class fencers. They would have competed in the Olympic games if Ashby didn't suffer an injury during training.

College in 1921, where an engineering department was contemplated. That failed to develop, and he taught physics for three years.

While at K-College, Ashby built and operated the first broadcasting station in the city. The radio station, WOAP, opened on January 3, 1923 with a wavelength of 360-meters. It broadcast programming every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. To prevent conflict with the programming from Detroit and Chicago, the hour of broadcasting was set at 6:30 pm. For a few minutes before this time students of a radio course gave stock and crop reports of interest to farmers around Kalamazoo. The regular programming consisted of orchestra music, vocal and instrumental selections, with special numbers and educational features. From time to time additional numbers were furnished by the Gaynor club and the Glee club. A license was also obtained to enable the station to be used for experimental purposes by the college classes in radio communication.

The Ashby's first attempt at starting a family ended in tragedy. Cyril George Ashby was born on July 18, 1922 and died of unknown causes that same day. Their second child, Frederick James Ashby (named after Nona's father), was born on June 29, 1923. Young Frederick had an interest in the relatively new field of aviation. Some photos, taken while on vacation in Port Washington, Long Island, show him wearing a leather aviator cap. He was also eminently skilled at making model airplanes. Fred was an ensign in the navy, serving stateside during World War II. I'm told he also taught sea cadets in Kalamazoo. Fred lived to the ripe old age of 77 – passing away on February 1, 2001. It is a shame we didn't learn about Leonard James Ashby during the rise of the KAS in the mid-1990's. We could have had the opportunity to speak with Fred while he was still alive.

Ashby left Kalamazoo College in 1924, which brought about the end of WOAP. The *Who's Who in Kalamazoo* article that appeared in the *Gazette* states that he resigned. Cathy tells me that he asked for a leave-of-absence to search for a new home. (The March 1922 *Kalamazoo College Bulletin* lists his residence as 897 Fairview Avenue.) After finding a



Ashby founded the first-ever radio station, WOAP, in Kalamazoo in 1923. Ashby is on the left. The newspaper insert publicizes an appearance by Ashby at a meeting of the Ladies' Library Association.



This photo accompanied the *Kalamazoo Gazette* article about Ashby's successful completion of grinding a 10-inch f/5 primary mirror.

new home, at 437 Stone Street, Ashby was told his position had been filled. Perhaps Cathy's account is true, and the author of the *Who's Who* article felt it best to omit this bit of information. Ashby may have briefly taught at Olivet College at some point, but the exact details remain unknown. With his teaching career now behind him, Ashby decided to start his own refrigeration installation business – a fairly new vocation at the time. Whether or not he owned (or rented) a shop or worked out of his home is unknown. This was likely his livelihood until he moved to Ann Arbor in 1940.

The *Who's Who* article suggests that Ashby also became interested in amateur astronomy after leaving K-College. Most amateur astronomers of this time were also amateur telescope makers (ATM) by necessity. Commercially made telescopes were quite expensive during this period. It should come as no surprise that Ashby, with his degree in engineering, had a completely equipped workshop in his basement. Even though telescope making was the rule of the day, Ashby shared his thoughts on the hobby in another interview with the *Kalamazoo Gazette* that would resonate with any ATMer active today:

That's the fun of it. Anyone can buy the things he wants to use, but to see them grow under his hands, that's the real kick in it. Then when he puts the machine together and it works, it's the thrill of a lifetime, repeated every time he does it.

This *Gazette* article features Ashby and the 10-inch f/5

primary mirror he ground himself. “Ten years of work and study and acquired skill have gone into the making of this mirror” Ashby was quoted as saying. He went on to say that the 10-inch mirror “took me my spare time all one winter to make.” Ashby also made sure to boast about his skill and the quality of his mirror:

In testing these parabolic mirrors, an error of five millionths of an inch is allowable. Mine shows an error of only 1.5 millionths of an inch, and by minute focusing I can cut that margin of error in half.

Telescopes aren't the only thing Ashby built to support his hobby. The *Who's Who* article states that he “indulges his love of star gazing from an observatory he has built in the top of his garage, where a section of the roof has been so constructed that it can be slid back on rails to give him a chance to train his telescope on the sky.” I wonder how common roll-off roof observatories were in the 1930s? It is a shame no known photographs of “Ashby Observatory” exist. I'd love to see it.

Nona wasn't one to wait for her husband to get through “tinkering with that gadget,” as she put it, but also built a telescope of her very own. The *Gazette* article states that she ground a 4-inch mirror. The completed telescope was likely featured in *The Beginner's Corner* section of the November 1939 issue of *Scientific American* (page 316). Ashby explains why they built a 4-inch rather than the more common 6-inch aperture Newtonian:

There are a few who want a really portable instrument-one which does not require several strong backs and a truck to handle and transport. My wife cannot conveniently carry around even a 6", hence this 4" Newtonian which carries easily in the family car and can be handled by a woman.

Ashby also boasted about the resolving power of Nona's new 4-inch telescope by saying “This little telescope resolves components of *Epsilon Lyrae* with $\frac{1}{2}$ " eyepiece, *Pi Aquilae* with $\frac{1}{4}$." From here on out, every time I observe the “double double” I'll think of Leonard and Nona doing the same through that 4-inch Newtonian.

Nona had many other talents in addition to grinding telescope mirrors. The *Gazette* piece states that she had a “gable studio” in their attic where she modeled in clay. When the article was being written, she was working on a portrait bust of a neighbor child, and she “caught the delicate, mysterious beauty of the child in remarkable fashion.” Nona was also a talented painter, and many of her works featured dogs and landscapes.

Perhaps Nona's most remarkable talent was as an amateur veterinarian. Cathy tells me that Nona helped a dog with a broken leg after a veterinarian said the dog was too old to help. Leonard and Nona made sandbags and buried the dog for several weeks. Once the dog was removed it was able to walk without much difficulty! Then there was their cat, Tuesday, that grew a giant tumor. Again, their professional vet thought the feline was too old to treat, so Nona sedated poor Tuesday, tied her to a washing machine, and removed the tumor herself. The cat got up for water the next day and

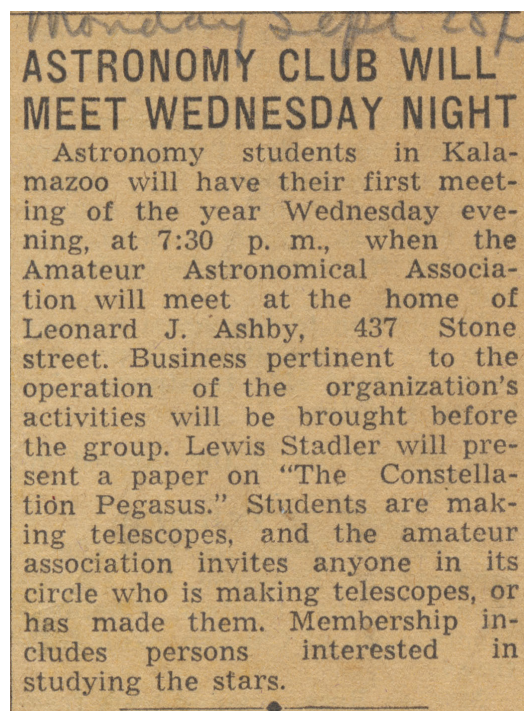
lived for many more years! These seem like rather daring procedures to attempt without proper training, but upon closer inspection of the Ashby's marriage license, I noticed that Nona's father, Frederick, was a veterinary surgeon. Obviously, she picked up some surgical techniques from her father!

The exact circumstances that led to the formation of the Kalamazoo Amateur Astronomical Association will likely never be known. Ashby probably already had several friends in the amateur astronomy community and his connection to Kalamazoo College helped attract younger students to the new organization. This is clear from extraordinary group photographs Cathy has in her family collection (see page 13), along with an invaluable newspaper clipping. The names of several prominent amateur astronomers in Kalamazoo at the time are hand-written on the back of one group photo. Many are names well-known and others are ones I've discovered in additional research. These include Hans & Lillian Baldauf, Alfred Bryant, Jim Hopkins, Leonard Hayden, Edgar Pashby, William Persons, James Sigler, Louis Stadler, and Dr. Lawrence Upjohn. The clipping starts off by saying "astronomy students in Kalamazoo," suggesting that students from K-College (and perhaps even Western Michigan College) were involved from the start. For this meeting, members gathered in Ashby's home at 437 Stone Street, very close to both campuses. The group photographs clearly show student-age people in it, so the KAAA began with both young and old alike.

The clipping, which has a hand-written date of September 28, 1936 on it, publicizes the "first meeting of the year Wednesday evening, at 7:30 p.m." That would make the meeting date September 30th, since the 28th was a Monday. "First meeting of the year" could mean the school year or of the season, since the KAAA met from September – May at first. However, I speculate this could be the first formal meeting of the KAAA *ever*. The newspaper clipping says that "business pertinent to the operation of the organization's activities will be brought before the group." This seems like an appropriate topic to discuss at an inaugural meeting. And why would Ashby save this clipping if it weren't important? However, the KAAA did regularly meet in Ashby's observatory for viewing before then. Cathy provided me with an "Observatory Record" of visitors kept by Ashby. The first



The Leonard James Ashby Telescope located within Owl Observatory at the Kalamazoo Nature Center.



KAAA gathering was recorded on May 6, 1936. The K-College astronomy class, taught by Prof. John Hornbeck, met at Ashby's observatory two days earlier.

Leonard & Nona Ashby were members of the KAAA for only the first four years it seems. In 1940, they moved to Ann Arbor where Leonard became a student at the University of Michigan. His name appears on a list of registered students dated from July 1, 1940 to June 30, 1941. In *The Michigan Alumnus* (Index Volume LI dated October 7, 1944 to September 22, 1945), he held the job title of Special Instructor of Physics from 1943 – 1944. Ashby died unexpectedly on June 12, 1945. He developed some sort of infection and the doctors tried to treat it by raising his body temperature. This procedure was done improperly, and his spleen burst. He was only 53 years old. It's not clear if Nona remained a member of the KAAA after her husband's death, but she did return to Kalamazoo – living at 303 Woodward Avenue. She passed away in August 1966 at the age of 77. All members of the Ashby Family are buried at Mountain Home Cemetery in Kalamazoo.

Thanks to the rediscovery of Leonard James Ashby, we now have a clearer understanding of the Kalamazoo Astronomical Society's origins. On June 23, 2019, the KAS Board voted unanimously to approve my proposal to name the new Owl Observatory telescope after Mr. Ashby, our founder and first president. It seems a fitting tribute to a talented man who lived an interesting, but brief life. As an engineer, he would appreciate the mechanical precision of our new Astro-Physics 1600GTO German mount with capabilities he could only dream of. Many thousands of people from the KAS membership, to students, and the general public will enjoy views of the universe for decades to come through the telescope dedicated in his honor.

Richard Bell is one of only three lifetime members and the longest-serving president in KAS history.



Kalamazoo Amateur Astronomical Association (circa late-1930s)

From left to right: Dr. Lawrence N. Upjohn, unknown man (behind refractor), Leonard Hadyn, unknown man (behind Leonard), unknown man (left of reflector), Louis Stadler (front), Jimmie Sigler, Mrs. Hadyn, Leonard James Ashby, Nona Ashby, Edgar Pashby (behind Nona), Hans Baldauf (front and center), Shiley? (behind Hans), Alfred Bryant (in profile), unknown man, Harriet Sigler (partial), Jim Hopkins, Fred Ashby (kneeling), Lillian Baldauf, unknown woman, unknown woman, Gratia Upjohn (dark dress), Bertha Ashby (front), William Persons, unknown woman (behind telescope), unknown man sitting on far right.



KAAA members gather for an observing session. Does anyone recognize the building in the background?