



J. Ernest Grant Yalden
1870-1937

Memorialized by the
J. Ernest Grant Yalden Memorial Fund in
The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
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At noon one day in the early spring of 1919, a tall, angular man with a pointed beard and twinkling eyes wandered into my New York office and told me he had a 3-inch telescope and wanted to know what to do with it. I told him. In 1925 he became President of the American Association of Variable Star Observers.

The man referred to was James Ernest Grant Yalden. Writing in a 1937 issue of *Popular Astronomy*, David B. Pickering remembered Ernest Yalden as a Renaissance man of the Twentieth Century—astronomer, educator, administrator, outdoorsman, navigator, seaman, mineralogist, photographer, musician, draftsman, inventor and author.

His talents were many and diverse... Care and precision and a joyous enthusiasm marked each step of his progress in whatever he had in hand, and never was he too busy—too bound to his task—to stop and lend a helping hand to others.

Ernest, as he came to be called, was born in England on February 6, 1870, in the London suburb of Brixton. His father's family had been prominent in public life since the time of William the Conqueror. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey Yalden, High Sheriff of Winchester, protected the city's Flemish guild weavers by defying Henry II, the bankrupt king of England, when Henry threatened to seize the weavers' properties. Three other Yaldens were to serve as mayor of Winchester in later centuries.

Ernest's father, James, was hired by the city of Newark, New Jersey, to organize its accounting system. He came to the United States to

accomplish that task, later helped professionalize accounting in this country and served as the first president of the American Association of Certified Public Accountants.

Ernest arrived in America at the age of twelve and attended the Riverside Academy, a military school in Poughkeepsie, New York. There he showed a keen interest in the sciences and was particularly adept at mathematics. He continued his education at New York University, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and, in 1893, received a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering. Upon graduation, he went to Pittsburgh to work as an engineer for the Carnegie Steel Company. There he met and began to court Margaret Lyon, whose father, James Lyon, was a leader in the city's glass industry. In 1895, Ernest and Margaret married.

Ernest's personal life was thriving, but after a year in Pittsburgh in the steel industry, he felt ready for a career change.

Back in New York City, plans were being made for the creation of a special new school to prepare uneducated Jewish immigrants for jobs in the construction and engineering trades—to teach boys and young men practical skills that would help them earn decent incomes. The idea for the school came from the trustees of the Baron de Hirsch Fund in America, established by Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-96), a German-born Jewish philanthropist.

By 1894 the Trustees of the Baron de Hirsch Fund began looking for a superintendent to design a curriculum and run their school. J. Ernest G. Yalden, an interested candidate, advocated modeling the school on the English apprenticeship system—a “learning by doing” system that, in the United States at that time, was quite novel and considered experimental. This concept of “hands-on experience” appealed to the directors, along with Ernest Yalden's “training and experience, combined with a

remarkable fertility of ideas and sober judgment" (*History of The Baron de Hirsch Fund, S. Joseph, 1935*). Ernest got the job and spent the next 25 years working hard at it.

Under Yalden's direction, the trade school attracted much interest and attention. Classes were run as shops; instructors acted as foremen and students as workers, learning carpentry, machine engineering, plumbing, painting and printing. The school grew; enrollment was healthy.

Ernest and Margaret settled in Leonia, New Jersey, where Margaret pursued her interests in theatre, literature and current events by working with civic and cultural organizations. She helped establish the Leonia Public Library and took a special pride in its development.

Throughout the years Ernest directed the Baron de Hirsch Trade School, he managed to pursue many hobbies and avocations "after hours." When he retired in the 1920s, he was able to devote even more time to them, and in 1932 *The Bergen Record* reported them at length in a profile:

Yalden is a nature lover. His home on Woodridge Place says that. A cozy, old-fashioned house, it is set among lofty firs and maples set out years ago by the scientist. In the rear is a garden in which he spends many hours.

He is a revered figure in Leonia. On an afternoon, he may be seen walking through the town with Biddle, his rust-colored cocker spaniel. He is popular with high school students and has lectured for the high school mathematics club on many occasions.

The newspaper reported that Yalden had organized a section of the American Association

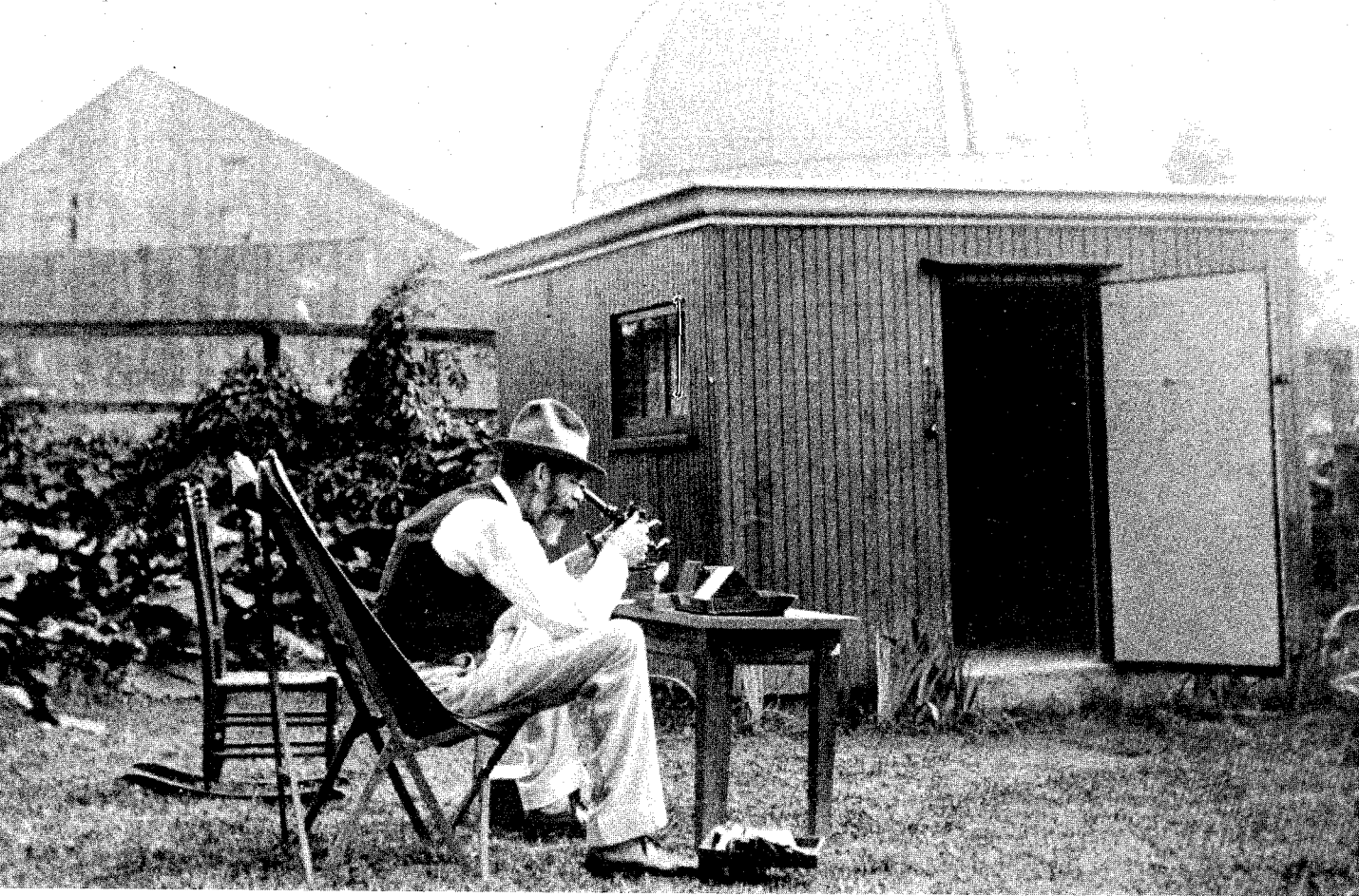


From left to right: Yalden; Annie Jump Cannon, an astronomer with the Harvard College Observatory; and William T. Olcott, one of the founders of The American Association of Variable Star Observers. The year was 1929.

of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO) to observe occultations (the passage of celestial bodies in front of one another) but emphasized that,

While astronomy plays a major role in the life of this noted Leonia scientist, it is by no means his sole occupation. Confirming his belief that 'hobbies keep one out of mischief,' Prof. Yalden plays with no less than fourteen of them. Every one of them he is in love with, for he also maintains that it is best to work at what one loves.

Ernest Yalden, *The Bergen Record* further reported, designed and constructed sun dials "in all shapes and sizes"; possessed a valuable library of texts in astronomy, mathematics and mechan-



Yalden's interest in astronomy led him to build an observatory in his own backyard.

ics; was a seasoned sailor who had "the tang of the sea in his veins"; and invented a camera in 1897 along the same lines as the Graflex camera (which arrived on the market before Yalden was able to patent his).

Perhaps many Leonia residents who read the *Record's* profile of Ernest Yalden already knew him as "the man with a big dome at his house." For Yalden had designed and supervised the construction of his own observatory, where he installed sophisticated equipment to examine the movements of planets and stars.

He also developed a new tent—the "Yalden tent," which was sold by camping equipment dealers.

As a navigator, wrote Pickering, Yalden "had once piloted a great steamer from New York to Bermuda by dead reckoning alone," trained merchant marines as navigators during the First World War and built many small crafts, from canoes to yawls.

He founded the Mineralogy Club of New York and the "Whetstone Club," a group of local men who met regularly to discuss their hobbies.

He was fascinated with sun dials, published a monograph on the subject for the Museum of Industrial Arts in New York and built one for the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. David Pickering described it as "an ornate stone shaft eleven feet high on which are five separate dials."

Music also played a role in Ernest Yalden's life. He not only organized and conducted an orchestra in Leonia, arranging scores for the various instruments, but he also performed as clarinetist.

At home in Leonia, N.J., Ernest Yalden posed for this picture with his wife, Margaret, and William Olcott.





Amherst College Observatory, 1929.
 Left to right: Yalden, Dr. Alice H. Farnsworth
 (AAVSO President 1930), Prof. W. K. Green
 (Amherst College Observatory Director), David B.
 Pickering (AAVSO President 1918-19, 1928-29).

On February 22, 1937, sixteen days after his 67th birthday, Ernest Yalden suffered a heart attack and died at home.

At the AAVSO meeting three months later, Ernest Yalden was remembered fondly by a friend who said,

Everything he touched bore the marks of the master craftsman's care and skill. He sent me once as a gift a small metallic measure with the quotation from Kepler: "To measure is to know."

Alert to the last, eager, patient, busy, deeply sympathetic with all the wonders of earth and sea and sky, he was also, as Lowell says of Lincoln, "Fruitful and friendly to all humankind."

"He was delightful, full of fun," one AAVSO member recalled more than forty years after

Yalden's death. "He was very human and very lively in meetings. He was full of ideas and had a lot of stories to tell."

David Pickering offered still another tribute to Ernest Yalden in 1937:

By his example we have learned that patience and thoroughness bring skill and success; that doing things for yourself brings independence; that, loving life, we should learn how best to use it.

The J. Ernest Grant Yalden Memorial Fund in The New York Community Trust was established in the Will of Margaret Yalden, who outlived her husband by more than sixteen years. The Fund was created to provide scholarships that would enable deserving boys and girls from the Leonia, New Jersey, area to pursue higher educations.



The New York Community Trust is a publicly supported community foundation that provides centralized management for many charitable funds. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for the J. Ernest Grant Yalden Memorial Fund is Morgan Guaranty Trust Company.