



# Robert G. Aitken

## The Twenty-First Bruce Medalist

Joseph S. Tenn

Sonoma State University

Robert Grant  
Aitken

31 December 1864 - 29  
October 1951<sup>1</sup>

1926 Bruce Medalist

(photograph 1923,  
courtesy of the Mary Lea  
Shane Archives of Lick  
Observatory, University  
of California, Santa Cruz)

<sup>1</sup>The author regrets that  
Aitken's birth date was  
given incorrectly in  
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106 (Jul/Aug 1986).

**A**fter awarding two successive Bruce Medals to theoretical astrophysicists in their forties, the A.S.P. returned to a more familiar type of medalist, a senior astronomer who still looked through telescopes. Although most observers had turned to photography and spectroscopy, Robert G. Aitken was still observing visually, and he was so good at it that he was the world's leader in the discovery and measurement of double stars.

Born shortly after the California gold rush in the small mining town of Jackson, Aitken entered Williams College intending to become a minister. There he was inspired by astronomy professor Truman H. Safford and took his B.A. in mathematics instead. Returning to California, he became an instructor of mathematics and astronomy, first at Livermore College, and later at the University of the Pacific, then in San Jose. Soon he was taking classes on field trips to the Lick Observatory on nearby Mt. Hamilton.

In 1894 he wrote Lick director (and A.S.P. founder) Edward S. Holden,

Please tell me under what conditions and at what expense it will be possible for me to become a student at the Lick Observatory for a few weeks during June or July. I am teaching a class in Descriptive Astronomy and have charge of our Observatory ... But all the knowledge I have of the use of these instruments I have acquired without instruction. I should like now to have skilled instruction especially in the use of the transit and the micrometer, if only for a week, so that I may be able to make practical use of these instruments here.

Holden suggested that Aitken formally apply "to be enrolled as a special student" at the Lick Observatory for two weeks. All went well, and by November Aitken was writing, "Now that my transit instrument is in good shape I want some other definite observing work to do."

Soon afterward he was asking Holden whether he could keep his teaching job and work summers on an advanced degree in astronomy at Lick. Or, better yet, might he obtain a fellowship which would allow him to support his family while studying astronomy full-time. He wrote Holden,

It is like this, Professor, I am tired of teaching . . . under the management of men who do not seem to know their own minds thoroughly and can therefore give no assurance of a permanent position to any of their teachers. If I leave here I want to devote my time to Astronomy . . .

**Moving to Mt. Hamilton was an adventure, Robert Aitken recalled:**

On the morning of June 1, 1895, the Aitken family, father, mother, and three little children, counting six-months' old baby Malcolm, arose unusually early, for they had to get breakfast and make their way . . . to the Vendome Hotel in time to take their places in or on the great four-horse stage which started for the Lick Observatory on Mt. Hamilton shortly before 7:30 every morning except Sunday. Dr. E.S. Holden, director of the Observatory, had given me the privilege of spending the summer there as a special student...

Two weeks later he was offered a one-year appointment as an assistant astronomer. He took it and stayed forty years. In the 1890s life on the mountain could be quite lonely. Before the Aitkens arrived, there were only 28 persons in residence, including seven astronomers and two astronomers' wives. Aitken found

