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GOODYEAR

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Physicist makes quantum leap

by Mike Walker

"I felt like turning around and leaving. I couldn't imagine myself in such a dead place."

This was Dr. Donald Betts' initial reaction to the U of A physics department when he came to Edmonton in 1955. But he had to stay — he was broke and his wife was pregnant.

This August, after 25 years, Betts is finally leaving the U of A. In September he will become Dean of Arts and Science at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

His feelings about the university have changed over the years however. "I'll be sorry to leave ... the U of A has treated me well," he says.

He sips coffee in his warm sunfilled office and recalls his arrival in 1955 as a post-doctoral fellow fresh from McGill University. Intellectually, he says "the university physics department was very dead." In fact, he says at first he was the only member of the department actually doing research.

Now he proudly points out that the U of A physics department is one of the best in Canada.

One of Betts' first tasks at the U of A was to help design the Physics Building. In 1955 the physics department shared the Old Arts building with a number of other science departments, the university administration and the entire Faculty of Arts.

Because the department had so little space, three lab sessions were held every afternoon. "By six o'clock you could cut the air with a knife," Betts says.

A new Physics Building had already been planned, he says, but it would have left the department with even less space than before. So a group including Betts demanded a new design, he recalls. "In 1956-57 we (the physicists) replanned the building, and it's still big enough."

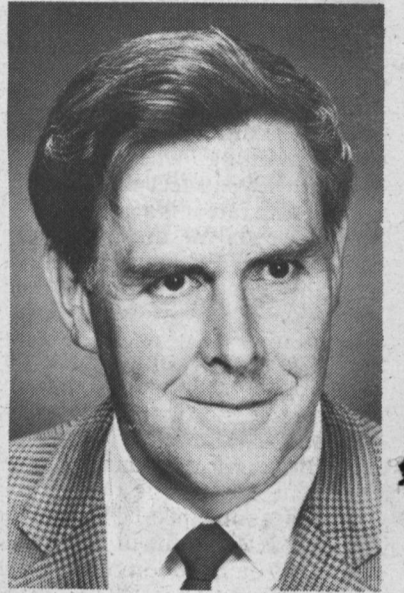
But it is Betts' non-architectural accomplishments which have earned him an international reputation among physicists. Betts has held offices in various professional associations — director of the Theoretical Physics Institute, president of the Canadian Association of Physicists and chairman of the International

Commission on Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics.

He counts as a major contribution the initiation, while he was chairman of this last organization, of the Boltzmann Gold Medal for achievements in thermodynamics and statistical mechanics.

But Betts has also been involved in interpreting science for the layman.

Since 1977 he has hosted a Wednesday morning CBC radio program on general scientific topics.



Dr. Donald Betts

He says the program originated when he called CBC early one morning to comment, on the air, about the recent Nobel Prizes. Afterward, he says, "the producer said, 'That was very nice. Can we call you sometime about some other subject?'"

"Two weeks later, there was a headline in *The Edmonton Journal* about the Russians controlling our weather. It was completely absurd. It came from Ottawa from someone who was trained as a town planner."

The CBC asked him to comment the next morning. The result was a regular time slot, in which Betts usually interviews a colleague from another discipline. "I have a completely free hand," he says, "as long as I can do it in five minutes."

He says he would like to do a similar program in Halifax, but it seems there is already a CBC radio program there almost identical to his. So, he says, "I guess I'll have to wait."

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