

“It was after we were at the luncheon table,” Konopinski recalls, “that Fermi surprised us with the question ‘but where is everybody?’ It was his way of putting it that drew laughs from us.”

York, who does not recall the preliminary conversation on the walk to Fuller Lodge, does remember that “virtually apropos of nothing Fermi said, ‘Don’t you ever wonder where everybody is?’ Somehow . . . we all knew he meant extra-terrestrials.”

Teller remembers the question in much the same way. “The discussion had nothing to do with astronomy or with extraterrestrial beings. I think it was some down-to-earth topic. Then, in the middle of this conversation, Fermi came out with the quite unexpected question ‘Where is everybody?’ . . . The result of his question was general laughter because of the strange fact that in spite of Fermi’s question coming from the clear blue, everybody around the table seemed to understand at once that he was talking about extraterrestrial life.

“I do not believe that much came of this conversation, except perhaps a statement that the distances to the next location of living beings may be very great and that, indeed, as far as our galaxy is concerned, we are living somewhere in the sticks, far removed from the metropolitan area of the galactic center.”

York believes that Fermi was somewhat more expansive and “followed up with a series of calculations on the probability of earthlike planets, the probability of life given an earth, the probability of humans given life, the likely rise and duration of high technology, and so on. He concluded on the basis of such calculations that we ought to have been visited long ago and many times over. As I recall, he went on to conclude that the reason we hadn’t been visited might be that interstellar flight is impossible, or, if it is possible, always judged to be not worth the effort, or technological civilization doesn’t last long enough for it to happen.” York confessed to being hazy about these last remarks.

In summary, Fermi did ask the question, and perhaps not surprisingly, issues still debated today were part of the discussion. Certainly, the line of argument that York remembers became familiar a decade later as the Drake-Greenbank Equation.^{6,7}

A final point: the date of the conversation. York is clearest on the date. “The conversation was either in the summer of 1950, 1951, or 1952, very probably 1951, and took place . . . when I was visiting LASL in connection with the forthcoming Greenhouse tests—specifically, the George shot.” The George test occurred on May 8, 1951, suggesting a 1950 date. Surviving correspondence from the time indicates that Fermi was an annual summer visitor during the years in question. Unfortunately, attendance and travel records for those years have been destroyed. However, we have the evidence of the cartoon Konopinski mentions. Drawn by Alan Dunn, it was published in the May 20, 1950, issue of *The New Yorker*. It seems quite probable that the incident of Fermi’s question occurred in the summer of 1950.

I am grateful to Hans Mark and to the three surviving participants for their accounts. These accounts, together with my letters of inquiry, are reproduced in the following pages.