

Los Alamos

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Dr. Herbert York
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Dear Dr. York:

There is a story about Fermi's days in Los Alamos that is making the rounds in the SETI (search for extraterrestrial intelligence) communities which has, unfortunately, little solid basis. It was Sagan who first used it in his book with Shklovski, but Carl has forgotten where or from whom he heard it. Hans Mark has given me a secondhand account from a retelling he heard in the early fifties; Edward Teller has also provided his recollection of the event. Several people have suggested that you might be a source.

The way the story is being told these days is that the lunchtime conversation turned to the possibility of interstellar travel, particularly faster-than-light travel. Fermi became engrossed in a quick calculation and then announced "If you are right, then where is everybody?" The implication of the question is that if interstellar travel is feasible, then the Galaxy would have been filled long ago by beings who originated somewhere else. Teller says that the conversation had moved on when Fermi asked "Where is everybody?" out of the blue, and without the qualifier. He says there was general laughter because everyone realized that Fermi was talking about extraterrestrials (I enclose a copy of Teller's letter).

Do you have any firsthand information about this little tale? If so, your help and a written description of the events as you know them would be of great help. This story is slipping too rapidly into legend, and changes with each retelling. I am currently editing the proceedings of a conference called "Interstellar Migration and the Human Experience" which was held here last year. The book will be published by the University of California press next year, and I would very much like to include an accurate account of the Fermi Story.

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely yours,

Eric

Eric M. Jones

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ENC. - a/s
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