

**“WHERE IS EVERYBODY?”
AN ACCOUNT OF FERMI’S QUESTION**

by

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ABSTRACT

Fermi’s famous question, now central to debates about the prevalence of extraterrestrial civilizations, arose during a luncheon conversation with Emil Konopinski, Edward Teller, and Herbert York in the summer of 1950. Fermi’s companions on that day have provided accounts of the incident.

Part of the current debate about the existence and prevalence of extraterrestrials concerns interstellar travel and settlement.¹⁻³ In 1975, Michael Hart argued that interstellar travel would be feasible for a technologically advanced civilization and that a migration would fill the Galaxy in a few million years.⁴ Since that interval is short compared with the age of the Galaxy, he then concluded that the absence of settlers or evidence of their engineering projects in the Solar System meant that there are no extraterrestrials.

Newman, Sagan, and Shklovski^{2,5} recall that a legend of science says that Enrico Fermi asked the question, “Where are they?” during a visit to Los Alamos during the Second World War or shortly thereafter. Fermi’s question has been mentioned in several other recent publications, but historical basis for the attribution has not been established. Thanks to the excellent memory of Hans Mark, who had heard a retelling at Los Alamos in the early 1950s, we now know that Fermi did make the remark during a lunchtime conversation about 1950. His companions were Emil Konopinski, Edward Teller, and Herbert York. All three have provided accounts of the incident.

We begin with Konopinski: “I have only fragmentary recollections about the occasion. . . . I do have a fairly clear memory of how the discussion of extra-terrestrials got started—while Enrico, Edward, Herb York, and I were walking to lunch at Fuller Lodge.

“When I joined the party, I found being discussed evidence about flying saucers. That immediately brought to my mind a cartoon I had recently seen in the New Yorker, explaining why public trash cans were disappearing from the streets of New York City. The New York papers were making a fuss about that. The cartoon showed what was evidently a flying saucer sitting in the background and, streaming toward it, ‘little green men’ (endowed with antennas) carrying the trash cans. More amusing was Fermi’s comment, that it was a very reasonable theory since it accounted for two separate phenomena: the reports of flying saucers as well as the disappearance of the trash cans. There ensued a discussion as to whether the saucers could somehow exceed the speed of light.”