

DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

How It All Began

"I was being asked to turn my back on something great—a job for life, backed by the taxing power of the state, with pension and full tenure, for a chance to tackle real fringe science with uncertain funding."

In previous columns, I've told the tale of how New Jersey industrialist Richard Factor, WA2IKL, founded the nonprofit SETI League, in the wake of Congress cancelling the short-lived NASA SETI program. But how exactly did I, a tenured full professor with a promising academic career, get roped into becoming its executive director? Well, campers, gather 'round the fire, and I'll tell you a little tale:

Richard was a ham friend. Since he didn't live nearby, he'd call me on the telephone, maybe once a year so we could catch up on our lives. Early one December, Richard rang me up. It was a call I'd long remember.

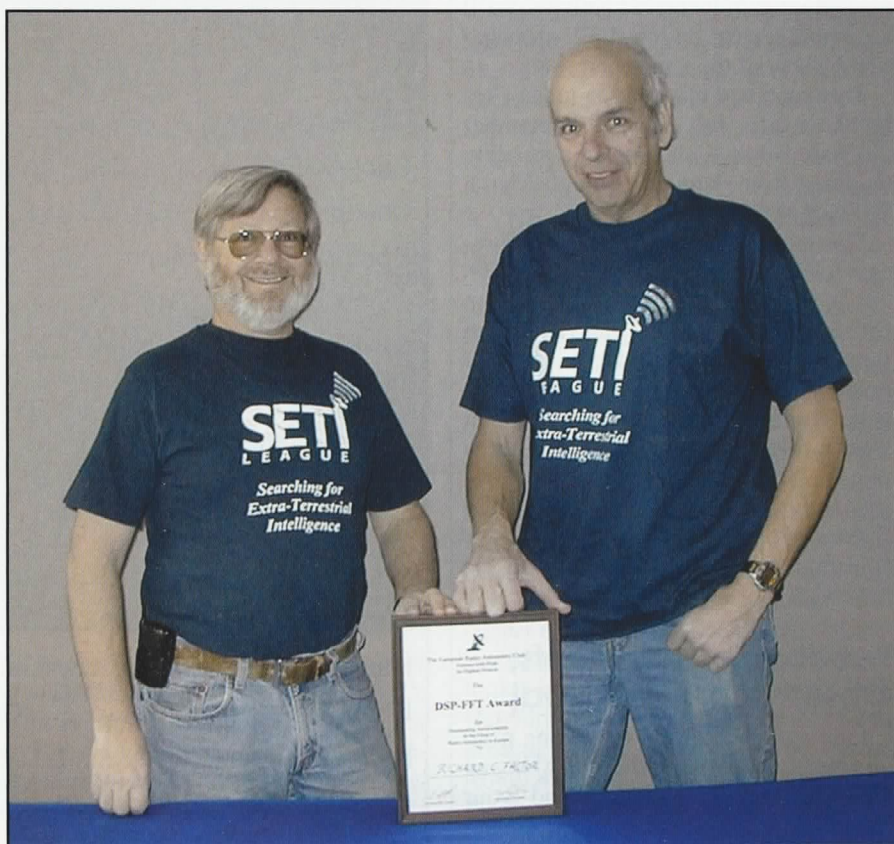
My wife had gone out Christmas shopping. I was home alone with lots of time to talk to my friend Richard on the phone.

"So, what's new with you?" he asked. He kept his questions short to give me lots of time to file as detailed a report as I was wont to give. This time I tried to make it clear that I had had a busy and most interesting year teaching some, and flying some, and getting on the air, not very often, but just to talk to here and there.

"And you?" I reciprocated. "Tell me, how's your life? Are you still a bachelor? Did you ever take a wife?"

"I may be deluded," Richard said, "but I'm no dunce. Marriage is the same mistake I never did make once." Richard then went on, of matters serious and petty, until he asked me, "Do you know what's going on with SETI?"

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The author, N6TX (left), and SETI League founder and president Richard Factor, WA2IKL, still run The SETI League together, and they talk on the telephone every December.

I was well aware that NASA's funding had been cut, and the search for life was in its final phases. However . . . maybe private funding would appear to save the day. "We can carry on," I said. There has to be a way. Richard, and I talked on for an hour and a half.

This situation could make you cry, or maybe laugh.

It's no more a secret, so now I'm free to tell Richard's callsign—WA2IKL.

Then he dropped his bombshell, and at last I came to see this wasn't idle chitchat. He was interviewing me!

"I'm impressed there's so much about SETI that you know. I've founded a nonprofit. Would you like to run the show?"

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something great—a job for life, backed by the taxing power of the state, with pension and full tenure, for a chance to tackle real fringe science with uncertain funding. I began to feel there was just no way that I could pass up such a great deal! Therefore, I told Richard that his offer had a strange appeal.

I first took a sabbatical from teaching, just to find I liked the change. Thus, the next semester, I resigned. Those 20 years of teaching quickly slipped into the past.

Now for two decades I've run The SETI League. It's been a blast! The classroom was another life that I can scarcely remember, and all because my ham friend, Richard, called me that December.

73, Paul, N6TX