

19. Hoppy Stories

Employees of Corning-Tropel Inc.

There is probably no one in the history of the Institute who is more beloved by his students, colleagues, and everyone who knows him than Bob Hopkins. A number of his friends and former students formalized their affection by endowing the Robert E. Hopkins Chair of Optical Engineering in his name. James Fienup is the first holder of this chair. A celebration was held on October 9, 2001, in honor of his joining the faculty. As a part of the festivities John Bruning, the CEO of Corning-Tropel, the company that Bob co-founded, gave a speech. Dr. Bruning described Hopkins:

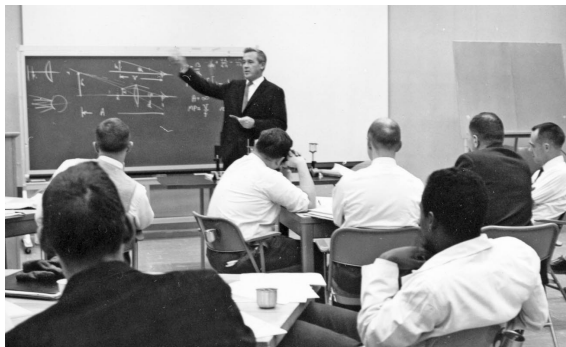
Hopkins, who directed the Institute of Optics from 1954 to 1965, stands out as one of the Institute's most influential figures, as an optics entrepreneur, an innovator in the field of lens and optical-system design, and as a teacher and mentor for hundreds of students. "Bob Hopkins could look at a lens and tell if it would work," according to Professor Duncan Moore '74 (Ph.D.), one of Hopkins's former graduate students. "He shaped assignments to encourage a hands-on approach."

Bob Hopkins was a strong contributor to the success of many individuals and companies that have become important names in the optical industry. The recently endowed Hopkins Chair at the Institute was founded in his honor to carry forward the tradition of excellence in applied optics and optical engineering that he started at the Institute and at Tropel.

In his speech Bruning also recounted a series of humorous anecdotes that he had collected from current and past employees of Tropel.

The "Hoppy stories" that he collected are familiar to anyone who passed through the Institute in the period from the 1930s to the 1980s. Hoppy was the stereotypical absent-minded professor, even when he was in industry. He was brilliant in his intellectual endeavors, kind to a fault, but a little detached from the details of life around him.

Scattered throughout this section and the next one are a series of these Hoppy stories contributed by various Tropel employees.



Hoppy lecturing on lens design.

Hoppy Story: Damn Computers!

Vance Carpenter

One time in class (late 1960s), Bob was scribbling some numbers on the blackboard and came to a point where he couldn't proceed until he subtracted two numbers—he stopped, hesitated, turned around to the class and said, “Will someone please subtract for me, I've used the calculator so long I can't subtract any more.”

Hoppy Story: Who's Driving?

Mark Westcott

When Bob was still teaching at the Institute, he was car-pooling with another professor. One day after classes, the two of them were returning home and Bob was driving. When he drove past the exit which led to the other professor's home, his passenger remarked, "Bob, you missed my exit." Bob replied: "Oh, I thought you were driving."

[*Editor's note:* I must come to Hoppy's defense on this one. He was not the only absent-minded person in the Rochester optics scene. I have it on good authority that a variant of this story actually occurred when Erich Marchand and Max Herzberger were car-pooling to work at the Kodak Hawkeye plant. Both were inveterate chess players who played mental chess matches as they drove back and forth. One morning a checkmate was perilously close when the plant gate passed by unnoted, leading to the exchange reported above. There is no question that both Hopkins and Marchand were capable of concentrating on the problem at hand to the exclusion of all else.

Erich was a lifemaster chess player who was New York State champion four years. After he retired from Kodak he taught classes part-time at the University and coached the student chess club. He even had a major tournament named for him. He often played exhibitions in which he took on the entire club in simultaneous matches. He also amused himself at playing Blackjack at casinos in Las Vegas and Reno. He could easily remember all the cards played in a seven-deck game, but the casinos quickly learned of his skills, and after they found that hostesses offering free drinks were not enough distraction, they began using a new deck for each deal or simply closing the table down when he arrived.]

Hoppy Story: Mike Hercher's New Jacket

Robert Maier

Hopkins had a summer place up in the hills around Wayland, New York. He periodically invited people down for an outing. On one such occasion Institute of Optics folks, including some grad students, were invited down there. Mike Hercher was an instructor at the Institute, and a consultant to Tropel. Mike removed his new sports jacket, and laid it on the grass in order to pitch horse shoes. Meanwhile, Hoppy set about giving others a demonstration of his new riding lawn mower. You can guess what happened next.

Hoppy Story: Computer Lab

Robert Maier

The teaching lab was just down the hall from Hoppy's office—3 doors. He came in one morning to illustrate a point to the class, but soon realized he'd left his computer output in his office. So, he excused himself and went to his office to retrieve the output. Returning with the output, he inadvertently left his reading glasses in his office. So, back he went for his glasses, returning with his glasses, but no computer output. This process repeated itself about four times before he came back with both the output and his glasses.

Hoppy Story: Show Me the Light

Mark Wescott

During the mid-1970s, Tropel developed a $1\times$ lens for a wafer lithography system, and Bob was in the thick of it. He could be frequently found in the lab, shooting images, developing and evaluating tests on silicon wafers. The performance of the lens was very sensitive to the polarization state of the imaging beam, and images viewed through a microscope gave colorful clues to subtle aberrations. One day, while engrossed with a particularly elusive problem, Bob burst out of the lab and exclaimed to no one in particular, “Who the hell around here knows anything about polarized light?!!”

Hoppy Story: The Pete Backer Story

Robert Maier

Pete Backer was a marketing guy. He’d been with Tropel for a couple of years. Hoppy decided he wasn’t working out, and went to his office about 3:30 p.m. on a Friday afternoon to “let him go.” Pete was just leaving as Hoppy arrived. The conversation went like this:

Hoppy: “Are you going someplace?”

Pete: “Well, yes. Remember? I’m just leaving for two week’s vacation.”

Hoppy: “Oh. Well listen, I think we’re going to have to let you go, but we’ll talk about it when you get back. Have a nice vacation.”

Hoppy Story: The Trip to Corning

Robert Maier

Tropel had been consulting for Corning for several years, on a number of fronts. Hoppy and Charles Munnerlyn had spent the day in Corning on such a mission, returning to Fairport in Hoppy's VW Beetle. As they passed thru Naples, New York, they failed to notice the gas tank was near empty. Selecting the "high" road, they headed north out of Naples. Well up the mountain, the car chugged to a stop. They pushed it a bit, managing a "K" turn in the middle of route 64. Following this, they "coasted" over hill and dale covering a distance of nearly five miles, back into Naples, to a gas station that was miraculously still open at 11:30 p.m. on a Tuesday night. Bob's stories didn't always end that well.

Hoppy Story: To Catch a Thief

Vance Carpenter

At an illumination conference in Boulder Colorado in the late 1970s, Hoppy joined a group dinner at a local restaurant. After splitting the bill and lingering for conversation, they all got up and left the table. Moments later, an irate maitre'd ran out protesting that the bill was not paid. Bob had collected all the money and put it in his pocket.

Hoppy Story: Car Wash

Anthony R. Phillips

One morning Hoppy came in to work, dressed in a suit, which was normal. One side of his body was dripping wet. When asked what happened, he simply responded that he went through the car wash with the driver's window down.

Hoppy Story: The Price of Lenses

Anthony R. Phillips

Bob was once asked by a longtime customer why the prices of Tropol's lenses had gone up so much recently. Bob's answer was, "Well, you have to understand that we now have all these high-speed computers to do the design, and they are expensive."

Hoppy Story: Neanderthals

Vance Carpenter

During the era of Brian O'Brien when Hoppy was a graduate student, several students (minus Bob) were examining a binocular type instrument that had a particularly large interocular separation. One of the young physicists suggested that "anyone with such a large interocular spacing must be a Neanderthal". Being inquisitive and scientific, the young physicists further conjectured that there might indeed be a correlation between a person's intelligence and their interocular distance. The physicists gathered data, fit a curve, and discovered a surprisingly strong correlation between their own test scores and inter-ocular distances. They showed the data to Hoppy who thought the study was both compelling and fascinating. When they measured his interocular distance, which fell way below the line, Bob immediately dismissed the study as unscientific and ridiculous.