

A Scientific American

by

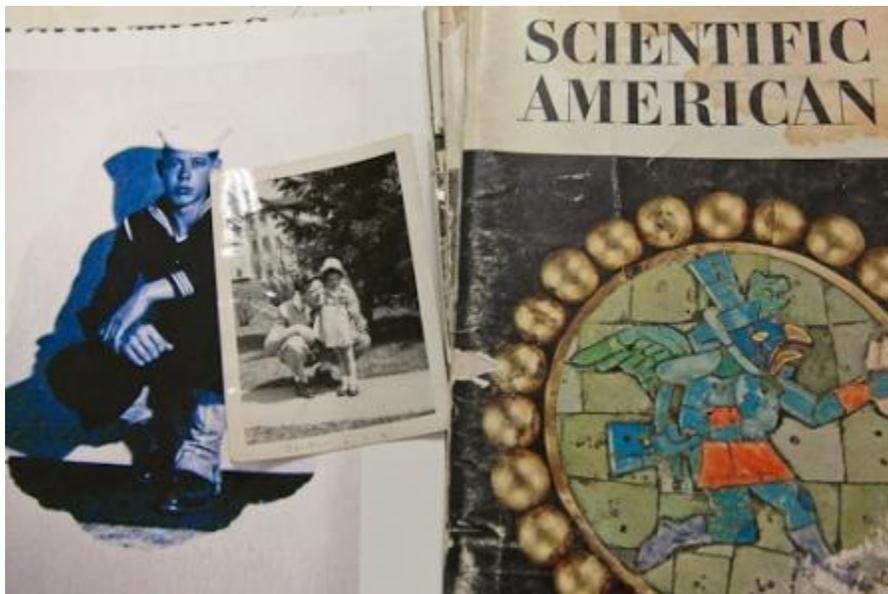
Susan E. Swanberg

My father didn't go to college, but he was a scientist. After he died, I inherited his old copies of Scientific American—dating from the 1960s to the early 2000s. My father could be a prickly man, and we were estranged when he died. His death came as a surprise to all of us because we thought he was made of more durable stuff. I'd hoped there would be time to mend things.

Soon after he died, my mother presented me with a trove of my father's magazines, saying, "He would have wanted you to have these." I gasped as I thumbed through each dusty issue and recalled how my father had planted the seeds of a scientist's curiosity in my young brain, seeds that would blossom years later when I returned to school to study for a Ph.D. in genetics.

I remembered some of the covers—the gull experiment picture on the cover of the October 1967 issue, the pre-Columbian medallion on the cover of the April 1966 issue and the salmon in a water tunnel on the cover of the August 1965 issue. I recalled how each magazine would sit proudly on our coffee table until the next month's issue arrived.

As I examined my father's collection, I saw on each cover—recorded in his handwriting—notes about the stories that most interested him. Each note elicited a memory or revealed something new about my father. "Holograms" he scrawled on the February 1980 cover. He and a buddy invented an aircraft trainer—the first that used holographic images he would tell me.



My father was trained in the Navy as an electronics technician. His first job after receiving his discharge papers was with AMF, the company that invented the electronic pin spotter. He mastered calculus, physics and optics on his own. Along the way he worked his way into the aerospace industry. Eventually he became a licensed engineer and by the end of his career his business card said "Senior Project Scientist".

My father's favorite section of Scientific American was "The Amateur Scientist". "Seismometer" [sic] he wrote on the cover of the September 1975 issue. Inside at page 183 was the design for a seismometer, which my father might have used to build the "earthquake detector" in the backyard of his Southern California home.

Notes about lasers appeared on the covers of a number of issues. In our living room for many years sat what he called his "laser". I never saw a demonstration, but I have no doubt that it worked. When he died, my father had over a dozen patents in his name and the name of whatever company he worked for at the time each invention was conceived.

Some of the notes were cryptic: "Lemon meringue pie", "Judo", "Sailing", "Hang gliding". The pie was probably a reference to my father's favorite desert, which my mother often baked. Were the other notes about dreams unfulfilled? I will never know now, but when I pick up one of the brittle magazines, I can imagine how excited he must have felt when a new, shiny issue of Scientific American arrived in the mail.

END

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