

SCIENCE

VOL. 80

FRIDAY, AUGUST 24, 1934

No. 2069

<i>Reminiscences of Physics and Physicists: SIR JOSEPH J. THOMSON</i>	169	<i>D. COURTNEY and RALPH SCHOPP. Lantern Slides on "Frosted" Gelatine: PROFESSOR C. E. POWER</i>	188
<i>Rock Formations of Death Valley, California: DR. L. F. NOBLE</i>	173	<i>Special Articles:</i>	
<i>Scientific Events:</i>		<i>Autocatalytic Activation of Trypsinogen in the Presence of Concentrated Ammonium or Magnesium Sulfate: DR. M. KUNITZ and DR. J. H. NORTHROP. Crystalline Progesterin: W. M. ALLEN and PROFESSOR O. WINTERSTEINER. Life Span of Platypocilus, Xiphophorus and Their Hybrids in the Laboratory: PROFESSOR A. W. BELLAMY. Sexual Rhythm in the Pelecypod Mollusk Tereido: PROFESSOR W. R. COE</i>	190
<i>Scientific Notes and News</i>	181		
<i>Discussion:</i>		<i>Science News</i>	5
<i>The Photomicrographic Reproduction of Documents: DR. ATHERTON SEIDELL. The Taconic and Appalachian Orogenies in the Hudson River Region: DR. JAMES F. PEPPER. Cultivated Apple Chromosomes: DR. MURIEL V. ROSCOE. A Hypothetical "Sanctuary" for Ocean-Dwelling Seals: DR. C. HART MERRIAM</i>	184		
<i>Special Correspondence:</i>			
<i>Expeditions of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences</i>	187		
<i>Scientific Apparatus and Laboratory Methods: Photo-Electric Technique for the Counting of Microscopical Cells: ANDREW MOLDAVAN. A New Source of Illumination Adapted to Photography and Low-Power Microscopy: PROFESSOR WILBUR</i>			

SCIENCE: A Weekly Journal devoted to the Advancement of Science, edited by J. McKEEN CATTELL and published every Friday by

THE SCIENCE PRESS

New York City: Grand Central Terminal

Lancaster, Pa.

Garrison, N. Y.

Annual Subscription, \$6.00

Single Copies, 15 Cts.

SCIENCE is the official organ of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Information regarding membership in the Association may be secured from the office of the permanent secretary, in the Smithsonian Institution Building, Washington, D. C.

REMINISCENCES OF PHYSICS AND PHYSICISTS¹

By SIR JOSEPH J. THOMSON

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WHEN I, somewhat light-heartedly, accepted Sir William Bragg's invitation to give a Friday evening discourse on incidents in my memory connected with the Royal Institution, I did not realize how difficult the task would be. It was difficult to find a name for the lecture and difficult to know what to select from the many events which have occurred in the sixty years during which I have been connected with the institution or been in touch with those who were. Finally, I decided that perhaps the best thing I could do would be to choose some of the outstanding discoveries in this period and consider them in connection with the institution. Not a few of these have been made by its professors; all have been the subject

of "Friday evenings" soon after they were made when they had the charm and simplicity of youth. The experiments I shall show will be those made at the time. I do not think we can realize what great achievements these discoveries were unless we take into consideration the very rough means, according to modern ideas, which had to be used to make them.

This lecture must necessarily be somewhat personal, and I hope to be excused if I take this opportunity of acknowledging the debt I owe to my first teachers in science at the Owens College, Manchester. I went to the Owens College, now the University of Manchester, through a mere accident. It was intended that I should be an engineer, and in those days the only way to do this was to be apprenticed to some big engineering firm. The firm I was to go to had a very

¹ Friday evening discourse before the Royal Institution of Great Britain.