Happy Birthday PSSC

by Karen Kwitter

I took PSSC physics in my junior year of high school, 1966-1967 and it was a transforming experience. PSSC was experimental then; of the three or four physics sections at my school only one got to use this new curriculum. We were told we were in a new kind of physics class where students would learn about interesting topics and do new kinds of experiments. While my friends in the other sections were measuring boiling points and specific heats (and complaining about how boring their physics class was), we were using carbon paper and a ticker to measure the progress of a falling ball, playing with the ripple tank and making slits for Young's experiment with razor blades. That captured our interest!

Learning about mechanics and Newton's Laws through the problems in the text and our experiments was so much fun even the "non-science-oriented" students were into it. But the ripple tank was by far the most fun and most memorable component of that whole year. It was such a novel device to us; we loved using it and got really good at predicting and analyzing the interference patterns. Learning about light through these experiments was the most fascinating thing I had ever been exposed to. I had wondered about the explanation of oil-slick rainbows for years, and had even asked my teacher about it at the beginning of the term – he promised we would get to it, and when we did, I felt a visceral sense of satisfaction to finally *understand*. I fell in love with physics during that class, and it may be that this early introduction to measuring and understanding light is what spurred me to become an astronomer (one who does spectroscopy!).

The excitement of that class 40 years ago was no doubt due in part to our charismatic teacher and to the general high academic level of the students, but it is clear that a great deal of the success of that class was due to the PSSC curriculum and the way it introduced us at the same time to the mystery and the comprehensibility of the physical world. For that I will always be grateful.

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