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FROM

GIRLS HANDBOOK,

1966.

The Universe and Solar System

The Universe

No one knows how large the Universe may be, nor even if it has a limit at all. The *visible* Universe (that is, the extent to which the largest telescope can penetrate) reaches out as much as 1,000 million light years away from Earth. The Universe is made up of millions of Galaxies: each Galaxy is formed from millions of stars: the Sun is just one of the stars which belong to our own Galaxy.

Astronomical Distances

It would be impossible to talk of distances in the Universe in terms of miles. Instead, we refer to *light years* or the length of time which the light of a star takes to reach us. Light travels at a speed of 186,000 miles per second. The light of the Moon reaches the Earth in $1\frac{1}{2}$ seconds. The light of the Sun reaches the Earth in just over 8 min. The nearest star is 4 light years away from us. The nearest Galaxy, the Andromeda Nebula, is 2 million light years away. The most distant bodies yet photographed are about 1,000 million light years away. Another unit of distance is the *parsec*. One parsec equals 3.26 light years.

The Solar System

The Sun is the centre of the Solar System and revolving around it are nine major *Planets*, of which the Earth is one. There are also many minor planets, called *Asteroids*, which are in orbit round the Sun. Each planet rotates on its own axis: the Earth, for example, takes one complete day to turn a full circle. The Sun also rotates on an axis; it takes