



The Prairie Astronomer

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ALAS! WHERE GOEST THE ROMANCE?

Amateur astronomers look forward to getting out under a clear, dark sky to commune with nature next to their telescopes. With the possible exception of the biting winds of winter, they appreciate the proximity to the sky and their Maker. Not so, apparently, with professionals.

The latest wrinkle, as reported in *SCIENCE NEWS* is the next logical step in a series of technological advances that have pushed the professional astronomer farther from his telescope, and closer to the comfort of his hearth. As instruments have become more sophisticated and astronomers more specialized, observatories have become increasingly reluctant to let butter-fingered researchers manipulate the controls of their magnificent and sometimes multi-mirrored beauties. Telescopes are, more often, controlled by "night assistants" who are familiar with their workings, if not their eccentricities, while the astronomer closets himself in cozy comfort next to a shimmering display screen and clattering computer printers.

Now, astronomer Robert Kirshner has reported that he was able to sit in his office at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and direct the pointing of a telescope and control data-gathering equipment on Kitt Peak in Southern Arizona. The trial run lasted five nights, on each of which

Kirshner went to his office at midnight. There, at the data hook-up to Kitt Peak, he had an open voice line to the telescope operator, control of the data-taking equipment via terminal, and a TV screen that showed, every 30 seconds, what the telescope was seeing.

There are obvious advantages to this arrangement. On Kitt Peak, everything must be transported to the mountaintop, including food and most of the water. The cost is high. Travel to and from the mountain for researchers in various locations around the country is becoming increasingly expensive. Research time constricts

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June Meeting

The June meeting of the Prairie Astronomy Club will be held at Hyde Observatory on Tuesday, June 30, 7:30 p.m. Program Chairman Russ Genzmer reports that the program will be a slide-tape show on the eruption of Mount St. Helens.

Ron Veys is donating a copy of the NASA-JPL publication "THE COMET HALLEY HANDBOOK--AN OBSERVER'S MANUAL", which will be given away as a doorprize at the meeting. This softbound book contains facts, history, observing tips, and an ephemeris giving positions of the comet

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT:

Well, the Mid-States Convention has come and gone, and I must say, the hard work really paid off. Earl Moser and our friends from the Omaha Astronomical Society had everything superbly organized--everything ran smoothly and right on schedule. Russ Genzmer and his volunteers set up a truly impressive display area that showed off our club's innovative and ambitious activities to best advantage. Attendees were treated to computer quizzes, computer graphics, a homemade 10-inch telescope, a computerized telescope drive, our solar telescope, club shirts, etc.

But if they were impressed with these displays, they were completely overwhelmed by our accomplishments at Hyde Observatory. During the field trip there Friday night, I heard favorable comments from all sides. Other clubs wanted to know how we got the thing built in the first place, and how we could run it so efficiently with "just volunteers and no money."

Bob Cox from Telescope Making magazine was fascinated with our club-built telescope and convinced me to write an article to be published in a future issue. But what impressed the delegates the most was the "professional quality" of the slide-tape shows written and produced by our members. Lee Thomas's latest shown on Saturn actually received a 3-minute "standing ovation."

All during the convention I was often asked "How does such a relatively small club in a relatively small city accomplish so much with so little in resources?" My only possible answer: "You've got to have good, dedicated people. We've got 'em."

Thanks to all of you "dedicated people" for all your help in making the convention one of the most successful and definitely the best-attended in recent history. Our club will certainly be remembered as an active, impressive organization by all the other clubs in this region of the country.

Congratulations are in order for three of our members who received Messier Awards at the Saturday evening convention awards ceremony. Lee Thomas has completed the first phase by observing over 70 M-objects and

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And a fine Convention It Was!

Over 150 people from as far away as St. Louis, Missouri, attended the Mid-States Regional Astronomical League Convention in Lincoln June 5-6-7. Registration began at Noon on Friday, with delegates milling through the convention displays at Olin Hall, a great many of which were contributed by the Prairie Astronomy Club.

Friday night, the crowd moved to Hyde Observatory where guided tours, slide shows, and a general star party with telescopes set up on the lawn was accompanied by the usual murky Nebraska summer skies. All day Saturday, the paper sessions were held, topped off by an especially effervescent talk by the irrepressible Bob Cox. Saturday night's dinner was followed by an awards ceremony, and brief reports from each of the clubs present on their respective activities. (It became clear from these reports that the Prairie Astronomy Club

is more than holding its own in the depth and breadth of the activities offered to its members.)

Saturday night, the throng headed for Behlen Observatory at Mead where billows of dust were raised to deposit on the mirror of the 30-inch telescope. (Ed Schmidt says he isn't worried--it's always like that!) Dr. Donald Taylor, who had delivered a fascinating Keynote Address recounting some of his personal experiences as both amateur and professional astronomer, devised an observing contest in which telescopes were aimed at a mysterious object, the winner being that person who most accurately described what he saw through the eyepiece. George Allen of Omaha won First Place, and our own Ron Veys and Marc Cherry tied for Second Place. Some hangers-on were reportedly still peering through the gathering clouds at 4:00 a.m. Sunday morning.

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has received his certificate. Russ Genzmer and Ron Veys have completed the Messier list and have received their Honorary Citations. The rest of the members of the Messier Observing Group are encouraged to keep working at it. You don't need a large telescope to see the M-objects -- Russ went through the entire list using a 4-inch reflector. You can easily see 95% of the M-objects with just a 2.4-inch refractor! We'd like to see more members get into a serious, organized observing program, and this is definitely the way to start.

Now, for those of you ready for a more advanced program--the Observe Manual for the Herschel objects is now available from the Astronomical League Book Service for \$2.50. This list contains about 400 NGC objects and requires a little larger telescope (at least 6-inch aperture), but it should be all that much more satisfying an accomplishment. Keep after that observing...join us at our monthly star parties. After all, that's what Astronomy is all about!

--RON VEYS

June Meeting

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from now through 1988. (Ron reports he has several more copies of this item that will be awarded, unannounced, at future meetings, as well as small poster sets of Voyager Saturn and Moons pictures. You must be present to win, of course, and you must be a paid-up member or newsletter subscriber to qualify.)

Astronomers' Lives Grow Cushier and Easier

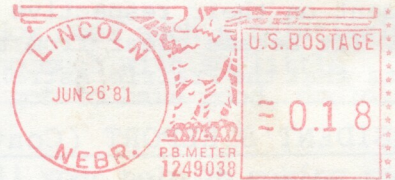
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the teaching schedules of professors,
not to mention the strain on families

during the time away from home. And, of course, there is the avoidance of frustration: a long-planned trip to a mountaintop for a few nights of research can't be washed out by a stubborn cloud layer.

Still, as with most advances that are technologically and economically prudent, another spark of the romance vanishes when the intrepid astronomer can stay in his office punching at a computer terminal, slurping hot chocolate and munching on cookies while discovering the secrets of the universe.

THE PRAIRIE ASTRONOMER
c/o Prairie Astronomy Club, Inc.
P.O. Box 80553
Lincoln, Nebraska 68501



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