Skywatch

'Serving Mobile's Amateur Astronomy Community'
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THE ASTRO AWARDS!

Look out Emmy, Oscar and Tony!

SOMEWHERE amateur astronomers are standing awed under the summer sky viewing the wonders of the Sagittarius/Scorpius Milky Way. But down here on the Gulf Coast we're still struggling with the hazes and thunderstorms which came to visit in May--and stayed. Deep Sky observing? Ha! We're lucky if we can get a look at Jupiter through this murk! The late Summer observing doldrums are here. This will pass. Before long, Fall's cold fronts will crispen-up the heavens. But until that happens, I thought it might be nice to recall the highs and lows of the astronomical scene over the past 12 months. So, without further ado I give you....The Astro Awards (look out Oscar, look out Emmy)!

Biggest Event:

The Envelope Please...**Hale-Bopp, HALE-BOPP,** ***HALE-BO PP*****!!**

Naturally, the passage of this

Our Lovely Golden Statuette!

spectacular comet dominated the amateur and professional astronomy scene over the past year. And this was one time that a comet lived up to our expectations (and hopes and dreams!)! Some carping was heard from a few curmudgeons who expressed doubt that Hale-Bopp should really be classified as a 'Great' comet! Fooey! Hale-Bopp *was* 'Great'--whatever that means--and will undoubtedly go down in the record books as one of the most beautiful (and most observed) comets in history. Was West better? Maybe and maybe not. I know I'll remember Hale-Bopp's mind-blowing journey through the inner Solar System for the rest of *my* life!

Runner-up:

The Mars Pathfinder landing on Mars

Didn't think JPL could pull it off did you? Aerobraking...a wacky air-bag landing system...a rover that looked like a refugee from an erector set. But it DID work, and in addition to sending a flood of spectacular images and data for the scientific community, the probe distinguished itself by generating more interest in the space program amongst the general public than anything has in *years*. It seems to me that there was more excitement about this 'budget' mission than there was over the unarguably much more elaborate Viking missions of the seventies! One gripe: there's a Yogi rock and a Scooby

The Winner!!

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Doo rock but there is no *Space Ghost* rock! Space Ghost is a cartoon character, right? And he's from outer space, right? Who's more deserving of having a Martian rock named after him, the Hero of a Hundred Solar Systems or a Cowardly Great Dane?!

Product of the Year:

The lovely Astro Statuette goes to....**Meade for the ETX** (applause)!

Who would have thought that the most exciting telescope of the year would, in an era of gigantic Dobsonians, be a teeny tiny 90mm Maksutov? While this little $600.00 Questar clone falls quite a bit short of its inspiration mechanically, optically it is a gem. Having personally observed with one, I can testify to the quality of its images. Refractor-like is absolutely not an exaggeration. And mechanically the ETX is OK. There *is* a lot of plastic here, but everything works well for visual observing. I think that this telescope will very likely attract a lot of new people to amateur astronomy. The price is right, the telescope is sold by mall merchants like the Nature Company, and it is little and cute. If Meade can keep the price down, keep the quality up, and still produce the scope in numbers, I think they'll have a perennial winner.

Runner up:

The Celestron Faststar

Though I haven't been able to use this innovative new SCT (or even see one in person, yet), and can only pass judgment on the *concept*, I think Celestron deserves recognition for introducing the first new idea in SCTs in many a moon. What's different about the Faststar is that it has the ability to be used at f1.95 with a CCD camera through an interesting arrangement which involves removing the telescope's secondary mirror and replacing it with a CCD camera head/corrector lens element! How well does this work? We're not sure yet. It is uncertain how many Faststars (if any) have been delivered so far.

Personality of the Year:

Carl Sagan, Clyde Tombaugh, Eugene Shoemaker

Over the last year, the astronomical community has suffered three agonizing losses: the deaths of Carl Sagan, Clyde Tombaugh, and Eugene Shoemaker. To amateurs, especially, this was sad news, since these three men provided role models for many of us. The passing of Carl Sagan and Eugene Shoemaker was doubly damaging since they undoubtedly would have continued to contribute to science for a long time to come. After following the careers of these three giants for many years, I, like many of my fellow amateurs, had almost come to feel that they were my personal friends.

Magazine of the Year:

Tom Clark's *Amateur Astronomy Magazine*

Mr. Clark is publishing a magazine which is best described as being a combination of the best parts of the old *Deep Sky* and *Telescope Making* magazines. If you don't yet have a subscription, you MUST send Tom and Jeannie some money NOW! I guarantee you won't be sorry!

Runner Up:

No, *not Sky and Telescope*. *Not Astronomy*. *Observatory Techniques*.

Like *Amateur Astronomy*, *Observatory Techniques* is a labor of love. You'll find much of interest here.

While the production values on these two relatively new magazines are nowhere near those found in the two big glossies, I personally find much more of value here than I do in either Astronomy or Sky and 'Scope lately. With both majors now seeming to be much more interested in printing pretty pictures and slick advertisements than in running 'meat and potatos' articles, let's be thankful that Amateur Astronomy and Observatory Techniques are devoted to providing hard information on observing and equipment. They both deserve our unbridled support!

Manufacturer of the year:

TeleVue

What do you say about a company that singlehandedly revolutionized amateur astronomy? How would you like to go back to the days before TeleVue eyepieces existed? I didn't think so. With his Naglers and other super-high-quality eyepieces, Al Nagler has made visual astronomy a completely new (and much more rewarding) experience! TeleVue is a company which is both innovative and customer oriented. This past year has been a particularly active one for TeleVue, seeing the introduction of a pair of new refractors and several new eyepieces. Now, how about some contributions so your editor can go out and buy that new TV-140 refractor he's had his eye on!

Astronomy Merchant

Amateur astronomy merchants are for the most part an honest and reliable lot. But there are a few who distinguish themselves from the pack....

This year's lovely Astro Statuette for Vendor of the Year goes to...**Pocono Mountain Optics!**

In addition to being reliable and professional, Pocono Mountain Optics also has just about the best prices in the business! And after meeting the Pocono Mountain folks in person at this year's Texas Star Party, I can also say that they are some of the nicest people you'll find. Another thing in Pocono's favor is that, in my experience, they are, unlike some outfits, ALWAYS forthright when it comes to telling you whether an item is in stock or not!

Runner up:

Telescope and Binocular Center (aka Orion)

You won't get the same level of bargains here as you get at Pocono, but Orion is, all in all, a high class operation. They have a friendly and knowledgeable sales staff and are genuinely eager to ensure that their customers go away happy. Reliability is the name of the game at Orion...er...'Telescope and Binocular Center.'

Star Party of the Year:

And the golden Astro goes to...The **Texas Star Party**

Has to be. Where else can you find such a combination of great skies and great people? Admittedly everything wasn't just as we would have wished at this year's TSP (new site, some cloudy nights, etc.), but when things were good, they were...GREAT! I remember: standing slack-jawed watching Cygnus rise because I realized that I was seeing the North America Nebula--naked eye!

Runner up

Winter Star Party

Largely because of our work schedules, Dorothy and I have never been privileged to attend the WSP. But MAS members who've made it on down to the Keys paint a glowing picture of a star party that just seems to get better year after year!

And that, ladies and gentlemen concludes this year's award ceremony. The Astros will be back next year, and I'd welcome your suggestions on nominees and additional categories!

--Rod

Equipment Review: Choosing an Astrocamera/The Ricoh KR5 Super II

Ricoh KR-5 Super II
List price: $325.00 for body only
Street price is about $200.00-$250.00 for body with normal lens

When I decided to give astrophotography another try after being out of the celestial picture-taking business for almost 20 years, I realized that I was missing one very important tool. A *camera!* While I had several SLRs that I was able to use for my casual lunar and planetary photography, they were all ancient, overweight dinosaurs which didn't really lend themselves to being mounted on my Ultima C8 Schmidt Cassegrain (ever try to find a 'T' ring adapter for a bayonet-mount Petri FT II?!). I was quite satisfied with my medium format camera (a Rollei) for general picture taking use and for afocal lunar and planetary photography, so I didn't feel the need to invest in an expensive automated 'system' SLR. What I wanted was a light, all-mechanical 35 single lens reflex with a common lens mount, which could be used on the telescope. Browsing through a few issues of *Popular Photography* and questioning the people on the Internet's Astrophoto Mailing List ('APML,'possibly the best resource out there for the beginning astrophotographer--where else can a fumbler like me have his questions answered by luminaries in the astrophoto world like Mike Covington and Brad Wallis?). Gave me some ideas of the new and used cameras out there that would fit my needs. I started looking.

Equipped with all this good advice, I naturally ran out and bought the one camera that all the good folk on APML had warned me about--a Russian Zenit SLR. I had seen one of these fully mechanical cameras at a star party, and had been somewhat favorably impressed. The Zenit seemed fairly robust, I was told that

the Russian optics were quite good, and boy oh boy was the price ever right. In retrospect, I should have taken a much longer look at the Zenit before buying one of my own. It turned out that the optics (a surprisingly fast 'Helios' f1.4 lens) were almost amazingly good. BUT, mechanically the camera...there is no other word...*sucked*. The Zenit did indeed, as the people on APML had flatly stated, make my old tank-like Petri look like a Rolls Royce! Compared to this camera's mechanics, a 1930s vintage Leica is a technological marvel. I wasn't expecting Japanese or German quality of course, and was quite willing to overlook a few of the camera's embarrassments (a frame counter that has to be *manually* reset, a severely limited set of shutter speeds, and stiff focusing and aperture controls on the lens), but I did expect the camera to be durable and reliable. Unfortunately, the Zenit did not work right from day one. It had a problem with its crude cloth focal plane shutter which caused fogged frames. The test shots, however, had shown that the lens was very sharp, so I was willing to have the vendor (Kiev USA, who I recommend highly) try to fix the beast. They were indeed able to cure the shutter problem, but a new malfunction had replaced it. The shutter would not actually trip until you had cocked the camera and released it four or five times! It was clear that the Zenit would not be reliable, so I returned it and received a prompt refund from Kiev USA. Russian cameras are, I feel, on the verge of being world class as far as optics go, with lenses at least as good as the typical Japanese offering from the 1960s. Mechanically, though, they have *a very long way to go*. My advice: steer clear of them for now.

Oh well, live and learn. How about a used SLR? The used camera which seems to be held in the highest regard by today's astrophotographers is the Olympus OM1. And it is easy to see why. The OM1 is compact and full featured. This all-mechanical SLR has a reputation for being reasonably reliable (despite its now advanced age) and its array of features includes a couple which are of special interest to astrophotographers: mirror lock-up and interchangeable focusing screens. Mirror lock-up allows you to open the SLR's mirror before the shutter trips, thus eliminating telescope shake caused by 'mirror slap.' I feel that this is a desirable feature for all astrophotographers and a critical one for those of us doing high magnification lunar and planetary photography. Although the 'hat trick' (hold a piece of black cardboard in front of the telescope's aperture, release shutter, remove cardboard) can take the place of mirror lock-up, I find this technique to be an annoying hassle. Interchangeable focusing screens allow the photographer to replace the SLR's stock focusing screen with one which makes focusing on dim targets a little easier--Beattie Intenscreens, for example. All in all, the OM1 seemed to be just the camera for me. Until I saw what used OM1s cost, that is! I had expected to pay around $175.00 for an OM1, but found that one of these Olympuses in decent shape commands anywhere from $200.00 to $300.00 with a normal lens! And this for a camera the newest examples of which are quite a few years old now and are no longer supported by the manufacturer. I decided to look for something else.

Another prime contender for the title of the 'best used astro camera,' the Nikon FM2, also proved to be a budget-buster for me. And I recalled that the FM2, fine camera that it is (I used one for Earthly photography for a number of years), doesn't feature mirror lock-up. The FM2 *does* feature interchangeable focusing screens, though, and this all mechanical camera is, I feel, one of the best cameras Nikon has ever made. I wouldn't mind owning an FM2 or FM2N again by any means. The FM2, one of the last of the dying breed of mechanical SLRs, is a jewel and would please any photographer--celestial or terrestrial.

My next candidate was that time-honored workhorse of the astrophotographer, the Pentax K1000. This camera has quite a few things going for it, but also has a few strikes against it. In the plus column, the K1000 is well built, all mechanical, and is eminently reliable. In addition, the Pentax 'K' lens mount system gives you access to a very wide array of lenses and adapters. The K1000's faults? No mirror lock-up and non interchangeable focusing screens. The K1000 actually *has* an '**undocumented**' mirror lock-up feature. The mirror can be released by applying just the right amount of pressure to the shutter release. Press down almost enough to fire the shutter and the mirror does indeed pop up. In practice, I found doing this to be difficult--about half the time I accidentally fired the shutter. Undoubtedly though, I would have gotten better with practice. I was fortunate that I was able to borrow my sister-in-law's Asahi Pentax K1000 (one of the older models) during the passage of Hale-Bopp and give the camera a real work out with the Ultima 8. I was very favorably impressed. So impressed that I immediately started looking for a K1000 of my own--only to find that used K1000s were *impossible* to find locally. With the comet in the skies, I felt I couldn't afford the time it would take to receive one from a mail-order outfit. OK, I'd shell-out for a new one

'Though I only stopped-down one f-stop, stars seem sharp to the edge of the frame.'

then.

As I was browsing through the photo store, though, I picked up the brochure for another of the few remaining all mechanical SLRs, the Ricoh KR5 Super II (which I had also seen recommended in the APML forum). What first caught my eye in the manufacturer's brochure was the fact that astrophotography was actually mentioned: '...the KR-5 Super 2 has several features of interest to the astrophotographer.' That was a bit amazing. Most camera makers don't seem to know that astrophotography exists. Reading further revealed that the KR-5 sports the following features:

- All mechanical. No battery required for operation.
- Mirror lock-up
- Shutter speeds from 1 to 1/2000 sec plus 'B.'
- Center weighted LED metering system.
- Lightweight body featuring Pentax 'K' lensmount.

Not an exhaustive set of features by any means when compared to modern computerized, electronic SLRs, but it had everything I was looking for in an astrocamera *with the exception* of interchangeable focusing screens. Peeking through the Ricoh's viewfinder in the store (after reading the brochure I had a clerk pull out the genuine article for me) revealed a 'semi-matte' viewfinder I could live with. I wrote out a check, and before long had the KR-5 out in the field attached to the prime focus of the C8 and pointed at Hale-Bopp. My initial results were so encouraging that I returned to the dealer the next day and bought the camera's matching normal ('Rikenon' 50mm f1.7) lens, since I didn't have a 'K' mount lens on hand.

The KR-5 has since proven itself as quite a performer. There isn't really much to dislike about this little camera (it is actually about the size of most modern SLRs, but for someone used to medium format cameras and older single lens reflexes, it seems **tiny**). It is light and manageable, the controls are reasonably easy to use in the dark, and it has so far been entirely problem free. I considered borrowing a back-up camera body to take to this year's Texas Star Party, but the KR-5 seemed so solid that I just never got around to it. The camera performed outstandingly well at TSP, and delivered some photos I'm really proud of. Particularly impressive were my piggyback shots. Though I only stopped-down one f stop, stars seem almost razor sharp to the edge of the frame in all the prints. The mirror lock-up feature, which is accessed by using the self timer, was a welcome change from the K1000. On the other hand, I feel that the K1000's screen makes it slightly easier to focus than the KR-5. The screens seem similar, but I thought the K1000's was just slightly brighter. The KR-5 certainly seems reliable. Though it is admittedly not built to the same level of quality as the FM-2 (which costs a bit more than twice as much as the KR-5), it seems easily durable enough for non-professional use; especially the way I'm using it--for astrophotography (very occasional astrophotography, given our weather lately) and once-in-a-while terrestrial usage.

I would eventually like to get a another camera (a body anyway) for astrophotography; perhaps a Nikon or a Canon or an Olympus. But till then, the KR-5 is performing superbly. I'll hang on to the Ricoh, even if only to use as a back up. I feel that it is an excellent value, a wonderful performer, and is one of the few remaining choices for the photographer who needs or wants a traditional no-frills mechanical camera.

--Rod

Astrobytes

The big boys have finally hit the Internet: Meade and Celestron have

opened World Wide Web sites! Many of us were surprised that these two giants of the telescope making business hadn't established a presence on the Web before now (especially Meade, who likes to promote itself as being especially high tech), but they've both got working Web pages now, and I thought we might take a look at what these two household names among amateur astronomers are offering on their home pages. Originally, I intended to review both sites, but, while Meade has been 'on the air' for about 6 months or so now, Celestron has only been active for a few weeks, and large areas on its site are still non-functional and marked 'under construction.' We'll come back to Celestron in a future review, but for now let's type 'http://www.meade.com' and visit Meade Instruments Corporation.

My first impression when Meade's home page loaded up was that they *do* have a good looking site, but one which is not quite as elaborate as I had expected given their very fancy advertisements and catalogs. Nevertheless, it is nicely done, with seven small but clear color photographs displayed which are clickable and serve as menu buttons to allow you to access the rest of the site. Our choices are: 'Meade General Catalog,' 'What's New at Meade,' 'Meade Authorized Dealers,' 'Meade Technical Archive and Customer Service,' 'Meade Gallery of Astrophotography,' 'Meade's Universe,' and 'Meade Public Stock Offering.' Let's click on the Solar prominence photo labeled 'Meade General Catalog' for our first selection.

When this page appears, we are presented with a hyper-text list (clickable links) of the products featured in Meade's Catalog. This seems to be a fairly complete collection of the products contained in Meade's printed catalog, and it also holds a couple of surprise extras--links which allow you to download software for use with Meade's Magellan digital setting circles and a program for use with the Pictor XT CCD cameras. This portion of the site performs its function nicely, containing just about all the info included in Meade's hard copy catalog. I was disappointed, though, that this page's 'Meade Factory Tour' turned out to be nothing more than small photographs and text. Given what is possible on the Web, I was hoping that this would be an opportunity to take a VR (virtual reality) walkthrough of Meade's Irvine California facility!

Returning 'home,' our next choice is 'What's New at Meade,' which is opened by selecting a picture of a silhouetted Meade refractor set against a starry background. This page is, again, a somewhat plain list of hypertext links which take us to pages with information/announcements concerning 'new' Meade products. There is a problem here that I see (surprisingly) with a lot of commercial sites. When will Web authors learn that putting a 'what's new' page on a Web site obligates them to update that page at least *occasionally*?! Doing what Meade has done here--leaving a 'what's new' area unchanged for weeks and weeks and weeks makes the site seem just a bit *amateurish.*

Our next button on the homepage takes us to what is probably one of the two best areas on the site: 'Meade Technical Archive and Customer Service.' The customer service side of this area isn't that exciting, being nothing more that a listing of support numbers and a text statement outlining Meade's commitment to its customers. But here we also find online versions of Meade's instruction manuals. I found it very helpful to be able to consult these pages and/or download the manuals when I had a question about Meade gear. The only criticism I have is that the manuals for several of Meade's most popular 'scopes are currently missing. I would have liked to be able to take a look at the instructions for the ETX, but they were nowhere to be found. Also missing were the manuals for the Starfinders--Dobs and equatorials. This area is a very helpful feature of meade.com, though, and it *does* include the guides for Meade's superstar scopes, the LXs, and even has data on accessories like digital setting circles. Well Done!

Our next stop is 'Meade Gallery of Astrophotography,' which will, I have no doubt, be Meade's most visited area! Loading this page presents us with a series of 'thumbnails' (small renditions) of astrophotos. Clicking on a thumbnail loads a picture (some of which turn out to be a disappointly small, unfortunately). There are some beautiful shots here! Among them are some of Jason Ware's stunning color astrophotos which are delivered in large format, and arguably look even better online than they do in the glossy Meade printed catalog.

Next up is a catchall page, 'Meade's Universe.' This selection contains various short items ranging from information on the Riverside Telescope Maker's Conference and the Winter Star Party to a story about Meade's Schmidt camera installation on Mount Wilson. Not much here that's new to any of us, but it is nice to see Meade, which earns its bread and butter from the amateur community, supporting worthy events like the WSP.

Our final destination on *www.meade.com* is 'Meade Public Stock Offering.' this consists of nothing

more that a photograph of Meade's factory building and an announcement of Meade's recent issuance of stock (found on NASDAQ, naturally).

And there you have it, Meade's new World Wide Web presence. I don't expect to visit here with the regularity with which I stop at skypub.com or some of the other big amateur astronomy sites, but meade.com does contain some useful features, and if the company continues to add to and update its Web pages, I'll definitely be back once in a while.

--*Rod*

Cosmic Carousel

In keeping with the broader perspective of Cosmic Carousel as opposed to my last deep sky column, City Lights, I feel that it's appropriate to talk about not only the 'how,' 'what' and 'why' of deep sky observing, but also the *where*. As things stand now, most of us find deep sky observing from our backyards to be problematical at best. Sure, you can get some nice views from even the worst sites in the city if you really push your scope and wait for that special night, but there are times when we all hunger for the spectacular deep sky treats that only a real dark site holds. So, I'd like to devote an occasional column to reviewing--or at least discussing--star parties. It is a sad fact that outside of star parties ('star gazes') many of us simply have nowhere to go for truly deep expeditions into the heavens. Since most of us can only attend a few star parties a year, it is very important to pick and choose those which will give us the maximum return for the extreme efforts many of must expend to attend these gatherings. Our first stop is close to home, a star party which many of us still consider the premier observing event of the season, the **Deep South Regional Star Gaze** ('DSRSG').

The Deep South Regional Star Gaze, which is held at Percy Quin State Park near McComb, Mississippi, is now entering its 14th year, and has become something of a tradition for many clubs located in the Louisiana/Mississippi/Alabama area. The star party is hosted by the Ponchartrain Astronomical Society (the 'PAS' of the New Orleans area), and continues to be helmed by the PAS' Barry Simon, who has been instrumental in the success of DSRSG from the beginning. Part of the reason for DSRSG's continued success in the tri-state area is its location, which is conveniently central for attendees in this area, being located about an hour and a half's drive west of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. That is not to say that Deep South doesn't attract visitors out of the local area--it is quite common for observers from as far a way as Atlanta to travel to Percy Quin for the 'Deep South Experience!'

One of the most pleasant things about DSRSG is the time of year it's held. Spring star parties are nice in some parts of the country, but the stormy Spring weather along the Gulf Coast would make a Springtime star gaze a recipe for disaster! DSRSG is always held near a New Moon in late October/early November. We have, in my experience, had our best luck with October dates since storms and the occasional freeze can make November a little less pleasant and profitable. October seems just about perfect--warm days and cool nights. The late Summer constellations invite us in the early evenings, and as the nights wear on, the fascinating Fall sky gives way to the splendor of winter. The first touch of Fall now means 'time to gear up for Deep South!' in my household.

Another plus for this star party is the facilities we have available to us at beautiful Percy Quin State Park. When I set out for Deep South that first year, I was really prepared to rough it. The literature I had received from Barry Simon stated that the sleeping accommodations consisted of group cabins. Cabins. In my mind was an image that was a cross between a dilapidated boy scout hut and the black hole of Calcutta! Imagine my surprise, then, to arrive on-site and find that I would be sleeping in a modern centrally heated/air conditioned building which was clean and had CLEAN BATHROOMS! There is plenty of cabin space to accommodate Deep South observers, and Barry usually does his best to give each club its own 'traditional' cabin.

Another BIG aid to a good star party experience is decent food. Here, Deep South has gotten mixed reviews in the past. The park cafeteria, which is located in the same area as the cabins, is beautiful and modern with huge windows overlooking the park's lake, and is always bright and clean. But the food served is somewhat variable in quality, and has ranged from very good at times, to simple and plain other years, to below average occasionally. I have NEVER had a problem eating the meals served in the cafeteria (well, I

am an ex-GI), but the fact is that recently we went through a couple of DSRSGs when the food definitely seemed to sink in quality. Last year, however, all was again well in the vittles department--there was a *marked* improvement in all of the meals. The fare actually went from something that was eaten as mere sustenance to something I looked forward to! Prices for the star gaze meal plans are very reasonable, and, with the improvement in the food, I can definitely say that the park cafeteria is the way to go. If nothing else, I would hate to give up the meal time conversation and comradery. I feel close to quite a few of the folks at DSRSG, and I only get to spend time with most of them once a year. If you arrive at the site on Thursday, I invite you to join in what has become a DSRSG tradition, supper at Mr. Whisker's, the Home of All-You-Can-Eat Catfish. Since star party meals don't begin until Friday, most of us pack-up and head to Mr. Whisker's on Thursday evening. Join us and I guarantee you won't be sorry! The food at this pleasant country- style restaurant, located just outside the park is incredible! As my fellow observers will tell you, the only thing that will cause me to leave Mr Whisker's table is sunset!

Sunset. The McComb skies are darkening. What can we expect as far as sky quality in McComb? It must be admitted that the little town of McComb, Mississippi has grown quite a bit over the last 14 years, and that the skies have been compromised somewhat. We went through a couple of years where we unluckily had hazy/semi-hazy skies for DSRSG, and were beginning to think that encroaching light pollution was signaling that it was time to think about another site for the star party. But then we had a couple of very good years, and discovered that when the skies are truly clear and clean, McComb is still capable of featuring almost unbelievable skies. This year's Texas Star Party featured really dark skies (when the rain stopped, anyway), but DSRSG has often shown-off skies *darker and clearer* that those found in Leakey, Texas. The Veil Nebula looked great from TSP, but it has been better from DSRSG. I could see the Eagle Nebula in my 12" fairly easily from Alto Frio, but it's been much more obvious at Percy Quinn. No one can promise you clear skies for a star gaze, of course, but it is a matter of historical record that there has *never* been a Deep South Regional Star Gaze that has been *completely* clouded out. There has always been time for at least *some* observing.

Dorothy Mollise on the DSRSG observing field (1996). Photo courtesy of Robert Rock.

DSRSG features two large observing fields, but since attendance at the star party is usually in the 150-175 range at most, the second field generally goes mostly unused (lately the #2--the 'upper'-- observing field was opened to tent campers). Even with all the observers on the 'lower' field, there's still plenty of elbow room--enough to allow you to have your vehicle parked next to your scope, and for clubs to erect tent canopies to shelter observers from the occasionally harsh sun.

The Deep South Regional Star Gaze is small when compared to big national events like the Texas Star Party or the Winter Star Party. But that's part of its charm. Small and friendly. Though we only meet once a year, DSRSG always feels like family. But it is also a family always willing to adopt new members. Having lived in quite a few different areas of the country, and having attended quite a few star parties big and small, I can unhesitatingly state that DSRSG is the FRIENDLIEST of them all! And while not the largest star party by far--even in the southeast--DSRSG still garners enough attendees to allow it to afford many of the features of the larger star gazes. There is always a raffle with wonderful prizes and recently vendors have started showing up at the site to add their wares to those featured in the swap meet.

If I've convinced you that the Deep South Regional Star Gaze (which is to be held October 30-November 1 this year) would be a good bet for your autumn observing calendar, check with me or your fellow club members for more details and copies of registration forms or contact Barry Simon, 820 Emerald St., New Orleans, LA 70124 . You won't be sorry.

--Rod

My Back Pages

Stories in the Sky

Sagittarius = Chiron

Who (or what) is that TEAPOT hanging in our southwestern skies? Although it's hard to make out a human figure in Sagittarius' asterism, I'm sure that most of us know that the teapot of Sagittarius is actually meant to represent an archer. An archer. OK. What archer? Well, thereon hangs a rather sad tale....

Sagittarius is Chiron, and Chiron was a *centaur*. The centaurs were a race of half-men half -horses. This is generally known, since the image of the centaur is one of the most identifiable and often used icons from classical mythology. If you can't quite remember what these demigods looked like, find a copy of Disney's *Fantasia* and watch *The Pastorale*. So the image of the centaur is well-known. What is less well remembered are any of the facts about this fascinating race. The centaurs as a group were just about as far removed from Walt Disney's cute little horse boys and girls as it is possible to be! To put it mildly, centaurs were bestial, blood thirsty, and guilty of just about every crime against men you can imagine. They were a bad, BAD lot--with one exception: Chiron.

As the rest of the centaur tribe was warlike, Chiron was peaceful; as the other centaurs were hot-headed, he was wise; as the balance of his race hated gods and men, this being loved them. And these sterling qualities did not go unnoticed by Father Zeus. After careful consideration, Zeus chose Chiron as the tutor for his beloved half-human son, Hercules (Heracles).

Chiron, it turned out, was the perfect choice to be the teacher of Hercules. He was well prepared to school the Hero in the gentle arts of poetry and music (it is not recorded how successful he was in imparting a love of the fine arts in Hercules!). And, though he was a peaceful man...er...*centaur*, Chiron was *very knowledgeable* in those other arts, the arts of war. Soon Hercules, equipped with his tremendous native strength and the martial teachings of Chiron, became the mightiest warrior that this old planet had ever seen! Alas, this was to be noble Chiron's downfall.

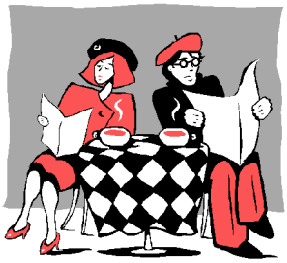
One day Hercules and Chiron were sparring with swords. The two must have been going at it for quite a while, since they were becoming weary (and demigods don't tire easily, as you can imagine!). Chiron was just preparing to call a halt to the drill, when Hercules thrust at him. Either Hercules miscalculated or Chiron's four legs got tangled, but Hercules blade thrust deeply into Chiron! To the student's dismay it was obvious that Chiron's wound was mortal. The centaur cried out in great pain! It was then that Hercules was chilled by a realization. Unlike most demigods, the centaurs were genuinely immortal! Though made of flesh, they *could not die*. Normally, battle wounds were shrugged off by the race, healing quickly. But Chiron had been maimed by *Hercules*, a warrior the likes of which even the gods had never seen before! It soon became obvious that Chiron's wound would not heal. But neither could he die! He lay at Hercules' feet wracked with never-ending pain!

The Hero could bear no more! He dropped to his knees and prayed to his father, Zeus, to end Chiron's life and pain. Looking down from Olympus, Zeus was genuinely sorrowful over the events, and, taking pity on his son's great teacher, he did end Chiron's sufferings by granting him *true* immortality, placing him in the heavens where you can still see him today!

Looking south in the Spring from our southerly latitude, you'll see one of Chiron's kinfolk, Centaurus, peeping over the horizon. Centaurus? What was his story? Well, he--ahhh, that's a tale for another time! Oh, before I forget: any rumors that jealous Hera (looking to torment Zeus' half-mortal son) caused Chiron to stumble are unsubstantiated!

--Rod

Old Chiron astride the Milky Way!



Club Notes

July 1997 Regular Meeting: This meeting of the MAS, held on July 2, 1997 at the club's usual meeting place, the Environmental Studies Center on Girby Road, was largely devoted to examining the beautiful job Loxley Greaves has done on the construction of the club Cookbook CCD camera. Very little work remains, so we should soon be the proud owners of a TC245 CCD camera! Before the meeting adjourned, the membership voted to authorize Loxley to

spend the money (club funds) required to purchase the CCD chip itself, which is the only remaining major purchase required to complete this project!

August 1997 Regular Meeting: The August meeting of the Mobile Astronomical Society featured a large turnout by the membership, and a lot of new faces--most likely due to the recent (and outstanding) interview with club president Pat Rochford which was featured in the *Mobile Press Register*. Loxley Greaves reports that he is attempting to contact University Optics to order a CCD chip for the club's almost-complete Cookbook Camera. Loxley was unable to get anything but busy signals after many attempts to call this vendor, so Rod Mollise volunteered to get University's email address (if they have one) and contact them on the net to see what's up. We decided that there would *not* be any formal star party--public or club-only--for the upcoming Perseids. Some members *are* discussing the possibility of getting together *somewhere* to observe the famous meteor shower. Diane Martin reported that the wife of late MAS member Howard Bectheim has donated Howard's collection of astronomy books to the ESC library for ESC/MAS use. Judy Anderson informed us that the recent lead she had had on a dark observing site did not pan-out. Her contact reports that the site has inadequate parking, not very good skies, and at least one large resident rattlesnake! The highlight of the meeting came when we adjourned to the ESC grounds to give some of the newcomers their first ever telescopic views of the Moon, Venus and Jupiter through the Center's 8" Meade Dobsonian!

---Rod

Editor's Musings--Once Upon a

Midnight Dreary...

It seems that we've hardly gone a month lately without learning of the loss of a prominent member of the

A Hurricane Comes to Selma Street!

astronomical community. This July we were shocked by the news of the death of Eugene Shoemaker. On July 18th, Gene and his wife Carolyn, who were on their annual pilgrimage to Australia, were involved in an automobile accident. Carolyn survived, but, sadly, the accident proved fatal for Gene. While Shoemaker was best known to the general public for his discovery, with David Levy and wife Carolyn, of Jupiter-smashing Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9, Gene was a titanic figure in his field, and will be sorely missed. Eugene Shoemaker was 69....

The following was posted on the Internet by Gene's beloved wife, Carolyn:

Forwarded from Virginia Keiper, USGS
vkeiper@flagmail.wr.usgs.gov

Update on August 4, 9:00 am

Dear Friends, old and new, all special people,

My children and I want to thank you for all your outpouring of love and support since Gene's death. To know Gene was loved, liked, admired, and respected by so many people has helped to sustain us in this very difficult time. Gene would have been so pleased to know you cared. The concern people have shown for me has been comforting and I am happy to report that I am recovering quite well and hope to be returning to Flagstaff soon. I was fortunate to have all my children (including my in-law children) and two Australian friends arrive very promptly in Alice Springs. New friends in Alice Springs opened their doors to all of them and then to me when I left the hospital. Everyone has been very helpful in taking care of the necessary details that needed to be addressed after the accident and this has allowed me to focus on my own recovery.

My children and I have also had time to reflect on our loss together and to think about it in the perspective Gene would have wished. Gene and I were traveling on the Tanami Track in Northern Territory close to the Western Australia border when the no-fault accident occurred. We were to meet Dan Milton in a few days to help field check the geology and mapping of Goat Paddock, an impact structure. The accident occurred on one of the few bends in the road where you could not see another vehicle coming. It was an unlikely place considering all the places we have traveled, yet it was a blind curve on a very rough track. There is no question that Gene died immediately in the vehicle on impact. It was my good fortune that it happened where it did, because help was quick to come from the gold mines in the area. In four hours time the Royal Flying Doctors had transported me back to the emergency ward in Alice Springs. I owe a special thank you to everyone who helped to save my life and the superb care I received at the hospital. It is remarkable I survived at all considering that mostly what was left of our vehicle was the bed of the truck.

Although the death of Gene is still a shock and a great loss to us all, Gene would have felt it was a good way to go. He was out doing something he loved away from all the pressures of the world, in a country he loved, with the woman who had been his life partner for 46 years, and he died quickly. We had both talked about how, if our lives were to end, we had lived very fulfilling lives. We had wonderful children and a close knit family. Our scientific careers have been extremely rewarding. We were blessed with having numerous friends in our lifetime. And, most of all, we had a marriage in which our love for each other knew no boundaries. Gene said a few years ago he would never be able to complete the many projects he had going. He said it would be up to others to pick up where he left off. He never felt he had all the answers, but he had complete faith that there were others who were capable to come along and follow in his footsteps. Gene would have said, "Don't grieve for me. Get on with life and work at the things that make you happy!" We hope you all will be inspired to do that.

Love,
Carolyn

Hope everybody came through **Hurricane Danny** OK. Dorothy, Beth and I survived with only a little minor damage to our Garden District home. As a matter of fact, I (Rod) didn't experience *any* of the storm's fury--my company, **Northrop-Grumman Aerospace**, had sent me to a ring-laser-gyro school in Virginia Beach, Virginia from 6-26 July! I was touched that the first e-mail message I pulled-up after the storm was from Russell Whigham and our friends at the **Auburn Astronomical Society** enquiring after our safety....

I, like most of you, I suppose, have gone through the Messier list several times (at least). But this last time I worked the famous list of 110 deep sky objects I was careful to keep records on every observation. I had finally decided to earn my **Messier Certificate** from the Astronomical League! What really surprised me was the degree of satisfaction and accomplishment I felt when I got my full Messier Certificate and lapel pin; it was definitely something worth working for! I wholeheartedly recommend this experience to all! If you've been procrastinating get out there and start observing the Messiers again (I believe that MAS member **Leland Cox** is only two or three objects away from *his* certificate)! Unsure about rules and procedures governing the Messier Certificate program? Check any issue of ***The Reflector*** or visit the League's World Wide Web site for details!...

I'm sure most of you saw the **nice article on amateur astronomy** which ran in the Sunday, July 3 issue of the ***Mobile Press Register***. What made this article special was the fact that it included an interview with **Mobile Astronomical Society President Pat Rochford**. The priceless publicity generated by this article has already resulted in quite a bit of public interest in the club. Our thanks to ***The Mobile Press Register***, ***MPR*** **'Living' Editor Cheryl Washington**, and, of course, our own **Pat Rochford**!...

Former MAS President David Switzer has indicated in an email to me that he is interested in **selling his Meade 10" LX-200** Schmidt Cassegrain Telescope. If you're interested, I can provide further details (*I'll say here that this would be a really good bargain for someone seeking one of these high-tech marvels*) and also put you in touch with David.

--Rod

Hurricane Danny had finally passed, but the rains just lingered on. Standing out on my porch I looked up and down flooded Selma Street. Not a person in sight. Until.... I could hardly believe my eyes when a ROWBOAT bearing two peculiar looking youths sailed down the street: 'Huh huh huh huh hurricanes are cool.' And, 'Hmmm...hmm...heh...heh..yeah, yeah. Cool!' Before I could say a word, the blond haired delinquent had chucked an object right at my head! Managing to dodge the missile, I started to chase after the idiotic pair--but they had sailed their little craft around the corner and out of sight! I then turned my attention to the object which

had been aimed at me. I fished it out of the puddle where it had landed, and saw that it was a hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar (kept on Funk and Wagnals' front porch). OBVIOUSLY it contained the latest installment of....

RUMOURS

Received disturbing news the other day. **Tippy D'Auria**, who is known to many of you from the Winter Star Party and other regional and national star parties (he was, I believe, a speaker at this year's Peach State Star Gaze), has suffered a heart attack. Tippy was admitted to the hospital for triple bypass surgery, and experienced cardiac arrest during the procedure. His surgeons were thankfully able to pull him through, and, according to astrophotographer Dr. Don Parker, who has visited him in the hospital, **Tippy is out of ICU and is, it is to be hoped, on his way to a full recovery!**...

How about a BIG 'scope? Big for a refractor, that is. **Roland Christen** of Astrophysics is, your anonymous correspondent understands, collecting the names of people who might be interested in 7, 8 and **9 inch Astrophysics refractors**. As you may know, a six inch is the largest instrument currently produced by the company. A 9" would be the largest APO ever porduced by the Christens. And I think you can guess that this big eye has a big price to match! I'm hearing the figure **$24,500** (optical tube only, natch) mentioned. Actually, even $24,500 seems low to me for a modern APO!...

In the Well Finally Department: we understand that **Murnaghan instruments has started delivering their revived line of 'Odyssey' telescopes**. You'll recall that after Coulter folded following the death of founder **Jim Braginton**, Murnaghan bought out the name 'Odyssey' and the remaining parts for this long time staple of the amateur astronomy world. Early word is that these scopes are **basically very similar to the last of the Coulter Odysseys**. Mount and tube remain exactly the same down to the 'Odyssey' sticker below the focuser and the fire engine red concrete form tube. **A *few* improvements have been made**, though, we're told. The plumbing parts focuser, it seems, remains, but it has been modified to incorporate a helical fine focus feature while also retaining the earlier slide focus that Odyssey owners remember so well. The mirror cell is still a simple push-pull design, but it is now ventilated to allow for quicker cool down. The 'new' Odysseys started making it into the hands of users in mid July, and most seem well satisfied. **Optics are said to be at least 1/4 wave**, and perhaps considerably better in some cases. It should be remembered, though, that many 'old' Odysseys (especially earlier models) also had fine mirrors. I welcome the reintroduction of the Odysseys. These telescopes launched the career of many an amateur. I do question the price, however. Murnaghan is pricing these telescopes in the same league as the Meade, Orion and Celestron Dobs, which are, I believe, more attractive and better finished that these new Odysseys are said to be (if no more functional). Also, I'm afraid it will be difficult to compete with the slick ads run by Meade and the other two players. I do, however, **wish Murnaghan the best**. Star Parties just wouldn't be the same without plenty of 13.1" Odyssey 1s!...

What's cooking at Sky and Telescope? In the wake of **this Summer's major format change** *RUMOR* hath it (please remember the name of this column) that OTHER changes are forthcoming. One change we noted was that **Phil Harrington's name was dropped** from the mast head of *Sky and 'Scope*, where he was formerly listed as 'Contributing Editor.' We further understand that Phil has been informed that **the column he has been doing for the magazine will now be written 'in-house.'** We're distressed about this since we feel that **Phil is a major talent** (his *Starware* has become the equipment bible of many of today's amateurs), and that his absence **cannot but hurt *Sky and Telescope***. While some observers claim this is just one more step on the way to *Sky and Telescope's 'Astronomy*fication' (lots 'o pictures, simple articles), we ***think*** *Sky and Telescope* is still maintaining a fairly even keel. There is certainly a place for *Astronomy Magazine* (there is actually quite a bit to like about the current incarnation of *Astronomy*, given its target audience), but I think we only need ***one*** *Astronomy*. There is also a place for a more advanced-level general interest amateur astronomy periodical (I hope)...

Once again, we're hearing rumors that Kenneth Novak, the famous seller of telescope parts, is out of business. While Mr. Novak has apparently reached retirement age, there is no indication that he has gone out of business--he has been reliably shipping scope parts and accessories all along as far as we can determine. Since he is no longer, I

believe, running ads it ***is*** possible that he wants to keep the business running at a somewhat lower level...

Little Birds are chirping about...the new Starsplitter GEM telescopes. If these 4 and 6 inch German-mount scopes are as good as they look, **they're one of the best astronomy values around** today! Check it out!

--The Anonymous Astronomer

SO LONG TIL' THE NOVEMBER SKYWATCH!

Skywatch® is published bi-monthly as a service to Mobile's amateur astronomers. Submissions are always welcome. Address correspondence to:

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http://members.aol.com/RMOLLISE/index.html

If possible, submit materials for *Skywatch* in machine-readable form. WordPerfect 6.1/6.0/5.1 format is preferred, but a wide range of word processors is supported. Members of the *Mobile Astronomical Society* currently receive their issues of *Skywatch* at no cost at Society meetings, but mail subscriptions to *Skywatch* are available for a nominal fee. If return is desired, postage must accompany all manuscripts, drawings, photographs, etc.

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Hope to see all of you at this year's Deep South Regional Star Gaze in McComb Mississippi. If you've never attended this event, see this issue's installment of Cosmic Carousel for details. But rest assured of two things: you'll be welcome and you'll have a GREAT time! See you there on Halloween Night!

Peace,

Rod & Dorothy