



## UNDER DARK McCOMB SKIES!

### 1996 DEEP SOUTH REGIONAL STAR GAZE CALLED 'BEST EVER'!

Stargazes (or 'star parties,' if you will) seem to loom larger and larger in the minds of amateur astronomers with each passing year. And there's a sad reason for this: the mindless expansion of the suburbs and the accompanying light pollution. This means that the only opportunities many of us have for serious deep sky observing come at these get-togethers. So when bad weather or other problems conspire to cause the star party experience to be a little less than perfect, there's plenty of gloom to go around. But, FOR ONCE, my wife Dorothy and I were able to attend a stargaze that was just about as perfect

as perfect can be. DSRSG '96, 1996's Deep South Regional Star Gaze, will undoubtedly be remembered by the many observers who attended as being the best ever!

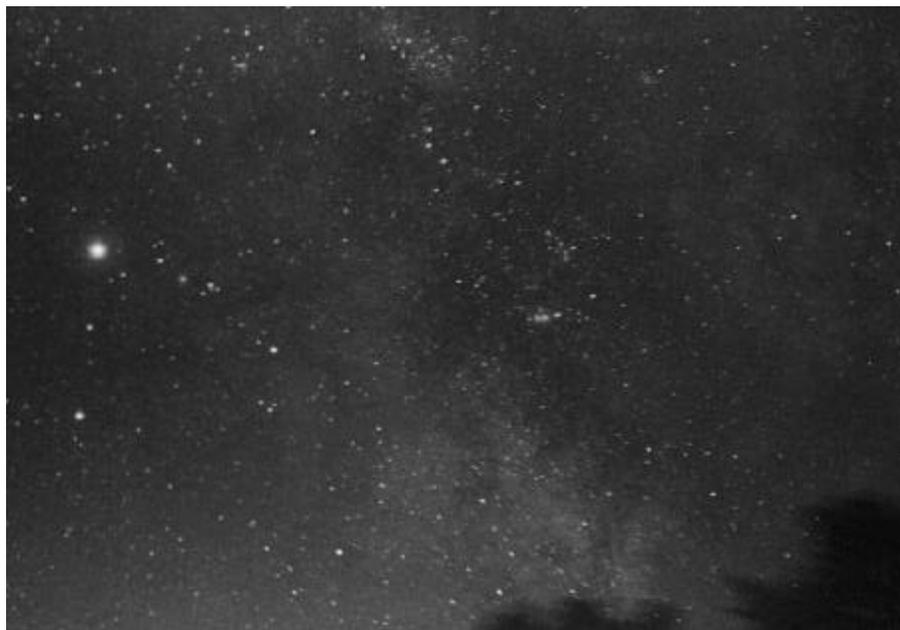
For those of you who are new to the hobby, or may simply never have had a chance to attend a DSRSG, the Deep South Regional Star Gaze, which is hosted by the Ponchartrain Astronomical Society of New Orleans, is now in its 14th year, and has become a tradition for Gulf Coast amateurs (though the event often pulls-in observers from as far away as Atlanta and Birmingham). It's certainly not the largest or most heavily promoted star

party in the land (or even the southeast), but this has, perhaps, helped it maintain its friendly 'regional' character. The event is held at Percy Quin State Park, which is near the little town of McComb, Mississippi. The growth of McComb has, in recent years, compromised the skies somewhat, but, believe me, they are still quite dark! Another plus for this stargaze is the park's modern facilities. Clean cabins with central air and heat and hot showers really enhance the observing experience!

Thursday morning, 10 November, the first day of DSRSG '96, dawned to lovely weather (not

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That's the way it was! The Summer Milky Way and brilliant Jupiter were spectacular at DSRSG '96! 10 minute piggy-back exposure. Photo by Rod Mollise, Rolleiflex, 75mm Tessar lens, Tri-X.

hazy, not unsettled, not merely 'OK'. Dorothy's teaching schedule meant that we were unable to leave for McComb before noon, but the fact that Percy Quin is only about 3 hours from Mobile, and the fact that this year's stargaze fell during daylight savings time, meant that we had time for a very enjoyable, leisurely drive, and didn't have to hurry with equipment set-up before the Coming of the Night.

Arriving at the old familiar observing field, we were greeted by fellow Mobile Astronomical Society members Ginny and Tony Kramer, and Greg Thompson. Also already set up and ready to go was Auburn Astronomical Society member (and deep sky fanatic) Russell Whigham. After readying the C8 and raising our tent canopy, we joined the rest of the group for the now-traditional Thursday night supper at Mr. Whiskers' Restaurant (the home of all-you-can-eat catfish, something I wasn't embarrassed to take advantage of!). Returning to the observing field, two things became evident: the deep blue of the late afternoon sky heralded a spectacular night, and the large number of 'scopes already on the field pointed to a record turn-out. In fact, I counted more telescopes on Thursday night than have been present on many a stargaze Saturday!

As darkness began to fall in earnest, I had but one thing on my mind: Hale-Bopp. I had been thwarted by last Summer's rotten weather in my attempts to get my first photographs of the comet, but it looked like I would now definitely get my chance! After polar-aligning the Ultima 8, I started searching for the comet--as if much 'searching' was required! While Hale-Bopp remained

dim to the naked eye (but perceptible), it was already spectacular in finder scopes and binoculars! In the C8, the comet *easily* filled the field of a 12mm Nagler with coma and tail! After getting my fill of Hale-Bopp photons (finally), I turned to photography, concentrating on medium format (120 film) piggy-back exposures. I was able to get some photos that I'm very pleased with, but I can hardly wait for next April! Ginny Kramer's 6" f5 Newtonian gave me some remarkably nice views between exposures--wasn't it just the other day that we enjoyed Hyakutake's splendor through this very 'scope?!



Finishing my 'photographic run' I turned to the evening's observing list. It was *so wonderful* to star hop from DSO to DSO under perfect skies as the soon-to-depart **Summer Milky Way** blazed away. It didn't take me long to run through my list, even though I did my best to stay on each object long enough to do it justice--there was just so much to see! I was **starved** for the deep sky, and the heavens were offering-up a banquet of

delights! Noticing that Aquarius was riding high, I thought about the Helix (or Helical) nebula. Photographs of this legendary object have fascinated me since boyhood, but real-time views of this giant planetary had always disappointed. 'Oh, well,' I thought, 'let's give it a try. After all, I've got that new OIII filter with me. Ought to at least see *something*.' I stuck a 26mm Plossl into the diagonal, and pointed the C8 at the Helix's approximate position (aided by a chart generated by *Deep Space 5*, of course). I didn't have the filter in--thought I'd take a quick look without it, but I fully expected to have to insert the filter and do some serious searching. Peering into the eyepiece I saw...*nothing*. Hmm..a small twist of the dec control and...OH MY GOD! The helix was at least as bright in the C8 without a filter as it had been at last year's DSRSG in a friend's 13". And the central hole was *far* more prominent! With shaking hands, I screwed the OIII into place and took another look. I don't hesitate to say that the formerly elusive (for me) Helix looked just like a photograph (well, maybe with a little imagination). 'RUSSELL! GET OVER HERE!' Lord only knows what deep sky compadre Russell Whigham thought had come over me, but he came running, and managed to interpret my sputtering and pointing at the star diagonal as an invitation to look through the C8. He too was *amazed*. The Helix was simply not supposed to look *this* good. Soon we had my eyepiece/filter combination in Russell's C11. Wonderful! We were really amazed at how well our 'little' telescopes (never thought I'd see the day when C8s and C11s are considered 'little') did on this object, but we couldn't **help** but wonder what the Helix would look like in Pat Rochford's 24" on Friday night (Pat was

due to arrive at the site on Friday morning!

I observed many more beautiful objects as the night wore on. By about 2:30am I noticed that it was starting to get kinda COLD, and that the crowd on the field had really thinned-out. Dorothy and most of the rest of the MAS group had left the field a while before--long drives and equipment set-up tend to make for relatively early evenings on the first nights of many stargazes. I had to admit that I was also starting to get a little weary. 'Finished tonight's list,' I thought, 'Guess I'll head for the cabin, no shame in it.' Walking up to the cabin though, through the lovely stand of pine trees which lines the road, I happened to glance up and see the burgeoning beauty of the Winter Milky Way. I started walking more slowly. 'Hmm...wonder if I locked the car?

Better walk back up to the field.' Almost before I knew what I was doing the C8 was uncovered, the drive hummed to life, and I was off into the galaxy again. I don't know how long I observed that night (I left the field well before dawn) but I remember the stark beauty of M42, and the surprising brightness of the legendary nebulosity around Zeta Orionis, NGC 2024. I even convinced myself that I saw a trace of IC434, though I couldn't quite make myself believe that I saw B33, the wondrous and elusive Horsehead. Sigh. Maybe next year.

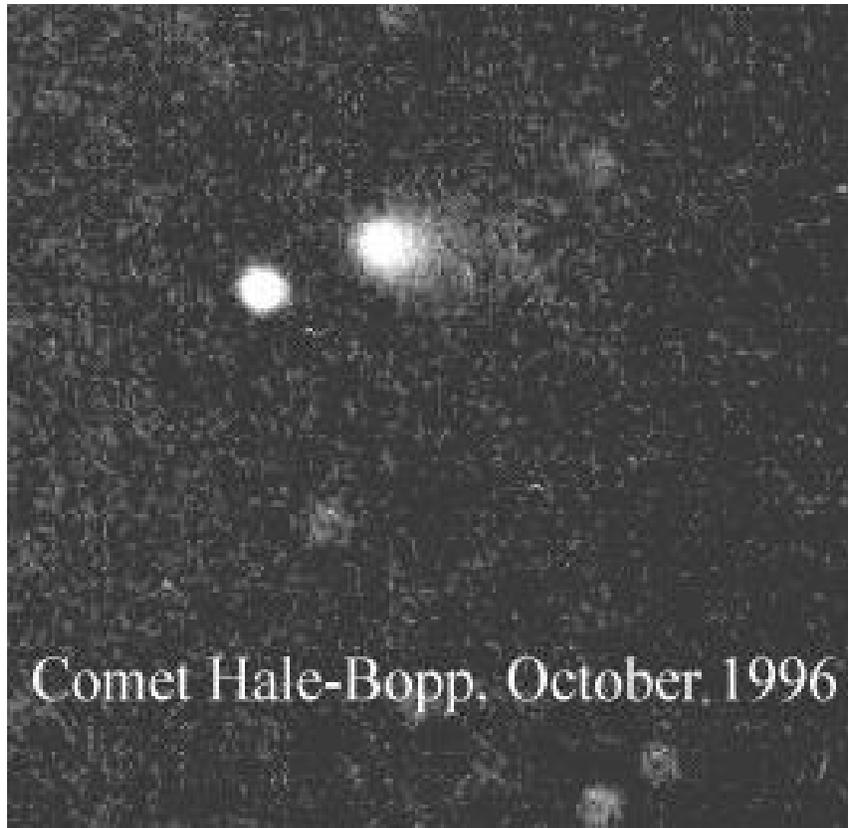
Anyway, something told me that this might be the very best of a series of good nights, so I just looked and looked and looked. The still quiet of the near-deserted observing field seemed to invite quiet contemplation and extended viewing of individual objects rather than quick 'collecting' of deep sky wonders. I must have spent at least half an hour on monster galaxy NGC 253. When I finally left the field I was very tired but also very happy.

Friday morning: more wonderful weather. By the time I finally crawled out of bed, the observing field was humming with activity. One of the focal points of all this bustle was Rex's *Astrostuff*. Arkansas astronomical equipment dealer Rex (after buying goodies from him for the last three years, I'm embarrassed to admit that I still don't know Rex's last name) had his usual huge selection of new and

used equipment. Since I'm trying to save-up for a new camera, I managed to restrain myself, but I couldn't pass up a Celestron tele-extender which Rex was offering for about half what the mail-order emporiums charge! Ginny Kramer was able to buy herself a beautiful used C8 OTA for an almost unbelievable price.

Next on my agenda was a tour of the field to see what new and interesting equipment was on-site this year. Before I go any further though, I want to mention the heart and soul (and the brains) behind DSRSG, the Ponchartrain Astronomical Society's Barry Simon. All of our wonderful DSRSG memories are the result of your untiring efforts, Barry. Thanks (again)!

Walking up and down the field, I examined most of the new (and old) equipment on the scene. About the only trend I thought I detected was that Celestron seemed to be making a 'comeback'-- at least at Deep South. Compared to recent years, there were many more C5s C8s and 11s in evidence. There were conspicuously fewer Meade SCTs, and particularly, LX200s in attendance this year (and I had finally gotten used to that omnipresent LX200 coffee-grinder-whine that has been the soundtrack for many a recent star party!). I'm not suggesting that this means anything, it's just an observation. What



Comet Hale-Bopp, October 1996  
A digital close-up of 'Mr. Comet!' Photo by Rod Mollise.

'new' telescopes did I see that really maxed-out my 'drool-meter'? I guess it would have to be the CG11 and the CG9¼. Neither of these are exactly new products, but this was, I believe, the first time I had seen either 'up close and personal.' I was particular impressed by the beauty of the Losmandy mounts on both telescopes. The CG11 later proved to have some of the best optics I've ever seen in a C11. If this quality is typical, Celestron definitely has a winner! I was also finally able to get a look at a couple of Meade's ETX Maks. I was frankly rather impressed by both of these little-bittys, and while I don't have any use for one, I can see how they'd be a boon for eclipse chasers (the optics seemed surprisingly good).

Shortly before noon, MAS President Pat Rochford arrived with his 24" Dob. If you've seen this telescope, I'm sure you'll agree with me that it's proof that a home-built Dobsonian can be both a deep sky powerhouse and a thing of beauty. After we finished setting up the 24", which doesn't take very long at all, Pat, Dorothy and I headed to 'downtown' McComb for some lunch. After a nice meal at a Chinese restaurant (yes, in McComb Mississippi) which Dorothy and I had discovered in '95 (I was attracted by the words 'all-you-can-eat buffet!') We returned to the observing field to find that fellow MAS member Sherri Martin had arrived with her venerable Odyssey 13.1".

Before long, the sky was darkening, and we all hurried to make final preparations for what was obviously going to be a productive night. Just before darkness we were treated to one of those wonderful serendipitous events that makes for cherished memories: a pass of the Hubble Space Telescope just before darkness fell. Dorothy and some of the

other observers had never before seen the HST 'for real' and were excited and amazed by the stately passage of this Great Observatory. For me it was a chance for a wonderful wide-field photo which included both Hale-Bopp and the HST. While the photograph didn't turn out quite as well as I'd hoped (it wasn't really dark enough for a good picture when the spacecraft passed over), it does preserve a wonderful memory!

What was my most memorable observing experience of Friday night? Well, I guess I'd have to say that it was my view of the (Bridal) Veil Nebula's Eastern portion. I sat (an advantage we SCT users have!) and stared at the 'filigreed' sections of the nebula for a very long time. The view through an OIII filter was nothing short of spectacular. The giant swathes of **deep-space-lace** are still bright in my mind's eye! What was the most *comical* event of the evening? It also involves the Veil Nebula. I decided that I just *had* to have a look at this object through Pat's 24". I inserted a 27mm Panoptic, swung the big Dob over to the Veil, climbed the ladder, eagerly put my eye to the eyepiece, and was...*badly disappointed*. *Why, the nebulosity didn't look much brighter in this monster scope than it had in my C8!* I decided that Pat's secondary was badly dewed-up. Before calling him over to check the battery, though, I figured I'd better take one last look. 'Strange, things don't look quite right...' Then it hit me: I was looking at one of the Veil's dimmer 'central sections.' It just wasn't very dim anymore! While this was all-in-all a beautiful night for observing, the dew was quite heavy, causing observers without adequate dew removal systems to shut-down rather early. If Mr. Kendrick had been present Friday night, he would have made a bundle! Pat, Russell and I were

all equipped with telescopes which were pretty well defended against dew, so we stuck it out until well after Orion-rise. The dew finally became so heavy that it started to seep into the plastic pages protecting my printed-out star charts, causing the Bubblejet printer ink to run; leaving me with ink blots where stars had been!

Saturday brought with it, almost unbelievably, even more good weather. After a pleasant breakfast in the park cafeteria (the food has improved tremendously; I can now recommend it without reservation!) We returned to the field, strolled around, swapped stories, and had a wonderful morning and afternoon (even though, ONCE AGAIN, I didn't win anything in the raffle). Early in the afternoon Kent Clark, wife Merlene and son Will arrived with their beautiful new Obsession 15. I know Dave Kriege charges a premium price for his Dobs, but some close looks at--and later through--the Clarks' new baby proved to me that it's well worth it! Believe it or not, it took some rearranging and figuring to make room for the Clarks to set-up. While the final registration number was, I think, around 150-160, which is pretty low for some star parties, it was very good for us! What was most surprising was the fact that most observers were on-site as early Thursday morning. Usually, a large percentage of the crowd doesn't arrive until sometime Saturday.

Saturday night I was off again into deepest space. My most cherished observing memory on this night was the view I had through Pat's big Dob of M16. My *vision* of the Eagle was, to me, far, far more beautiful even than the now fabled HST 'Fingers-of-God' photos! Another wonderful sight was the Lagoon Nebula through MAS member Judy Anderson's wonderful

orange-tube C8. When I think of the Lagoon these days, the image that comes to mind is the one I saw through Judy's wonderful classic telescope! As the night grew old, I couldn't help but feel a little depressed. Three nights just wasn't enough. I wanted this star party to go on for weeks. Saturday night was not as plagued by dew as Friday had been, so we were able to (almost) get our fill of deep sky objects in relative comfort, though it *was* a little chilly--mid 30s--something a bit peculiar for this location in early October.

All too soon, it was Sunday morning and time for goodbyes. This is always the sad part of the star-party-experience, with the only bright point being the fact that the Internet now makes it a little easier to keep in touch with the observing trade time space prev u s see i n g m o r t h a n o n c e o r t w i c e a y e a r! Please join us for Deep South '97 (which takes place over Halloween weekend next year). I can't promise skies as spectacular as those we embraced this year, but I can promise a good time. Even when rain, and storms (and tornados one year!) have dampened spirits and limited observing, Dorothy and I have always had a memorable weekend with our wonderful astronomy friends! See you there!

## Stargaze SOUNDS



When you load-up the equipment for that next star party don't forget the *music!* It's wonderful to talk to your 'neighbors' while observing, but I know you'll want to spend at least some time in quiet contemplation of the heavens, and music provides a nice 'soundtrack' for these personal journeys. Music can also be a God-send for those early morning hours--it can help you focus your concentration and can increase your stamina, allowing you to make that one last observation or photograph. Just remember to use HEADPHONES. *Don't impose your choice of music on the entire observing field by blasting it with a boom box!* Following are 10 of my all-time observing music favorites:

1. *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs-Derek and the Dominos (Eric Clapton)*. This album, a classic from the early 70s, has absolutely *nothing* to do with astronomy or space, but its blues-based, **majestic** music just works when you're observing *anything!*

2. *Minuet from Berenice--Handel*. Handel struggled mightily with his opera *Berenice* with uneven results. This remarkable minuet, however, lives on, and provides a wonderful backdrop for galaxy observing (especially in Coma Berenices, natch!). My favorite recording is one by Sir Neville Mariner and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields from their video production *At Longleat*. This piece is short, but it's so wonderful that I 'looped' it on my tape--I certainly don't

mind hearing it five or six times in a row!

3. *Galaxies-Kevin Braheny*. This album, which is actually the 'soundtrack' music from a planetarium show, works well for any type of deep sky observing! Very well done and enjoyable, even if you're not overly fond of music in the New Age mode.

4. *Stardust-Willie Nelson*. A remarkable recording by one of my heroes, **Willie Nelson**. Provides an *unbeatable* accompaniment to *any* activity--including star gazing!

5. *2001: A Space Odyssey-Original Motion Picture Soundtrack Recording*. A natural for the Solar System Observer. The almost-frightening 'Gayne Ballet Suite' provides a chilling ambience for Jupiter observing!

6. *The Planets-Holst*. EVERY Solar System observer needs this! Holst's memorable and mysterious music can, of course, also do justice to deep sky objects!

7. *The Allman Brothers Band Live at the Fillmore East-The Allman Brothers*. Like *Layla*, this music doesn't have a thing to do with outer space. I've listened to it so much during observing and photographic runs (since the early 70s), though, that I can hardly imagine looking through a telescope without hearing 'Hot Lanta' or 'In Memory of Elizabeth Reed!' Simply incredible.

8. *Symphony No. 6-Beethoven*. The beautiful *Pastorale*. You may remember this astounding symphony from Disney's *Fantasia*. If you don't own a copy, go out and buy one *now*. Enjoy it at and away from the telescope. As perfect in realization and execution as any piece of music can

be.

9-10. Be sure to pack these last two into your observing kit bag. These are 'waker-uppers': perfect for late night/early morning boosts. Also good



for those astrophotographers out there who have the habit of dozing over the guiding eyepiece--I can guarantee that either of these two will definitely wake you up!

*Hank Live-Hank Williams Jr.*

*A Meowy Christmas-The Jingle Cats*

11. OK, I know, I said top 10. But I couldn't leave out Miles Davis' WONDERFUL *Sketches of Spain*. It's perfect for touring the convoluted depths of the Milky Way!

These are MY favorite pieces of 'telescope music.' But what are yours? I'd be very pleased to print your personal 'hit list'--let me hear from you!

--Rod

## From City Lights to Deep Space

### *Goodbye City Lights!*

After almost four years, I've decided to discontinue my column, 'From City

Lights to Deep Space'--at least temporarily. Not that I haven't enjoyed writing it over the last several years--I had almost as much fun putting each installment together as I did doing the initial observing which provided most of the data for these pieces. Indeed, this 'survey,' which was done with an old (60s vintage) 4" f11 Newtonian stationed under the lights of metropolitan Mobile, Alabama, was a *surprising* pleasure. I'll never forget the night, for example, when I stood awestruck viewing galaxy NGC1023--I had never imagined that such frighteningly deep voyages were available to an observer with an almost laughably modest telescope from a location plagued by skies that were often sodium pink instead of velvet black!

A big than those you super project over the year with your kind words and encouragement! And, never fear, I haven't turned my back on the deep sky. I have a new series in the works; one which will be a little less restrictive ('*Cosmic Carousel*' is the provisional title). 'City Lights' was fun, but adhering to the stricture that all objects had to be '...visible and rewarding from under city lights when viewed by 4-6" telescopes...' had finally become kind of a drag. So, *farewell* 'City Lights,' but don't give up on that bright-skied back yard (or, of course, on the battle against light pollution)!

--Rod

*Note: I've had a few requests for*

*reprints of the City Lights columns, and have been toying with the idea of collecting them into a season-by-season compilation (and rewriting/revising some of the earlier installments). If you'd be interested in something like this, please let me know.*

## Across the Universe of Books

*Amateur Astronomy Magazine*  
2111 Whitfield Park Avenue  
Sarasota, FL 34243  
USA Subscription: \$18.00 for one year

*I remember...RUNNING* home from the school busstop every day as the first of each month approached. *DASHING* into the house and looking for the mail. *HOPING* that *The Magazine* had arrived. *The Magazine? Why, Sky and Telescope*, of course. If it was there, my evening plans were set--homework and TV be *damned*. Back in those days--the mid-sixties--*Sky and 'Scope* was mailed in a 'plain brown wrapper,' and how well I remember *ripping* into each month's envelope to see what new wonder of the cosmos or giant telescope (or even, occasionally, *AMATEUR Telescope*) adorned *this issue's* cover. Then it was into the magazine itself. The back half of *Sky and Telescope*

was always devoured first. Back then, the second half of *S & T* was devoted to amateur-oriented articles. Scotty's column, which was the first thing I read--always--resided there, along with the monthly star chart, and most of the advertisements (the *front half* was mostly free of ads, with the exception of Questar's full-page-on-the-inside-front-cover, natch). After Scotty, I turned to the advertisements, and drooled longingly for hours over photos of giant, impossibly expensive, telescopes. The too-expensive telescopes were easily identifiable: there was invariably a white coated 'scientist' somewhere in the picture holding the corrector hand controller and looking serious and 'official'. The ads for the 'amateur size' telescopes--most of which were also impossibly expensive for me and my friends--were also examined minutely (a few years later, the pretty girls in sixties clothes who were often found caressing manufacturers' telescopes also received some attention). Finally, the 'serious' articles received their due reverent study : 'Galaxies and Quasi-Stellar Objects at Prague'. And so it went, month after month, year after year.

After a certain amount of time, though, this monthly ritual became a bit less satisfying. Maybe it was because I'd seen all the advertisements *many* times (did Jaegers *really* run the exact same ad for 20 years or so as I seem to remember?), or maybe it was just that amateur astronomy and astronomy in general had unavoidably lost some of their newness. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that I now had my first 'big' (6") telescope and was making my own first 'real' expeditions into the deep sky. At this point, I was more interested in my own impressions of galaxies and nebulae than in what Walter Scott

Houston thought of them (a truly misguided phase in my adolescent development which was soon to pass, thankfully). I was now spending more time browsing through Norton's than I was staring at pictures of Unitron refractors.

Then, when I was a Sophomore in college, *another* astronomy magazine came along, *Astronomy*. At first it seemed to be *heresy*, *Sky and Telescope's* junior-scientist outlook was gone, replaced by articles aimed at the amateur astronomer. But above all, it lived up to its cover blurb, which was, I think, 'The World's Most Beautiful Astronomy Magazine!' *Oh the pictures!* We'd never seen anything like it! In color, yet! I was a quick convert. I continued to buy and read *Sky and Telescope* and *Astronomy* faithfully through the 70s (*Sky and Telescope* had finally loosened up, and was running many more amateur-type articles, and, eventually, even color photos).

After a while, though, I began to weary of *both* magazines. While *Sky and Telescope* was usually very good, it didn't generate the same excitement it had in the early days. *Astronomy Magazine* had been a breath of fresh air at first, but it now seemed a little...well, *simpleminded*. Then, just as I was beginning to despair, *Deep Sky* came along. And the old excitement was back. Here was a magazine for and BY amateurs. And it was *wonderful!* **Somebody was finally printing the articles that I wanted to read** (and, often, that I wished I'd written). Though this magazine focused almost exclusively on deep sky observing, it also contained occasional pieces on photography, equipment reviews, and how-to articles. Combining *Deep Sky* with the other new magazine, *Telescope Making*,

provided reasonably complete coverage of our amateur astronomy world. I continued to read the two 'biggies,' but more out of *religious fervor* than need. Most of the useful (for me) articles were coming from *Deep Sky* and *Telescope Making*.

Then a terrible thing happened. In 1991 *Astronomy Magazine's* parent company, **Kalmbach Publishing** (who'd owned the magazine for a few years by this time), announced that they were closing down both *Telescope Making* and *Deep Sky!* Corporate Greed? Maybe just a bad case of Bottom-line-itis? I still don't know for sure. The departure of these two publications, though, left a void that had not been filled...until now, with the coming of a new (quarterly) magazine: *Amateur Astronomy*.

Ok, so now we get to the **real** review. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to get here, but I wanted to show how *important* astronomy magazines are in my life (and in the lives of many amateurs, I know for certain). *Amateur Astronomy* (and, still, *Astronomy*, and *Sky and Telescope*) are far, far more important to me than *Time* or *Newsweek* will ever be. And I'm not exaggerating when I say that I'm more excited about this new magazine than I've been about any astronomy periodical since the mid sixties and my first exposure to *Sky and Telescope*.

After the fall of *Deep Sky* and *Telescope Making*, there were a few attempts at producing AMATEUR astronomy magazines. *Deep Sky Journal* was initially very promising, but came to a sad, bungled end before it really had a chance at life. *Observatory Techniques* is another new-comer which seems very promising, but, from what little I've seen of it, it may not be QUITE there yet. Then I started hearing wonderful things about this

new effort, *Amateur Astronomy*. At first, I had it confused with another fairly recent offering, the U.K.'s *Amateur Astronomy and Earth Sciences*. I picked up a copy and was, frankly, **disappointed**--it was just a variation on *Astronomy Now*, and was filled with lightweight articles and pretty color pictures. Luckily, though, I discovered my error: what I wanted was the *other* new *Amateur Astronomy Magazine*, the one being published by Tom Clark (he of *Tectron* fame).

And I continued to hear raves about this magazine (which is now in its third year). So I was pretty excited when I saw that the postman had dropped-off issue #12, which Mr. Clark was kind enough to send me. Tearing into the envelope that contained the magazine brought back pleasant memories of the old *Sky and Scope* days, but I didn't really know what to expect. Being jaded, I hoped for something more than *Astronomy*

and expected something less than *Deep Sky*.

What was my first impression of the magazine? **Density**. In recent times, I find that I can finish *S&T* or *Astronomy* in a single (slow) afternoon at work. Not this baby! *Amateur Astronomy's* 70 or so black and white pages are a little **plain** in the layout and printing department, but the 'information bandwidth' is huge. Think of a combination of *Deep Sky* and *Telescope Making*. And more. Fellow observer **Pat Rochford** and I spent at least an hour just paging through the magazine and discussing Tom Clark's sure-to-be-controversial and **definitely** thought-provoking article on **big-mirror telescopes**. Shades of my Air Force astronomy club days, the early issues of *Telescope Making*, and the first wave of the Dobsonian revolution!

Something else that makes the value of *Amateur Astronomy* immediately obvious is the fact that I've already gone back to the magazine a couple of times to refer to observing articles (Tom Lorenzin's 'The Deep Sky Observer's Guide' PEGASUS ARTICLE). I've found that when I refer back to an issue *Astronomy* or *Sky and Telescope* these days, it's usually just to look at an advertisement or check solar system data--rarely anything else.

I felt that the balance of the magazine was just about right: good **hard** articles on observing and equipment, but enough general interest articles and stories--a lovely bio of Barnard by Nancy Jones comes to mind--to make the newer observer feel at home (at times, the old *Deep Sky*, for example, could be a bit off-putting, even for the seasoned observer: '*This 13th magnitude UGC galaxy is bright and easily found!*').

Was there anything about *Amateur Astronomy* I *didn't* like? Well, that's a hard one... It *would* be nice if

Mr. Clark were able to upgrade the paper and printing at some point. While certainly not newsprint pulp, the paper used in *Amateur Astronomy* is also not the glossy stock we've become used to with the 'other' magazines. While the type and layout are easily readable, if a bit plain, this paper doesn't really do justice to photographs and may not hold-up well over the long run (I'm one of those fanatics who's saved every issue of *Sky and Telescope* since the mid sixties!). On the other hand, I'd **much** rather see AA stick with its current production values than see it attempt to do **too much too soon** and go down the tubes ala *Deep Sky Journal!* My final complaint? The magazine's *frequency*. It's already obvious to me that I'm going to want to see *Amateur Astronomy* a *lot* more often than its current **quarterly** appearances will allow!

--Rod

## MAS/ESC 1996 Harvest Moon Eclipse Stargaze

What do you get when you mix a dozen telescopes, a total lunar eclipse, and 800-1000 excited parents and children? Chaos? Well...there was a little bit of that, but mainly what you get is an educational and enlightening evening for a large group of Mobile's school-children (and their parents). It was *also* an educational night for the members of the Mobile Astronomical Society who supported the 10 September public stargaze, which was a joint production of the MAS and the



The Harvest Moon Lunar Eclipse! Photo courtesy Lonnie O'Mary, Hasselblad, 90mm lens.

Mobile Public Schools' Environmental Studies Center. A crowd this large makes it easy to determine what's being done *wrong* as well as what's being done *right* when it comes to public star parties. While there *were* a few rough edges, we were mostly very happy with the outcome of the event, and are looking forward to presenting even more successful public programs in the future.

Sunrise on eclipse morning illuminated dishearteningly unsettled weather. After a spell of remarkably clear skies (for this time of year, anyway), those old clouds were moving back in! Unfortunately, it's become almost a cliché recently that any time the ESC's Dianne Martin expends a lot of effort planning a public stargaze, clouds and storms will unfailingly gather over Mobile, and it looked like the Harvest Moon Eclipse Stargaze was to be no exception. By late afternoon, weather conditions were still 'iffy,' but it was time for me to start packing up a scope--if it looked like the event would take place *at all*. At first I considered taking my 8" Dobsonian out to the ESC. After all, if we were going to be mostly clouded out, why spend a lot of time setting-up my SCT? I'd use the Dob to *maybe* give a few kids some fleeting glimpses of the Moon or Saturn. At the last minute, though, I decided to load up the C8. The Ultima 8 is *much* easier for children to use (especially the little ones)--the drive keeps the target in the field, and the eyepiece position is just about perfect for even the tiniest observers. This was to prove to be a wise decision.

Arriving at the Environmental Studies Center a little early (the stargaze was slated to begin at about 7:00pm) to give myself plenty of time to get the Ultima 8 ready, I couldn't help but notice that conditions were

becoming a *little* better. The few 'sucker holes' that had adorned the sky earlier were actually giving way to patches of blue! And before long our group of MAS observers began to arrive. The 'stargaze staff' eventually grew to include Your Editor, Dianne Martin, Pat Rochford, Judy Anderson, Ginny and Tony Kramer, Greg Thompson, Leland Cox, Sherri Martin, Kent and Merlene Clark and George Byron. In addition, several telescope owners we'd never met before showed up over the course of the evening bearing everything from 2" refractors to a 16" Meade Dobsonian! Quite a turnout! And a good thing, too, because, in testimony to Dianne Martin's organizational and promotional skills, seemingly endless streams of visitors soon began to descend on the ESC observing field!

More and more cars continued to file into the Environmental Studies Center's now overflowing parking lot, but I was unaware of much of anything other than the long, long line of children and parents at the C8. Thankfully, weather conditions had continued to improve. There were a few times over the course of the evening when the Moon and planets were obscured by errant clouds, but, for the most part, our guests were able to enjoy a couple of hours of uninterrupted observing! Surprisingly, given our recent luck (or lack thereof) with weather, Mobile was apparently one of the few locations along the Gulf Coast to get a reasonably good look at the eclipse. I enjoyed the Moon's show as much as I could, and it proved to be a very nice eclipse, which I felt was about 'medium dark.' A plus for this eclipse was Saturn's presence only a few degrees away, which made for a beautiful spectacle! Most of my 'observing,' though, was confined to quick glimpses up; I (like the other

members of our MAS crew) was kept *very* busy by our visitors. I know I *definitely* had *my* hands full moving the telescope from the Moon to Jupiter to Saturn and back, answering the excited questions that each view prompted, and trying to shoot an 8mm video of the eclipse! What was my most touching moment? Having to explain to a four-year-old who was bravely trying to hold-back her tears, that my telescope and I *weren't* making the now shadow-eaten Moon '*go away*,' and that it would be back soon! My most reassuring/inspiring moments? Watching the skeptical, 'cool,' expressions on the faces of teenagers give way to child-like wonder when they put their eyes to the eyepiece.

Though the evening was a lot of work for all of us, it passed quickly, and, with Dianne's announcement to the crowd that the Moon was now coming out of total eclipse and it was time for everybody to head for home, we had a chance to relax and reflect on the evening. The few problems we encountered were mainly due to the large crowd. The time has obviously come for us to start planning on having large groups for just about every public event. Where we could once expect maybe 50-200 children and parents, we are now routinely hosting up to 1000 visitors! But the small amount of fine tuning we need to do in no way means that the 1996 Harvest Moon Stargaze was anything less than a success. It was, in fact, a tremendous success, largely due to the tireless efforts of Dianne Martin! Please join us for our next public evening and help us make the 'next one' even more successful!

--Rod

*I have a short video (approximately 20 minutes) of the eclipse available. If you'd like a copy, just let me know (and get a blank tape to me)...*



Mobile Astronomical Society

Mobile, Alabama

'Under Orion Skies'



## My Back Pages

### Stories in the Sky

*Orion? Oh, well, he's the hunter. His story? Well he...ahh...he hunted things. Yeah! That's it!*

While most of our constellation figures have some kind of well-known and oft-repeated tale associated with them, strangely our *most prominent* constellation seems to be missing a myth to go with his splendor. A little checking revealed that even the classical poets seemed a bit confused about poor Orion's identity and story, but, from what I could tell, the basic facts are these:

*Once upon a time, there arose amongst mortal men a mighty hunter, Orion. So great was his stature, prowess, and, indeed, his physical beauty, that he inspired awe in men, and before long, even in the gods. In addition to awe, Orion also inspired love in the heart of at least one goddess.*

*Artemis, whom the Romans call Diana, was the goddess of the hunt and also the Moon. Artemis was at all times aloof in the presence of both mortal men and male gods, leading all to think her cold and barren. Late one night, though, the goddess came upon the mighty Orion as he slept in a wood, wearied from the labors of the hunt. Then and there Artemis' icy heart melted, and she watched Orion in secret every night thereafter. Finally, she could withhold her love no longer, and this once-cold goddess revealed herself to the hunter. Orion also immediately fell in love, and the hunter and the goddess of the Moon were one.*

*Artemis' brother, Apollo, had been watching the romance and was exceedingly wroth. To think that his own sister would consort with a mere mortal man! In his anger, Apollo dispatched the great scorpion, Scorpius, to slay the giant hunter. And, indeed, Scorpius did kill Orion, sneaking up on the man as he slept and stinging him to death.*

*But so great were Artemis' wails of sorrow that they really did raise heaven--the attentions of her father, Zeus, anyway. In order to console his beloved daughter, Zeus granted Orion immortality, and placed him in the heavens where he and Artemis could be together forever. And They Lived Happily Ever After...*

By the way, as you may know, Zeus was very careful to place Orion on the side of the sky opposite the dwelling place of Scorpius, and that is why we never see the two together in the night sky!

Note: there is another, more tragic, version of this tale in which Artemis is tricked into killing Orion with one of her arrows, but I prefer this one...

--Rod



### Club Notes

**November 1996 Monthly Meeting:** After Your Editor showed the video tape he shot at the recent Deep South Regional Star Gaze, a summary of our wonderful experiences at this well-loved star party was presented by President Pat. Following was more discussion on our need for a real dark site. Any ideas are **urgently** solicited!

**December 1996 Monthly Meeting:** We were very pleased to have a new prospective member or two present at the December meeting of the MAS; also heartening was the appearance of some faces we hadn't seen in a while. When the meeting got underway, President Pat and Your Editor demonstrated the use of the ESC's two new Meade telescopes (an 8" Dob and 8" German equatorial) and answered the questions of some attendees who are interested in buying new telescopes. **We also discussed the January meeting/dinner which will be held at Shoney's in Tillman's Corner (this has become a nice tradition for us). Club member George Byron has thoughtfully arranged for us to once again have the use of Shoney's 'back room.'** As usual, you'll be on your own as far as ordering and paying for your meal. **Due to the holidays, this yearly dinner will be held on 8 January, which is the second Wednesday of the month. Come join us at 7:00pm for food and fun (and you can tell us what astro goodies Santa brought you!).**



## Editor's Musings (Once upon a Midnight Dreary...)

### All Newsletter publishers have been asked to run this announcement:

Dear Astronomical League Member,

The league is holding the 50th Anniversary (Golden) Convention at Copper Mountain Colorado next July. We would appreciate it if you would print the below announcement in your club newsletter for our membership and post it on your bulletin board. The below information is current for October, 1996. We expect to name speakers and add commitments as the time approaches.

The Astronomical League Is Celebrating Its 50th Birthday. The Golden ALCON. This celebration, an international event, is open to all members of the league

How are we celebrating ? --By reserving a Colorado Rocky Mountain convention equipped major winter ski resort (Copper Mountain) to host the 1997 Astronomical League Convention. We are taking advantage of this facilities size and getting low off season rates for 6 to 12 days (June 27, 1997 through July 9, 1997) . Rooms, condos and efficiencies with or without kitchens are available. Creating an International Celebration within the reach of most of our 14,000 members. Assuring dark skies at 9,000 to 14,000 feet above sea level, 60 miles from any real light pollution with many observing sites. 6.5 to 7.5 magnitude skies are common. Colorado has over 300 clear nights a year. Creating a summer vacation opportunity in a most beautiful place, 18 miles from Vail, 25 from Aspen, 10 from Breckenridge and 50 miles from the Rocky Mountain National Park in the center of the highest National Forest land in the USA. And Much More- See 'Colorado' in any good travel guide. Inviting the AAVSO, the Royal Astronomical Society, IOTA, The Dark Sky Association and many other national and international groups. These are confirmed with more to answer.

What to do?

Tours of the second highest observatory (14,200 ft) in the world. Denver University's 28 inch I.R. binoculars (the Hubble is the only one higher) on Mount Evans, 35 miles from Copper Mountain. Tours and viewing through the Denver University's Chamberlain Observatory's famous 20 inch Alvan Clark refractor and shows at Gates Planetarium in Denver. Denver is 60 miles (1hour an 15 min) away and is a beautiful Major League city with great day and night life. Door prizes, raffles, auctions, astronomical display tables and night time demonstrations including many major astronomical equipment suppliers. Convention speakers from the top of Astronomy' pyramid both amateur and professional. JMI is bringing their 40 inch scope along with a 25 inch NGT for all 5 nights. Many other 20" and larger scopes will be there. S&S Optica, a Celestron dealer, will represent Celestron. Other major vendors are not yet committed to attend but have expressed strong interest. Copper Mountain Resorts facilities and programs including golf at 9100 feet, complete gym and spa facilities, dining, cocktail lounges, hiking, wildlife viewing, ski lifts, nearby white water rafting, fishing, boating, and much more. Local fireworks nearby on July 4. This looks to be the greatest star party/convention ever. ATM awards for

prizes judged by the Denver Astronomical Society optical and mechanical judges.

When and How much?

The official Convention dates are from July 1, 1997 to July 6 1997 with three days before and three days after for extended vacation at the negotiated rates. The Convention fee which includes 3 meals has not been set but will be less than \$75 with 250 registrations. Final convention fees will be published by end of May 1997. One convention breakfast, one barbecue dinner as well as a formal awards dinner included in the registration price (this also pays for the fixed convention space costs - the more who come the cheaper it gets).

The room rates are as follows:

When calling to register tell them you are with the "Astronomical League Convention" (July 1-6, 1997)  
Voice: 1-800-458-8386 (ext. 1 and ext. 1 again) FAX 1-970-968-2733  
Mail: Copper Mountain Resort  
PO Box 3001 Copper Mountain, CO 80433.

Hotel Room King or Twin (1-2 people) \$79.00 per day (add 7.8% sales tax to rates)

Deluxe Studio with Kitchen (1-2 people) \$95.00 per day

1 Bedroom Condo with Sofa bed (up to 4 people) \$105.00 per day

2 Bedroom Condo with Sofa bed (up to 6 people) \$170.00 per day (Shared room costs can be near \$30 per person)

Low airline rates can be arranged through you local travel agent into Denver or Colorado Springs airports from US hub cities. Please begin those arrangements early to take advantage of airline discounts. Van and Limo service is available. Parking is available at Copper Mountain for those who drive. No camping is permitted at Copper Mountain. Other accommodations are available but could present difficulties in access to parking.

Travel arrangements are up to you. You can arrange them any way you choose. If you have a local travel agency whom you trust, by all means use them. We have informed a reputable travel agency here in Denver, Colorado who knows the turf. They are :

Business and Leisure Travel Agency  
1775 Sherman Street  
Denver CO 80203  
Telephone 1-(800) 895-2805  
Local Phone 1-(303) 830-8928  
FAX 1-(303) 830-8938

They can arrange good airline rates from anywhere in the U.S. and transportation between the airports and Copper Mountain.

Of course one early announcement can only skim the surface of what will be going on there. Keep tuned to the Reflector Newsletter and the Internet DAS & Astronomical League page (<http://www.du.edu/~pryan/alcon97.html>) for updates.

Not sure you are a member of the Astronomical League? Check with your club. If not, You can join for \$25 at the ALCON.

Edmund G Kline  
Chairmen for Raffles and Prizes  
1997 Golden ALCON

**Editor's note: If you're a member of the Mobile Astronomical Society, you are a member of the**

***Astronomical League and should be receiving The Reflector...***

--Rod



## Bob Dole's a CCD Man

**Steven Waldee** (*toccata-and-fugue@postoffice.worldnet.att.net*) writes:

*In that strange time between sleep and waking, I dreamt I read the following in the morning paper on Wednesday, November 6:*

### DOLE A CCD-MAN

Russell, KS., AP - An ebullient Robert Dole, appearing fresh, tanned and relaxed, appeared before reporters this morning to make an announcement that seemed startling to many veteran Dole-watchers.

"Bob Dole's armed for bear. Got my laptop. Got my C-8. Autoguider. Get out there and bag some DSOs." In a burst of inexplicable jargon, the failed Republican presidential candidate, sporting a jauntily tilted Stellafane cap, mystified the Washington press corps until a certain Dennis DiCicco, representing a small magazine in Cambridge, Massachusetts, acted as interpreter.

"Dole's an amateur astronomer," explained DiCicco, contributing editor of Sky and Telescope Magazine, a publication catering to stargazers. "He successfully hid this avocation from the public and the press, but his life-long passion hasn't been congressional arm-twisting as everyone thought...it's been astronomy."

The former candidate snapped at the surrounding

journalists, adding, "In Arkansas, they got poor seeing. Twinkling. Turb'lence. And humid: boy it's wet! But KANSAS! Well, we got good seeing. Hell, GREAT seeing! And Tombaugh. Found Pluto. Bob Dole's gonna be out there every night. Find a planet for himself, too."

With copies of *THE LIGHT HEARTED ASTRONOMER* and Malin's *THE COLOR OF THE STARS* clutched under his arm, Dole continued in a more expansive mood, his brow now unfurrowed and his gaze set on the far horizon.

"Bob Dole's a CCD man. SBIG. ST-8. Got a million and a half pixels. And filter wheel. Toshiba laptop, 32 megs. Got the software. Photoshop. Bisque. Look out Schillings. Forget it, Parker." The famous legislator chuckled at the confused expressions on the faces of the newspapermen, adding: "Not forgetting Ph'tography. Got some Gold Pro 400. Kodak did it! America comes through again. Rec'procity failure? It's history! Forget it. Gone along with the forming gas. Good riddance!" he spat, as though consigning a Democratic contender to the perdition of defeat.

"Been practicin' unsharp masking. Set up a darkroom in the corner of the Senate Cloakroom. Got a 'Lagoon' you wouldn't believe. Bok globules. Dark lanes. Go in there when those Democrats wind up. When Bob Byrd gets up to speak, Bob Dole knows he's got 3, maybe 4 hours to party!"

After a deep breath, the former Senator smiled and slowly surveyed the corpulent, donut-inhaling reporters. "Y'er on your way to your first heart attacks. Dole's not eating donuts. Bob Dole's pumped-up: ready for some planetary nebulae: M57. And supernova remnants: M1. Crab. M27. Dumbell." (That's the transcription of what the former candidate meant to say, though in his clipped Kansas accent, it came out 'plannary nebula' and 's'nova remnants') He continued, "And Liddy. Loves the stars. Got her an Astroscan. Keep her busy during those two-hour exposures," he twinkled.

The Senator momentarily lost control of the laptop computer that was lodged in his left armpit; it clattered to the ground, lid flipping open to reveal the splash screen of Windows NT 4.0. A surprised DiCicco called out from the rear periphery, "But how are you gonna keep all of that stuff running out in a field in Kansas, Senator?" he inquired.

"Ethanol," Dole intoned, as he stepped into the Archer Daniels Midland limousine to be whisked to a waiting corporate jet and on to certain history as a great astrophotographer.

***HMM..ahem...well, it COULD be.....***

--Rod

## RUMOURS

*The New Year brings with it **Year Two** of Rumours. What strange secrets will escape from the hermetically-sealed mayonnaise jar over the coming twelve months?*

Did you tune into the **Internet** and pick up the sad, confused story of **Comet Hale-Bopp** and the **'Mysterious Saturn-like Object?'** The basic story is this: Houston astrophotographer **Chuck Shramek** took some CCD images of the comet on 14 November. Shramek noticed that a bright object appeared in the same small field as Hale-Bopp. This object was bisected by a streak which, in Shramek's mind, made it look a bit like the **Planet Saturn**. Checking the appropriate field in the very deep computer star atlas, Megastar, revealed no trace of the object. Further, the photographer decided that the object was 'following' Hale-Bopp! That's the story. But then things get **interesting!**

Shramek, convinced of the anomalous character of his 'object,' went on Art Bell's 'Dreamland' radio show to discuss his 'discovery.' From there, the 'story' burst onto the Internet. After some discussion, it was opined by some cool heads that it was quite possible that Shramek's object was merely an SAO star, which didn't appear on Megastar's display due to incorrect settings of the program's magnitude filters ('incorrect' for what Mr. Shramek was trying to do). In addition, examination of Shramek's images didn't seem to reveal any motion of his 'object' against background stars. Finally, the streak was provisionally identified as being caused by dew on the corrector of Chuck Shramek's SCT (there were also some other ideas; so far no iron-clad identification of the 'streak' has appeared).

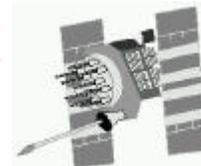
At first, the discoverer seemed to **accept this verdict**, but then, in typical Internet fashion, things began to get a bit ugly. Almost immediately, Chuck Shramek became the target of many attacks; not merely on his supposed 'discovery,' but, as so often happens on the Internet, on his *character*. **Feeling the need to respond**, he managed to handily eliminate any feelings of sympathy that many bystanders felt for him and alienate his 'supporters' by **ranting and raving** about a **'CONSPIRACY'** at **JPL!** **Then, Alan Hale**, the codiscoverer of the comet, made a statement on the net which referred to the Shramek as a 'so-called amateur astronomer' and hinted that Shramek's **real** agenda involved 'anti-government conspiracy theories,' etc., etc. While there *does* admittedly seem to be some truth in Hale's insinuations that Shramek is interested in conspiracy 'theories,' Hale's statement seemed a little harsh in tone. And completely unneeded. **A rational exposition of the facts of the matter would have quickly shown that Shramek's claims were entirely specious!** The whole thing

is passing into history now, soon to be forgotten--**again in TYPICAL Internet fashion**. I'm sure there's a moral here, but I'm not really sure what it is! *One* thing's sure, most of the principals in this little play were able to show themselves in the worst possible light. Perhaps the whole sordid affair is merely another of proof of what many of us Internet 'old-timers' have been aware of for some time: with each passing day, the chances for polite discourse on the Internet, and especially on **Usenet**, grow less and less. Why is it that normally 'nice' people feel a desire to say things over the Internet that they wouldn't dream of saying to each other in person?...

**Checking into Sky and Telescope's World Wide Web site** revealed that the publisher is **selling 10" telescope mirrors**. The ad doesn't give the origin of these mirrors, which are offered in a number of **surface accuracies** and focal lengths for **various prices**. A .80 wavefront (urk!!) mirror is offered for **\$175.00**, while a **.26 wave mirror** is **\$550.00!** I know it's the 90s and prices have risen on everything, but wasn't it just a few years ago that poor old Jim Braginton was selling 10" mirrors (many of which tested-out at 1/8 wave and better) for \$150.00 or so? Also, I feel a little queasy at seeing **Sky Publishing**, who've often been in the forefront of the quest for optical quality in commercial optics **selling '.80 wave' mirrors**, even if the accuracy is known **'upfront'...**

*I'm hearing persistent rumors* that Meade is readying an **LX-400** telescope. SUPPOSEDLY this SCT is **much like the Celestron Ultima 2000...**i.e. lighter, quieter, and less power-hungry than the **LX-200**. Does Meade think that the U8 is really shaping up to be the **LX-200 killer** of Celestron's dreams? Is this a real project or vaporware? Impossible to say at this point, but in recent times Meade has been pretty good at delivering on its promises; even if it takes *years* (the 16" LX-200 for example)...

**Finally** (a little short this month, your anonymous correspondent is still nursing an egnog hangover!), I see that **Televue Optics** is marketing its new **TV-140 FIVE INCH refractor--for \$5,600.00!** By all accounts this is a wonderful telescope (I've yet to see anything but excellent equipment from 'Uncle Al'), with some users **swearing that it blows away Astro-physics' legendary 130!** Guess I won't be using one any time soon, though...unless...some kind soul out there makes a nice donation to my 'refractor fund' (maybe I can get United Way interested in this worthy cause)! And you had a monopoly on inch of aperture next time...



thought **Questar** the \$1000.00+ per business! Until

--The Anonymous

Astronomer

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With the coming of the new year, let's **resolve** to find a new dark site! We think that finding a good spot for the club to gather and observe would go a long way toward assuring the continued health of the Mobile Astronomical Society!

Peace,

Rod &  
Dorothy



As promised last issue, here's a photo of Meade's new Schmidt Camera! That's a 7" EDT Refractor being used as a guidescope (comes standard with the camera, along with a CCD!).