Amateur Astronomy WITH AN ATTITUDE *from Chaos Manor South!*

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"A Newsletter for the Truly Outbound!"

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Skywatch
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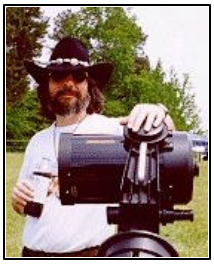
Rod Mollise's

Skywatch



Chiefland 'Light'

The May 2002 Informal Chiefland (Florida) Star Party

Rod Mollise

Howdy boys and girls!

Just returned from a great New Moon weekend in Chiefland, Florida (in the Florida interior between Gainesville and Orlando). What a blast! For those of you who don't know, Chiefland is the home of the *Chiefland Astronomy Village*, a little back-country development that's basically **a subdivision for amateur astronomers**. If you've read *Amateur Astronomy Magazine*, you've seen pictures, since Tom and Jeannie Clark, the publishers of AAM, are a couple of the prime movers there. Renowned astrophotographer Jack Newton was also formerly a resident, though he's now moved on to Arizona to start his own version of CAV out west.

At any rate, my observing buddy and best friend, Pat Rochford, and I loaded up Pat's little SUV and a borrowed trailer with my NexStar 11, Pat's 24" dob and the supplies we thought we'd need for a couple of nights of tent camping, and hit I10. The trip was a very comfortable one for us, with almost all of it being on the Interstate or 4 lane state Highway 19. We got out of Mobile by 8:15, and pushed as hard as we could pulling a trailer—having to set up for tent camping, we wanted to have plenty of time before dark to get organized. We eschewed lunch, choosing, instead, to have an early supper at about 3pm in the small town of Chiefland.

Chiefland, unfortunately, appears to be having a hard time economically, with many closed businesses and unworked fields evident. The people were very friendly, however, and the town's premiere restaurant, Bill's Bar-B-Que, has some of the best pork sandwiches Uncle Rod has tasted in QUITE a while (and you KNOW he's an epicure when it comes to that type of food). The beer looked cold, but with lots of work to do and a long night ahead,

we settled for <shudder> Diet Coke!

Arriving at CAV, the observing field was quite a surprise. Pat had spoken to Jeannie Clark early in the week, and had asked her what to expect for this informal star party (no speakers, no organized events). She said, "Could be five, could be 50, could be—who knows." "Who knows" definitely won out, with it being obvious that over a hundred observers were on the field with more arriving. Once on the field, we didn't waste any time setting up our picnic canopy—it was HOT and we needed shade desperately. The incredible heat (over 100F on the field Saturday afternoon) was the only slight downer the whole weekend. We were prepared, though, with appropriate clothes (if you weren't there, you missed the spectacle of Rod and Pat in shorts!) and lots of liquids.

With our canopy, tents and scopes up, we took a break, changed out of our sweat soaked traveling clothes, and wandered around the field meeting friends old and new (including quite a few SCT-User and Nexstar GPS list members we were pleased to meet eyeball to eyeball for the first time). The scopes at Chiefland were a motley lot, with lots of truss tube dobs in evidence (this *is* Chiefland, afterall, practically big-dob central thanks to the Clarks). But there were almso many beautiful CATs too, including at least three Nexstar 11s, one Nexstar 8 GPS, numerous LX200s (no GPSes, darnit), many Orange Tubes and other classic Meades and Celestrons, and, Saturday, an 8 inch TEC MCT on a Millennium mount (no, I didn't get a chance to try this high-toned bird; the owner tore it down and split before I had a chance to bug him Saturday evening).

As evening came on, we became concerned about the weather, which had been variably cloudy all day. Didn't look so hot (except temperature-wise). It was quite some time after twilight before I was even able to pick out a couple of alignment stars for the NexStar11. For you Celestron mavens curious about the new 11 inch, yes, the scope started well and just kept *rocking* all night long! My sweet new Big Kitty (yes, your silly Uncle has nicknames for his scopes) took a GPS fix immediately, and just seemed *anxious* to soak up photons. For the remainder of the evening, and the rest of the weekend, she easily put any object I requested in the field of a 12mm Nagler at f/10 (about 220x). But what about those clouds? Thankfully they began to scud away.

So I got started. This was the first chance I had had to give the 11 a real workout under dark skies. And they *were* dark. When clouds occasionally blocked part of the sky, something that happened occasionally for the balance of the evening, I'd just choose another area to work. There was never a time—or at least a very long time—when the whole sky closed out.

I saw lots of wonderful objects on this evening, but the two that stand out are the lustrous M5, which on this eve' looked better than M13 to Rod's wondering eyes (and I wasn't the only person on the field to agree) and the weirdly beautiful NGC 3115, the spindle Galaxy. In the 11 it was bright, with the faint envelope that surrounds the "spindle" evident and surprisingly easy. Hungry for targets, I pulled out Kepple and Sanner's *Night Sky Observer's Guide* and did just about every globular cluster good and bad, big and small, bright and dim in Ophiuchus—and that's a lot of globs! Another treasure was M22 as seen in the 35mm Panoptic. I'll leave its appearance to your imagination--I really don't have the words to describe it right now.

And I just kept going, object after object, the NS11 quietly humming and just *delivering*. I was particularly

impressed by the hand-controller. It is simple enough to operate that when, as usual, I got the "stupids" at 3am (hey, it was a long day!) I was still able to navigate without a hitch. In fact, I now believe that one of the NS11's real strengths is not its hi-tech features, but the basic simplicity of its layout and operation. Hey! I like cool gadgets too, but not in the middle of a field at 3am—Uncle Rod ain't smart enough to figger out all those buttons when half of his brain is shut down!

At about 3 - 3:30 the sky began to seriously cloud out. Pat and I decided to take a break. Before you know it, Unc had broke out the bourbon (Jack Black...would you believe it: I could NOT find a bottle of Rebel Yell in all of Mobile? I must be makin' that stuff too danged popular!). Around about 4am, the sky began to clear off, but the whiskey and fatigue had taken their toll, the Desert Storm cover had gone over the NS11, and we finished the evening just eyeballin' the purty Florida skies. In my tent, I drifted off looking out at the Dipper's stars as it plunged into the West.

Tired as I was, I was only able to sleep for about 3 hours--the Sun had made my tent too hot for snoozing at 7:30am. Quick shower (nice, clean, showers were available on the edge of the field). Quick trip to town for a big omelet, and back to Chiefland.

Right here, I need to mention that one of the BEST features of the entire star party was the hospitality of Tom and Jeannie Clark. After the picnic (the Chiefland folks supplied the chicken, barbequed it to perfection, and the rest of us contributed side items) We were feelin' really tired and hot. Tom says, "Come on over to my shop and I'll show you my project." Walking past the giant dome Tom has built from scratch, we entered the blessed cool of Tom's "barn" shop. Pat and I got to eyeball his sketches for the *42 inch computer-controlled monster dob* that will inhabit the huge dome. Yeah, I'm a CAT man, but I can hardly wait to get a look through what I think will be Tom's masterpiece.

By the time Tom and I finished shootin' the breeze and comparing notes about the astro-biz, it was cooling off. Amost time to start gettin' ready. But what a wonderful opportunity to carry on my usually long-distance friendship with Tom Clark, one of the real GOOD GUYS in this game, and a man who's responsible for quite a few of the things we take for granted in amateur astronomy these days.

Saturday night started out similarly to Friday. Quite a few clouds. By the time I got the 11 aligned, however, it was pretty obvious that this would be a better night than Friday had been. I started out with the showpieces—M13, M5 (again), and so forth. My main focus was to be galaxies on this evening, though. And Miss Kitty lapped 'em up like a cat with a dish of cream—or yer Uncle Rod eatin' beer nuts! I was so enthralled running through Leo and Virgo's wonders, that I ALMOST forgot to look at Omega Centauri. By the time I was reminded, it was halfway behind a nearby tent, and I was probably using only about half the C11's aperture. But even so, what a mind blower, pards! Tiny stars all OVER the field of the 35 Pan.

Yeah, Uncle Rod's a CAT man. Probably only one man could convince him to leave his new SCT for a dob: Tom Clark. About midway through the evening, Tom marched over and said, "Rod, I need to borrow you and Pat for a minute." OK. He took us over behind the new dome where the 36 inch "Yard Scope 2" was setup. He and Jeannie had it aimed at M5 with a bino-viewer in place. I gingerly climbed up the ladder (Jeannie and Tom thought I climbed it like a flat-footed SCT user!) and took a look. Almost fell off that ladder! The cluster was so bright that the pseudo 3D effect that you see on the planets in smaller scopes with bino-viewers came into play. The big glob was nothing less than a 3D ball of countless suns, many of which showed *color*. The contrast was amazing. Normally M5 has a slightly bluish tent in most scopes. But in the 36 its suns were individuals—white, amber, orange. We then went on to M104 (the dust-lane was mottled and curved like a Georgia dirt road) and the antennae galaxies (star burst regions were detailed and the "antenna" was easy with averted vision). I signed the Clark's observatory guest book*: "To Tom and Jeannie: Thanks for a wonderful time and the great hospitality—I'll be back!"*

The rest of the evening with the NS11 was a continuous tour of wonders. I was able to see the famous Playing Mice galaxies in Coma, and it was a kick to eyeball these (very dim) wonders while recalling the recent Hubble ACS image! Another incredible memory was of M17, the Swan, in Pat's beautiful 24". The detail was incredible—streamers of mottled gas everywhere. I love my CATs, but I must admit that I have NEVER seen Old Swan look better.

On me and Kitty went til about 4. I reluctantly called it quits, since the ride back home, while not punishing would be a bit of a pain with only a total of about 4 hours sleep for the weekend!

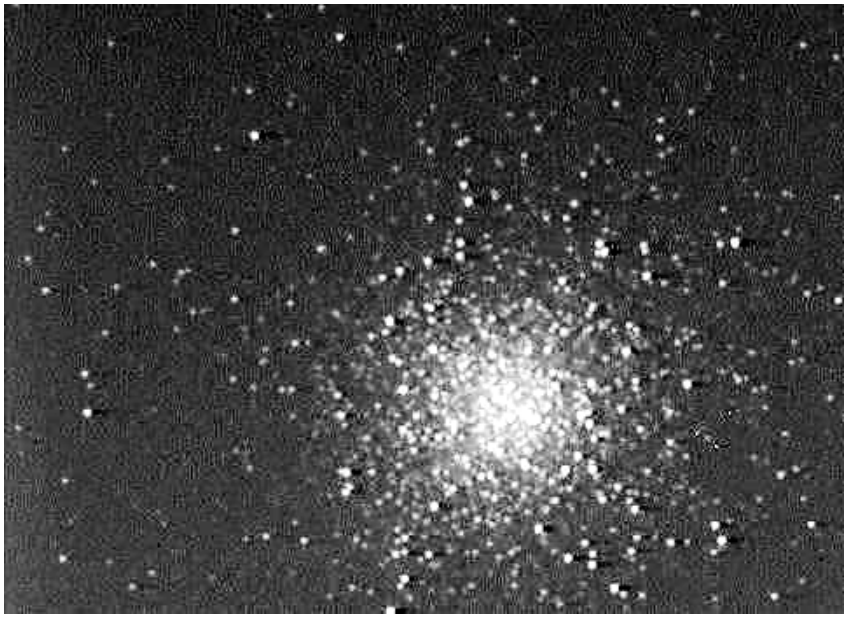
All too soon we were packing up. Despite the occasional clouds and incredible heat, it had been a weekend to remember, and I'll indeed treasure my Chiefland memories for a long time. By the way, Chiefland hosts *two* star parties a year. The informal May bash and a more oraganized event in November (really incredible skies, not too cold, and great speakers).

The Globular Cluster Top Ten Greatest Hits!

Rod Mollise

Recently, Greg Crinklaw, noted deep sky observer, and author of the ***Skytools*** observing/planning software, started a thread on the sci.astro.amateur (s.a.a.) Internet newsgroup soliciting folks' opinions as to the top 10 globulars. It drew some interesting responses. Below are mine...what do y'all think?

1. **Omega Centauri**. I need not justify this to anybody who's seen it, particularly from a location south of 30N! It R-O-C-K-S! A great big elongated thing that will challenge your field-size! I waited too late for this at the recent Chiefland Star Party...it was almost obscured by a nearby tent. But I sent the NexStar 11 over that way anyway, and it was still spectacular despite me using maybe half my aperture.



2. **47 Tuc(ana)** (NGC 104). I've not yet been lucky enough to see this with my own eyes, but I'll accept secondhand reports from buddies who have and who say that this bright thing is second only to Omega.
3. **M5**. I suppose that in most folks lists M13 goes here. Uh-uh. *No sir buddy!* For me it's M5 all the way! It's equal in integrated brightness to M13, and a tad smaller. Always looks flashier to me than its more famous neighbor. Visually, my impression of M5 is usually "blue"...especially in a smaller aperture scope. M13 is "yellow."
4. **M13** And, yes, it *is* a big, bright, well-resolved marvel, no doubt about it (even my little ST80 Short Tube refractor begins to pick it apart under dark skies at relatively high power). And, nearby, little galaxy, NGC 6207 is an interesting added attraction. And there's the famous "Propeller" darklane/asterism/whatever, too. And don't forget to take a look at nearby M92 while you're here (Rod's sneaky method of sneaking in an 11th glob).
5. **M22**. If this big old grandpappy were a wee bit more northerly declination-wise, you wouldn't hear much about M13, I'm afraid. At mag 6.5 or so, and about 17-18 minutes across, this is a mind-blower! It's quite loose (Shapely - Sawyer Class VII) and incredibly easy to resolve--my Short Tube 80 f/5 doesn't just *hint* at resolution on this one, it *does* it. From my 30 degree North latitude I get a good look at 22, but I assume it just gets better the farther South you go.
6. **M3**. Not the biggest or brightest, 3 is a middle-of-the-road Globular. Very pretty and well resolved in 6 inch and larger scopes. It also says: "The globs ARE BACK" to me each Spring!
7. **M53**. Might as well list the other Deep Spring glob. Not *too* much to look at, frankly, but fairly easy to resolve with any reasonable scope. Prime attraction: its little-buddy glob, NGC 5053. 5053 is Gilligan to M3's Skipper. There's been some discussion about this one on s.a.a. recently—apparently some people struggle with this NGC glob, but I've never found it very hard with a C8 from a dark site. You do need about 10 - 12 inches and dark sky before this loose, silly little thing begins to look like much. I find that my appreciation of a DSO is often enhanced by what's close to it, the richness of the field, etc.—but don't get me wrong, M53 *is* good on its own!
8. **NGC 6712**. Am I allowed something somewhat offbeat? This little-bitty in Scutum (mag 8 and about 5 - 7 minutes across) ain't much on its own. BUT, MAN...WHAT A VIEW! It's the incredibly rich Scutum starfield that turns this from "ho-hum...OK" to WOWSERS! The glob itself shows at least edge resolution in 8 inches and up.
9. **M71**. It's also the rich starffield (in Sagitta) that gives Mr. Messier's 71 a spot on this list. But 71 is actually interesting in its own right, too. It is very loose (Class IX), looking more like a very condensed open cluster (think "M11) than a globular. A color magnitude diagram, however, tends to show it to be

a globular, though doubt in this classification is still *occasionally* expressed.

10. *Another* weirdo. **NGC 2419**. This distant (100 kiloparsecs or so) Intergalactic Tramp (it is actually in a very elliptical orbit) gets talked about a lot...but few folks hunt it down. Do so! Mainly to say you've seen it...of course...it's just a dim (mag 10 or so) spot of light...but it's nice to say you've "been there"... :-)

Hunting the Elusive 400 Dollar Telescope!

Rod Mollise

You hear it all the time from Newbies—on s.a.a. and at the local astronomy club: "I want a telescope. What can I get for less than 400 dollars?"

In the past my inclination has been to reply, **"Get yourself a nice pair of binoculars. You simply CAN'T get a good scope for 400 dollars."** But is that true? It turns out, surprisingly, that it's *not*. Things have changed a lot since the 80s. Even though the dollar has shrunk, the astronomy market has expanded. There are more sellers, more buyers and a much greater selection of equipment on offer. But what's really helped Jane and Joe Novice Amateur is the entry of mainland China into the astronomy biz.

The Chinese equipment story started with Orion's introduction of the famed Short Tube 80 80mm f/5 refractor. This was such a huge success that the maker, China's Synta, and other firms in mainland China and Taiwan have begun exporting an ever larger variety of very inexpensive equipment of reasonably good quality. Are there any reasons we shouldn't welcome this influx of scopes? Well, to some extent, the proliferation of inexpensive equipment tends to drive out better quality mid-priced gear (cheap imported scopes have little effect on the high-end market). Also, some folks question whether we should be supporting an undeniably repressive regime with our dollars (this can be argued either way for hours). Finally, while the quality of far eastern gear can be *surprisingly good*, it is not, as yet, even *close* to the quality of Japanese, U.S. or European equipment. QA seems especially problematical, and that means that getting a good Chinese scope can be a crapshoot—quality varies wildly at times.

But, frankly, even with these caveats, it must be admitted that these imported scopes are a boon for the newbie; especially the young person with a lot of enthusiasm, but without a lot of money to invest.

I knew all this, of course, that there are some amazing telescope bargains out there. But *exactly* what does your 400 dollars (or less) buy you *right now?* I hit the Internet and the astronomy magazines and catalogs for a quick survey of what 400 teeny 2002 dollars will get an excited new amateur. In less than 15 minutes, I'd rounded up the following REAL DEALS.

The Orion 6" XT dob (now imported from mainland China) at $349.00. This scope has a good record of pleasing new owners, and has enough aperture to keep many folks satisfied for a lifetime. The quality of the scope is possibly not *quite* as good as it was when it was first introduced, but the Synta version is still, frankly, impressive for the price.

Or there's the Discovery 6 for $339.00. This U.S.-made scope is also a prime choice. You'll get a cardboard (Sonotube) tube rather than the aluminum one on the XTs, but the scope works every bit as well as the oft-praised Orions.

Or, if you ain't a dob fan, another option is the Orion 6" EQ scope for $369.00 on a CG4/EQ3 GEM. This is another Chinese Newtonian reflector, this time an f/5 on a reasonably steady and well-made CG4 mount. Dobs are nice, but I prefer tracking, and this is one hard-to-beat package.

Or there's a Short Tube 80, a classic widefield scope that WORKS on a GEM for $289.00. What more can you say? The Short Tube 80 is a modern classic. It provides stunning wide-field views from dark sites (I've never had better views of the North America Nebula than the ones the 80 has given me), makes a decent imaging scope piggybacked on a larger instrument, and provides reasonable views of the Moon and planets (though planetary viewing is certainly not the forte' of an f/5 achromat).

Or the Orion Short Tube 90 on a little GEM for $389.00. This provides the same nice features as the 80 and throws in a little more aperture to boot (and a little more false color, of course).

Or the Celestron C150HD 6 inch Newtonian on the CG4 for $399.00. For the price, this 6 inch f/7 Newtonian is a steal. Although it provides the f/7 focal ratio in such a short tube via a built-in barlow (aka "corrective lens element"), I understand it performs well nevertheless. The very short tube will no doubt stress the mount less than even Orion's f/5 OTA does.

Or the Celestron C102 4 inch refractor on the CG4, also for $399.00. This is a classic f/10 achromatic refractor that can do a good job on the Moon and planets (albeit with some false color) and provide a decently wide field for deep sky viewing, too. No, the mount ain't the Rock of Gibraltar when you put a semi-long refractor

on it, but it's definitely *good enough* to provide much pleasant viewing. Again—a positive steal.

Or Meade's 90mm Maksutov-Cassegrain, the ETX90 RA. This cutie is also likely to please an experienced amateur as a second porta-scope. This is the non-goto version of the scope, which Meade is currently phasing out. At less than 250 dollars from some sellers, and usually featuring exquisite optics, I must admit: WHAT A BARGAIN!

And on and on and on. **I'm amazed!** I could hardly believe, once I really started checking, what 400 simoleons will buy a novice! ***Dang!*** Far MORE than what the equivalent dollars got in the 70s or 80s. *Equivalent* dollars, remember. One of these babies, a pair of Simmons widefield 10x50 binocs (less than 40 bucks at the discount houses), a copy of the Cartes du Ciel computer program to print star maps (free), and maybe a planisphere or a copy of Orion's *Deepmap 600* (less than 15 bucks) and Joe and Jane Newamateur will be ready to ROCK--I mean it! :-)

None of these scopes are what "advanced amateurs" will salivate over. BUT...any of these scopes will please a novice in spades, and will be far, far, far better than what I started out with in 1965, a Tasco 3" reflector on a an altazimuth fork. And that little bitty thing opened up the whole, beautiful universe to my wondering eyes!

And they call it

NAGLERMANIA!

Pat Rochford

I don't know about you, but the most dangerous moments in my life seem to occur when I come into a little *extra money*. Especially when that little *extra* happens to be in the neighborhood of a few hundred dollars. You know … ***Nagler money.*** From the moment that windfall comes into my possession, until the eyepiece finally arrives, I am imagining views of things celestial. Driving safely in rush hour traffic becomes nearly impossible, as the set of taillights belonging to the car in front of me suddenly turn into the Double Cluster. I will forget to shut off a pot of boiling rice that I'm watching for my wife because it has become Omega Centauri. And I will no doubt fail to notify the utility company when I discover strands of wire dangling from a downed power line because it has been transformed into the Veil Nebula. Dangerously wonderful chunks of brass and glass, these inventions of Al Nagler.

And this time we're not just talking about *any Nagler*. We're talking the Mother of All Naglers - **the 31mm**. This will become my seventh Nagler purchase. And just as with all the rest, nearly every waking hour is consumed with everything related to it. I've run all the calculations - *several times* - on how it will perform in each of my telescopes. Magnification, true field of view, exit pupil--you name it and I can tell you the number. I may not be able to remember where I placed the car keys when I got home from work yesterday, but I can quote you the field stop diameter of each and every one of these. Eye relief too. Weights and dimensions? Hah! That's child's play.

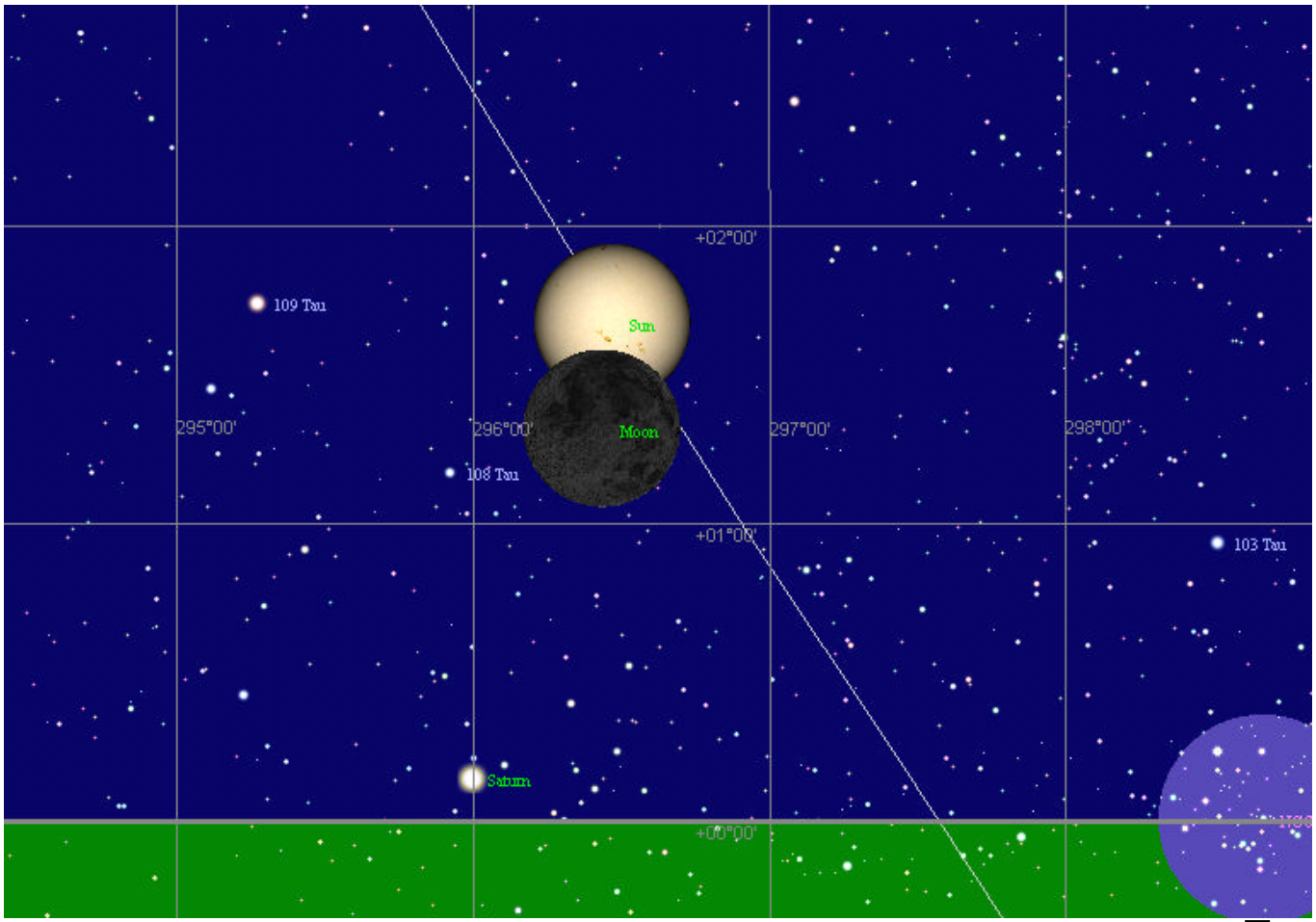
Now, will I actually be able to *use it* when it arrives? Of course not! Just like I couldn't use most of the others when they came to live with me. Take the arrival of my 12mm type 2 in 1997. It arrived two days before hurricane Danny. The clouds were already present when the UPS truck pulled up and of course the following days were record setting. How about just under 24" of rain over the course of the weekend! No joke, that actually happened. I couldn't even get to my observatory for almost five days. The following year brought the arrival of my 9mm. It was December and dark and CLEAR when I got home from work. There on the kitchen counter top, sat a box from Astronomics. Ah, this cruel ritual was finally going to end. I was actually going to experience the joy of using a new eyepiece the very same night of the day it arrived. Or so I thought. A voice from the bedroom, my wife's, shouted "Hurry up and get a shower honey, the school Christmas program starts in forty-five minutes."" Crap. By the time we returned home, so had the clouds.

So just what sort of event will delay first light with the 31? I have no way of knowing. I only know that it *will* be delayed, even though I have already eliminated every conceivable roadblock. Known major obstacles were overcome earlier this year, including insufficient in-travel with the focuser (I read of several horror stories regarding this problem) and the issue of balance (this eyepiece weighs as much as many premature infants do at birth). I suppose weather will more than likely be the culprit, although I do not rule out an unexpected strike at UPS or the quarantining of my town due to some heretofore unheard of disease.

So will the acquisition of the 31 complete my quest? Certainly not, as I never did get the "grenade", the 20mm type 2. You can't call a collection complete when there are still holes to fill. Also, there's the issue of the 4.8mm type 1 with its too small eye relief, now that the 5mm type 6 is out. And what about the soon to be released 26mm type 5? It may well be a better "finder" eyepiece than the 31for locations where total dark adaptation is not possible. Oh, lets not forget the collector's Holy Grail, *the elusive 11mm*. And then there's the 13mm

type 1which will no doubt become scarce as well. And what about **sets** of 13mm and 16mm type 6es for my BinoVue? My current pairs of Plossls will have to be replaced *eventually*. And, and, and …

Did y'all miss the recent partial Solar eclipse? You did if you didn't have an unobstructed view of the Western Horizon, as Old Sol was WAY down there for us on the Alabama Gulf Coast at eclipse time. Anyhoo, here's a simulation courtesy of the wonderful freeware program Cartes du Ciel (with the blue sky subtracted for good measure)!



My Back Pages

This little piece of humor (something all too lacking in most astronomy reading matter) came in from Rod's buddy Doug Holcomb. Take it in the light-hearted spirit in which it was intended! ☺

Rod,

I made this up a few months ago. I sent it to *Sky & Telescope*, who wrote back that they liked it, but admitted they were too chicken to print it. (I've changed it slightly.)

I hope you get a chuckle.

TOP TEN THINGS FOR A YOUNG MAN TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING BETWEEN MARRIAGE AND ASTRONOMY.

1. You can enjoy your telescope in front of friends.
2. A telescope never has a headache.
3. Your telescope won't get jealous if you constantly look at high-priced optics catalogs.
4. After buying a telescope you will spend more money on your hobby, but you will be paying for eyepieces and CCD's, not shoes.
5. When you're not in the mood, you can lock your telescope in a closet for days and it won't complain.
6. You can lend your telescope to a friend and nobody will think poorly of you.
7. You can have as many telescopes as you like without moving to Utah.
8. You can use all sorts of accessories on your telescope and it won't object.
9. If you get tired of your telescope you can sell it on AstroMart.
10. A telescope won't make you visit its manufacturer every Christmas.

Club Notes

Mobile Astronomical Society (MAS)

Summer is usually a fairly quiet time for the MAS. Skies are cloudy and folks are on vacation. We intend to make the humidity and clouds a little more bearable, though. In conjunction with the July Members Only Star Party at the ESC, we'll hold our second MAS Summer picnic and group observing run on 13 July! Be sure to attend the next meeting (to be held on July 11 due to the 4th falling on our usual meeting day) for details! The club will pick up the tab for the fried chicken, drinks and some other essentials, but it will be nice if the membership can contribute lots of nice side items.

SCT-USER

The second annual Imaging Competition will be closed to entries by the time you read this, with winners to be announced by 15 July! We had some beautiful work submitted this year, and I for one can hardly wait for the decision of the judges! Also talked over recently are some new list projects of a non-virtual nature, such as an All Catadioptric star party to be held at some time in the future!

Ah, yes, Summer, sweet, sweet Summer: *Cool dips in the pool, quiet hours barbequing while sipping an iced Rebel Yell, and the destruction of that peaceful solitude brought on when a mayo jar (hermetically sealed and kept on Funk and Wagnal's porch for a fortnight) is hurled at Old Uncle Rod by two silly delinquents, impacting his noggin' painfully, but containing the latest…*

Rumours

What's the straight poop on Celestron? As most of you have no doubt heard, TASCO, long-time importer of cheap and (usually) not so good optics, has folded. Cause for

celebration in amateur ranks? Yes and no. You see, a couple of years ago TASCO purchased Celestron from the Swiss holding company that had had the Torrance, California telescope maker for some time. This was good in that it provided the infusion of capital necessary to allow Celestron to dramatically improve its marketing and to expand and improve its product line. But now that TASCO is belly-up, *what happens to Celestron?* Celestron's senior management team, including former chief Alan Hale, is attempting the buy the company, and has tendered an offer. But this is complicated by Meade's ongoing lawsuit against Celestron, which claims that Celestron has infringed on its patents regarding goto scope technology. And Celestron has counter-sued, claiming infringement of *its* goto technology by the Meade boys. Normally, suits like this would come to little, but at a time like this they can definitely throw a monkey-wrench into the Celestron team's plans. What do I think will happen? I *believe* Celestron will survive, but it will be a while before it becomes clear *how and in what form.* **STOP THE PRESSES! Shortly after this was written, I received word that Celestron's Senior Management Team had indeed successfully completed the buy-out of Celestron International's assets. The long and short is that the company, renamed simply "Celestron"—no "Pacific" no "International"--will continue normal operations from Torrance. Celestron still has its work cut out for it, in my opinion, but with a strong, sensible and innovative product line like the one they've got now, the future should be rosy! For complete details go to: <http://www.celestron.com/pr62802.htm>**

Whatever happened to Vixen? Many of you have noted that Orion (Telescope and Binocular Center), the sole Vixen distributor for the U.S. of A., has offered only a *very* small subset of Japanese telescope-maker Vixen's wide product line, and that the Big O has been *dropping* many of the Vixen products that they *have* carried from its catalog lately. Now it can be told! **TeleVue is taking over as U.S. Distributor of Vixen products** under the AEGIS of "Vixen America." We hope this bodes well for Vixen in the U.S. and that we'll have some access now to the Vixen goodies that brother and sister amateurs in the rest of the world have enjoyed for a while.

Despite questions about its health and survival, Celestron has just announced two new scopes, the Nexstar 5 (i) and the Nexstar 8 (i). These two will replace the older NS 5 and 8, provide GPS alignment as an option that can be added whenever the buyer chooses (by plugging a module into the scope), furnish a dramatically better --and now optional -- computer hand controller basically identical to the one sold with the Nexstar 8 and 11 GPS scopes, and add an array of functions to allow use of these scopes on **equatorial wedges for imaging!**

Enough of the C. What of the M? Meade's time lately has been spent in trying to get enough LXD55 scopes produced to meet user orders. The 8 inch SNTs are now flowing to customers, and the 10 inchers are beginning to trickle out of Irvine. The 6 inch refractor, the last of the scopes to appear, is just now starting to get out the door. What's the verdict on these scopes? Despite some early QA problems, these scopes (which, save for the optics, are produced in China) appear to be winners—especially for the incredibly low prices they command.

In other Meade news, APPARENTLY the optics in older Meade SCTs can be replaced with new UHTC coated optics sets. This isn't overly inexpensive, but it's a nice option for folks with scopes that are good mechanically but that possess *less than good* "Halley-time" optics!

--The Anonymous Astronomer

"Unca Rod, is there **REALLY** a Chaos Manor South?" "Sure there is, Skeezix; here's the stately and storied edifice, just as it is today, situated right on the border of the Great Possum Swamp!"