

## Highlights

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- Observing at Prude!

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# Skywatch

*Exploring the Final Frontier! A Newsletter for the Truly Outbound.*  
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## 1999 Texas Star Party!

“Warping into the Millennium!”

It's not often that *anything* lives up to your expectations in these days of mega-hype. And this is especially true in the case of Summer vacations. Something *always* seems to be lacking. Something *always* seems to go wrong. Your destination just doesn't ever seem to come close to equaling your fantasies. You

wind up wondering why in the heck you thought your holiday would be such a good idea in the first place and resenting being taken in by the travel agents and TV commercials!

every single way. I spent *my* Summer vacation week at the 1999 Texas Star Party!

Ah, the Texas Star Party! That amazing combination of Disneyland

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The Scorpius/Sagittarius Milky Way as seen from Prude Ranch. Image by Rod Mollise.

But this year, my Summer adventure did meet and exceed my expectations in

and Utopia for deep sky observers! It's held each year in the late Spring at the Prude



Deep in the Heart of Texas!

Ranch in west (far west) Texas, near the little town of Fort Davis, exactly 1080 miles from my Garden District front door! Prude, a 'Guest' or 'Dude' ranch the other 51 weeks of the year, features some of the best, darkest, driest skies you're likely to find in the continental U.S. I'd been reading and hearing about the TSP for years, and had been wanting to make the 'pilgrimage' to Fort Davis for a long, long time (this year was the star party's 21<sup>st</sup> edition). Even *tried* to go one time, in 1997. But it was not to be. Pat Rochford, Joe Diefenbach and I were all ready for a glorious TSP when the cruel fates stepped in. Due to a temporary disagreement between the Texas Star Party and Prude Ranch Management, the star party had to be moved to a different location, the Alto Frio Baptist Encampment in Leakey, Texas. We made the trip anyway, but it was something

of a disappointment. Alto Frio was just a poorer location, suffering from a weather pattern more reminiscent of the Gulf Coast than the desert (actually, Fort Davis was also clouded out at this time due to the el nino' weather pattern) . We had a great time, but viewing was strictly limited. When the clouds did briefly move away, the skies looked awesome to me. But TSP old timers just shook their heads and muttered, 'Not like Prude.' I decided right then and there that somehow, sometime, someday, someday I'd find out just what those Prude skies were really like.

It turned out that this was the year that things finally came together! Not only did I resolve to head west, but my wonderful wife decided to go with me! Dorothy and I spent a number weeks excitedly planning our trip. And planning is definitely required when you're attempting to pack a 12" telescope, all necessary

observing accessories, clothes for a week for two people and a full suite of camping gear into a Toyota Camry and still leave room for two passengers! But guess what? Somehow, we managed to stuff all this into our Japanese sedan (don't ask me how we did it) and head west on Saturday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of May. I didn't even forget the eyepieces! We didn't try to push things on that first day, contenting ourselves with going as far as Houston. We spent a relaxing afternoon and evening visiting with Dorothy's brother Ed and his family, and tried to rest up for what we knew would be a long and tiring drive Sunday morning.

Fortified with drive-through coffee, Dorothy and I hit the road at 5:30 am, and by dawn were well on our way to the ranch. Texas is a big state. Everybody knows that, but believe me, you don't realize exactly how big it is until you drive across it. The landscape changes ever so slowly. But before too many hours had passed, the land definitely was changing. Gone was the humid Gulf feel of Houston and San Antonio, replaced by drier, more 'Texas like' ranch land. A few more hours went by and Dorothy and I realized that we hadn't seen a tree in quite a while! The land had morphed again, becoming more like what I'd describe as 'arid semi-desert' than the fertile ranch land we'd left behind. Before long the horizon began to bloom with hills not unlike those around San Antonio. But unlike the Hill Country's gopher mounds, these slowly

grew into real mountains. After one last stop at a gas station which would have been perfect in a 1950s science fiction movie, we finally left I-10 behind, pulled into Fort Davis and headed for the Ranch.

Late Sunday afternoon, Prude was already a bustle of activity. There were amateurs everywhere--setting up scopes, readying tents, and preparing for what would be, it was clear, a spectacular night of observing. The skies had that purplish look that means deep space adventure in the offing! Dorothy and I didn't waste any time getting our tent up, unpacking the scope, and squaring things away as best we could for our first night. In a small stroke of luck, we even found a vacant spot under a little tree to pitch our tent. It provided some very welcome shade during those long afternoons! Dorothy had decided to stay on site with me on this first night. We had rented her a room at the Fort Davis Motor Inn, which is both clean and convenient, for the next few days while we waited for ranch accommodations to open up. We had failed to secure a room in the lottery, but had been assured by TSP personnel that something would turn up 'soon.' With our campsite and scope ready to go, we headed to supper in the Ranch's 'Big House,' which includes the office, dining hall and auditorium.

I'm sure you've all heard tales about 'Prude Food'. But let me assure you that the ranch fare is really quite good. Portions were large, entrees were varied,

and all meals featured fresh vegetables and a salad bar. Most attendees seemed content to eat on site, and Dorothy and I never did get around to trying any of Fort Davis' several restaurants. As it always is when amateurs gather, mealtime was a lot of fun, and I became reacquainted with a number of old friends. Following our meal, we strolled around the ranch, looking at scopes and the facilities Prude offers. We had to do *something* to kill the time. This far west in the Central time zone, the Sun doesn't set until after nine, and astronomical twilight doesn't end until after 10 pm!

What's Prude like? It's a lot like what you imagine an old-fashioned dude ranch to be. Rustic, pleasant and, well, different from what we're accustomed to back east. The major reason for this difference is that way out here you really are on the edge of the desert. We were told by one of the ranch hands that they hadn't received any rain to speak of since December of last year! What does this mean for astronomers? Dust, lots and lots of dust. It *will* get into your clothes, your telescope, and *you*. There's nothing that can be done to really fight it, you just have to learn to live with it. When most of us think of a place like this, we think 'sandy,' like beach sand. Uh-uh. What you have here is micron-sized dust. A fine concoction of what blows in off the real desert and the manure of a couple of centuries of horses! It *is* going to get on your mirror, so don't worry about it. Just plan on spending a couple of hours taking your scope apart for a

thorough cleaning when you get home. The ranch did its best to deal with dust by watering the roads several times a day, but this really did little good in a land so parched for moisture.

After what seemed like an eternity, the deep Texas night finally arrived! Out at Prude this means *real* darkness! There's little light pollution of any sort to speak of in the area, and ambient light is pretty much nonexistent with the legendarily draconian TSP 'light rules' in effect (even a coke machine on the south end of the ranch had its plug pulled). The result is that as the Sun disappears the stars come out in the their multitudes. It reminds you of the way the skies looked out in the country when you were a kid. Only better. Here, at 5,000 feet with the humidity at less than 10 percent all the time, the bright stars blaze with an unmasked fury and the dim stars keep appearing and appearing and appearing. After spending a few minutes just looking up at the sky in open mouthed astonishment, I swung my dob into action.

I planned to 'take it easy' on this first night, just doing a few bright Messiers and showpiece objects, and turning in when I got really tired (11 hours on the road and the initial setup of our equipment would do me in before midnight, I thought). And, oh, those Ms were glorious. The bright galaxies, M101, M51, M81, M82, and M83 looked as much like photographs as I'm ever likely to see them in my 12.5" Dob! My scope was performing

superbly, and the distant reaches of the **Great Out There** seemed to open before me. After an hour or two, I suddenly found I wasn't tired any more. Having had my fill of easy stuff, I grabbed the notebook of charts I'd made with the computer program Megastar. I started chasing the hard, weird stuff--like the Double Quasar in Ursa Major and Copeland's Septet in Leo. I figured I'd hunt around for these types of object for a while and call it a night. But, wonder of wonders, the most challenging objects I'd put on my observing list kept falling prey to my 'little' 12". So, like an Energizer Bunny on steroids, I just kept going and going! One of the things I learned from my trip way out west is that under really good skies medium-sized scopes (10-14") can be powerful performers.

Before I knew it, it was well after 3 am. One thing that helps you keep going at TSP is the moral support around you. Many of your fellow observers have driven as far (or farther) than you have, and nobody wants to waste one minute of precious dark skies. It's a matter of honor to keep on truckin'! Another help was The Voice of the Texas Star Party, K211BI, the TSP's very own FM radio station. The extremely eclectic mix of music which was broadcast all night long (along with TSP info and announcements) helped keep me alert when conversation flagged. A mix of music where Beethoven is followed by big band which is followed by the Grateful Dead will do that! Another plus was

the concession stand, which sold everything from hot coffee to ice cream to burritos!

After about 3 am I decided to walk around and relax. I took in the views from a number of big scopes, and was stunned. Unless you've experienced it, you've no idea what a 36" telescope under dark skies will do for a formerly nondescript NGC galaxy! I capped off the night by touring the incredible, blazing Milky Way with binoculars. As the Sun heralded a new day, Dorothy, who'd turned in earlier, rose to watch the stars put out their lamps and a very old and waning Moon rise over the mountains.

So it went on Monday and on Tuesday as well. Every night was a very late one. Even if every one of us hadn't had a challenging observing list to work through, we'd have stayed awake just for the experience of watching an unbelievable Milky Way creep over the mountains! It was, simply put, a huge, edge-on spiral galaxy sporting a humongous dust lane! David Levy felt that the Milky Way looked at least as good, if not better than he'd ever seen it in his life *from anywhere!* With the Milky Way high in the sky, I did something I hadn't done in a long time. I located little Pluto! The most distant planet was easy to find this year, being found in nearly the same field as bright Zeta Ophiuchi. Pluto was easy in these skies, and it was a thrill to track him as he floated slowly through the rich fields of background stars night after night.

Despite the long nights, I did manage to trot around a bit during the day,

talking with old friends, meeting new ones, enjoying the ranch ambience, and, you guessed it, buying goodies from the vendors. There was an excellent turn-out for this year's TSP. On site were Tele Vue Optics, Lumicon, Pocono Mountain Optics, Eagle Optics, Telescope Warehouse, Astrosystems, Astro F/X and many more. I was very pleased to finally meet Al Nagler and his son David, and was treated to a personal demonstration of the new Tele Vue Radian eyepieces. Needless to say I was impressed, and wished that I could have bought 'em all. I did manage to restrain myself, and limited my major buying to a Tele Vue 2" Big Barlow I picked up for a nice price from Pocono Mountain Optics (still much more than I ever dreamed I'd pay for a barlow lens, but well worth it!).

Tuesday evening brought with it the news that a room on the ranch was ready for us. It was pleasant for me to be able to desert my tent. It had been ok, but it was very difficult to get enough sleep, since by 8 or 9 am a blazing Sun made it uncomfortably hot inside the little tent. We wasted no time in getting Dorothy moved out of the Fort Davis Motor Inn, and on Wednesday evening I had a nice motel-style room to crash in. This made a big difference for me; being able to get sufficient rest allowed me to execute a very demanding observing program--and those long showers and naps in air conditioned comfort were wonderful. The heat is one thing that TSPers from our

part of the country have to look out for. Due to the low humidity I rarely felt hot, and it was easy to forget to protect yourself from sunburn and to drink enough water.

Wednesday morning saw the start of TSP's speakers, and the Planetary Science Panel, which included Jeff Medkeff, Gary Seronik, and David Healy, and myself was on first. It might seem strange to be discussing *the planets* at a star party largely devoted to deep sky observing, but our program was very well received. Despite a few butterflies in my stomach I thought things went well. One hard core deep sky observer did come up to me later in the week and say, "Hey man, sorry I missed your presentation on planetary observin'! I love planetary nebulae!" Ah, well! There were many, many outstanding morning/afternoon talks given at this year's event, but the ones which stand out in my memory were "Observing the Bear at the TSP" by Larry Mitchell, and "Planetary Nebulae, Beyond the NGC: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," which was presented by a buddy of mine, Houston amateur Jay McNeil.

Wednesday evening found me in something of a dilemma. I'd finished my observing list! I had been all they way through that thick notebook of charts! The one crammed with what I considered to be difficult (or impossible) objects! What to do? Only one thing...get started on this year's TSP Observing Project: "A Planetary Party." This

consisted of a list of 49 planetary nebulae put together by John Wagoner of the American Association of Amateur astronomers. Challenging? I'll say! Many were tiny, requiring 'blinking' with an OIII filter for identification. And just about all were either in obscure constellations like Lupus or Ara, or in unvisited and cobwebby nooks and crannies of familiar areas like Sagittarius and Scorpius. By Thursday, John was sporting a T-shirt which read, 'TSP: Twenty-five Stinkin' Planetaries!' Our goal was to observe 25 of the 49, a number I achieved on Friday night. It was a long journey, and one which usually couldn't begin until early morning when the Milky Way was well up. But I and a record number of other observers persevered. By the end of the star party it was announced that nearly 150 observers had earned the coveted planetary pin. I know I'll wear mine with pride for a long, long time!

One thing the Texas Star Party has long been noted for is the quality of its evening speakers. And this year was no exception. On Wednesday night, Sky and Telescope Associate Editor and author Steven James O'Meara presented "O Night Divine: A Tribute to Walter Scott Houston." Steve's moving tribute to 'Scotty,' the late dean of deep sky observers, left us pumped up for a good night of deep sky cruising. On Thursday evening, we had the U.S. Naval Observatory's Brent Archinal and his "Like Gold and Silver in Sands in Some Ravine-the Star

Clusters." Brent's program on the neglected open clusters of the NGC was superbly done. Finally, on Friday night, Keynote Speaker, author and comet hunter David Levy, brought us "More Things in Heaven and Earth: Finding Passion in Nature." David's talk touched on many things, and did indeed bring home to many of us the passion for the night sky for which David is famous

In addition to the good speakers, our good luck with the night sky continued. One evening, Thursday evening, though, we did leave the meeting hall to find the sky covered in clouds. We were all a bit disappointed (though, in truth, some of us would have welcomed a break after four straight nights of observing), but weather reports did seem to indicate that the skies might clear. Almost magically, they *did*. Just as twilight ended, the clouds scuttled off, leaving in their wake one of the best nights of the entire week. Friday, likewise, featured lovely skies--perhaps the best of the week.

Dorothy and I had settled into a routine and were really enjoying star party life. In addition to observing and visiting with fellow TSPers, we had a little time to do some sightseeing, and toured the nearby Davis Mountains State Park, which features some incredible vistas. We also drove through Fort Davis. The downtown area features restored historic buildings and shops, and is definitely worth a visit if you enjoy doing 'touristy' things. And naturally we toured nearby Macdonald

Observatory--a look at the amazing Hobby-Eberly Telescope is an experience which is not to be missed.

Some mention must be made of the **Great Texas Giveaway**, the Texas Star Party's fabled door prize program. Some wonderful prizes were featured this year including several telescopes, a portable canvas observatory, and one of the new 22mm Type 4 Nagler eyepieces. The emphasis this year, though, seemed to be on quantity rather than on a few 'big' prizes. Enough was given away that even I --who never win *anything* at star parties--managed to garner a prize (a David Lee print of the Milky Way)! A number of vendors contributed prizes and are to be highly commended for their generosity.

Sadly, and before we knew it, it was Saturday evening, the last night of TSP '99. Like everybody else, I was exhausted after seven long nights of pedal-to-the-metal observing. But I pushed on, looking at the showpieces again, trying to store up those precious TSP photons. By midnight I knew it was about time to call it quits in order to get enough rest for the long drive home. The sky seemed to agree. At around 1 am, clouds moved in basically closing us down. It was almost as if the heavens had said, *"That's enough boys and girls! I've given you all I have this year. Go to bed and leave me alone!"*

As we passed under the ranch sign emblazoned '**Vaya Con Dios**,' Dorothy and I reflected on what a

wonderful week it had been, and how TSP had turned out to be just as we'd imagined it--wonderful! I'm already scheming and dreaming about another TSP trip (in a couple of years or so). Once you've seen perfect skies, it's hard not to feel their loss. If you've never been to the Texas Star Party, or haven't been in a while, I strongly recommend a trip Way out West. The people are great, the ranch is great, and the skies are simply unbelievable!

--Rod



## Equipment Review: The Tele Vue Big Barlow!

What can you say about the Tele Vue Big Barlow? Well, it is **big** for sure. It's finely made in the best Tele Vue tradition of

quality. And it's *expensive*, relatively speaking, anyway. And, no, I never dreamed I'd spend this much money for a 2x barlow lens. Is it worth it? In my opinion it is, effectively doubling your eyepiece collection (as most of you know, a barlow, with its negative lens elements, extends the focal length of a telescope, 'amplifying' the power of your eyepieces) with *no* degradation in the quality of the images offered by your eyepieces, and, in some cases, as we shall see, dramatically improving performance.

At the 1999 Texas Star Party, I was confronted with a sad fact. I really didn't have a 'good' short focal length eyepiece. Oh, I had several short fl Orthoscopics which performed adequately. But after getting used to Naglers and big Plossls, it's hard to go back to the tiny, restrictive apparent fields of these 'old fashioned' eyepieces. And if there's one thing I don't like, it's fiddling with a 1.25" adapter to allow 'small' eyepieces to be used in my 2" focuser. With Mars hanging overhead, and many small galaxies in the spotless skies begging for high(er) magnifications, the time just seemed ripe to invest in a new toy!

But what to get? Touring the booths at the TSP vendors' hall, I was definitely beguiled by Uncle Al's new *Radians*. These eyepieces are said to be beautiful performers. But did I *really* want to spend about \$230.00 on a 6 mm eyepiece? Well, yes, honestly I did! But just before digging way, way down



in my wallet, I spotted the Tele Vue Big Barlow.

I don't usually think of a simple old barlow lens as being 'impressive.' Just a plain metal tube with a lens or two stuck at one end. Oh, but this one is different! Finely machined, it looks like a refugee from a plant producing stealth bombers! It is adorned with an oversized set screw (great for gloved hands), and in one of those wonderful little Nagler touches, the set-screw is *captive* (you don't realize how wonderful this is unless you've spent a week dropping set screws from focusers and adapters into the microfine Texas dust!). The BB comes equipped with a 1.25" adapter which is a tour-de-force as well, also being equipped with a big, captive set screw, and, like the barlow itself being very nicely machined (sliding the capped 1.25" adapter into the barlow produces a satisfying *hissss* of escaping air!). The two element 2x lens system is coated a dark blue/purple and doesn't give up much in the way of reflections. Staring into the lens end of the barlow is like looking into a dark, deep pool. The end of the unit is conveniently threaded for 2" filters, and the BB is finished off with attractive green lettering on the barrel and with a pair of bright orange end caps. As I said, it's hard to be impressed by a simple barlow lens, but this one impressed *me!* Without thinking twice, I told the Pocono Mountain rep, "I'll take it!" And handed over \$160.00. For a barlow, for God's sake!

Having to wait all

through that long, long, long Texas afternoon before I could try out my new toy ("TSP souvenir/father's day present/birthday present") was torture, but eventually evening came and I was able to give it a go. As darkness descended, Mars appeared very prominently in the east and literally called my scope to it! This seemed a perfect test subject, so I went a 16mm Nagler and the BB. **Excellent!** The image looked *no worse* than that delivered by a short focal length Nagler eyepiece. I didn't notice *any* additional reflections, spurious color or other problems, and in moments of good seeing, the planet was astonishingly detailed (this was with my 12.5" Dobsonian). In went the 12mm Nagler. Same story. The view was excellent, with no degradation to the image that I could detect. All that wonderful Nagler contrast was still there, it was sharp to the edge of the field, and if I hadn't known otherwise, I would just have assumed I was looking through the Nagler 7. The biggest surprise, though, came when I tried the Big Barlow with my 38mm Rini Modified Plossl. This is a great eyepiece, providing me with a low 'searching power' for a very nice price. Sure, there's quite a bit of coma at the edge of the field and some other minor optical problems, but, hey, for 45 bucks I can live with it! But with the BB added to the eyepiece, the result was a 19mm eyepiece that was VERY sharp all across the field. It was truly a revelation! Sure, any barlow will improve the performance of a 'simple' eyepiece, but I can't help but

feel that the Big Barlow with its high quality optics and wonderful coatings added an additional notch of performance to this proletarian lens! The improvement simply seemed well beyond what's typical in these cases. All I know is that it's like getting a great 20mm eyepiece for 'free!'

Yes the Big Barlow *is* a tad pricy, but like all the Tele Vue (and the Pentax, and the Meade UWA) eyepieces, this is something you'll no doubt use for the rest of your observing life! I recommend it highly. I think the Big Barlow is perfectly described by Al Nagler's term for it: it's a 'magnification window.' If somebody produces a better barlow lens, I haven't seen it!

--Rod

## An Amateur's Thoughts on This Hobby at the Approach of the Millennium

With the year 2000 just around the corner, now seems to be a good time to reflect on the past and ponder the future of amateur astronomy. So if you can stand one more person's thoughts on the changing of the millennium, please read on. The subjects aren't in any particular order of importance, only the order

in which the thoughts come from my head.

LIGHT POLLUTION - Some very encouraging news today on Sky & Telescopes' web news page. The state of New Mexico has passed rather groundbreaking laws regarding outdoor lighting. Under the new law, lights over 150 watts must be either completely shielded or else turned off from 11pm until dawn. By January 1, 2000 all mercury vapor lights will be outlawed. It is with this bit of news that I find myself feeling both excited and ashamed. Excited because this law has the potential to eventually find it's way from the Southwest to as far south and east as right here on the central Gulf coast. Ashamed somewhat, because I really haven't gotten off my ass to push for the cause right here at home.

I guess I have more or less felt that it would be a waste of time with all my effort falling on deaf ears. That's really no excuse. I should have started working on this issue in the small town of Fairhope, AL when I moved here five years ago. This town is right in the middle of the fastest growing county in the state and I can already see the skies becoming brighter. So with all of you as witnesses, I hereby promise to join the International Dark Sky Association ('IDA') and try to do my part. I'm certainly not going to expect results in the near future, since it will take some time to just make people aware. But it is encouraging though, to see new car lots and other

businesses around this area building with some type of shielded lights. This is probably the result of the IDA talking with light manufacturers over the past several years. At this point I will predict that light pollution here and elsewhere will get worse before it gets better, but I think it will definitely get better. I would think that perhaps my grandchildren might be able to see the Milky Way without having to travel so far into the country to do so.

YOUNG AMATEURS - It's not difficult to notice (I'm fairly certain that our club is no different than most) that the average age of the typical amateur is around forty. The first conclusion one might come to would be that this is a dying hobby. And for a while I felt it would meet with the same fate as the Latin Club I belonged to in high school. But the biggest difference is that Latin is a dead language and astronomy is growing and thriving on many fronts. That alone will keep it in the headlines from time to time. I think there's probably the same percentage of kids interested in learning about the stars now as there was twenty-five years ago, but with the advances in entertainment technology there's just more to compete with. Let's face it, there's a lot more to do as a child now than there was when I was growing up (50's & 60's). I firmly believe that if the interest is there, it will surface eventually and bear fruit. Perhaps all it will take is a peek through a telescope at Saturn or a glimpse of the astounding beauty of the Great Nebula in Orion. All the more important

for us to keep bringing the stars to kids the way we do at our public star gazes every year. I'm confident that a few of those faces will show up at our club meetings in the future, as maturity and curiosity about the 'unknown' begin to replace skate boards and MTV as "life's essentials".

TELESCOPES & EQUIPMENT - The current availability of good telescopes and related accessories must be at an all time high. As someone who grew up drooling over the same Edmund Scientific and Unitron ads, month in and month out, the current smorgasbord of astro goodies is almost unbelievable. And for the most part, the quality is on par with the cost. Today an 8" Schmidt Cassegrain costs just about the same as it did twenty five years ago. True, the number of standard accessories may not be what they used to be, but the optical tubes and mounts are just as good if not better now. Sonotube Dobsonians with fairly large mirrors (of decent quality) are readily available and quite inexpensive. And as I write, little 90mm Meade Maksutovs with \$150 goto computer systems are about to change the way newcomers are introduced to astronomy.

For those demanding the very best in optical and mechanical quality (and not worried about price) there are plenty of high end, limited production and custom optical tubes and mounts available. When equipped with the latest CCD cameras and software, these systems are capable of



obtaining images that could only be made by large, professional observatories only a few years ago. If CCD cameras go the way 35mm cameras have, they should be pretty much fool proof and thus allowing even me to enter the digital age.

I have no idea where it will all end, but I can tell you this – I couldn't have picked a better time to live than now, to witness this explosion of new and exciting equipment.

#### CHARTS & PUBLICATIONS

—With the availability of large mirrors comes the need for charts that go deeper into space. Remember Norton's Sky Atlas? An outstanding publication for a 6" F/8 Newtonian, not so hot for a 25" Dobsonian. Well Norton's was replaced with Sky Atlas 2000 (stars to mag. 8), which was improved upon by Uranometria (mag. 9.5) and now we have the Millennium Star Atlas (mag. 11). If that's not good enough there's Megastar (and other CDROM based atlases) which can plot more objects than you could ever hope to see in your entire lifetime.

Observer's guides used to be few and far between ... and usually penned by someone from the U.K.. Double stars and Ramsden eyepieces were the staple diet of these gentlemen. The fourth edition of Sidgewick's handbook reads like the Code of Federal Regulations. Suddenly, in the last five or so years, there has been a near tidal wave of handbooks for the amateur. We now see updated versions more frequently (like Nightwatch

and Starware) to keep up with this rapidly changing hobby. As the ranks of this hobby grow (the Astronomical League is larger than it has ever been) I see a continuation of this trend.

#### THE WORLD WIDE WEB

—I'm relatively new to this method of information exchange, but I can see that it has in a few short years, taken the typical lone amateur astronomer and literally connected him/her to the entire Universe. From unusual disturbances on Jupiter to the sudden explosion of a supernova in a galaxy 30 million light years away, one can probably find out about it only moments after it is discovered. It wasn't that long ago that I would read about an event in the news section of Sky & Telescope that happened three months prior.

After talking astronomy to only a handful of people (here in the Mobile area) for over thirty years, I am suddenly conversing with perhaps thousands of people on a news group called Sci.Astro.Amateur. In my wildest dreams I never could have imagined this as a twelve year old sitting under the stars with a 60mm refractor and a copy of Olcott's Field Guide to the Stars. I look forward to finding out the latest news or astro-gadget on the net as much as I do rolling out one of my scopes for a night's viewing.

STAR PARTIES – I believe it started with Stellafane in Vermont. Regional and national star parties are now found in almost every state

and month of the year. Along with the internet, these gatherings are responsible for the phenomenal linking of amateurs we see today. The combination of dark skies and socializing with others who have similar interests is a real drawing card, proven by the ever increasing numbers of attendees each year. I have been fortunate to attend national star parties in Texas and Florida along with our own regional stargaze in Mississippi since 1985. There is nothing that really energizes interest in observational astronomy like a gathering of this nature. With the rarity of dark skies that exists now, I believe these stargazes will grow and flourish for many years to come.

CONCLUSION - We are, in my opinion, living in the true golden age of amateur astronomy. With the exception of the issue of light pollution, there has never been a better time to be involved in this hobby. For all the reasons stated above, I feel very good about the future of our love of the stars. I don't think it will ever be a hobby of the masses, but I do believe our ranks will continue to grow in the coming century. I think the "lone scientist" image is rapidly going the way of the dinosaurs as the hobby evolves socially, while still taking us all on a personal journey through the cosmos. And what a journey this is turning out to be!

--Pat Rochford

## MY BACK PAGES-MY BACK PAGES-MY BACK PAGES



## AstroPoem

21<sup>st</sup> Century Astro Man

Farther and farther we go  
 With bigger glass always  
 On our minds.  
 And the blind eye of the computer  
 Now guides our travels.  
 But maybe once  
 Before the Millennium turns,  
 Stop and just look up with  
 A primitive human eye.  
 The warm and soft  
 Can still far outstrip  
 The glass and silicon.

--Rod

## Editor's Musings: Once Upon a Midnight Dreary

**MOSPs**..After a run of good luck, the clouds are deviling us again. But as always, if it's not raining, I'll (Rod) be hanging out on the ESC observing field. If it looks like there's a chance of clearing, or if you just want to socialize and talk astronomy head on out no matter how many clouds are in the sky. If the weather's good enough for me to go on out to the ESC, I'll generally stay on site for at least an hour (assuming the rain does not begin to fall) no matter how thick the cloud deck! If you've never attended one of your club's star parties, please contact me for further details, and

I'll look forward to seein' you there.

**Have you been making MAS meetings?** Yes, we're still there on the first Wednesday of each month at 7pm! Haven't been to a meeting in many a Moon? Don't be shy. You'll be rewelcomed with open arms. I'd like, in particular to see some of the club's **old timers** who've fallen by the wayside return to the fold! **You know who you are!** Your wonderful store of knowledge is a resource we really need! If you haven't been in a while, just give us a couple of months, and you'll find that you've got the MAS habit again. Remember all the fun we used to have? Well it's still the same. Nice presentations at meetings, socializing before and after. Informal observing at meetings. The (new) ESC monthly star parties. Group trips to area stargazes! C'mon back!

*Summertime's funtime. Vacations (to star parties, natch), lots of observing (if you can get a clear night), and backyard barbeques/starbeques aplenty. I was grilling up some goodies out back one evening. All was well. Mosquitos were staying away. Burgers were hot, and my SCT was cooling down. Ahhhh! Summertime! But then the peaceful chirping of the cricket chorus was interrupted by a grating:*

*Heh-heh-heh-heh, I smell food Butt-head! It's pretty cool!*

*Huh-huh, huh-huh. Yeah dillweed, food is cool. We're there Beavis.*

*And up trotted those two disreputable youth, Beavis and butt-head. But being in a generous frame of mind, I offered these two weenies. couple of weenies in return for a hermetically sealed mayo jar (kept on Funk and Wagnall's back porch) which held the latest installment of Irving Forbush's favorite column! Face Front True Believers here come the ....*

## Rumours

*In the huh-why-the-heck-did-they-do that department We hear that Celestron is once again selling the*

German mount version of it's 9.25" Schmidt Cassegrain, the CG 9 1/4. But there's a fly in the ointment here. Actually more the proportions of a 747 than a fly. Now that Celestron has ended its relationship with Scott Losmandy, the company can't sell the scope on Losmandy's GM-8 anymore. Instead, *they've put it on their Great Polaris 'clone' mount, the G5!* The C9 1/4 is a pretty big CAT, substantially heavier than the C8. Many folks felt that even the GM8, a very nice mount for sure, and *substantially* heftier than the Great Polaris, was a bit *stressed out* by this large OTA. As for the G5, we've heard complaints from G5 users that it's **not really heavy duty enough to properly support the C8**, which is decidedly lighter than the 9.25! Celestron has also had some QA problems with the G5 and its drive motors. All in all, it adds up to a very nice telescope on a shaky, so-so Chinese copy of a Vixen Great (or Super) Polaris German mount. Pity, really....

What the heck's goin' on in the land of the el cheapo dobs? Hasn't been long since Orion discontinued selling their 16" sonotube monster. Now we hear that they're also doing away with their standard series 8 and 10 inch dobsonians. This leaves only an inexpensive 6" and the premium 10 and 12 inch scopes in their dob stable. We've also just been told that the Big C, Celestron, is to stop marketing the large (11-17.5") dobs they've been peddling for a while. They will continue selling their nice 6 and 8 inch telescopes, though. What gives? Did Orion and Celestron decide they couldn't really compete with Meade's bargain basement dobsonian telescopes? Neither Orion nor Celestron actually made any of the scopes they were selling. Were there problems with suppliers (I see that 'Discovery Telescopes' is now selling dobs themselves rather than just making 'em for others).....

*One of the Anonymous One's sources* told him that insiders at Orion are saying that they're more and more interested in 'selling their own telescopes,' than just marketing those made by others. Which raises the question of just what *is* an Orion scope? Far as I know they've never made a thing. They sell Celestron, Tele Vue and Vixen (I notice that the Vixen telescopes, which used to be labeled 'Orion by Vixen' now just say 'Orion') and import a variety of small telescopes--often similar to the Chinese imports sold by a number of other vendors including Apogee. At any rate, Orion, we understand, will SUPPOSEDLY make some

substantial additions to 'their' line of telescopes before the Summer's out. As always we'll wait and see. Me, I'd just like to see Orion start importing a fuller line of Vixen's equipment....

*And a little bird chirped a tale of old time refractor maker Unitron in the Anonymous One's ear.* Seems that famous 50s-60s achromatic refractor maker Unitron is not quite moribund. They have plans to produce modern APO-style telescopes in the near future. Could work, they still have a lot of fans. But they do need to think '**reasonable prices.**' Currently the f15-f16 achromats they still sell are priced competitively with the telescopic wonders sold by AstroPhysics, TeleVue and Takahashi!

--The Anonymous Astronomer



In the foreground is the camera tracking platform Rod used to make the image on the first page of this issue. TSP goesers dubbed this 'Rod's LX-2,' but it sure did work!



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