



Dorothy and Rod Visit Rocket City...

NASA'S Space and Rocket Center

As someone who's been interested in space and astronomy for a very long time, I'm embarrassed to admit that until this past Spring I had never been to Rocket City! Rocket City, of course, refers to Huntsville, Alabama, the home of the Army's Redstone Arsenal, NASA's George C. Marshall Spaceflight Center, and, especially interesting for the 'space tourist', the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, an outstanding museum and IMAX theatre on the same grounds as NASA's famous Space Camp. When we were in the planning stages for a Spring mini-vacation, Dorothy mentioned Huntsville, and asked if I'd ever 'been.' When I somewhat shamefacedly replied in the negative (though I'd always *meant* to take the trip north), her reply was: 'Oh, then we've just GOT to go! You'll love it!'

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In these days of 70mph speed limits, we didn't find the trip from the Gulf Coast to Huntsville at all tiring. It is about six to six-and-a-half hours, but since we make regular visits to Atlanta, this was a breeze for Dorothy and me. It was also nice to take a trip where very little navigating is required--you just get on I-65, stay on it, and you're in Huntsville (you do have to turn off onto I-565 at the very end of your journey, but by this time you're basically there)! Arriving late in the afternoon (Dorothy and I are time-honored overpackers who won't leave home until we've packed most of the clothes we own into our bags), we checked into our motel, the Space Center Holiday Inn. I don't know when this facility was built, but it fairly reeks of the sixties and the

glory days of the U.S. space program. I could almost see the 'Seven' sitting in the cocktail lounge (which is decorated with graphics of stars and planets and is appropriately named the 'Galaxy Lounge'). While this motel preserves its sixties flavor, it is also clean and in excellent repair, with a decent coffee shop/restaurant and a *great* swimming pool. We easily found the nearby mall and had dinner at the adjoining Lone Star Steak House. By this time evening was upon us, and we, as planned, called it a day, reserving the Space Center for the next morning!

I had expected great things of this museum from listening to Dorothy and other MAS members who'd been up to Rocket City, but I must admit that I was pretty bowled over when



Rod and Dorothy are reflected in a helmet visor!



The Space Station under construction!

we arrived at the facility the next morning! The first thing that catches the visitor's eye is the full sized shuttle mockup suspended high above the trees. And the very futuristic looking Space Camp 'habitation modules' (the camp's dormitories) are also very striking. Just outside the main museum building, I found my eyes drawn to a Blackbird--a *REAL* Blackbird--one of the now retired (maybe) SR-71 reconnaissance planes is parked just outside the main entrance! Dorothy managed to pry me away from this marvel, and we began our tour of the Space Center's wonders.

Once inside, we were pretty glad that we didn't have any little kids with us! A sizable portion of the lobby area is taken up by the museum's extensive gift and book shops. Some people may find this commercialization slightly objectionable, but they do have some nice stuff! While Dorothy was checking on IMAX show times, I sidled over to the gift shop and purchased a *Freedom 7* patch (Shepard)! First on our agenda was a quick look at the museum's exhibits while waiting for our IMAX show to begin. I was rather taken by a display of the surface of Mars and spent quite some time viewing the famous Werner Von

Braun/Disney films which were playing continuously on monitors outside the IMAX theatre. In addition to the films, there were some large graphics of the paintings done for Von Braun's 1950s Collier's Magazine articles (including his beautiful 'wheel' space station).

While I've enjoyed visiting several IMAX theatre's in various parts of the country, none of them compare to the Center's IMAX! This is one of the medium's few 'dome' installations, which give the audience a near 360° view! And the sound? TREMENDOUS! The feature we saw on this day, *Destiny in Space* was good enough to stand on its own merits, but the impact lent its incredible vista's of Earth orbit, and fly-overs of Mars and Venus by IMAX left me gaping in wonder!

Following the movie ('movie' just doesn't seem to be enough to describe the full IMAX experience), Dorothy and I boarded buses for our tour of the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center and Redstone Arsenal. After a short ride of perhaps ten minutes, our buses delivered us space tourists to Marshall's Boeing facility. We were given a nice tour of the bays where Space Station Freedom (or the International Space Station, if that's its current name) is being assembled. The tourguide was a retired aerospace worker who knew what he was talking about, and, most importantly, was excited to be showing us the components of the space station which, we all hope, will soon be in Earth orbit! We also made a stop at one of

Redstone's most historic sites, a perfectly preserved Redstone Rocket test stand and blockhouse. This was the place where the final tests on the missile which would send Alan Shepard into space were done. Standing in the bright Spring sunshine, I could, nevertheless, almost see the shadows of the giants of the early space program going about their tasks!

When we returned to the Center Dorothy again had to pull me away from 'my' Blackbird in order to get me into the cafeteria for lunch. This restaurant, the 'Lunch Pad,' offers fairly standard 'Disney World Style' fare, but the prices were reasonable and the food more than acceptable for lunch. After a quick meal, we started 'doing' the museum in earnest. To say that the Space Center's exhibits are 'extensive' would be an understatement! We *easily* spent several hours here, and *still* didn't see all there was to see!

What were my favorite moments? I guess the most moving for me was being able to sit in the command couch of the actual Apollo 16 Command Module. Dorothy and I also marveled at the Lunar Module Mockup. While the Command module was even smaller than we had imagined, a Lunar Module, a 'LEM,' looks *much* bigger than it does in the pictures! Oh, and the Mir mockup is also wonderful (if a little much for those who are apt to suffer from inner ear/balance problems--pay a visit and you'll see what I mean!). I could go on and on describing the museum's holdings, which are literally the stuff dreams are made on. Everything is there--from real U.S. and Soviet/Russian space hardware to 1950s toy robots and ray guns! There are also quite a few hands-on style displays designed for the little ones. I

saw a lot of kids in the museum and not one looked bored! As for Dorothy and me, we just looked and looked and dreamed and dreamed! Before long it was time to call it a day. But since we hadn't even come *close* to seeing all the Center had to offer, we planned to return for at least a half day on the morrow; mainly to see the amazing *Rocket Park* which is located behind the museum.

After we made a few *more* souvenir purchase (for the kids and ourselves), we headed to Huntsville's equivalent of Mobile's Airport

Boulevard in search of food. We hadn't gone far when we spotted Rosie's Mexican Cantina. The food and atmosphere were great, and a brace of Carta Blancas made for a wonderful end to a wonderful day.

The next morning we didn't waste any time making our way back to the Center, since we wanted to catch the 'other' IMAX film which was showing this past Spring, *Cosmic Voyage*. This movie, narrated by Morgan Freeman, is a new take on the 'Powers of 10' concept--you are taken via IMAX from the infinitesimally small world of subatomic particles to the infinitely large universe of galaxy superclusters, and from the beginning of time to the end. I didn't find *Cosmic Voyage* quite as engaging as *Destiny in Space*, but it did include some *amazing* effects. The Big Bang was, especially, a mind blower (and was too much for the littlest in the audience: following the birth of our

universe, one of the smaller audience members yelled, 'Mommy I DON'T LIKE THIS!'

Our last stop was the Rocket Park. This is just what its name indicates: static displays of historic rockets and missiles! It's *all* here from the *Atlas* to the *Saturn V*. The real thing! You can touch 'em and pose with 'em! When I found one of the park's newest acquisitions squirreled away in a corner, I almost had a *fit!* It was an old Titan II, the ballistic missile which sent Gemini into orbit, and



Dorothy's ready for an exciting day!

which was a part of the Strategic Air Command's missile force for many years. This was very exciting for me, since I was a member of a SAC Missile Launch Crew back in the 70s. I was even more startled when I realized that I '*knew*' *this Titan*...the panels which were removed from its distinctive interstage separator ring revealed that it was one of the boosters from the Air Force's Ballistic Missile School that I trained on when I was a young chirper! For the brave among you, the park also includes a zero gee simulator. This involves being hoisted in a car to the top of a tall tower and...dropped! Dorothy and I declined, but this was VERY popular among the Center's teenage visitors!

All too soon our wonderful vacation was over, but I was definitely left wanting more and plan to go back soon! If you've never been to Huntsville, you've just *got* to see this! If you *have* been you need to go back! The Center is open daily except for

Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. Admission is charged, and discount tickets are commonly available at local hotels and motels. Hours are from 9am to 5pm, with extended hours 'til 6pm during the Summer. The Space and Rocket Center is located just off exit 15 on I-565 which is accessed from I-65. Further information is available on the Center's web site at <http://www.spacecamp.com/spacecenter>.

--Rod

Coulter and the Odyssey

Who comes to mind when you think of simple and inexpensive telescopes--BIG, simple, inexpensive telescopes? Though several well-known names in the scope business are now producing budget Dobsonians, for those of us who've been in the astronomy game for a while these words--big, simple, cheap--mean **Coulter Odyssey!** The 'original' Odysseys, which included 8", 10.1", 13.1", 17.5" and (for a time) 29" telescopes, were produced by Jim Braginton (Jacobson) of Idyllwild, California. His company, Coulter Optical, had been around for quite some time, producing, among other things, mirror sets and kits for reflecting telescopes. Their classical Cassegrain optics, especially, were well-liked and were thought to be of very good quality. Coulter had been in business since the 60s, and they were definitely a familiar presence in the astronomy marketplace by the 70s. The company started small and stayed that way, but they always seemed to have a lot of spunk. They took their name, incidentally, from the 'Coulter Pine' tree, which, Jim said, was

because Coulter, like the pinetree, was "...small, but purposeful in our work. We....offer a lot for the money--much the same way the Coulter has a large cone in comparison to the small cone of the Sequoia."

What really brought Coulter their small measure of fame, though, was their introduction of a line of Dobsonian telescopes, which began with their debut of the Odyssey I 13.1" in May of 1980 (this scope was followed by the 17.5" Odyssey II and 10.1" Odyssey Compact in '82--the 8" was first seen in '84) They were, I guess, the first people to offer commercial Dobs. The *Odysseys* followed San Francisco Sidewalk Astronomer John Dobson's original design, and featured mirror boxes and removable primaries (in fact you *had* to remove the primary mirror for transport). Imagine a truss tube telescope with a solid Sonotube section in place of the upper cage and truss tubes, and you'll have an idea of what these scopes looked like! They were painted blue, and, thus, you'll still see ads for **'Blue Coulters'** for sale. They generally had pretty decent optics, were very reasonably priced (in the beginning, the 13" sold for less than \$400.00 excluding shipping) and turned a *lot* of folks on to large-aperture deep sky observing!

As the years rolled by, the *Odysseys* remained popular, and Braginton chose to keep their prices as close to the original level as possible (e.g., in 1993 I bought an 8" f7 for \$239.50--new!!). He did this by **cheapening and simplifying** the design. The old 'blues' went the way of the dinosaur, replaced by the **'Red Coulters'**. The mirror box was eliminated in these, which featured red Sonotube tubes with permanently mounted primaries in push-pull cells. The rocker boxes were now made of

inexpensive particle board. But these telescopes *still* worked and worked well. My 8" f7 doesn't have the greatest optics in the world (bit of turned down edge), but it delivers very good images; especially on the deep sky, and serves its purpose as an *indestructible* public star party scope quite well.

And so it went for year after year and into the 90s. Same scopes, same little single column ad in the magazines. By this time the *Odysseys*, and particularly the 13.1" Odyssey I, were a familiar star party fixture. While this scope was somewhat large, it was still relatively portable (I've seen them stuffed into **Hyundai hatchbacks!**), and with a little help was manageable by even the youngest and smallest observers. It also had plenty of aperture. For someone who was accustomed to 4-6" telescopes, the Odyssey I experience was like being in deep sky heaven!

By the Mid 90s, unfortunately, things had begun to go a bit awry at Coulter. Apparently in a quest to cut costs and shorten delivery times on their smaller scopes (always long, the wait for *Odysseys* now sometimes stretched to periods of up to a year--and more if you just ordered a mirror *sans* telescope), Coulter eliminated one of the staples of the Odyssey line, the 17.5" Odyssey II. Lots of folks mourned the passing of this scope. It was a *monster* in size, but could provide monstrously good views! Many of the 17.5" mirror sets (which some owners would have refigured) found their way into beautiful truss tube Dobs, which were now beginning to dominate the Dobsonian scene.

The elimination of the 'II' was the first indication that all was not well in Idyllwild. And after Jim Braginton suffered a series of health problems, the company *really* began to slide. Like many similar small operations, they

financed *yesterday's* scopes with *today's* orders (they required *at least* a deposit for each order, no matter how long the projected delivery delay)! This worked for a long time, but when production faltered due to the owner's health problems, things began to come crashing down. As long as Jim was around and active, ol' Coulter managed to keep on truckin', muddling through *somehow*. But when his health began to fail, the company quickly--very quickly--ran out of steam. By the time of Braginton's death in '96, the company was in bankruptcy.

His family *had* valiantly attempted to keep things afloat. Ads for a **16" replacement** for the Odyssey II had garnered a *lot* of interest and orders, but the family was apparently never really able to put it into production. A very thin primary mirror in a **3 point cell** (!) caused a lot of problems, and before this design could be modified into something a bit more practical, Coulter Optical was on the skids. It should be remembered that by this time **Orion and Meade** were producing Sonotube Dobs which were *much* more attractive than the Coulters. The Meades, especially, also featured top-flight optics; it must be noted that Coulter's optical quality had been sliding--from often 'pretty good' to 'barely passable'--given the quality of a couple of 'late period' *Odysseys* I've seen. It has also been said that, in one more effort to curb rising costs, most Coulter mirrors were by this time no longer produced on site--they were being contracted-out to an optical house in Mexico.

With bankruptcy Coulter disappeared for a little while--taking quite a few people's telescope money with it, sadly. Most of us never expected to see the ol' *Odysseys*

again, so it was quite a surprise when the amateur community learned that Coulter Optical was to live again after being bought out by Florida's **Murnaghan Instruments**. Reports I've heard say that, while the scopes are much the same, quite a few 'details,' including optical quality, have been improved. The prices have also risen to the point where they're about the same as the other 'bargain Dob' manufacturers' prices.

Jim Braginton's Odysseys were by no means perfect telescopes, but all-in all Coulter produced very usable economy scopes that helped a lot of people enter astronomy. And reading any of his old catalogs and instruction manuals, it quickly becomes obvious that the man had a real and deeply held love for the night sky:

"I can remember the many nights on a mountaintop or in the middle of the desert that I touched the universe and felt a sense of belonging to it. It is ironic that we all are trying to make sense out of this colossal universe and yet we can see it staring back at us with its light tempting us to understand it. It is now your unique opportunity with your own telescope to make a beginning."

--Jim Braginton, July 1986

--Rod

Astrobytes

As everybody around here is aware, I've become something of an 'astronomy software collector.' Sure, I've got some programs that I use month after month and year after year (*Megastar* and *Skyglobe* come

immediately to mind). But I just enjoy sitting down and playing with a new astro application whether I have an immediate use for it or not! Not that I'm easily impressed, though. I've certainly have had a love-hate relationship with Maris' *RedShift* programs. I really liked the first *RedShift* (1994), but I had a very bad experience with its successor, *RedShift 2*; the CD is now doing duty as a beer coaster! When I received a mail offer from Maris (apparently now calling themselves 'Piranha Interactive Software') to upgrade to the new *RedShift 3*, it took me a while to convince myself ('good money after bad') to fork over some \$\$\$. But just as you'd expect, I found that I couldn't resist the lure of an **astronomy CD for 'only' \$19.95**, and, against my better judgment, I sent off for the upgrade to *RedShift 3*! I received '3' about a month ago, and have been able to give it a pretty extensive workout.

To cut to the chase, I gotta say I'm pretty impressed. This is NOT a program that I'd dream of using to do actual observing (for that we have *Megastar* and David Chandler's *Deep Space*), but I think Dorothy and I are going to have a lot of fun with this new *RedShift*. The following is based on fairly extensive trials of the program on two different machines: an older 133mhz non-MMX Pentium with a 4x CDROM drive, and a 300mhz Pentium II with a 32x CDROM.

RedShift 3 is, as you'd expect for a commercial program these days, very attractively packaged in a fold-out-cover full-color box, and, believe it or not, it comes with a real, printed **HARD COPY** manual (something that's becoming pretty rare lately). Even more surprising, I actually *received* the box and manual with my upgrade copy (when I upgraded to *RedShift 2*, I only got a CD and a jewel

box). The program loaded and ran without a problem on my clone 133mhz Pentium (48mb ram), and, from what I've seen, it seems pretty bug-free. A look at Explorer revealed that the installation routine had deposited only a few megabytes on my hard drive--needless to say, the CD must be in the drive for program operation. If you don't have **Quicktime** and **Microsoft Internet Explorer** installed on your hard drive, the installation program will do it for you--they're both required. *RedShift* did run with a lot more snap on my PII 300 with 64Mb of ram, but I feel that it would run more than acceptably on any Pentium Class machine. The speed of the CDROM drive undoubtedly had more to do with its performance than the processors did.

One thing was eminently clear from boot-up: **for the Solar System enthusiast, this program is going to be quite a treat!** It offers a seemingly very realistic model of the workings of the Solar System, and features beautiful (to put it *mildly*) depictions of the planets. I also found the control scheme (the program's 'control panels' are used heavily while negotiating the Solar System) quite a bit improved over *RedShift 1-2*'s 'TV remote control' metaphor. There is some similarity between the new control panels and the old, though, so previous *RedShift* users should be able to jump in without too much of a learning curve.

In the process of fiddling with the controls, I saw some truly beautiful sights! A simple sunrise or sunset is a thing of beauty on your computer! I ran time at an accelerated rate (real-time-advance is also available) and watched the Sun go down; the skies *gradually* darken and change color, turning from bright blue to black; and saw the stars slowly begin

to wink into existence! Wound things back and watched this a couple of times! Set the controls to a morning in March of last year and was rewarded by a lovely image of **Hale Bopp with a realistic tail** Took a spin around Jupiter (planet depictions were one of the few things I really liked about *RedShift 2*). Jupiter, and indeed all the planets, are much improved, even over 1 and 2's decently realistic renderings, almost looking 'photographic' (especially Neptune/Uranus, since they look less cartoonish than *RS*'s Voyager-image-processing-style Jupiter and Saturn). Oh, and *RS 3* offers one thing I've never seen any astronomy program do before: total Solar Eclipses. Most programs can depict total Lunar eclipses, but Solar eclipses usually consist of nothing more than a dark disk coving a yellow disk. Not *RS3*! When the Moon covers the Sun, the skies darken, the stars come out, and the Solar corona appears in all its glory!

OK, so the program does a pretty good job on the Solar System (and also appeared reasonably accurate, given my very informal testing). How about its star mapping capabilities? As stated above, there's no way that I would EVER depend on *RedShift's* charts in the field (well...maybe for binocular use). But it *has* improved. And it was quite a kick, I must admit, to zoom into **Omega Centauri** and see it go from a spot to a...resolved **GLOBULAR CLUSTER**! Yes, *RedShift* offers an option to display IMAGES rather than symbols for deep sky objects! Looked **great**! When I moved over to nearby Centaurus A, I discovered that it doesn't just offer generic images of deep sky objects either; the brightest deep sky wonders are represented by realistic individual images--there was

Centaurus A in all its double-lobed glory! The area of the Lagoon and Trifid nebulae was quite a treat! I also found that the program's star map printouts are somewhat better now; at least the deep sky objects print so you can see them (but only when you switch back to symbols--the little images do not print at all well).

How about *RedShift's* ancillary 'multimedia features, which have always been one of its major selling points? One big improvement here is the use of Microsoft Internet Explorer for viewing the program's image gallery--this means a right mouse click will save those pretty pictures for use in other applications, something that was a pain to do in the other *RedShifts* (alt-printscreens). It did seem, though, that there were fewer images on the disk than were included with the original program. Most also seemed smaller. The *Online Penguin Dictionary of Astronomy* has been updated, and continues to be useful. And the main program now includes a 'copy screen' function which I found useful for saving screen shots.

All in all, Not bad, not bad at all... But **WHAT DIDN'T I LIKE?**

The manual. You'd think, for example, that the tech writer who did this would have spent a bit of time showing new users how to get things set up...but NO! Even though I'm familiar with *RedShift*, it took me a while to figure out how to set my location (Mobile, Alabama is not a listed city in the location dialogue). The program also falls a bit short in its online help, which is basically just another version of the printed manual. If the online manual featured a search function, it would be a step ahead, since the printed book's index is a *joke*, but it does not!

I did say that the program has improved its control panels, and it has,

with the exception of 'preferences' and 'settings.' It seems to me that both preferences and settings could have been combined into one dialogue. As it is, the difference between them is easy to forget. One thing that they did do right was fix things so settings load automatically on start up. With the old *RedShift*, you had to **manually** load your location data from a file every time!

The program makes a big deal out of its ability to access the web through your ISP. This works OK, but it would be nice if you could do something marginally *useful* with this function (like go to the **Digitized Sky Survey**--the online POSS--ala' *Starry Night*, the other 'pretty' planetarium program on the shelves right now)! As is, it seems the most useful function for this is downloading program updates (one is already needed...version 3.0 will not print 7th magnitude and fainter stars!). And if they were so intent on doing a beautiful planetarium, why didn't the designers include detailed horizons (also like *Starry Night*)?

Dorothy and I do do a lot of Solar System stuff from time to time--if nothing more than sitting around talking about **MARS** (as Anne says in Robinson's *Blue Mars*, 'On Mars, on Mars, on Mars, on Mars!'), so I think this CD may actually be useful as well as pretty--for us. And it has whetted my appetite for more pretty planetariums (just received the new upgrade for MEGASTAR, so we're covered for observing programs). Hmmmm...Christmas is coming up, and *Starry Night Deluxe* ain't **THAT** expensive....

--Rod

Seeing in the Solstice with Pat and Stephanie

Stephanie and I continued our tradition this year of rising well before daylight to witness the Sun rise on the first day of Summer. This started a few years ago while staying up late one night and catching Jack Horkheimer's Star Hustler on the education channel. He was announcing an essay contest to describe your experience of this yearly event, with a pair of nice binoculars as the grand prize. We didn't win the binocs, but it was a lot of fun, and we've since turned it into a ritual. It's amazing the things that take place around us that we don't or that we just take for granted. So, thanks Jack! You're a little weird, but given us the opportunity to stop and take notice (at least once a year) of this beautiful universe we call home!

We are not lucky enough to live near Stonehenge, Newgrange or any other megalithic site, so we make do with our own Stargate Observatory. The giant capstones are missing, but I'm sure the sky looks just as beautiful this morning as it would from the plains of Salisbury or the Boyne River Valley. We are initially greeted by a waning crescent Moon and its stunningly bright companion, Venus, low in the eastern sky. High in the southern sky is Jupiter. In my eight inch reflector we discover Ganymede's shadow drifting across the face of this, the king of the planets. At 315X, three tiny discs are seen accompanying Jove: Io (just popping out from behind the planet), Europa to the left, and Callisto swinging wide out to the right.

The air is slightly cooler and dryer this morning, a welcome break from the past few weeks of the more August-like weather we've been experiencing recently. As twilight begins to make its entrance, we leave the observatory in search of a couple of chaise lounges. Now in the more comfortable prone position, and armed with mugs of hot coffee with amaretto, we await the show. By 5:20 the thin cirrus clouds begin to take on a light shade of pink. Then, over the next thirty minutes, the colors begin to change dramatically. A sudden bright orange followed by a golden hue which then fades to light yellow. Back to orange again, but this time followed by an almost burgundy color which gradually becomes gold, and then the light yellow seen a few minutes earlier. Finally the colors are gone and the clouds will spend the rest of the day boring us with dull shades of gray and white.

The sound of crickets chirping, the only sound heard when we first woke up, has now been replaced by the songs of birds. At first these songs are sporadic, then they become continuous. The repeating patterns are distinctive, but I must plead ignorance of which bird makes what sound! Nonetheless, the complexity and volume is astounding when we really listen closely. This winged symphony is periodically interrupted by an occasional bee, the kittens wrestling on the picnic table, and Bubba in his noisy pickup truck heading home after a long Saturday night's worth of proving his manhood at some local watering hole.

By 6:15 the noise from our stomachs begins to drown out the birds, so we head in to fix breakfast and enjoy it before the kids wake up (and bring to an end our peaceful little commune with nature). We never do actually see the Sun rise because of the

cloud cover in the east, but the Solstice officially happens at 9:03.

Summer has arrived once more. We find ourselves at the same point in our orbit around the Sun we were last year at this time. I'm grateful to be here again with my wife, two healthy children and a safe comfortable home.

To be continued next year...

--Pat Rochford



My Back Pages

Stories in the Sky

What's the most prominent Fall constellation? Well its gotta be ol' Pegasus! Looking to the east on these lovely Autumn evenings, I see that this cosmic nag has again pulled himself up into the heavens! There's no denying that Pegasus with his Great Square (probably the most identifiable asterism around after the Dippers and Orion) is lovely and prominent, but what was the place of a *horse* in mythology?

Beautiful as he may be, Pegasus' birth was a thing of horror! His story begins with the end of one of the **Gorgons**, the infamous **Medusa**. The Gorgons were, of course, the ugly, snake-haired daughters of the god Phorcys and his wife Ceto. Not only did they have snakes for hair, they had huge wings, sharp teeth, and a reputation for being monsters in *every sense* of the word. It was a well-known fact that one look at one of the Gorgons would turn a human to stone--literally! Father Zeus, though not known as an overly merciful God, didn't fancy seeing all his worshipers turned into lawn sculpture, so he decreed that the Gorgons be exiled to the farthest reaches of the western sea, requiring them to make their home somewhere near the *Pillars of Hercules*. There things stood for many ages until up stepped **Perseus** who slew Medusa (who was the only Gorgon who was mortal). Perseus chopped off Medusa's head in order to--well, that's a story for another day! Naturally, lopping off a monster's head is a messy thing. A lot of the creature's vile blood was spilled. Uck!! **BUT** out of this smelly mass of gore sprang a beautiful and full-grown horse, **Pegasus!** This horse was unlike any ever seen by mortal man--Pegasus was a **winged** horse, trotting across the skies between earth and Olympus as easily as your garden-variety filly gallops down to the local 7-11 (or whatever convenience stores were current in ancient Greece).

Naturally, when the word got out that there was an OWNERLESS winged horse trotting around, every mortal and his brother longed to capture this wondrous animal! Most gave up right away, since on the ground or in the air Pegasus was as swift as Zeus' lightning bolts, and had more sense than most would-be Pegasus tamers. One Greek did not give up, however. For **Bellerophon**, prince of Corinth, Pegasus became an *obsession*. Unfortunately, in those days

there were no *Support Groups* to help Bellerophon deal with his little problem, so he continued the chase month after month! Lucky for Bellerophon, for some reason he was a favorite of **Athena**, and one night as he was spending the night in one of her temples (the chase had so depleted the funds of the Prince that he couldn't even afford a **Motel 6!**), the Goddess of Wisdom appeared to him in a dream, and let him in on a little secret: a golden bridle would allow him to catch the steed! When Bell awoke, there beside him was said golden bridle!

Our hero wasted no time! Taking the bridle, he snuck up on Pegasus as the winged wonder browsed in his favorite glade. Pegasus was well aware of Bellerophon's approach, but found that he was strangely hypnotized by the gleam of the golden bridle! Pegasus seems to have taken to Bell right off the bat, so it may be that he was only waiting for the appropriate and appropriately equipped hero to become his master. Or, more likely, the whole Pegasus-Bellerophon thing was a scheme of the Gods, arranged for their own devious reasons!

Whatever the truth, Pegasus proved a boon for Bellerophon and Corinth! Pegasus and Bellerophon become unbeatable in battle and had many adventures in their campaigns against the Amazons and their quest of the Chimaera! As so often happens in these tales, though, our hero eventually became a victim of his own *pride*. After a while, Bell decided that he was no mortal prince; he deserved a place beside the 'other' gods in Olympus! He ordered Pegasus to bear him to Olympus. Pegasus did as he was told, though he didn't think it was a very good idea at all. And as the journey progressed, the horse became exceedingly nervous! The gods were not likely to be happy about a mortal setting foot in their home, and being noted for their tempers, they were also not likely to spare Pegasus though he was 'only following orders!' Balancing his own interests against the well-being of his beloved master, Pegasus made an eminently practical decision (he had a lot of horse sense!): as the neared Olympus he bucked-off his rider!

Bellerophon? Squashed like a bug after a fall of several miles. But he does live on even today in story and song!

Pegasus? The whole thing gave Zeus such a good laugh that the appointed Pegasus the job of bringing him his thunderbolts and lightning! And still we see Pegasus in our Autumn skies when his heavenly master turns him out to graze in the cosmic pastures!

--Rod



Club Notes

The July 1998 meeting, held at the ESC on 1 July, featured an exceptional turnout with quite a new faces present! Following a discussion on club business and a report by Treasurer Ginny Kramer, Rod Mollise brought the membership up to date on the Cookbook 245 camera he's building for the club. Rod also gave a short presentation on a new astronomy computer program, RedShift 3.

The MAS August 1998 Meeting: was held on Wednesday, 5 August 1998. Pat Rochford showed us some of the components he's built for his new 12.5" truss tube Dobsonian! From looking at the progress he's made so far, it was clear to the membership that Pat's latest will be like all his other telescope projects: beautiful and a dream to use! Rod Mollise then presented a program on video astronomy, showing the tape that he and Pat had used at Pensacola's EAAA last Spring when they visited to give a talk on using video at the telescope.



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

It's Deep South Time Again! Deep South--The Deep South Regional Star Gaze (DSRSG)--is the star party that local observers look forward to each year! The 1998 edition of DSRSG will be held on October 14-18 at its time honored location, McComb Mississippi's Percy Quin State Park. If you need registration materials, check the Ponchartrain AS page on the web (accessible through the 'link' page on the

MAS home page), or contact one of your club officers!

Thanks to all who offered their support after my (Rod's) recent severe automobile accident. Things are basically back to normal now, but it was a lot easier to get through this episode knowing I was in your thoughts!

I've completed work on the Cookbook CCD camera computer interface and now am in the process of checking-out the camera preamp. The only major stumbling block so far has been waiting for parts delivery. I'm hoping we'll have the camera available for use this Fall!

--Rod

Oh for the opening of school...at least it'll get those delinquents Beavis and Butthead off the streets part of the time. I was dumbstruck by the sight of them trotting down Selma Street in their beach garb; apparently they were looking for the nearest public pool...I guess! In spite of their unrelievedly gross appearance, I ran out and snatched from the pasty white hands of Beavis the mayonnaise jar (hermetically sealed and left on Funk and Wagnal's front porch) containing the latest installment of...

RUMOURS

Deepsky '99 is out and it's already threatened! While we haven't had a chance to try '99 yet, as most of you know, the Skywatch gang have been big fans of Steve Tuma's *Deepsky '98* (Rod reviewed it a couple of issues ago). Now, right of the heels of the author's announcement of the release of *Deepsky '99*, comes word that the 'unlock code' for the program (the code required to make the shareware version fully operational) has been distributed on a 'cracker' newsgroup. This is bad for a couple of reasons. First, using an unauthorized unlock code on a shareware copy of the program is JUST PLAIN STEALING! That's all their is to it! Also, I'm sure that Steve and his colleagues will be hesitant to do any more work on the program if the even minimal recompense they see from selling it disappears. If we want more wonderful astronomy programs like *Deepsky*, we (the amateur community) simply *HAVE to support the authors!....*

Celestron on the move. In the wake of the announcement of the planned merger with Tasco, there have been a number of product announcements. First, Celestron has discontinued their agreement with Scott Losmandy to use his wonderful G11 mount on their 11 and 14" SCTs. Celestron is replacing this with a German equatorial mount produced in house (this is contrary to early rumors that indicated that the mount is made in China...from what we've heard, it's clear it is made in good old Torrance, CA). This new mount, the CI700, has gotten good initial reviews (though Scott Losmandy reportedly thought it was 'ugly'), and offers several improvements over the time-tested G11. The major advance is the inclusion of manual slow motion controls, something that G users have wished for for a long time. It also features a reportedly better polar alignment scope (though weird looking: it hangs off the side of the RA axis...the polar shaft itself is solid), another long time complaint of Losmandy customers. The G11 and G14 telescopes will now be called the CM1100 and CM1400 respectively....

Another surprise was the word from Celestron that they will be offering two competitors for the Meade ETX. These are the G3, a 90mm f11 Maksutov (sounds like a reincarnation of the C90, but I haven't seen a photo yet), and the G5, a C5. Both of these will offer included German mounts, battery powered drives, and metal tripods. The G3 will sell in the \$500.00 price range while the G5 will be priced at around \$750.00. I was very excited about these telescopes--until I saw a photograph of the G5. I had assumed that they would be mounted on one of Celestron's Super Polaris 'clone' mounts (though I did wonder how Celestron could 'sell so low.' Well, the answer was obvious in the picture I tracked down, which showed the G5 on a mount which looks more like the small German mount used on the 80mm widefield refractor they've been marketing for a while than it does a Polaris/Super Polaris. This mount looks like it would be enough for a 90mm Mak, but I don't know about a C5....

Talk about companies on the move....have you seen the way Orion has been aggressively expanding their product line? Their most recent catalog features a number of *very attractive* scopes on Super Polaris 'clone' mounts. Especially nice looking is the Argonaut (INTES) 150 Maksutov which comes on one of these clones (the 'new' Skyview mount) and which commands the attractive and reasonable price (for a high quality Mak) of \$1099.00. I also like the new INTES 6" Mak-Newt, which is on a Vixen Great Polaris DX mount. \$1999.00 is a fairly steep price for a 6", but I'm guessing that this f6 scope would deliver apo-like images with its tiny secondary. And I've always been an admirer of the DX German mounts. I also noticed in this catalog that Orion has finally given up on their name change to the funky 'Telescope and Binocular Center,' and have gone back to

simply O-R-I-O-N! Finally, in the midst of all these nice additions to the catalog, I did notice one deletion: the 16" Dob is apparently GONE. I *have* heard rumors over the last couple of years that Orion had been having troubles with the optical quality of the 16" mirrors (unlike Meade, whose 16"ers, while certainly not fancy, are pretty good optically and pretty usable with a little tinkering). Perhaps Orion just got tired of messing with this beast--they probably weren't selling a huge amount of these massive, monstrous closed-tube Dobs anyway....

The Anonymous Astronomer



A very happy Halloween from the Skywatch Gang:
Rod, Dorothy, Pat and the Anonymous One!