

REDISCOVERING OUR CLUB'S PAST

MATTHEW WILL

INTERVIEWS

DON JARDINE

February 1, 1992

FOREWORD

This article was written ten years ago when the Sangamon Astronomical Society (SAS) was relocated in Jacksonville, Illinois and was under a different name, the Central Illinois Astronomical Association, (CIAA). References to the present are references to the situation with the club in 1992. This venture was intended to be a much larger project of research and writing but it never really got off the ground and so only one article was written.

MATTHEW WILL INTERVIEWS DON JARDINE

This article is one in a series of articles about the history of the Central Illinois Astronomical Association. In these articles we will probe in to the people and events that are related to our organization over the years. My reconstruction to the history of our club has included research through the club's written records and personal testimony through interviews.

When I began this effort, I had two purposes in mind. First, to study the history of any subject is to learn from the experiences of other people from the past. It is my hope that as our members read these articles, they will gain valuable insights about amateur astronomy and the operation of our club in its formative years. Secondly, the other purpose of these articles is to preserve the past. Our 40 year old organization has had its fair share of achievements over the years and I would like to document our club's history before it becomes untraceable and completely forgotten.

My first article is an interview with Don Jardine, the founder of our organization back when it was known as the Sangamon Astronomical Society. Having been an amateur astronomer for much of his life, Don Jardine began his interest in amateur astronomy by tracing out the constellations in the night sky from his parents backyard in his hometown of Youngstown, Ohio. Later on as Don's interest in astronomy grew, he studied telescope making under the tutelage of a renowned telescope builder, T. J. Beede. Don had planned to attend Princeton University on an astronomy scholarship when World War II broke out. Rather than waiting around to get drafted into the armed services, he elected to enlist in the navy and served as a flight engineer on B-24 Bombers in the European Theater. After the war, unable to continue academic studies in astronomy, Don settled down in Springfield to pursue a career as an architect.

Since he moved to Springfield in 1948, Don Jardine has been one of Springfield's foremost amateur astronomers. Now retired, Don at age 70 resides in rural Sangamon County where he still actively observes from his personally constructed observatory.

It was on a Saturday afternoon on February 1, 1992, that I interviewed Don about the origin of our 40 year old club and his life as an amateur astronomer.

MW: How did the Sangamon Astronomical Society come into being?

DJ: In 1948, after I left the navy and settled down in Springfield, I became acquainted with Dwight Bailey another local amateur astronomer. I had erected an observatory with a dome where my first home was located on the corner of old Route 66 (now Stevenson Drive) and Palmer Street. You could visibly see it from the highway and Dwight had seen my observatory while traveling on Route 66 and inquired about it and my interest in amateur astronomy. Later on, I made other friends and acquaintances in the Springfield area who were interested in amateur astronomy. By 1953, I decided to start an astronomy club with the people I knew, that were also amateur astronomers.

MW: Who were your charter members?

DJ: Basically, there were 6 charter members other than myself that were more or less the Sangamon Astronomical Society's longtime "regular" attendees.

Dwight Bailey, like many of our initial members, built his own telescope. Although he was not our most active participant, Dwight enjoyed our monthly meetings and always loved to socialize with the other members. Dwight was one of the first persons to help me take the first preliminary steps in founding the club.

Harry MaConnell was another one of our members who built his scope. He was also a bird watching enthusiast. His reverence for nature was anchored in his religious beliefs as a Seventh-Day Adventist.

Virgil Carrier, who passed away last December was a general observer of sorts. Virgil always loved to crack jokes and had a keen sense of humor. I eventually gave him my observatory building site on Palmer Street when I moved from my former residence to Pawnee. Virgil used the dome to house his 12 inch reflector.

Harold "Soupy" Creighton passed away last year. Harold was very knowledgeable about astronomy and had practically an encyclopedic mind about the subject. He was always good for a talk because he had such a command of the subject. He too built his scope. Harold's professional background as an electrical engineer, for Bell Telephone Company, helped him to create an electrical photometer that I use today for my variable star and asteroid observations.

John Snyder was a high school principal in Rochester and although he did not own a telescope, he had a steady interest in astronomy and the club.

Carl Nickolson was another founding member who was very actively involved with the Sangamon Astronomical Society in its early years as a club officer. When Carl passed away his 12 inch Newtonian reflector telescope that he had made for himself was sold to Virgil Carrier.

Charles F. "Chick" Capen was never a member of the SAS but he grew up in the Springfield area and socialized with our group. We had done some telescopic observations together before he left the area in the early 1950's. Chick later became a world-renowned amateur astronomer who also did professional work in astronomy. From 1969 until his untimely death in 1986, he was the lead researcher for the Mars Section for the Association of Lunar and Planetary Observers. He was an extraordinary visual observer who could sight surface markings on Mars that I had problems seeing! I sold him an 8 inch Cassegrain telescope made by T. G. Beede that he used in planetary observing.

MW: How did the focus of the club evolve as the membership changed over the years?

DJ: Primarily, we had a very close knit group of people. We were mostly from the same age group. So we had a lot in common other than amateur astronomy and shared our experiences in other facets of our lives at the meetings. We cared about each other and would visit one of our members if he were seriously ill. In later years there was a division in age between members. Our new members were considerably younger than our older founding members. Some of the older members, like myself, refrained from active participation in the SAS simply because several of us were in demanding situations in our own personal lives that did not allow us time for the club. So the younger set stepped in and took command of the leadership in the early 1980's.

In the following years, as your membership knows, Fred Pilcher moved the club to Jacksonville in 1986 when the members from the Jacksonville area outnumbered the Springfield faithful. So, throughout its history in Springfield, the Sangamon Astronomical Society was generally composed of telescope builders and amateurs that observed with their telescopes quite a bit.

MW: How large was your membership?

DJ: During most of the club's history we never varied much above or below 20 members. Members would come and go but we always stayed in that

range, except during the early 1960's when the Sangamon Astronomical Society peaked out at close to 50 members.

MW: How was the Sangamon Astronomical Society structured?

DJ: Very loosely. We had very modest dues when we started the club. If we ever wanted to make a purchase for an astronomical item such as a book or a special piece of equipment, we never had any problems obtaining the funds from our membership. With dues only two to four dollars during my association with the club, the only other expense for membership was a club subscription to SKY & TELESCOPE.

The SAS was devoid of a newsletter for much of its existence. There were some attempts to publish a newsletter a couple of times. However, putting together a newsletter takes much time and effort. Also, we did not have do-it-yourself desktop publishing with computers back in those days. Unless one had a mimeograph, you would have to go to a professional printer to have the work done.

MW: How were your meetings structured?

DJ: Well, we didn't have very many discussions about club business at our meetings like many organizations have. Very occasionally we would change our constitution to better serve our membership. Because we never had much formal club business to perform, the Sangamon Astronomical Society kept limited minutes of our meetings.

For most of time I was active in the SAS, I was its "program coordinator". I believe for a club to remain a cohesive group, it must have an active program to keep the membership interested in attending the meetings. Fellowship and camaraderie are fine but there has to be a focus.

Since we were essentially a group of observers with telescopes, I structured an observing program around telescopic observation. When we would accept a new member into the club we would give him a 3-ring binder notebook for him to record his observations and other data. At the monthly meetings I would outline the program of observation and how to do it. Most of these observations could be done at home with their own telescopes. I would hand out a worksheet with all the pertinent information and directions on how to conduct the observation. We might decide to perform a star count on a star cluster, or note the change in magnitude of a variable star between meetings, or monitor certain aspects of a lunar eclipse. These are just a few examples. At the very next meeting we would compare notes. Sometimes we would just state what should have been seen. We never pushed people into

describing their own work in front of the group if they didn't want to. But through these experiences we became better observers.

I taught astronomy through our club as a form of adult continuing education. We used study materials about astronomy from the Santa Barbara Navigation School. They had two types of courses on astronomy. One for novices and one for more advanced students. The time it took to complete the courses was in the neighborhood of a year to a year and a half.

MW: The records we have for the Sangamon Astronomical Society indicate that your group had other means of entertaining yourselves. According to the records, the SAS rented a number of films from film libraries at the University of Illinois in Champaign, Illinois and the University of Indiana in Bloomington, Indiana. One meeting announcement mentions that you were going to show the NET science special "The Violent Universe" in February of 1973.

DJ: Yes, I remember that event. Of course, back then we didn't have VCRs. In order to view the films we would need to use a 16mm projector. Harold Crieghton, one of our principal members who worked at the Illinois Bell offices in downtown Springfield, arranged for us to use their meeting room that was equipped to project movie presentations.

MW: The club records also reveal that you had some guest speakers at the SAS monthly meetings over the years.

DJ: That's correct. Often, we had members of other amateur astronomy organizations speak to us. On more than one occasion we had the late Robert Cox of the St. Louis Astronomical Society speak to our group. Mr. Cox was internationally recognized for his expertise as an optician and an amateur telescope maker. He was also well-known for his column "Gleaning for ATM's" in SKY & TELESCOPE and as editor of the now defunct magazine TELESCOPE MAKING.

MW: Where did your meetings take place?

DJ: It varied over the years. In the early years we used meeting facilities at the Lincoln Library in Springfield. We also met at some of the local area churches and at various members homes when it was convenient to do so. Several of our members had telescopes, so if we met at a members house, it was quite possible to have a brief star party afterwards. Generally, we met on the second Thursday of the month.

About once a year, in the fall, the month of October, we would invite members and their wives to a "wiener roast" at my home and observatory

near Pawnee. Eventually, I was forced into moving from my property when the county declared eminent domain on it for the purpose of the "Lake Two" project. After moving around a couple of times elsewhere in the county, I wound up here in Pleasant Plains.

MW: Can you remember any other outstanding meetings of field trips that might have occurred during your association with the Sangamon Astronomical Society?

DJ: In the 1950's, the SAS was primarily a private organization. However, we did eventually open our meetings to the general public. Our first public meeting occurred on January 29, 1960. The SAS announced it in the State-Journal Register and reserved a meeting room at the Lincoln Library for the event. The turn out was quite phenomenal. We had over 150 people in attendance. Certainly, an over flow crowd for a small meeting room! Subsequent meetings were later held in an auditorium in Springfield.

MW: Do you think that the public interest in the "space race" at that time was the prime motivator for the public to attend your meeting?

DJ: No, I really don't think so. I believe we had general astronomy programs to keep the public interested in attending future meetings. The success of these meetings was astonishingly good.

In reference to special trips the SAS have made in the past, we did travel as a group to Chicago to attend a convention of the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO) in the late 1960's. Because of my participation in the AAVSO going back to the 1930's, I was already personally aquatinted with the founders of that organization Newton and Margaret Mayall. These conventions were a way for myself and many other amateurs to renew past friendships. Field trips of any sort were always popular with the membership.

MW: In studying other records of the Sangamon Astronomical Society, I have discovered that the organization corresponded with optical companies about the items they sold. For example, the SAS participated in test marketing the RKE eyepiece for Edmund Scientific Company in 1978. Also, in 1976 your group invited a sales representative from Celestron Corporation to speak at a meeting. Did the SAS participate actively in these or other projects with optical companies?

DJ: I don't ever recall that the sales rep for Celestron accepted our invitation to speak to our group. I do remember my correspondence with Edmund about their RKE eyepiece.

Edmund Scientific initially, in its early days, sold World War II surplus optics. A tremendous amount of surplus in the form of lenses were obtained from 7 X 50 binoculars. Edmund bought these "never before used" lenses and had them around for quite a few years with little use. To move these lenses off the shelf and sell them, Edmund used them in the manufacturing of the RKE eyepiece.

Almost all binoculars use a Kellner design eyepiece. When I received the RKE eyepiece, I took it apart and examined it. It was indeed nothing more than a simple Kellner eyepiece.

MW: In talking to Craig Crawford, a former secretary-treasurer of the SAS, he said that there had been some media coverage concerning the club about Comet West in 1976 and Comet Halley in 1985. Was there other media coverage of the SAS going back further?

DJ: Every now and then we would get some publicity about the club and myself and my observatory, in local area newspapers. Sometimes I made the front pages. In 1973, when Comet Kohoutek was in the news, I was in the paper again. The article centered around Comet Kohoutek. I said that Comet Kohoutek would be the brightest comet of the century, and that people should watch for it when it was scheduled to be at its brightest. Another amateur, Chick Lanphier of Springfield, was featured in the paper and said that Kohoutek would be a disappointment if we were expecting to see a very bright comet. The newspaper characterized this difference of opinion as a debate between us. As you well know Comet Kohoutek was a "dud", never achieving significant brightness for the public to even see it.

MW: You certainly had a lot of interesting experiences in amateur astronomy.

DJ: Yes, I have. My technical foundation in astronomy goes back to the late 1930s when I learned the art of telescope making from T. G. Beede. In my opinion he was the best in his field. His craftsmanship as a telescope maker surpassed the work of big name professionals of that day, and perhaps even of today. He had a feel for producing telescopic mirrors that was unrivaled. I remember Beede setting up one of his telescopes in the city park in my home town of Youngstown, Ohio during the 1939 opposition of Mars. His superior workmanship with optics gave stunning images of Mars that I have long remembered.

In addition to being in local newspapers, I have written articles on astronomy in various publications. However, this was many, many years ago and I have not done any of that for a very long time now. I believe

Back then, I had both the time and energy. Since then, up until my retirement, I was limited in the energy that I could expend to explore and develop my life long avocation as an amateur astronomer. So while I had a family and a career as an architect to manage, I mainly continued in amateur astronomy as an active observer and stayed active in our club as long as I could.

Astronomy is something I have loved and cherished all my life. I feel fortunate that my interest in astronomy has lead me to many personal experiences and many friends. I am pleased to see that the old Sangamon Astronomical Society survives in its latest incarnation as the Central Illinois Astronomical Association. I hope the experiences of your group are as exciting, fulfilling, and enjoyable as they were for my friends and I, all those years ago.

POSTSCRIPT

Since the writing of the unpublished interview, the "club" has moved back to Springfield and assumed its earlier identity as the "Sangamon Astronomical Society". Don has been the guiding light and elder statesman of our group since it has moved back to Sangamon County in the 1990's.

OUR ORGANIZATION TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO

The following are the recorded minutes of a meeting of the Sangamon Astronomical Society that took place on July 8, 1971.

July 8, 1971 Jardine's Home

Discussed renewal of magazines and dues. It was decided to increase dues to \$8.00.

A film strip 'The Story of the Universe - Eyes and Ears' was shown.

Too cloudy for observing.

A meeting was tentatively scheduled for July 22nd in hopes of observing Mars.

Doesn't sound too much different from what we are doing today!