

A HISTORY OF THE PRAIRIE ASTRONOMY CLUB

1960-2004

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The Prairie Astronomy Club can trace its beginnings back to November 7th, 1960, when the planet Mercury transited the sun. The upcoming event prompted an article in the newspaper, which mentioned that Professor Carroll Moore was going to observe the transit from Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln. Several astronomy enthusiasts from the Lincoln area joined Professor Moore in viewing the transit from the Wesleyan campus, and afterwards decided to meet again as a group sometime in the near future. Widespread media publicity brought the attention of others interested in Astronomy, and informal meetings began in the basement of Van Fleet Hall of Science at Wesleyan. In April, 1961, a constitution was adopted by the 14 charter members, and the Prairie Astronomy Club of Lincoln was formally established. The charter members were:

Walter Erbach Harlan Franey Faun Fritz Dick Hartley Jim Hoskins Philip
Johnson Rick Johnson Werner Klammer Carroll Moore Tom Pansing Philo
Prell Eugene Robertson Pete Schultz Jess Williams

The meeting place was moved to the upstairs lecture hall in the Van Fleet building later in 1961, and an informal newsletter was started late that year by Jess Williams, who was later to become a fixture in the club for many years as its treasurer. On June 30th, 1961, the first club star party was held at the home of Dick Hartley, On April 6th, 1962, the first issue of club's official monthly publication, THE PRAIRIE ASTRONOMER, was produced, and edited by Pete Schultz. Club activities expanded to showing the public the heavens through club members' telescopes, when on August 9th, 1962, the first monthly Gateway Shopping Center Sky Show was held.

In October of 1962, the club was first affiliated with SKY AND TELESCOPE, offering the magazine to its members as a direct benefit of membership. In 1963, the club moved its monthly meetings to the University of Nebraska State Museum. From 1964 to 1965, the meeting place was changed to Union Loan & Savings at 56th and "O" street. With telescopes in short supply, in July of 1965, the club began discussing some form of club observatory, which later led to the purchase in August, 1967, of a 12.5 inch f/6 equatorially mounted Newtonian from an Idaho amateur. The telescope's cost was paid for partly through member donations over several years, and the club's "mortgage" on the scope was later burned in a spectacular ceremony by placing it at the telescope's focus and pointing the instrument at the sun!

The club scope made numerous trips to the monthly Gateway shows, where it attracted much attention and a few new club members. It was later housed in a tilt-off metal building at Earl Moser's rural residence near Hickman. Earl served as club president for

many years in the late 1960's and early 1970's, allowing his yard to be the regular site of the club's monthly star parties centered around the club telescope. In December of 1965, the Prairie Astronomy Club was formally incorporated as a non-profit educational corporation through the efforts of Philip and Rick Johnson. In 1966, the club again moved its meeting place back to the Van Fleet Science building on the Wesleyan campus, where it remained for three years.

On June 9th, 1967, club members first attended an Astronomical League Mid-States Regional Convention to see what the League could offer. In August of that year, the club officially joined the League, and changed eastern Nebraska from North Central to Mid-States Region affiliation. In August of 1968, the first annual club family picnic and star party was held at Wagontrain Lake east of Hickman, a tradition which continued for 30 years. In 1969, the club moved its meeting location to the main lecture hall of the newly completed Olin Hall of Science on the Wesleyan campus. Meetings were generally held on the last Tuesday of each month at 7:30 p.m. Professor Carroll Moore often used the Jensen Planetarium downstairs for a preliminary club program and star-talk, while a business board meeting was held upstairs in the lecture hall.

1970 was a banner year for the Prairie Astronomy Club, starting with the Solar Eclipse of March 7th. The club provided the public safe viewing of the eclipse at the Gateway Shopping Center, while a few die-hard members went to Mexico to view totality. From June 5th through the 7th, the Club was the host for the 1970 Mid-States Regional Convention of the Astronomical League, held on the campus of Nebraska Wesleyan University in Olin Hall of Science. In the early fall of 1970, club members traveled to Beatrice to provide a public sky show at a Chevrolet dealership when the "Vega" car was introduced. Club membership varied at this time from around 35 to as many as 50 people. The Gateway Shopping Center public sky shows also continued on a regular basis into the mid 1970's.

In the summer of 1973, the Prairie Astronomy Club and the Omaha Astronomical Society co-hosted the National Convention of the Astronomical League in Omaha. During the mid 1970's, a group of individuals headed by club member Carroll Moore began a fund drive to build a public observatory for the city of Lincoln in time for the U.S. 1976 bicentennial celebration. Although the date for completion missed the bicentennial year, a generous donation from the A.L. Hyde estate made possible the construction of the Hyde Memorial Observatory in Holmes Park just west of the golf course. A number of club members participated in the planning and design of the facility, and when it opened, Hyde Observatory became a focus for the club and its activities. The club built an 8 inch Newtonian telescope and donated it to the observatory, where it joined a 14 inch Celestron Schmidt-Cassegrain and an 8 inch Cave Classical Cassegrain on the observatory deck. Hyde Memorial Observatory was formally dedicated with great public fanfare on November 6th, 1977, and began regular public viewing sessions held on Saturday nights. The Gateway Shopping Center sky shows were discontinued, as members turned their attention to helping staff the observatory during the regular public nights. Several club members served on the observatory's board of directors to help guide

observatory operations. A number of slide-tape programs for Hyde were created by club members, often narrated by long-time club treasurer Lee Thomas.

Once Hyde Observatory began operation, club membership increased to over 60 people, and the club moved its meetings to the observatory's lecture room. The February 26th, 1979 eclipse of the sun was viewed by over 500 members of the general public from the observatory, assisted by club members and covered on local television. At the same time, Carrol Moore headed up a group of club members and others on a trip to view totality in frigid Bowbells, North Dakota. The club put on its first annual Astronomy Day display on April 7th, 1979, at the Gateway Gallery Mall to showcase the hobby of Amateur Astronomy to the public.

The weekend of April 11-12, 1981, the first of several semi-annual club trips was taken to the new Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center in Hutchinson, Kansas to view two OMNIMAX films, along with some of the space hardware, which would be put on display in the near future. Later years would bring trips to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, Adler Planetarium, and Behlen Observatory. In the early 1980's with money from the Junior League of Lincoln, a unique safe solar telescope was designed by club member David Knisely, and built by two other members for Hyde Observatory for use mainly by school groups. The club continued its annual Astronomy Day displays at the Gateway Gallery Mall, and membership slowly increased.

The annular eclipse of May 30th, 1985 was a record breaker for both Hyde Observatory and for the Prairie Astronomy Club, as over 500 visitors viewed the event. The year 1986 brought the return of Halley's Comet, and with it, large crowds at Hyde Memorial Observatory. Club members provided their own telescopes outside for the public to help ease the extreme crowding in the observatory. When the comet got too low in the south to be visible from Hyde, club members staged a late night public viewing session at a rest area 15 miles south of Lincoln. An enormous crowd of nearly 1000 people observed the comet through club members' instruments from that location.

Concern over light pollution at the club observing site near Hickman in 1986 prompted the formation of a working group to establish a new dark sky site for the club. On March 24th, 1987, the club formally took possession of a decommissioned Atlas missile base for its new dark sky site. Difficulties with the Gateway Mall location for previous Astronomy Days caused the club to move its annual display to the lobby of the Ralph Mueller Planetarium on the University of Nebraska city campus, where it enjoyed great success for many years in attracting interested people.

The 1990's brought even more activity to the Prairie Astronomy Club. The club again hosted the Astronomical League Mid-States Regional Convention in June of 1993 at Nebraska Wesleyan University. Membership continued to increase, nearing 100 as the year drew to a close. In the summer of 1994, several Prairie Astronomy Club members created the first NEBRASKA STAR PARTY, bringing over 60 amateurs from locations across the country to view in the dark skies of the Sand Hills at Merritt Reservoir near

Valentine. The club also built a second club telescope: a 13.1 inch truss-tube Dobsonian which can be set up by one person in only a few minutes.

In July of 1995, the Second Annual Nebraska Star Party drew 200 people from 11 states to attend a week of dark-sky observing and family fun activities. The club joined forces with the Omaha Astronomical Society to put on regular public star parties at Mahoney State Park, halfway between Lincoln and Omaha. In addition, both clubs provided telescopes for the University of Nebraska's Behlen Observatory public open houses held during the spring and fall. In March and April of 1996, Comet Hyakutake put on a fine display, and the public got wonderful views of it through club members' telescopes and binoculars at Hyde Observatory.

In May of 1996, the club once again held its annual Astronomy Day at Mueller Planetarium, in conjunction with the International Space Station exhibit. In August of 1996, over 250 amateurs from across the country experienced the 3rd Annual Nebraska Star Party, now co-sponsored by the Prairie Astronomy Club and the Omaha Astronomical Society. The club was also establishing a presence in cyber-space with its own club web site on the Internet. December 3rd, 1996 was a sad day in the history of the club, when charter member and club "father", Professor Carroll Moore, passed away at age 79.

The spring of 1997 brought the appearance of Comet Hale-Bopp, but due to its position in the northwestern sky, Hyde Observatory's telescopes could not view the object. Members of the club once again provided some telescopes for the large crowds, which gathered at the observatory to view the comet. In May of 1997, concerns over light pollution and rural development prompted the sale of the club's Atlas observing site, and the search for a new one was begun. In early August of 1997, over 330 people from as far away as Brazil, Belgium, and Hawaii, attended the 4th Nebraska Star Party at Merritt Reservoir, again co-sponsored by the two largest Nebraska clubs. The 5th NSP in July of 1998 had an even greater attendance, with over 400 people present, despite hot weather and limited clear sky nights. The club continued to hold its monthly star parties, but now they were held at either Olive Creek Lake near Hallam or Wagontrain Lake east of Hickman.

In late November 1998, the Leonid meteor shower put on a fine display, with several groups of club members seeing several hundred meteors per hour. A few members were interviewed on KOLN-TV and in the Lincoln Journal-Star about their observations of this spectacular shower. The spring of 1999 brought on another club visit to the newly remodeled and expanded Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center in Hutchinson. In conjunction with Space Week (May 10-15), the Prairie Astronomy Club took Hyde Observatory's solar telescope to the Lincoln airport to give hundreds of school children a safe look at the sun. The club then held Astronomy day on Saturday, May 15th in the lobby of Mueller planetarium with exhibits, computers, and a hands-on mirror grinding demonstration.

The 6th Nebraska Star Party, August 7-14, 1999 was called by some attendees as the best ever, with 330 people in attendance from as far away as Puerto Rico, the United Arab Emirates, and Beijing, China. NSP was thus firmly established as an annual worldwide family "Astronomical Vacation", by the PAC and the OAS. On September 18th, 1999, club members Erik Hubl and Dave Knisely put on "The Stars of the Prairie", a star-talk and viewing session at the Homestead National Monument near Beatrice, with about 50 members of the public in attendance.

With the Nebraska Star Party now becoming the main late summer activity, it was decided to dispense with a summer club picnic/star party in favor of a autumn dinner involving people from both the OAS and PAC. On Friday, October 8th, the first joint Fall Banquet was held in the Riverview Lodge at Mahoney State Park, with nearly 50 people in attendance. As the year 2000 arrived, the Prairie Astronomy Club continued its involvement in public service. The total Lunar Eclipse of January 20th brought out nearly 600 people to Hyde Observatory to view the event. Again, the observatory provided live television feed to local TV stations, while club members operated the telescopes on the observing deck and on the grounds outside.

On May 12th and 13th, the club put on displays for Space Week and Astronomy Day in the lobby of Mueller Planetarium, with over 3,000 visitors in attendance. The Mahoney Star Parties continued the interaction between the club and the Omaha Astronomical Society, culminating in 7th Annual Nebraska Star Party July 29-August 4th, 2000, with nearly 400 attendees. As in the previous year, PAC members provided telescopes and guidance for about 40 people for the Homestead National Monument's "Star Walk", held near Beatrice on September 30th. On Friday, October 20th, the Lincoln and Omaha clubs once again gathered at the Riverview Lodge in Mahoney State Park for the second annual Fall Banquet.

2001 was another good year for the Prairie Astronomy Club. Astronomy Day was held on Saturday April 7th in the lobby of Mueller Planetarium, while April 28th, an "Informational Star Party" was held for the benefit of new and prospective telescope owners on the grounds outside of Hyde Observatory. The Mahoney Star Parties continued, and the 8th Annual Nebraska Star Party (July 15-20) again was highly successful, generating huge national publicity on ABC radio stations, the Voice of America (shortwave), and local television stations. On Friday, October 12th, the Omaha Astronomical Society and the Prairie Astronomy Club once again held the annual Fall Banquet at the Sapp Riverview Lodge in Mahoney State Park. The next night, a "How to use your Telescope" workshop for the public was held on the grounds of Hyde Memorial Observatory.

In November, the Leonid meteor shower once again provided a spectacular display to groups of club members despite some interference by clouds. Late in the afternoon of December 14th, Hyde Observatory again opened for a partial solar eclipse, with club members providing telescopes for solar viewing, as well as for a local television station's video feed. 2002 opened with a "New Telescope Owner's Night" at the January 29th club meeting. Several public nights were planned in conjunction with the annual

Astronomy Day celebration, but rain forced activities inside. Due to a conflict with the spring football game at UNL, the club's Astronomy Day exhibit in the lobby of Mueller Planetarium was changed to Sunday afternoon April 21st, where it attracted over 200 visitors. The Homestead National Monument near Beatrice held its "Prairie Appreciation Week", which culminated May 17th with a Public Star Party presented by 6 club members next to the monument's Freeman 1-room school. Several club members also brought their telescopes to Hyde Observatory to help the public watch the near-sunset partial solar eclipse on June 10th.

In late July, the 9th annual NEBRASKASTAR PARTY was held above the shores of Merritt Reservoir, with nearly 400 attendees present. Friday, October 11th again brought members from the Lincoln and Omaha clubs together for good food and social fun at the Fall Banquet in Mahoney State Park.

On Sunday, November 10th, club members participated in the 25th Anniversary Celebration of Hyde Memorial Observatory. Guest speakers provided presentations in the UNL Union, including Dr. Kevin Houser on proper lighting design, Larry Stepp of NOAO on Large Astronomical Telescopes, and Astronaut Clayton Anderson on EVA training. After the presentations, festivities moved to Hyde, where Lincoln's mayor Don Wesely and other dignitaries were on hand for a public proclamation and open house at the observatory. Club members provided outside telescopes for public viewing, and the club received an award for 25 years of service to the facility. On Monday night/Tuesday morning November 18-19th, club members and the public gathered on the grounds of Hyde Observatory to witness a fine display of the Leonid Meteor Shower despite the nearly full moon. Hundreds of meteors were seen, with club members helping staff the observatory as well as watching the show. The club purchased a 100mm f/6 refractor as a second club telescope to loan-out to club members.

2003 brought on "the Year of Mars", with the close opposition of the Red Planet. A lunar eclipse occurred on May 15th, which brought crowds at Hyde Observatory but also brought mostly cloudy skies to club members helping out. Astronomy Day was held April 6th with multiple displays all over the State Museum as well as the lobby of Mueller Planetarium. Hundreds of people got looks at things like CCD imaging, telescope making, an up-close computer simulation of the solar system, along with a program by Rob Landis of JPL on the Mars Exploration Rover project. The 10th Annual Nebraska Star Party was held July 27th to August 1st at Merritt Reservoir, with nearly 300 people in attendance for a week of good observing. The evening of August 26th, the Prairie Astronomy Club held their monthly meeting, but afterwards set up their telescopes for the overflow crowd of 1,100 people who came to Hyde Observatory to view Mars at its closest approach.

Once again, the Fall Banquet was held on the evening of October 10th at Mahoney State Park, where good food was followed by a program on Mars by UNL professor Dr. Martin Gaskell. The total solar eclipse of November 8th was a fight with clouds, but 150 members of the general public got to see at least part of the event from totality onward through both of Hyde Observatory's telescopes and those brought by club members.

2004 had a number of weather problems (and access problems due to the dredging of Holmes Lake), which delayed the annual "New Scope User's Night" to April 17th, at Hyde Observatory. A large group of people were given an informative presentation by club member Brian Sivil, while other club members helped those who had brought telescopes assistance in setting up and using them.

April 18th was Astronomy Day, with multiple demonstrations and exhibits by club members in various places around Morrill Hall. In addition, Nagin Cox of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory gave a wonderful talk on the two MER rovers and their ongoing mission on the surface of Mars. The Mahoney Star Parties were held during the summer, and the 11th annual Nebraska Star Party brought over 320 people to the high Sandhills for a week of viewing and fun July 18th-23rd. On September 11th, the club held an observing session for the Audobon Society southwest of Lincoln. The Fall Banquet on October 8th was again a success with 60 people in attendance. The total Lunar Eclipse of October 27th was cloudy, but 70 people got to see it on the screen of Hyde Observatory relayed from Oslo, Norway.

The future indeed looks bright for one of the best organizations in amateur astronomy,
THE PRAIRIE ASTRONOMY CLUB.