

J. Chapter TEN - Astronomy

Have Telescope, Will Travel Part Two

Getting around outside California and back, friends, education, the Sunset, the CAS, and more of the great beyond...

SA in the PNW

Seattle Washington, I have the box 'scope (with the 6" mirror) set up on the corner of 85th & Greenwood. As far as I can tell, Sidewalk Astronomy is not a Seattle thing. Most passing by tend to avoid me, possibly suspicious that I'm a nutcase up to no good. Probably just not used to such a public service in the dark of evening. It's a bay area tradition.

Yet there are a few who give in and have a look and their minds are suitably blown — we are looking at Saturn after all! It's rings look sharp and bright on this clear window above in the typically wet skies. This corner becomes my favorite for a few reasons. I discovered more of an open audience whenever there is a play at the theatre down the block, especially on clear weekends. People who are out in groups having a good time bodes better for being open to sidewalk Astronomy, more so than individuals trying to get home soon. Good crowds warmed up to seeing Saturn or the Moon! word would spread, with short lines forming. This helps attract the otherwise tentative individuals passing through. Some good SA happened there, with restaurants and cafes helping the flow of foot traffic.

Nearby was the Neptune Cafe, where I played some open mic events with my friend Shelly Clift who lived a few blocks away! We had good times in that active neighborhood. And there was a unique art project center across the street that had a theme

that was all about space travel! There we had it, space themes in the vicinity — How appropriate for sharing live views of the planets!

It's spring of 2008, and why am I in Seattle?

Invited by family, Joni & David, and Brian, to help clear my head and heart of a painful divorce. Yep, I lost my life partner. Going there was tough but wise, to be in a different environment for awhile. Fortunately, my smaller box shaped telescope fit comfortably in the car with other essentials. I missed my big 'scope, back in storage in California, yet this 'scope proved to be more versatile for those months away. It worked great when taking it on a camping trip to Rainier! And the dozen or so times I did Sidewalk Astronomy on 85th & Greenwood.

Going home via starry skies

When ready to return to San Francisco, I made the drive into an enjoyable Astronomy trek! Ashland Oregon is my first stop, visiting good friends John and Jill Williams for always a pleasure of good company in a fav town. Sidewalk Astronomy was a hit on the main drag! Kathy Williams joined for the cosmic viewing fun, with a community who was into it.

Another time I drove back north with the same telescope, I joined in on a public astronomy event in a park in an accessible area. Some in the group know Dobson from his lecture visits to Oregon, which is quite a terrific astronomy friendly state.

Forty-five in Lava Beds

After bidding adieu to my generous hosts, on the morning of my 45th birthday, I set out for a destination that I always wanted to check out — Lava Beds National Park! Just across the California border, south of Klamath Falls, Oregon.

A FANTASTIC day in a remarkable park! Filled with accessible lava tube caves to explore by day. A great way to cool down when it's in the 90s above ground. Low attendance made it easy to get a good camping space. And at night, the stars! An exquisite telescope time was perfect, and a grand way to return to California!

Plans for Astronomy in Lassen Park were thwarted the next day by unexpected rain when arriving, so I skipped camping and got a room at the nearby Lodge. I still managed to enjoy hiking Mt Lassen in rain gear. It's an awesome park!

Onwards to the coast for a most wonderful trip alongside the ocean, camping in Humboldt Redwoods, and on south, stopping at my storage unit in Cloverdale. It had only been 7 months, but seemed like ages. There was my big telescope, soon to be back in use!

First, a few days of getting settled in.

4135 Judah Street

Thanks to communicating with thoughtful friend Carol Strauss, who helped organize Dobson's cosmology class at his home, had found a golden opportunity for me. She connected with Loretta about me staying in the vacant rooms upstairs above JD's apartment. I could help be present for JD while having a segue point for returning to the bay area. Sweet!!! They were so supportive to me. This is such good fortune. The house was planned to go on sale at some point ahead, and I agreed to help work on the house as rent if I needed to stay over a few months. Dobson was traveling when I arrived, and only was in town for a few days that season. Like I mentioned previously, this guy gets around!

The brand new California Academy of Sciences

Carol used to be a volunteer docent at the old CAS, and had connections enough to get early access to the newly renovated, high tech building — and she invited me to join!

This has been highly anticipated by everyone for years. Work on the new structure was lauded in the news for all of the progressive design put into it, some had been clearly visible from the outside. I mean this was a major remodel!

We were one of the privileged small groups allowed in to experience the completed facility just a few days before public opening day. And WOW is everything impressive! Especially the giant coral reef aquarium — 212,000 gallons, with a dazzling array of colorful salt water fish. This floored me. And the fabulous rainforest section, and more.

I missed a few features of the old facility; mainly the old planetarium. The new one is a digital wonder, bringing us on a virtual out of the body trip from our chairs, off of Earth to way out light years beyond the solar system!

It's a dramatic marvel — very Hollywood meets Pixar at a peripheral Omni theater dome, complete with swooping cinematic soundtrack and a famous actor narrator. Essentially it's a high tech recording, that *is* awesome, but there was a more silent awe missing from the old planetarium. This was an impressive cinema. [found out later that some select showings would have an astronomer guide the audience through our night sky. Good to hear, but it should be for every time. I'm probably in the minority. Most of the public seems happy with the popular high tech movies experience.]

Meanwhile, I was impressed by the newness of the place, and I was looking for work. Getting on their job board, and to get my foot in the door and to enjoy being involved, Carol hooked me up to the volunteer docent team. I was able to take introductory classes for what docent guide positions they need. None for Astronomy, so I chose the aquarium course. [by the new year of 2009 they started *NightLife* events on Thursdays. I then joined with my 6" telescope for clear nights, up on the roof!]

Back with The Third Eye

One of the essential items that I retrieved out of storage., naturally. First stop is back to the longed for Astronomy viewing site near Lake Sonoma for a most satisfying return to high quality cosmic deep sky observing! I must have been grinning the entire time out there alone with the big telescope — I was levitatingly happy to be back! Galaxy, nebula, star cluster hopping to my utter obsessive delight!

Lone Springs parking lot — with friends!

My longtime friend Anthony from Minneapolis was visiting in 2006, and we loaded my then new homemade 'scope in the old VW bus for an epic clear night up there above Lake Sonoma! Great fun to go there with friends, sharing the extraordinary views in dark, dry rural California skies.

I wouldn't return with friends for a few more years, bringing special new date Joanne, where we met friend David Casselman there. He lives near with a factory made 10" Dobsonian. We had a good night with his large sky atlas on a red lit portable table. Good prep!

I met good art Academy and Cacophony Society artist friend

Carrie Galbraith (aka Ethyl Ketone!) there a few times, when she lived nearby for that short time. She really loved scanning the sky slowly moving the telescope on its smooth bearings, finding random asterisms. A natural space traveller! She once brought her sister and bro in law — now that was a fun little star party!

Spirited times were had whenever my good artist friend Stewart Stanyard joined me there, who kind of lived on the way. He has this to say about the experience:

"On various trips to Sonoma Lake with Dean, I was able to once again kindle my love for astronomy and stargazing. Way excited with his marvelous homemade telescope, of which to locate distant galaxies, planets, and specific stars, those adventures truly became as close as one could ever get to being "out there". I am grateful for those experiences and marvelous memories."

I will always remember our shared pop cultural references out under the cosmic canopy of a million stars, flashing back to space flicks that we both grew up with. The ***Close Encounters*** theme notes, emphasizing the window shatteringly loud, last two notes! Laughing while we viewed phenomena such as the Andromeda galaxy! Which has a certain ghostly alien feeling by its eyepiece encompassing glow, among other visions of the great far flung beyond. ***We were into it!***

Meanwhile at the CAS

I enjoyed being a guide every Thursday night, and sometimes other evening special events. If it's cloudy, I'd leave the telescope at home and work as an aquarium guide — another fascinating realm! And when clear, the box telescope went in the car, I would get free parking in the garage, haul the 'scope in, use the elevator to the roof to join Jeff Schwartz and Bing

Quock who worked there and use CAS owned factory made telescopes. Mine representing a DIY Dobsonian (and I did take the hassle to bring my large telescope a few times for variety.)

NightLife is kind of a date party event held most every Thursday, at a reduced entry fee, booze for sale, with areas that have thumpy music cranked. Women would doll up every time, which was... Distracting! The crowds were mostly well behaved and genuinely interested. But there was always a few drunks who would be a difficult challenge as they'd spill wine on my 'scope while nearly tipping it over, thinking it funny. Alcohol and Astronomy are often a poor mix. (thank goodness for the presence of Academy guards.)

The role was just like SA, only the crowds were there expecting science wonders. Bing is a chief director of the Astronomy department, and Jeff is a planetarium presenter. It was good to contribute with their welcome, even though I wasn't paid and never hired after exhaustive applying. I volunteered there for almost two years before having enough. Plus the party emphasis of NightLife wore thin. I still consider those events to have good value for all of the different interactions with people being shown planets and the Moon for the first time!

JD in town

I was living just upstairs from him now, so it was a pleasure to give him rides to 9th & Irving for SA, to the Randall for the SFAA, and to a daytime event at the ASP (Astronomy Society of the Pacific.) There are always people eager to see him — old friends and new folks wanting to meet. He's a popular fellow! Who was soon back on the road for lectures or classes.

Ahhh, back to Yosemite!

I couldn't wait for the annual SFAA trip to Yosemite, especially after eating my heart out from missing the previous year. 2009 turned out to be one of the very best — for the weather conditions and comradery. It was an excellent group, with Ken Frank enthusiastically involved, Peter Schumacher and his fab family, Dave Frey with his new homemade truss support telescope (with a 20" mirror!) Vivian who was an active board member, and Ken from San Rafael who crafted a beautiful 12" Dob out of fine woodwork — a piece of fine art with fine optics to go with his investment in the details.

Those are just a few names that I recall. There was a super friendly guy who made a 'scope (10"?) that moved on a spherical bearing, well engineered. And now I'm kicking myself for forgetting the names of two new SFAA members who were great. I think one was Welsh, and the other from South America (?) Who were among the few of us (out of maybe 30) who stayed out at Glacier Point all night long until nearly sunrise — the conditions were too perfect!

Peter, Ken with the crafted 'scope, Vivian, and the two new SFAA members who have some nice factory made equipment (c'mon names memory), really bonded by being so into the perfect viewing conditions that we were unable to leave until the suns glow started to show!

We spent time looking through each others 'scopes, constantly tripping out on the quality.

"hey, whaddya got? "

"ooh, it's the best Whirlpool galaxy I've ever seen! Check it out."

"Whoa! That is nice."

"I'm on NGC 4565, and it is indeed a sharp spindle, and I detect its central bulge and faint forefront shadow edge."

"How did you find that without a finder?!"

"hey gang, I have the Crescent nebula through the OIII"

"oooh, that is amazing! It looks like an ear"

"the universe is listening!"

"have you seen M27 yet tonight? Super definition through Peter's 'scope!"

"Look, Capella is rising!"

... And so on all night nonstop. I remember climbing into my tent back at Bridalveil campground just three hours before the sun made it too hot to sleep. I wasn't alone, and with my new SFAA friends, stayed slow at the campsite brewing plenty of coffee for night #2.

Still great, yet most of agreed that first night was extra epic.

Mt Tamalpais!

It should go without saying that *ya sure, you betcha* that I'm into the Mt Tam star parties! More than before, and I became one of the gatekeepers. My new Astronomy freak friends from Yosemite were regulars. We loved continuing with the observing, knowing it's nothing like that Yosemite sky. Again I enjoyed public nights more, while attending several members only events, but only if the weather was windless.

SFAA at Lands End, and the Randall

Since I was living near the ocean, it was an easy drive to the SFAA city star party at the Lands End parking lot. Not too bad for being in the city, but with not much deep sky contrast. Good for a few of the bright magnitude open clusters and maybe a nebula, faintly. It was fun for sharing with the public on occasion.

Monthly lectures at the Randall museum auditorium were rarely missed, and now living in the outer sunset, I would ride my bicycle. Through the Sunset, stopping at 9th & Irving for a bite, then through the Haight to ride up steep Masonic avenue to the Randall museum nestled along Corona Heights. Meeting SFAA members, usually Jeff from the CAS would show up. Sometimes good friend Bruce would join me there.

Dave Goggin is an SFAA member who was active with trying to reduce light pollution in the city. Not an easy battle, dealing with city politics and not sure if he got very far. I applaud his valiant efforts, mostly alone in the fight, since the SFAA avoids political intervention for the most part.

Lecture highlights of the time include a presentation from a member of **SOFIA** about the extent of extreme study it takes to detect an exoplanet! Imagine trying to see one window light turn off in the Empire State Building from hundreds of miles away, but it's only happening every two years — then wait for it to repeat!

Another memorable presentation was about how impossibly amazing was the success of the Saturn V rocket!

These lectures are always top tier, and free to the public. One of the great offerings in San Francisco, with just enough popularity to comfortably fill the intimate auditorium.

2009

The year was excellent for Astronomy, for Yosemite, Lake Sonoma, SFAA events on Mt Tam, Randall lectures, the CAS, Sidewalk Astronomy at 9th & Irving, 24th & Noe in SF, and back in Fairfax where I continued being a regular for years.

By summer's end I only scored sporadic freelance website design jobs, amidst the recession. I applied in vain to get even mindless cashier and warehouse work all year, and the CAS was only interested in my volunteering. Pessimistic times regarding having a good livelihood. Midnight Design was my excellent career avenue for years until they folded under the "**dot bomb**" affliction to multimedia business.

Thanks to Bruce, one day meeting at his favorite daily haunt — The Beanery — a café at 9th & Irving, where he encouraged me to join him for a free semester of graphic design courses at CCSF, Mission campus. And, our brilliant friend Carrie Galbraith is one of the teachers!

Opportunity knocks!

What to do during a recession? **Study**, and sharpen your tools. I had a head start by being an Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator professional since the mid 90's, but need updating and I was not familiar enough with Indesign.

What a wonderful offer by CCSF during that economically challenged time. We had a great fall semester, good classes of teachers, facilities, and fellow students. It truly helped to form my direction of the following year, along with my experience with public astronomy events!

Dean Gustafson, April 2021