

# **Chapter 11- Astronomy Embarcations!**

## **Have Telescope, Will Travel Part Three**

*Changing opportunities, JD, more Astronomy highlights.*

Getting my chronology into overlap mode here, I forgot exactly when, but Dobson unfortunately suffered a minor stroke in LA ('08/early '09?) When he was back in town he was still walking without help, leaning slightly. Impressive for being 94! He has the "*inde-goddamn-dependent*" (his word) spirit!

Going out for Sidewalk Astronomy, it was a good idea to bring a portable chair for him. Tiring for him to stand out there during the few hours, and being able to sit down helped to work out fine.

### **Clearing out**

He was back in early 2010 for a last time to his apartment. Now comfortably living in the Vedanta monastery in Los Angeles, where he was welcome from being so involved in his earlier years in the Vedantan monkhood, (in Northern California from the 1940's - mid 1960's?) dedicated for a substantial chunk of his life. The world benefited by him being booted out of the monk role for being too AWOL when out with his handmade telescopes! Then with a few others, formed the San Francisco Sidewalk Astronomers, circa 1968.

He was no longer a Vedantan monk after that, but still apparently had some vedantic viewpoints. I recall him saying in class that "the Vedantan's need more physics, while the

physicists need some Vedanta." or some such of a paraphrasing.

Now it was time to clear out his apartment as he bid farewell to bay area living. This also means that Loretta and her sister will finally put the house on the sale block. Owned by their parents for decades, this was overdue. Unfortunately also means that I need to leave, but it had been such an excellent opportunity for me at the point in time. I was there for almost two years, working off and on the house for rent. Brian helped me to tile a bathroom on one of his visits, and I did some painting and general maintenance. A great deal and during the lowest point of the economic recession.

### **JD's last weeks at Judah Street**

He was given a ride from Los Angeles by his close and generous LA based friend and fellow astronomy enthusiast, Donna Smith. While back, he held a few final cosmology classes up in the living room that I'd been using. Carol again was informing interested people, and the house was full! More than ever since most of us gathered this as his farewell. Those were good sessions, of Dobson holding court as good as ever.

Before he arrived, Loretta and I had to clean some of the mold that invaded his apartment over the rainy season. His antique rugs had to go after getting moth infested, and airing the rooms out for a few days was much needed.

Once he was back I helped clear out tons of old paperwork and telescope making parts to the garage, where interested folks (mostly a few from the SFAA) would swing by to visit and pick up a few things. Dave Frey came by a few times, picking up boxes of parts since he was now teaching the telescope building class at the Randall, with Doug Smith also of the SFAA. Ken

Frank would stop by, and some of Dobson's friends and associates from years before my time. Dobson's old sweetheart collected some of his most substantial belongings (they had a son, Loren. No doubt named after Loren Eiseley) and a woman visited who JD credits for starting the Sidewalk Astronomers! She was super cool — great personality. I met some good, interesting people that week.

After helping him clear, clean and haul his stuff around, there was a 16" porthole glass on the seat of an old chair, placed over its torn, weaved straw work. It was his very last piece of porthole glass. I wanted to buy it, and he sold it to me for a mere \$20 for being so helpful. These go for much higher prices! I looked forward to an opportunity to make it into a stronger telescope yet! Someday.

## **Tumbleweed**

After our final night out on 9th & Irving, we got his telescope out — Tumbleweed — that lived in his friends garage a block away. He had a key to the garage door, to use anytime he wanted to use the telescope, easily transported around the block in a kids red wagon. After I helped him by fetching it, he wanted me to keep the key, telling me (with his style of raised voice for emphasis) "***Tumbleweed belongs out at 9th & Irving!***" I was very honored to be appointed this authority, and heartfully agreed to do so!

Strange to have him completely cleared out of the house. I helped painting the walls after tearing up the old carpeting. Loretta had me "marbleize" the bathroom walls for a fun afternoon project. It looked good.

I got Tumbleweed out for a few good nights that spring, but couldn't help but notice that the mirror is suffering from corrosion (from years of salty ocean air) needing re-aluminizing. I wasn't up for paying for this, preferring to conveniently use my own 6" 'scope. Plus I somehow didn't feel quite right holding such a legendary torch. I'm not trying to be the new Dobson. I'm merely a latecomer who was available. I guess that made me a bit too self-conscious despite the honor.

### **Hollywood bound**

With a ticket to see Paul McCartney at the Hollywood Bowl! And a good opportunity to visit John at the monastery in the vicinity! A welcome road trip in late March, and to visit my good artist and art college friend and roommate from our Mission years — Jim Lauritzen!

It was a pleasant drive down the coast, until hitting that historical LA traffic. I went to stay at Jim's apartment, who offered the sofa. Great! As I drew near, stopping to give him a quick call first, the police stop me, blaring light on me, checking my license, apparently I turned into the parking lot without using the turn signal! I usually am good about that, but the midnight streets was empty. No ticket, but welcome to LA — ha!

[I digress, but anyway it's a different world from the SF.]

Great spending time with good friend Jim! The next day I drove across town (slow traffic, from near Venice Beach to Hollywood) to visit Dobson!

### **Vedanta Place**

The monastery where he was staying has its very own street name, and looked like an eastern monastery, with an onion dome temple. In the Hollywood hills — I liked the view of the

Capitol Records tower!

Super nice folks guide me in to see John, who I just saw a month before. He was great to visit and appeared well. I asked if he gets taken out for any Sidewalk Astronomy? He says *no*. I then offer to drive him if there's a telescope to use. He LOVED this plan! Suggested that Donna has a telescope to use, in a couple of nights away. *Yeah!* He is made for SA, so it shall happen.

That afternoon he shows me how he maintains fitness as good as he can. Out on the parking lot he jogs about a 20 yard length with a very slight grade. Starting from a metal bolt marking point in the tar, to the fence and back. I was impressed by his tenacity. It was fun how he put his foot on the mark, then says "ok, see you!" huffing slowly across the lot and back — twice. He explains how you can't produce hemoglobin in your bone marrow if you don't get winded!  
Wisdom from one in the know!

I was invited by the staff / residents to join them for a vegetarian dinner, for a nice time with the group. One guy was 99 years old. Dobson would say "I'm just a kid next to him!" That was fun. Then I made a test walk from there to the Hollywood Bowl, it was about 15 minutes. McCartney was playing two sold out shows, and I was going the 2nd night. I heard *Jet* echoing overhead and I thought to possibly stay out front and hear the 1st show for free, but then again, *nahhh*. Taking the quality surprise away. I wandered to the main strip instead, enjoying impressions made by different kinds of stars — in front of the famous Graumanns theater! (wow — The Marx Brothers!)

## **"a good friend of mine studies the stars... "**

After a nice day enjoying Venice Beach with Jim, I got back to JD's in good enough time for a short visit. I was able to park there and walk to the concert.

Paul opened the show with *Venus and Mars*! Incredibly appropriate! (and *Rockshow*, at the Hollywood Bowl!) Without switching to concert review mode, of course I totally loved it, being a lifelong Beatles / McCartney enthusiast! A terrific highlight of the year, with more ahead.

## **SA in LA**

I drove to meet Donna Smith at the floral shop that she owns across town. She gladly let me take a telescope for JD to have a night of Sidewalk Astronomy! We set up on Sunset Boulevard, across the street from Amoeba Records. Foot traffic was not as steady as back home in SF, but it was okay. Donna alerted the LA Sidewalk Astronomers, and one showed up to join us with his telescope! (i didn't retain his name.)

Enthusiasm was kinda lacking from a percentage of those stopping. Dobson chalked it up to (paraphrasing) "they think they've seen everything they want to, so there is little interest."

It was still a good evening showing the Moon and Saturn. I suggest to Dobson that he should ask more people for help getting back out more often. I think most of the Astronomy events he attended were at Griffith Observatory. (where I missed visiting.)

Another day in LA, Jim and I soaked in a fine visit to the Getty museum of art... an impressive collection! We took public transportation for a change.

A last visit with JD, who was into talking about cosmology,

posing me the question before I left, "Why is there a central bulge to NGC 4565?"

[I think, from having a black hole in the center.]

## **Back in the bay area**

I had to figure out what to do. With no steady work and soon without a place to live, I was in a crisis mode. Still continuously applying for work daily to dead ends every time. Enrolled in job search seminars packed with hundreds of other job hunters. Unemployment was up everywhere during these couple of years. I got a few small temp gigs at best. I need a *real* connection.

## **The AAU**

I got the tip from friend Marc Weber that his friend Jim O'hara is hiring tutors at the Academy of Art University — my alma mater. I didn't think I had the cred to be a professional educator, but it proved different, and I was hired after a great meeting with Jim! I was up to speed with Adobe Indesign, which was in demand, and I was an alumni (my low number student id #00007427)

I have the knowledge and experience, but what I think gave the actual teaching ability was all of those years of active public Astronomy. The comfort levels gained were to be able to communicate with nearly anyone, in an inclusive manner. Before, I would be too self-consciously nervous to consider talking to so many strangers. The universal appeal of astronomical phenomena seems to help erase the notion of "strangers", and that is a healthy thing. Now I get to teach students from all over the globe! Starting out by individual tutoring, leading to teach classes, in the graphic design department. This took awhile to build up to beyond sporadic

part time hours. This direction was indeed the best career fit for me!

### **Fabulous astronomy loving date!**

Cheryl and I had such fun! Into Astronomy and a true naturalist, she truly appreciated attending star parties on Mt Tamalpais, NightLife at the CAS, and the time we brought my big 'scope to the Farm Sanctuary event up near Black Butte Lake about 3 hours north and in great dark skies!

She always wanted a good telescope, and I found that chance. In the garage of the Judah Street house sat an old 'scope made by John Muhilly, up for grabs! The problem was that it was a telescope with no base, and the mirror needed re-aluminizing. So she set about to get this up and running! Bringing the mirror to Bob Fies for aluminizing at his remarkable apparatus setup in his garage in San Bruno. With base plans and help from a local woodworking shop (she lived in Half Moon Bay) got it going, its shiny mirror like new! Fine tuning was needed for the base, but it was working. (I think it had an 8" mirror?)

### **Yosemite!**

Going twice a year, with a unique group camping trip with good nephew Kim and a gang of his friends! They reserved a large camping space and invite me to join — yes, with telescope! It's a perfect July weekend and coincides with the Santa Cruz Astronomy club event on Glacier Point. A smaller group than the SFAA, so they warmly welcome my participation! It was another positively epic night of stunning Astronomy up there, and our entourage (a dozen of us from the campsite?) had a fantastic experience traveling the cosmos by telescopes.

During the late, less public portion of the night, someone from



the SC group was missing their bag of nearby snacks. It was snagged by a sneaky bear! reported to be in the area recently, and we saw it earlier on a short hike! Named "**Yellow 47**" by the rangers, with a yellow tag attached to one ear.

For the next night, rangers were guarding the periphery of the telescope setup area, armed with rubber pellet rifles. I spoke with one of the rangers, reporting our sighting of Yellow 47. He said that the bear has been harmless, but shouldn't get comfortable with human food or humans. The rubber pellets only sting them enough to shy away, and has proven to be the best form of bear control thus far. Otherwise they start to become aggressive, popping cars apart as if they are tin cans! Then the bear has to be killed, and the park service wants them to live, so using rubber pellet guns saves bears. Fascinating!

Back to viewing the stellar Sierra skies! The summer sights are all there... Rich towards our galactic center; The Swan, Trifid, Lagoon nebulas hang in that direction — such distinctive compositions! The star clusters; open and globular, M13 is one of the biggest and brightest — like seeing a still of an explosion of a half million stars! What is really happening are those half million stars are locked toward a gravitational center; very old and very far. Globular clusters are big hits — with the public and me. They never fail to astound in clear sky conditions.

More exploring the hard to see galaxies and nebulas, such as the Spindle and Pinwheel, and much more. The Santa Cruz group was great, and Kim's party!

Another night after a day of hiking Yosemite falls with Karsten, then back at the campsite I ended up driving my telescope just a few miles down the road for solo Astronomy. Naturally, I love it — I was in the zone!

\* DATE CORRECTION — That trip was in July of 2009.

## **Venus and Mars are alright tonight**

I'm not talking about through telescopes, especially being fogged in, but the San Francisco concert of Paul McCartney! Again opening with that astronomically themed song. I went with Cheryl, Jaynie (Ken Frank's wife) and Stewart — it was Stewart's birthday, and we had a great time! John M and Loretta were there somewhere in the bundled up outdoor crowd. Fab show!

This was around the time when I had to leave the house, finding home sitting opportunities for the next three months. This doesn't stop me from traveling by telescopes! I used both 'scopes, alternating between needs. Returning to Seattle between the semesters, brother Brian was having a downturn with his health and could use my help, mainly with his tasks as a building manager where his apartment was. I drove with the 6" box 'scope in tow, using it at a fun Astronomy event in Ashland Oregon, otherwise not much telescope use on that trip.

## **A unique astronomy event in Yosemite**

My reputation must have been good. I was invited by the Astronomy Society of the Pacific (ASP) to participate in a week of events focused on training national park rangers about doing Astronomy events in the parks. The event series of daily seminars was run by the ASP in conjunction with the Astronomy leaders of the National Parks system. As one of the volunteers, we were there to represent different types of telescopes that may be used. Mine was representing a classic, exemplary handmade Dobsonian reflector. Others had different kinds of factory made telescopes — refractors, reflectors, equatorial mounts, Schmidt-Cassegrain, solar scopes,...

We had free entry into Yosemite and free tent cabins in Yosemite Village, with meals covered! Wonderful opportunity! This was early October, the days balmy, the sun setting earlier, the nights chilly and clear.

The rangers who attended were nationwide, from Utah, Massachusetts, Florida, and more. There are around 30 rangers in the course. Beginning every morning in a concourse building in the village center. We had shared heated tent cabins (Curry Village?) giving this a camp retreat setting. My cabin mate was a cool dude from Chico, being a good pairing of personalities. The few people who I knew there were with the ASP; Pablo Nelson, Jessica Santascoy (also with SFAA) and Ken Frank! I became more acquainted with more coordinators during the week, such as Anna Hurst and a few of the visiting rangers. It was a good group!

The seminars offered presentations from directors of major Astronomy centers and different experienced rangers, giving Astronomy education in topics from finding your way around the constellations, to how to diplomatically handle crowds, and more in depth applicably relevant content. Well organized. Us telescope volunteers were not obligated to attend the day classes, but it was interesting so I went. Wandering off to sketch the dramatic cliffs if there was a test period or break.

Evening-fall was when we volunteers get busy, demonstrating telescope setup and all that it takes. Collimate the mirrors, let the 'scope cool down, find a suitable target to begin with as soon as it's dark. Others had a go at it as I demo how to navigate with no finder 'scope.

As it got dark (this was in a field in the valley), the director of the night sky program for the National Parks Service (NPS), Chad Moore, asks me what I'll show next. I figured on M13 — always a stunner. After I keep demo'ing how my finderless 'scope works, he returns to kind of edge me on, saying "so Dean, are you still trying to find M13?" and before he finished speaking, I hopped straight on it.

Whew. Pressure from above. I'm not used to that, but I think I know why he was testing me: to show everyone watching that expediency is a virtue when the public is waiting. And I think I had the reputation as the guy with the handmade Dob who doesn't need a finder attached!

Chad *really* knows Astronomy — a true authority in the field. I guessed that he might think of me as kind of a nutcase amateur — which would be correct! I did develop an uncanny familiarity to hop between deep sky objects faster than most technical finding equipment.

I described my process to find M13: first sight your eye alongside the edge of the 'scope to find its brightest nearest star. In this case it's the lower corner of the keystone in Hercules, using a wide field eyepiece. Now nudge the 'scope slightly in the direction of the bright star of the keystone to its left but only move it very very little, and if you're nudging at the proper approximate angle, you will easily find it, and be blown away! M13 is a trip!

The group of enthusiastic rangers tried this out, and there was a discussion about the pros and cons of this approach. Surely it's better to get to it without fumbling, but what if the power dies for your finder? Then improvisation is called for, best to have strong familiarity with the night sky details. My way forces

that navigation style into the physical procedural memory to great advantage. It's sort of a "use the force" method of knowing the neighborhood above.

[The hard ones to find have less reference stars surrounding them, and low magnitude. M13 is one of the easiest unless it's directly on the zenith, that is referred to as that difficult zone "Dobson's hole."]

### **Back to Glacier Point**

The following night we went to Glacier Point! A fantastic clear, crisp sky. Chilly unlike summer, bundled with layers, we had a great few hours up there. Many enjoyed using my telescope, finding higher quality than probably expected for being handmade. One thing about electronic telescopes at star parties that sets my teeth on edge are their noisiness. Constant *whirr-bzzt-click*. While a good Dobsonian moves silently!

I know there are gains to be able to type in a coordinate and have the equipment do the finding. The point is viewing after all! And when doing astrophotography (which is not done through Dob's which are alt-azimuth) a powered equatorial tracking setup is necessary. So I get it, just not interested in doing so myself, partly because it's too expensive for me. Being immodest here, I would nearly always hop my telescope to a deep sky object before the time it takes for electronic equipment to find the same sight, without the *whirr-bzzt-click*. Just years of experienced familiarizing.

Our intrepid NPS leader Chad had his doozy of a Schmidt-Cassegrain with equatorial mount, blowing our minds by showing some rare to find gems of the deep autumn sky. Sure,

it goes *whirr-bzzt-click*, and he knew what to look for! NGC objects, probably NGC 7009 and M108 to name a few, that we'd struggle to find at previous star parties up there. Challenging visions!

One of the telescope owners showed us a peculiar asterism that has a structure that I never recognized before. *Digital 37* in Orion, after having it pointed out, became easy to see that those stars form the number 37!

[back at the CAS for NightLife, this was a fun asterism to show the 37 year olds, being the average age of most attending.]

### **Back in the bay area**

I was fortunate to be invited to stay at good friend Sebastian Hyde's house in Oakland after home sitting ended that October. Friend Lee lived there too, and we had good times, with figure drawing parties there every Tuesday evenings. [ha -- the first Tuesday after Yosemite, who is our figure drawing model? but Pablo with the ASP, who I just saw organizing the Yosemite event! I didn't know that he was also one in the Bay Area Figure Models Guild.]

### **Starry nights**

Not to miss optimum skies at a scheduled star party, that Christmas eve had a members night on Mt Tam, with the weather forecast showing clear and windlass skies. Cheryl and I went with my big telescope and it was one of the more spectacular nights up there! Being a major family based holiday meant low attendance — so low that only one other SFAA member showed up. This worked out fine since I was a gatekeeper.

Viewing was extraordinary and no wind made it unseasonably not too chilly. The Orion nebula ruled with fine subtleties and beautiful contrast!!

We ended the night just the two of us. Pointing the 'scope down the view along the coast before breaking down to leave. The lights near Cheryl' s home in Half Moon Bay were easily visible! It was a stellar December 24th and a great cap to another great Astronomy year.

Dean Gustafson, May 2021