

## **Chapter 12 - Astronomy .**

### **2011**

**Have telescope, will travel.**

#### **Part four**

*A peak Astronomy year, Dobson breezes through, and a grand celestial tour!*

#### **SFAA board member**

I believe I was inaugurated into the SFAA voting fold by being so present at the events! Doubtful that I contributed much at the meetings at the Randall museum held monthly, but I appreciated being part of the crew!

Sue-Ellen from Australia was the charismatic new SFAA president, Vivian was the VP, Other board members were Anil, Matt, Doug, Angie, Mitchell, Elan, Dave... All who are familiar at the Mt Tam star parties, and are good company! The board members rotate annually in a voting method, and I don't think it was very competitive. I was a board member in 2011 - 2012, missing the meetings between my work semesters when I went to Seattle to help brother Brian.

#### **SFAA, Mt Tam, the CAS, and good friends**

The Mt Tam star parties (SA too) and Randall museum lectures were regularly attended... Such potent mind food! It was great to be involved, and have such advanced speakers every month.

Otherwise I continued volunteering at the CAS for Night Life on Thursdays, through 2011 but less and less as the year grew on. . I burned out on the free work they were getting out of me, while the other telescope bearers were paid employees. They gave me just one interview out of dozens of times I'd applied

for work there, since 2008. This was for a planetarium presenter opening, which I would have been good at... But The Academy of Art turned out to be my career focus and made better for the better fate.

I really enjoyed the CAS, the crew who I got to know over the few years as a guide, the many who looked through my telescopes, the amazing displays... But it was time to move on. I was still able to visit the place by entering with my badge for a couple more years! I returned later to draw the skulls exhibition, and for some of the special Astronomy lectures in the planetarium, complete with hi-res photos shown on the huge screen of Mars! The definition at that scale was staggeringly hyper-realistic, and the best use of the planetarium technology that I witnessed.

Oh yeah, there was a volunteer, Paul Salazar, who is excellent at guiding groups through the constellations, describing the science behind the solar system and stars. Soon he was involved with the SFAA, presenting the night sky at Mt Tam, and a board member. Great guy to have involved!

Sometimes familiar faces appeared on Thursday nights. Friend and science enthusiast Jon Alexandr and his future wife Jane surprised me at the telescope when I was showing Saturn, Narit showed up a few times, and it was always good to see Anna Hurst of the ASP who attended frequently. Cheryl went with me once and had a blast!

Also looking through my 'scope were artist Stanley Mouse and family, (I'd met him a few times at art and music shows displaying his wonderful work. Friendly and good to talk to.) and musician Chris Isaak, who lives in the Sunset, who asked me about Dobson. I told him he moved to LA, but a few of us still

do SA around town. He gives me thumbs up to that.

I really enjoyed the many interesting exchanges there, (not the drunken youth), on the sidewalk, for a few special events at the Exploratorium (Yuri's Night, and live eclipse simulcasts), and on the mountain.

Speaking of Mt Tam, more good friends showed up for public nights. Matt Granz and his daughter Casey, who did some impressive night photography. Joe and Jane frequently made it by. Stewart showed up with a friend. Tracy Swedlow, Richard, and their daughter Hannah became regulars for years. Robert of the exquisite drum shop [A Drummers Tradition in San Rafael. The logo depicting moon and stars above a drum kit!] showed up a few times — once with a date who wandered up the hill for awhile, returning to a ticket on his car! However, the ranger marked its time down as before 11pm. The public event reads plainly that it ends at 11pm, so when he disputes this he easily won. Some rangers get hasty to shuffle the public out. One time they kicked the public out by 10:30. I immediately complained that the public expect it end later ; but these rangers played bad cop with me, creating a stir that they decide and threatened to kick even us members out due to my complaint! So much for actual reason. Other SFAA members had to remind me that what they decide, ultimately goes, so don't rock the boat even if we're right. On a happier note, the asshole rangers were outnumbered by cool ones, so incidents like that were rare.

More who made a showing one time was Carrie Rehak with friends from her art critique group Inspirati, on a good clear night looking through the big telescope — and other SFAA members 'scopes. . They loved it when I brought my TARDIS

telescope to one of her meetings, showing a very unreal looking Saturn out in front of her pad in Berkeley — SA in the East bay!

Back to Mt Tam, were other newer SFAA participants; Angie and Doug, Sue-Ellen, Mitchell, Dave, and more names that are hopefully recalled soon. [Yosemite friend from South America? Who was good astronomy company, we shared many views] Those were absolutely positively some of my favourite times of the year! Bonding over celestial wonder with friends, the curious public, and SFAA members and occasional rangers — in an ideal locally accessible spot.

### **Terrestrial telescopes**

I forget when exactly it was, when Cheryl alerted about the single night event to light up the original fresnel lens on Pigeon Point lighthouse down the peninsula. Eventful because they only light the 19th century technology every five years or so, and it's supposed to be extra dazzling, so we went.

Traffic got thick to see this popular lighting, so we take a back road up the hills that Cheryl knows. For a good view away from crowds — and I have my very portable box telescope with!

The view from the hillside was the ticket, and the light through that fresnel lens system was indeed *incandescent*, especially when pointing the 'scope on it! Cheryl was so charged by this that she was dancing!

A fun event, and only one of a very few times the telescope was used on something other than the sky.

Another was when I brought the big 'scope to a barn jam at my musician friends Karen and Marc's place in Sebastopol. Good Astronomy, but their kids wanted to point it down the hill to see the billboards miles away! That was fun. (with an upside down view from being a parabolic mirror)

And pointed on Half Dome from Glacier Point when waiting for the sky to darken.

## **Yosemite SFAA, July 2011**

Missed the SFAA trip of 2010, opting at the time to visit Brian in Seattle instead. It felt like I was just there for the October event, and I couldn't wait to return! Another excellent Yosemite trip, yet with a different last minute campsite shift. Something went awry with our usual Bridalveil campground about 5 miles away, but we camped up near Glacier Point, conveniently and next to the rangers cabins.

The group had some of the same regulars as '09; Dave, Peter & family, Ken, Doug,... And Sue-Ellen was now there, and totally into it! A few old friends of Dobson's gave a presentation before dark, and then ranger emeritus Dave gave his experienced night sky talk to the intimate crowd. Like every other summer weekend event, those attending were from all over the world.

## **Religulous**

[to ripoff Bill Maher's film title] One subgroup was there before we arrived, sitting in high directors chairs, flag raised with a logo depicting a galaxy with the cross of Christ at its center. Oh brother, *no*, not a religious group invasion, pulleeeze. I pulled Ken and a few others over to discuss asking them to take their flag down, since our event has Glacier Point officially scheduled for the weekend. They already have this in mind, and I think Ken did the diplomatic work. They took the flag down yet stayed. I hoped they won't impose their dogma around the star party.

After the presentations and it came dark enough to start

showing the cosmos to our audience, it was more of that high Sierras celestial splendor! The gems of Sagittarius as a favorite area to show off! Those who check out these visions are naturally amazed and I always am too!

The religious group members did look through my 'scope, and as expected they had to say something about "we believe in... so and so". Without excluding them, I nipped their rap in the bud by saying something like, "there are many different beliefs out there, but we're here to focus on observational phenomena with some proven scientific facts only." followed by, "have a look at this beautiful open cluster, M11! In the constellation Scutum, near the direction of our galaxies center."

How to silence the dogmatically inclined, if we're both polite. They were fortunately fine about it, not fanatical.

The thing is, human beings search for reasons and meaning of existence. Faith based beliefs are the oldest way to do so, but mostly conflict with scientific reasoning, which I prefer... Based on repeating experiments, if a theory fails to hold up to experiment by a wide margin of trial and error, it's false and we move on from it; this includes the highly implausible. Faith based religious beliefs are largely unprovable, which becomes sort of a fail safe support for the "faith" part. The problem is that they often seem addicted to faith based certainty. I am one of the mentalities that see's uncertainty as a motivating virtue for working things out — with honest science. Two different clashing approaches — though I am talking about knowledge, not morality. The latter stems *many* sources, beyond being only from religious control.

Okay, it's easy to tell that I have contentions with religiosity, (influenced by pushy ex in laws who fortunately pushed me in

the opposite direction!) Also with pseudoscience such as astrology which fails to hold up to realism. However, it is mostly not taken very seriously, and can be seen as fun. I'm simply skeptical; favoring honesty — even if questions outnumber answers.

### **Back to viewing the deep skies**

Another fantastic weekend in Yosemite! Not staying up all night like '09, but great, wonderful, dramatically beautiful, cosmic exploration in good company !

The next morning I enjoyed talking to the elder ranger Dave, who regaled a few of us about Dobson's summers with the huge telescopes — one with a 24" mirror! This was (i think?) the 1970's - 80's. They would camp there for weeks, on astronomy tours of western national parks!

### **Day hikes**

When I set out for a day hike, I got a great insiders tip about an unmarked region to hike. Illilouette Ridge, nearby, accessed by no trail, but enter the woods at a point in the road that he showed me on the map. Walk south through the wilderness for around a thousand yards and emerge up to the ridge with spectacular views. Bring a compass.

Perfect way to spend the day! I did some watercolor and ink sketches up there with unique views of Half Dome and beyond. What a secret treasure I'd been "given the keys" to! Only one other hiker passed by — probably someone who works at the park. It was a fantastic opportunity. I returned the next day for more!

### **Clouds**

Rarely remembering the nights that were cut short by the

weather, because they're so uneventful, but I seem to recall that 2nd night became clouded over. We pack up early disappointed, but it's not so bad if the night before was great, that gave satisfaction to our deep sky yearnings. Fortunately we got that in. Plus I was soon to embark on my biggest Astronomy tour yet.

### **John Dobson returns for a final visit**

Donna drove him up to SF from LA for a few days! Ken alerted me to meet them at Aquatic Park in San Francisco on the bay for a meeting point, so I rode my bicycle there from the AAU. It was one of those cloudy, chilly SF days, so JD stayed seated inside of the cozy SUV. It was great to see him again, over a year later. Slowed down even more, but he is turning 97 the next month.

I think the idea was to possibly do some solar telescope SA at that populous site, but the weather wouldn't have it. This calls up a favorite Dobson quote: "if it wasn't for clouds, there would be no Astronomers to complain about the weather."

The next night was public star party night on Mt Tam, and JD was going! Cheryl was really enthusiastic about meeting him and planned to show up with her refurbished telescope! For some reason, I only brought the box telescope. Probably had the big 'scope stored at a friends house and they were unavailable. Up on the mountain, JD sat outside while still light out and warmer. We arrived early enough to visit him before dusk. Cheryl was talkative with John, amidst others who wanted to catch up. After dark, he stayed in the warmth of Donna's cush van, while people took turns sitting with him to visit. I did for around 10 minutes, and that was the last time I saw him. I'm sure we spoke about Tumbleweed, and how it needs

aluminumizing, but I never got to it. I reassure him that SA is being kept alive and well by a few of us sidewalk astronomers. That last meeting with him was August 6th, 2011 — and I do believe that was a farewell for most of us who were there. The next day he was in Yosemite!

There was an event for his 98th birthday in LA at Griffith Observatory. I imagine that some from the bay area traveled south for that. I wish that I did.

My way to keep in touch was to mail him hand drawn postcards of different positions of Jupiter's Galilean moons as seen through the telescope on certain nights.

### **The grand tour**

August after summer classes end, It was time for my between semester trip to Seattle to help Brian, returning by September's 1st class. This time I planned to bring the big telescope and turn my return drive into a telescope tour of great dark sky parks along the way through the southern Cascades!

If weather is good, my itinerary is to stop in Ashland first, from there to Crater Lake where good dark skies should be found. Driving from there to Lava Beds where camping was easy to get. And through some backcountry roads, land at Lassen. Back by September. Lassen sounded great to Cheryl, so she plans to meet me there!

With a new Android smartphone that Brian hooked me up to that August while I was in Seattle, communication and picture taking amplified; it's a new world technology.

I didn't have a chance to use the telescope in Seattle for the couple of weeks I was there (weather?), but had good family visiting, and helped Brian at his apartment building.

## **Telescope tour, first stop - August 25th**

Ashland was wonderful as always, with the generous stay at the Williams house up in the hills of Ashland — we have a great visit! I refer John Williams as the future mayor of Ashland, since whenever we're walking downtown, most everyone we pass knows him! A perfect town in my estimation. Not too big, not too small. Creativity is active, with quality neighbourhoods. Kind of a gateway between Oregon and California. John described it as a really clean Berkeley, mixed with Mill Valley, and I see that. We enjoy the summer free shows held on a stage outside of the Shakespearean theater, diverse acts perform from evening to evening, from flamenco to Scottish folk punk. All ages show up, around 6pm every day. I thought, *this is Pepperland!*

Dinner at our regular fav, Standing Stone brewpub, then before its too late, John and I drove (separately) up Mt Ashland! In search of a good telescope setup spot. With not much dusk left, I pulled over to the first suitable pulloff to setup, hopefully dark and undisturbed enough. It was fine!

I showed John a few good summer highlights through the collimated Third Eye, for about a half hour until he left (being more of an early bird than I). Great observing mountain! I'm sure there are better spaces up there that the local skygazers bring their telescopes, but time ran out. Trees blocked some of my view, but it was more than fine. I spent a few good hours scanning and made a couple of decent sketches! Of the Swan and Lagoon nebulas, in superb sky conditions. A successful start to the tour!

I think windier or cloudy skies kept me from getting the 'scope out the 2nd night, but having a nice time with friends in Ashland! Always fab, with another free show in the park, more

Standing Stone brewpub times, and got well rested for the following trek.

## **Astronomy night two, Crater Lake - August 27th**

Not that far away from Ashland, I drive to Crater Lake after stocking up on goods at the natural foods co-op. I could live here! The weather forecasts predicted perfect conditions all the way down through my southern Cascades tour destinations! I set out feeling good about this.

I'd been to Crater Lake before, only during daytime. This time I arrived in time to score a good campsite, explore around the magnificent lake, draw, and find the best spot to setup telescope. I found that the upper southern ridge was probably perfect. I found a pulloff on the edge of an open field, far off the beaten track, with rarely a passing car. **Yeah!**

Setup and collimated the 'scope good and early enough to leisurely sketch the surrounding beauty. At dusk a car pulls in my area and a young woman gets out, probably in her early 20's. Asks me what I'm looking at with the telescope? A refreshing friendly free spirit, who turned around after passing me seeing the telescope. I explained my astronomical tour of the parks, ISO the best possible viewing conditions for seeing distant galaxies, etc. She loves this and asked to return around an hour later, after finding a place to camp, after all the campsites sold out. I mentioned that I have a camping space reserved from earlier in the day. She then asks if I wouldn't mind sharing the space, will pay for it and not disturb me, sleeping in a hammock if there are trees. I was glad to be so trustworthy and agreed, giving my site number, informing that my tent is red and gray. Getting dark, she thanks me with zesty gratitude, "I'll be back in an hour" and zooms off. And I was

quite trusting myself, she seems genuine. She was on a road trip to friends in I think Colorado. [her name long forgotten]

I got on to my space traveling by telescope... **Wow!** This is one of the best dark skies yet, with no detectable glow of civilization in any direction! The familiar Messier and NGC sights demand extra attention. I explore on with the stars feeling closer than usual.

### **Sketching at the 'scope**

She returns after around an hour and a half later, having a challenging time setting up hammock in the dark back at the campground. I showed her some of the highlights of overhead ; M13, Ring, Dumbbell... to name a few standouts. That was fun, and she was amazed, loving this! lasting about an hour before retiring. I stayed up there a couple of hours longer, until around 1am, scanning away... sketching the low magnitude Crescent nebula, looking good through the OIII filter. Also, sketches of the Pinwheel and Whirlpool galaxies. It's a challenge to sketch in the dark with only a small red penlight clipped around the sketchbook, seeing light over dark, but drawing it as dark over white paper. Gently rubbing the graphite to try to capture the subtle tonalities. So different from the many other types of drawings that I regularly do. Why do this since there are already oodles of accurate professional astronomical images to readily find?

Drawing from life both causes us to view deeper, and to possibly depict dominant shapes and tonalities not made as obvious by the most vivid photos. I will add that it can be an enjoyable experience! If its challenges don't create frustration.

I really wanted to stay up there all night long, the settings were

so ideal! A car might pass by only once per hour, easily heard in advance enough to cover my eyes until it passes, preserving my night vision. This was one of the very best dark sky observing areas ever in my limited exposure. But I need sleep before another big day, and it takes time to break the ' scope down, load it in the car, driving down to the campsite, and get ready to crash.

Back at the campground I tried to be quiet to not stir my guest asleep in her hammock. The space is easily large enough, with room for a few tents and cars.

In the morning after about 5 hours of shut eye, awoke refreshed with a quick goodbye with a cuppa coffee before she drove on. Cool kid; I didn't charge her for the already inexpensive camping fee. (\$12?)

Got myself oriented with the map for the drive from there, through the town of Klamath Falls on the Oregon - California border, proceeding into Lava Beds park! I looked forward to returning — this time entering from directly north instead of east from I-5.

### **Save the bats! - Lava Beds National Monument**

At the park entry, the ranger has me sign a disclaimer, stating that I have not been in caves for the past year, including Europe and the East Coast, or you're not allowed in the park, or they have to fumigate your boots as one solution. Last time I was in a cave was here in 2008. They have me read a handout about ***White Nose Disease***, killing bat populations out east and Europe. Fortunately it hasn't been detected there in Lava Beds, and they're doing the best to keep it that way. I remember while walking in the caves last time, appreciating the sound of occasional bat wings quietly flying by!

I thank the ranger for this and drive into the openly spacious parkland, covered with wild sage brush, aromatically baking under the hot sun. Knowing how underneath this near desert-like terrain, lie a couple of hundred Lava tube caves! Several set up for entering, which I looked forward to doing soon! First, drive south to score a good campsite, easily done. This is not a popular park, too much off the main roads and I like it this way.

### **August 28th - caves and stars**

Not to forget the date of night #3 of this satisfying telescope trip! After getting tent ready, I decided to go north and peruse caves that I missed during the last visit. A good choice for this hot day, since some of the caves that way still have ice in the deepest levels! A great place to alternate between hot and cold. Several caves features sturdy aluminum step ladders with safety railings, installed by the park service. Some of these allowed access to deeper levels, getting colder as you go. Nature's refreshing air conditioning! The coolness keeping me more alert in the heat of day above.

Cave exploring at a leisurely pace went by fast I found a nice little parking lot in the central western side of the park. I brought ready made supper from Ashland, in my cooler, and have my camping supplies, so I brewed a thermos of coffee, setup telescope to cool, and savor the changing light of lengthening shadows across the rolling brush covered expanse, doing some sketchbook drawing while waiting for dark.

Like Crater Lake, traffic was delightfully low. I only saw about 3 or 4 small groups of people all day at some of the North side caves parking lots, and now I am truly solitary. Perfect!

As the sky grew dark, and a few bats were out flying around for their own supper, [*save the bats!*] I couldn't help but notice the manmade glow of the town of Klamath Falls to the north. The skies were still superb for the telescope, and realized that the glow free sky at Crater Lake has spoiled me.

I had another *tremendous* night! Everything sought looking clear. I made more sketches... Of the elusive planetary nebula M76 in Perseus, dim galaxy M108 and the Owl Nebula in Ursa Major, M30 cluster in Capricornus,.. A perfect late night temperature. Cosmic, beautiful, awe inspiring... Late!

### **August 29th, Lassen bound!**

The backcountry roads from Lava Beds to Lassen were sketchy! If I'd known how rough they were in advance, I would have probably opted for taking the long smooth route. No matter, the trusty Prius [Big Electric Cat!] made it just fine. A breakdown could have been really bad in that barren zone — but hey, phenomenal skies!

### **Cheryl at Lassen park!**

I am pretty sure that the plan was to meet at the campground in Lassen, and whoever is there first secures a space for two nights. Of course it's Cheryl, who is an early bird! Plus the winding, rocky roads I took after an “astronomers hours” start certainly didn't encourage expediency.

It works out fine, with enough light out to enjoy the area some, then going to the Bumpass Hell parking lot for Lassen Astronomy, night one — where I've set up 'scope a few years back in' 07 to excellent results. It felt great to be back, and Cheryl loved it! She is well attuned to state and National parks, studying to be a ranger, and working at state parks down the

peninsula from Half Moon Bay to Santa Cruz. A true naturalist — genuinely!

### **The eye see's far**

Extraordinary stars above Lassen, with a stronger glow from light pollution than Lava Beds, from Chico south of here. Still spectacular, and fun to share the views with someone so appreciative!

I got in a few sketches — one of M27 [the Dumbbell nebula], usually resembling an apple core, but in darker skies this planetary shows more form as an almond shape, tracing its gestalt.

One big difference Lassen has compared to my other stops along the circuit, is cold night temperatures — *brrr*, was it chilly. Bundling up was wisely planned in advance, knowing how cold it gets. A fine Astronomy night, but the next night at Devastated parking lot proved to be better!

### **August 30, Lassen day and night #2**

Awoke to spend a beautiful day hiking to the Bumpass Hell area of sulphuric geysers, and took the long way around like I'd hiked with Alisa a few years before. Such a fabulous trail, with lupins abounding, popping out to expansive views of mountain vista's, ending up at the sulphur springs, like a little Yellowstone park! Cheryl absolutely loved it all, who was excellently fitting company!

After hiking and being tripped out on the volcanically bizarre geyserscape, we got back towards our campsite, to spend several divine telescope hours at what is again, a parking lot named after a historic disaster, and reputable for being a top quality place for Astronomy — Devastated parking lot.

Conveniently much closer to the campground than the other lot, this was perfect. We get there early enough to setup, collimate, bundle up, cook dinner on a picnic table, and let the sky grow nice and dark. This lot is better, without a noticeable city glow from afar.

A couple more telescope bearing cars pull in at the other end of the lot. Reputable place indeed!

### **Epic - perfect - wonderful - astronomical!**

The sights were clear and we were stoked to travel millions of light years! The Third Eye rolling smooth through the space-time of stardust from eons past, yet present to the eye. The Veil nebula, snaking its way through the Milky Way like a river of subtle yet sharp celestial light! Finding low magnitude visions that are usually hard to find ; the faint patch of Barnards galaxy in Capricornus! Open clusters such as M30 that we agreed that has a general shape resembling a lunar lander! I sketched a few visions, such as clusters M10 in Ophiucus, M12, Trifid nebula, M22, M30.

The other Astronomers are nice to briefly meet, and we kept mostly to ourselves. Our only wish for being alone was to not have to hear their electronic equipment. Oh well, it's a star party sound, and I think they were doing astrophotography. Cheryl enjoys driving the silent 'scope, making cosmic discoveries along the endless journey. We stayed out much longer than the first night, hopping from most all of the visible Messier objects to NGC, familiar and less familiar. What a perfectly successful Astronomy journey!

The next day, sleeping late until it was warm enough to get out of tent, taking our time before the 4-5 hour drive to the bay area, getting in an invigorating noonday swim in the nearby

lake.

Driving on in our separate vehicles,... Feeling like autumn after leaving the park. Summertime's come and gone, my oh my. Or has it?!

## **September 6, 2011**

I would otherwise choose to take a solitary bike ride up and around Mt Tam on my birthday, with some SA in Fairfax afterwards. This time the weather conditions were predicted to be too good to miss at Lake Sonoma — so away I went! For yet more astronomical bliss. Not as great as the other week, but great enough for me. Observational Astronomy can be addictive! Especially if you have access to clear, dark skies. Matt Granz called to wish me a happy birthday, hears where I am, then appeared 2 hours later! Not there for the telescope, but briefly visited me at the lot before meeting a friend at the bridge over the lake for his obsession with night photography — getting fantastic results. I was totally content to be in solitude with the night sky, galaxy hopping to my satisfaction. (when I left around 1am, I passed those guys near the bridge with their photo equipment)

I consider that night to be the topping off to that late summer Astronomy tour. There are others who have much more effective telescope trips than the one I just had, throughout the southwest for instance ; those are the best astronomical skies in the country. I must plan to travel there with telescope next time.

Next time... To be continued.

Dean Gustafson, May 2021