

THE ATLANTA OBSERVER'S NOTEBOOK

-prepared for the members of the Atlanta Astronomy Club-

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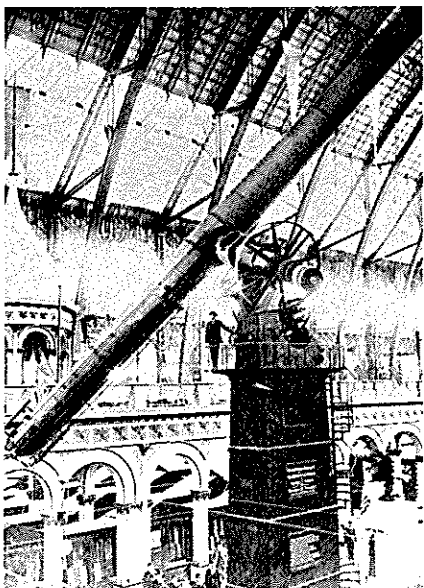
Number 3

THE TIME I PINCH-NIP FOR ARCTURUS

On the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago the Columbian Exposition was held in 1893. This was a world's fair on unprecedented scale. It came a little before my time, but my parents went on their honeymoon, and brought back a huge picture book which gave hours of delight to me as I lay on the parlor floor and pored over the wonders therein. Elaborate buildings were filled with displays of all sorts, and many native groups who came from all parts of the globe (including "Little Egypt" doing her famous, in those days, belly-dances). But what impressed me most was the world's largest telescope set up in the Hall of Science. This was later transferred to the new Yerkes Observatory of the University of Chicago. Still the largest refractor, for me it has greater charm than any of the huge reflectors.

In 1933, Chicago hosted another world's fair, "Century of Progress", featuring new technological development since the preceding exposition. It occurred to Dr. E. B. Frost, the blind director of Yerkes Observatory, that it would be a

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40 inch Yerkes refractor, constructed primarily through the efforts of a dynamic young American astronomer from Chicago, (George Ellery Hale, 1868 - 1938), the first director of Yerkes Observatory. The support column is 43 feet high and the tube 63 feet long. The movable parts weigh 20 tons, with the object-lens alone weighing 1/2 ton. The telescope became operational in May 1897.

-lee

B/W prints by Leonard Abbey

The Atlanta Observer's Notebook

striking opening if the lights and power could be turned on by an impulse that had originated at the time of the preceding fair. Arcturus, that golden K beauty, was made to order, being 40 light years away. Catch a beam that started on its journey in 1893, make it trigger a relay in Chicago and create a spectacular opening of the whole shebang!

Because of the diabolical uncertainty of weather, four observatories were invited to participate: Yerkes, Harvard, Allegheny and one other I can't remember. I was the photo-electric man at Harvard, having just finished a helluva year working day and night completing my Ph.D., and so got the assignment. The event took place on a Saturday night in June. Each observatory was given its cue to open the shutter by national radio hookup, the signals went to Chicago by Western Union, were displayed individually and then mixed to the final climax.

The next day was naturally, Sunday. As was our custom, my wife and I packed a picnic basket filled mostly with the New York Times and set out for an afternoon of biking along the Charles River. It was about 7 PM when we got back to our basement apartment, and lo, there was a telegram stuck in the door. The upshot was that the grand opening of the Century of Progress was an "overwhelming success" and needed to be repeated. There would be no radio broadcast, but would Harvard send its impulse at exactly 8:14 D. E. S. T.?

This was a predicament. The equipment was locked at the new observatory station at Harvard, Mass. some 26 miles away. There was no possibility of getting out there and opening the telescope in time. What should I do? I thought of asking Arcturus, but it would have taken 80 years to get an answer. I couldn't leave that effulgent orb in the lurch. I simply went down to the western Union office at Harvard Square and explained the situation to the operator who informed the technicians in the Windy City. At exactly 8:14 (by Western Union clock naturally) I pressed the key. If I seem a bit queer, it is because after all these years, it is not clear whether or not a crime was committed. It's driving me nuts!

-Bill Calder

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AON Staff

To all club members! and visitors!, The annual Hank Hudson Banquet will be held simultaneously with our hosting of the SEARL Convention in June, so mark your calendar for the 3rd. week, 14 - 16, and plan to be at the Camelot Inn, 1706 Clairmont Rd, Decatur Ga. 634-3311.

-lee

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