
The FOCAL POINT

Newsletter of the Atlanta Astronomy Club, Inc.
Volume V, Number VIII April 1993

THIS MONTH'S PROGRAM

Joint Observing Session with the Astronomical Society
of the Atlantic

Saturday, April 17th, 1993, 7:30 p.m.

Walter F. Barber, Jr., Observatory, Villa Rica, GA.

There will not be a Friday meeting this month. Instead the Club is hosting a joint observing session with members of the Astronomical Society of the Atlantic on Saturday, April 17th beginning at 7:30 p.m. at the Barber Observatory in Villa Rica.

If the sky is cloudy on the April 17th the rain date will be Saturday, April 24th. There will be no April meeting should both nights be cloudy.

Members should bring their own food but some soft drinks will be provided.

Bring your telescope if you can, but the Club's twenty-inch and ten-inch telescopes will be available too. Rumor has it that the Club's eight-inch Gregory Maksutov will be there with a new and improved clutch for its clock drive. With its long focal length and sharp optics this instrument is ideal for sidewalk astronomy programs.

For up-to-date information about this meeting please call the Club Hotline at 621-2661 or log on to the Club's BBS at 455-3089. Check page 3 for a map and directions to the observatory.

See you there!

AAC COMPUTER BULLETIN BOARD SYSTEM ONLINE!

Doug Chesser, SYSOP

BBS Phone Number: 404-455-3089

The AAC's BBS is now online. The BBS supports communications from 300bps to 14.4kbps/V.42. The system is always running so you can connect anytime. The Club's BBS gives AAC members the ability to SEND and RECEIVE personal public electronic mail with other callers on the system. This is a free service, however, if you call long distance to connect with the BBS, you will be charged for a long distance call by the phone company. The BBS contains information about

Club activities along with shareware and public domain software which can be downloaded.

The AAC BBS is in the process of trying to establish a link with the Astronomical Society of the Atlantic's BBS. When this link is established it will allow members of both clubs to send and receive electronic mail to each other. The AAC BBS is also in the process of becoming a national echo mail node. The BBS phone number is (404) 455-3089.

One of the most promising aspects of the BBS is the ability to share information with the public. If you have news or information that you would like to get out to the public, try putting it on one of the AAC BBS conferences, or EMAIL it to me and I'll place it in a bulletin. The Club's participation in this system is vital to its success. I encourage you to call! As with all AAC activities the public is invited to call in, so if you have friends who have computers with modems, give them the number.

SIDEWALK ASTRONOMY

The Tucker Recreation Center is hosting weekly Sidewalk Astronomy sessions, weather permitting, every Tuesday from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. This is a great opportunity for Club members to meet for informal observing and also introduce the general public to amateur astronomy.

The Recreation Center is located at 4898 Lavista Road, two miles east of Northlake Mall. For more information please call Jim Brant at 296-6334.

AT THE EYEPIECE

Bud Rosser

In the course of some eleven years as a practicing amateur astronomer, I have confronted lots of questions that I cannot answer...indeed, a number of questions that just cannot get answered by those who should know.

For example, a year or so ago, I did research on globular clusters and even made a presentation on them to the Club. I still don't know why those stars can cluster so closely and what will become of them in several million years.

Another example: Is it empirically pure to seek a simple, coherent unified theory of physics, or would Freud simply accuse us of projecting a need to make the unfathomable a simple and masterable truth awaiting discovery?

Another question of great wonder to me: Since we construct so many of our universal formation models on observations at the edge of the observable universe (sixteen billion light years, eh?), where do the cosmological theorists go in ten years, when we can observe in the twenty-plus light year range? What if there is nothing to see beyond that edge? ("There be Dragons?")

Actually, the most challenging question that I have yet faced as an amateur astronomer is: "Is it manic/depressive illness or just human nature to experience wide swings in inspiration and apathy about my hobby?" Is Steve Gilbreath the only person who can stay "pumped" on astronomy for months at a time? What about guilt?! Do you ever feel, as I do, guilty because you didn't go outside to look up at the sky on some clear night? Are we having FUN yet?

I suppose the gist of this message is to share with you my feeling, as your president, that all hobbyists have swings of enthusiasm about their hobbies. It's OK not to be excited all the time.

I do, however, suggest a cure for the guilt...just take out the telescope or binoculars and train the objective on one of the familiar sights that have become our lifelong companions on our unfathomable journey around mortality. It's still awe-inspiring and it's still the harbinger of the inner peace that only the observer knows.

I'll see you in the dark sometime.

APRIL OBSERVING SESSIONS

David Riddle

A three-day-old moon will set early on the evening of Saturday, April 24th and will not seriously brighten the sky for observers present at the Barber Observatory for April's observing session. Jupiter will be the first "star" visible in the twilight skies and as darkness falls the constellations around the realm of the galaxies will be well placed for your inspection.

M-81, the bright (visual magnitude 6.9) spiral in Ursa Major deserves your attention. About 3 arc minutes

southwest of the nucleus is a newly discovered Type II supernova. Predictions as of early April suggest the supernova may become as bright as magnitude 8. Type II supernovae fade rather slowly, so it should still be an easy target late in the month.

Comet Schumacher-Levy is located a few degrees from Jupiter. This is not just a chance alignment; the comet is within Jupiter's gravitational grip and is being torn apart. Early April observations report this comet to be of the 12th magnitude, about 1 arc minute across and showing 17 distinct nuclei! It will be interesting to see what our 20" reflector shows of this comet.

A joint observing session is scheduled for April 17th with members of the Astronomical Society of the Atlantic. The "rain date" is scheduled for April 24th. With luck we will have two observing sessions this month. It is always a pleasure to meet new friends who share a passion of watching the skies. So please make every effort to attend.

ASTRONOMY VS. ASTROLOGY

John Dickinson Ross

Amateur astronomers are often irritated and amused by the popular confusion between astronomy and astrology. As amateur scientists we often feel contempt for and superiority towards those who practice astrology or follow it avidly. But the continued popularity and profitability of astrology poses some serious issues for astronomy and for science in general.

In American society today science, including astronomy, has great prestige but also suffers from much popular fear and suspicion. As amateur scientists we need to remember that the scientific community is finite and fallible. In contrast Truth and Reality are probably infinite just as Christianity teaches that God is. One major scientist is supposed to have said that the Universe is queerer than we suppose. Indeed he said it may be even queerer than we can suppose.

Astronomy provides rigorous challenge and baffling mysteries. Also astronomy and science in general and the technology it has spawned threaten the living Earth our home with the effects of the ever-spreading Industrial Revolution. More to the point the Industrial Revolution and science have failed to deliver the Heaven on Earth that many intellectuals promised they would. Also many advocates of science have provoked hostility by proclaiming that science as a way of

knowing that renders obsolete all other ways of knowing the World and the Universe such as religion, literature and the arts.

Partly as a result, American society, outside of the space program, spends more on astrology than it does on astronomy according to Dr. Dave Wingert, Professor of Astronomy at Georgia State University.

Look at any commercial bookstore. You will find far more popular books displayed and sold dealing with astrology than with astronomy.

As amateur scientists, we amateur astronomers need to remember that all the triumphs of science and technology are far from delivering heaven on Earth as many promised they would. We need to respect the

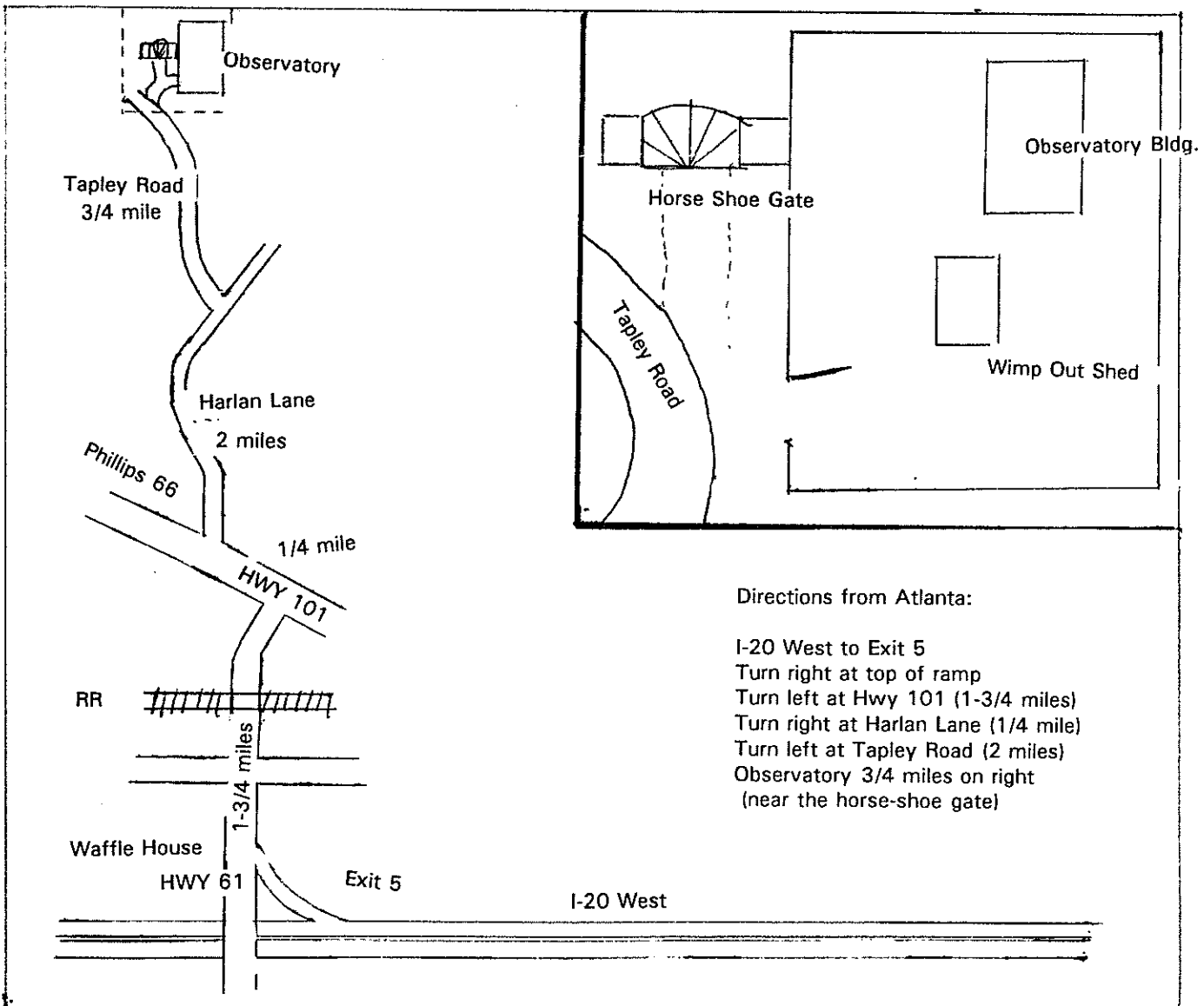
causes of Astrology's continued popularity if not its pseudo-scientific claims. We need to reflect on the limits and defects of science and technology as well as the triumphs and promises.

TRIVIA

Answer to last month's question:

The largest refractor ever built was a 49-inch on a horizontal mount that was used at the Paris Exhibition for a few months in 1900. It had a focal length of over 180 feet and was fed by a large siderostat mirror.

This month's question: What is the rotational period of the Earth?



Directions from Atlanta:

- I-20 West to Exit 5
- Turn right at top of ramp
- Turn left at Hwy 101 (1-3/4 miles)
- Turn right at Harlan Lane (1/4 mile)
- Turn left at Tapley Road (2 miles)
- Observatory 3/4 miles on right (near the horse-shoe gate)

The *Focal Point* is published monthly by the Atlanta Astronomy Club, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of amateur astronomy.

Meetings are held on the third Friday of each month (the second Friday in December) at the Bradley Observatory of Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia.

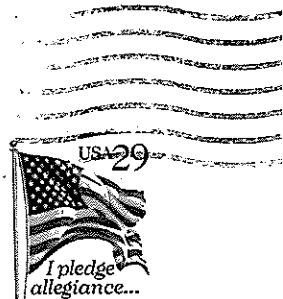
For up-to-date information on Club programs and activities please call the AAC's telephone hot-line at (404) 621-2661 or log in to the Club's Computer BBS at (404) 455-3089.

Membership: \$20 annually for families and \$10 for students. Membership includes a subscription to the Astronomical League's *Reflector* newsletter and use of the Club's observatory in Villa Rica, Georgia. Optional subscriptions to *Sky & Telescope* and *Astronomy Magazine* are available for \$20 and \$16 per year, respectively.

Article submissions are strongly encouraged; please deliver to the editor for consideration. The submission deadline for the May 1993 issue of the *Focal Point* is May 5th. Permission is granted to duplicate and redistribute in a non-profit manner, in part or whole, provided credit is given to the authors, the Club and this publication. Please call the editor at (404) 294-6055 for more information.

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First Class

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