

NEWSLETTER of the WESTMINSTER ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY
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WAS Assistance Requested for College Astronomy Course Western Maryland College has asked WAS for volunteer lab assistants to help with the astronomy course taught at the college. Each assistant would be responsible for one of the 8 inch Celestron telescopes used by the class (providing a good opportunity for the assistant to get hands on experience with a moderate sized instrument). The labs are held on Mondays from about 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. except during poor weather or periods of full moon. The first lab will be Monday, September 17. WAS is pleased to have been given this opportunity. It will help assure us a meeting place in the future. To arrange your time, call Curt Roelle at 848-6384.

League To Tour Halley's Comet The club received a personal letter from Jerry Sherlin, retiring president of the Astronomical League and now Light Pollution Committee Chairman. He welcomes us to become league members and share in the many benefits. One such benefit will be a tour south of the Equator to view Halley's Comet. During the 1986 apparition the comet will be poorly placed for viewing from the northern hemisphere. The League tour will view the comet and the splendid southern skies from the Andes in Peru. The basic tour includes 8 days hotel, round trip from Miami, and several meals including a banquet with the Peruvian President. More details will appear in a future issue. The League is a non-profit federation of astronomical societies.

Notes from August's Meeting The first meeting held at Western Maryland College featured Mike Schaeffer of Fairchild Space Company speaking on telescope types and selection. Surely there is not one "perfect" instrument as a variety of telescopes were on display. The buyer must decide what the telescope will be used for (the Moon, planets, deep-sky observing, etc.) and purchase the instrument best suited for that purpose. The telescope will probably have a number of intended uses and a compromise must be made. Size (portability) and cost are obvious factors as well. The important thing is not to rush into a purchase; a telescope is an investment, and like a piano it is an instrument to be enjoyed often and shared with others.

41D: Take 3 Space Shuttle flight 41D, the 12th shuttle launch and the first for "Discovery" finally made it into orbit after two earlier last minute and last second delays, and a postponement from the previous day. Before dawn as we approached the space center in our rented convertible with top down, we could see the spotlights shining up into the night sky over 15 miles ahead. We had two passes, from NASA and the Air Force. The Air Force pass let us get about a half mile closer than the former. Our observing sight was near the Titan assembly buildings, where the two-man Geminis were assembled and launched in the 1960's, and the Mars Viking landers nine summers ago in 1975.

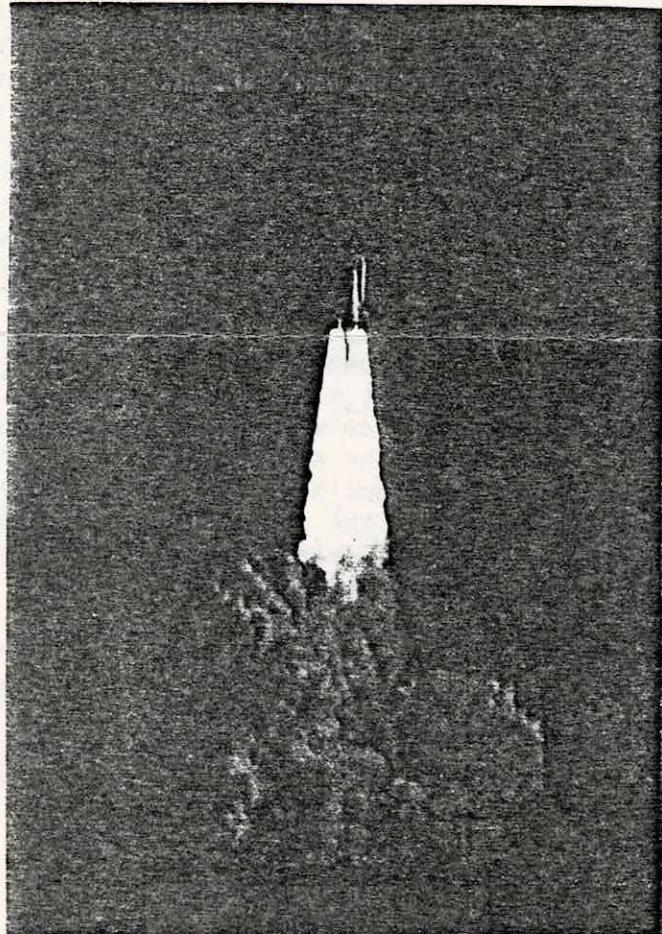
Much of the pre-launch time was spent watching alligators and sharks off shore in the Banana River, looking for their breakfasts as the sun was rising. It was one of the most perfect days ever for a shuttle launch. Shortly before lift-off a delay was ordered as the Air Force escorted out a small aircraft that had entered the restricted airspace. With grumbling faces turned upward, angry spectators searched for the inconsiderate intruder; for many this was the third attempt in two months to see Discovery go.

Finally ignition started and the Discovery was completely engulfed in smoke. Then slowly it rose and quickly picked up speed as it arched, with blazing colorful thrust and huge billows of smoke. Then came the sound; thundering crackling shaking noise and with it loud whoops from the mob. It was odd to realize that the ignition and launch had been viewed in silence. The perfect weather allowed the separation of the solid rocket boosters to be viewed with binoculars. With their separation the trail of smoke ended. Through binoculars the shuttle was a small bright day-time star. Occasional glints of light were seen as the boosters tumbled toward earth.

When the shuttle flights are again running on schedule everyone should have plenty of opportunities to see a shuttle launch, either from Florida or California. The next Florida launch is the Hughes Galaxy-C communications satellite on September 21; I plan not to miss it -- I am hooked. The next shuttle flight will be in October.

Club Display at Public Library Now on display at the main branch of the Carroll County Library in Westminster is "Does Anyone Know Where the Earth Really Is?" The history of man's search to find where we are in space is illustrated through the lives and words of Aristarchus, Ptolemy, Copernicus, Digges, Wright, Shapley, and Hubble. WAS was requested to provide a display when the library was used for the May meeting. The display is located in the flat display case near the entrance and will last through September. Everyone is encouraged to see it.

September Meeting Canceled Because I will be in Florida and our speaker will be in Boston, there will be no September meeting. Instead, visit the WAS display at the library in Westminster (above). Volunteers are still needed to help with the astronomy lab at the college (see other story). Next month in addition to the meeting will be a "star party".

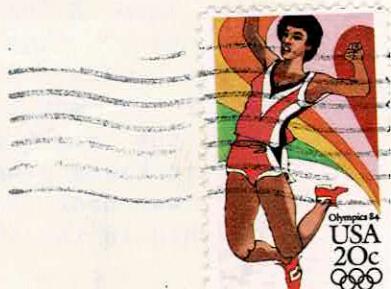


Discovery rises from Pad 39A on September 30.

Photo by Curtis Roelle

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