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Eye to sky, it's a good time for amateur astronomers

by Paul Miller

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Jim Fox is 61 years old, a star-gazer, an admitted science fiction junkie for about as long as he can remember. And he's seen the light, you might say. Or at least Fox, who is president of the Keene Amateur Astronomers Club, has seen enough lights, galaxies, moons and assorted far-away objects in his years of deep-sky viewing to have experienced "that strange feeling that perhaps we're not alone out there." Believe what you may, Fox knows this much about our solar system: "It's bigger than any of us can imagine."

Fox has logged enough hours with telescopes and acquired enough astronomical knowledge to know that he's not sticking his neck out to say as much. His profession is computer-based information systems; but he speaks about astronomy with a bit of a twinkle in his eye. It's his hobby, of course, all this star-gazing and star studying, but deep down Fox wishes more people would take the time and interest to see what he's seen, to experience a "wow" moment like you get the first time you look beyond the Saturn you see with the naked eye to the Saturn you see through a powerful telescope with its colorful rings and orbit of small moons. His efforts with the local club are toward that end.

"When you're with people who know what they're doing and what they're looking for, they can take you on a tour," Fox says. "It's just exploding; you go further and further and deeper and deeper and you see amazing stuff."

It's an exciting time for astronomy. This year marks the 40th anniversary of Galileo's astronomical use of the telescope; it is the International Year of Astronomy; and 40 years ago tomorrow - July 20, 1969 - Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to touch foot on the moon.

Fox remembers that moment in history vividly. On a black and white television, he watched with millions of others the grainy, at times fuzzy, images beamed back to earth. Then, also like millions no doubt, he and his grand children went out into the backyard to steal a peek at the moon, to try to envision how something so far away could seem



close and so attainable

There was now, after all, a boot print and a flag to prove it

Fox began tracking space long before the famous moon landing and subsequent Apollo missions. Camping on Scout expedition, Fox remembers seeing a NASA Echo spacecraft, which was actually large aluminized Mylar designed to boost satellite communications. Inflated in orbit, these NASA creations made it possible for two-way to be bounced from ground stations on the west and east coasts of the United States.

The moon landing, understandably, only heightened his interest in space exploration.

Fox has many astronomy friends, fellow club members mostly. Once a month, and always around the arrival of the new moon, they gather at the club's observatory on the outskirts of Keene to gaze at the heavens. The observatory, donated to the club by a nearby family, is a modest, two-car garage-like building on the outside, stained green, off the main road and perched near the top of a grassy hill. But there are no large garage doors; rather, the roof can be cranked open to the side, where it rests on an independent, reinforced wooden frame.

Inside the structure are the toys, most noticeably a 16-inch diameter Newtonian reflector telescope that is mounted in the center of the floor.

During viewing sessions, chairs are placed around the giant telescope, and everyone gets a turn to explore. Viewing typically begins around 9 p.m.; winter affords the best viewing and sessions start around 7 p.m. and can last as long as 2 hours, Fox said.

The club this year partnered with the Keene Public Library in helping to plan, promote and schedule speaker "Vision of the Universe program." In part, the club viewed its involvement with the educational program as a recruitment effort, Fox says.

"Any astronomy club, any club, should be connected to some sort of iconic organization in a community, and ours has been very instrumental to us," says Junie Esslinger of Alstead, a past president of the club and a member for more than 30 years. "We've had our ups and downs because of the loss of connections with other established clubs. In the couple of years we've been very proactive in bringing in people with the same interest."

Club membership, around 15 today with even fewer die-hard types, is well down from what it was more than 20 years ago, when card-holders numbered three to four dozen or more.

With a smaller membership, the observatory fell into neglect in recent years, Fox says. Current members, however, have worked hard the past couple of years to "get it back together."

The club's other priority, no less important, is to increase its visibility. Its close association with the library is a key initiative. A second, Fox says, is to hold a series of public viewing events in the fall in downtown Keene. Fox will set up their large, 15-inch portable telescope in the city's downtown and let anyone who wants to use it look up at the sky.

"We want to wow them right off the street," Fox said. Esslinger agrees that outreach and education are a strong, thriving club. But that's easier said than done, he admits. "The problem with astronomy is that you don't know what they're doing, all they want to do is look through the telescope," he says. "There are so many different types of astronomy - planetary motions, extra solar planets - that amateurs can get involved in. The equipment's not too hard to use, happy sitting out in a field and looking through a telescope. It's nothing personal that's where I feel at home."

The club's big telescopes, mind you, are so powerful they blow right through the moon. "The more powerful you see," Fox says. "You might focus in on one star and then look beyond that to see another star circling it and gravitationally linked to each other, and it can be something to see."

American Optical Co., then a Keene company, donated the 12-inch mirror for the observatory's permanent telescope. The very first club members ground, polished and curved the telescope's mirror, a delicate, detail-intensive process.

Kingsbury Machine Tool Corp. donated \$3,000 toward construction of the observatory in 1970, and a handful of volunteers, including Phil Atwood, the last remaining charter member of the club before his death, made not only the original but re-made it two other times, Fox says.

Esslinger says Atwood was his inspiration. In the late 50s, when the club started, most members could not afford telescopes, Esslinger says, so many of them, like Atwood, got together and started building their own.

The need for something bigger led the same people to build the 16-inch telescope that still stands as the club's.

Esslinger, 55, of Alstead, says it was the collective efforts and drive of those people that made the club and possible.

And he says he can't overstate the role the lunar landing 40 years ago played in sparking his own interest in astronomy.

"I remember that night so vividly," Esslinger says. "To watch Armstrong as he kicked the dirt. I tell you, that walking along kicking the dirt of another world."

"I often would walk the dirt roads around here, as a youngster, just thinking of myself being on the moon. The reality of space for me."

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