



The Mason-Dixon Astronomer

Westminster Astronomical Society of Maryland

September 2001

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Coming Events

September 8 and 9
Reisterstown Festival

September 10
MD Section IDA
meeting

September 12
MD Science Center
monthly MDA meeting

September 13-16
Tuckahoe No Frills SP

September 14-16
Black Forest SP

September 29
Piney Run Applefest

September 30
NOVAC SP

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Presidential Message

By Brian Eney

September is going to be a busy month, starting with the Reisterstown Festival on the 8th and 9th (still looking for volunteers), the IDA-MD meeting on the 10th (visit www.westminsterastro.org/ida_md for directions), and WAS meeting on 12th at the Maryland Science Center. Note the mention of several star parties around the region in the column to the left.

Many members have requested, talked about, hoped for and wished for an I-MAX movie before our meeting on the 12th. Thanks to Phil and others it is happening! All members are invited to see *Cosmic Voyage* at the I-MAX and should arrive by 6:15 p.m. The movie will start promptly at 6:30.

There will be a three-dollar fee for adults and one dollar for kids under 10. Normal price is \$7. **The club will pick-up the rest.**

The Maryland Section of International Dark Sky Association meeting will be on the 10th in Silver Springs, MD at 12600 Eastbourne Dr. Check the web site for directions. We will be discussing the upcoming November convention at the Science Center. Volunteers for this are greatly needed and will be appreciated.

In the meantime, keep looking up and reaching for the stars and share the universe with your neighbors.

A Summer Observing Log

by G.W. Gliba

It has been fun to watch comet LINEAR A2 as it has been heading north into our skies in July. I first spotted it on July 3rd, when it was in Cetus and was about 4.5 magnitude. I still couldn't see it with the naked eye because it was low and due to the light pollution in Greenbelt. I continued to watch it as it went thru the circlet of Pisces and on into Pegasus as it continued to fade to around 6th magnitude by July 12th. My hopes of seeing it with the naked eye were gone by then, but I had forgotten that this was no ordinary comet. When I got up to see it on the morning of Friday the 13th (who says Friday the 13th is bad luck) I was lucky to see the comet having an outburst. What's more is that I could see it with the naked eye from downtown Greenbelt!

I estimated it to be around 4.5 with the naked eye, and about 4.8 with my 8x50 binoculars. Due to the light pollution, the comet seemed fainter than it really was, but what a wonderful surprise to see it having an outburst!

Observing Log, Part II

[Due to technical difficulties this part of the newsletter is not available.]

Lunar and Solar Calendar Links

To obtain Ray Sterner's Lunar and Solar calendars, link to:

http://fermi.jhuapl.edu/temp/almanac/westminster/2001/Moon_SEP_2001.pdf

http://fermi.jhuapl.edu/temp/almanac/westminster/2001/Sun_SEP_2001.pdf

APPLEFEST ASTRONOMY

Howdy: I just got a call from Deanna at Piney Run Park asking if we wanted to set up a booth or a viewing area for the Applefest coming up on Saturday September 29th. We need to let her know by the 24th of September if we are coming. Call me and let me know and I will take care of it with them.

Former WAS President Skip (Skippy) Bird.

(410)-549-3026

Autumn Sunspots and apple cider!

Leslie Peltier's *Starlight Nights*, a review

By Richard Schoen

It has occurred to the MDA editors that if each of our members selected one astronomy book from our library, read it with enthusiasm, and then generated a book review; we would have a steady flow of material for the *MDA*. The library would also receive the respect it deserves. To this end, here is your editor's review of Leslie Peltier's *Starlight Nights*.

This book has been amply reviewed elsewhere, more than once for instance, in [Sky and Telescope](#). An attempt has been made here to bring a more personal feel for the Peltier classic as well as to bring new readers to this important autobiography. Essentially, Peltier realized that he had attained the stature of one of the more important amateur astronomers of the twentieth century. In his life story, he takes us back to the early portion of his life, early in the twentieth century, when a dedicated amateur could garner serious attention from professional astronomers merely by making scientific observations of the heavens and keeping careful records. (This can still be done today but there is more competition and the competitors may be very knowledgeable with terrific equipment.)

Peltier's early life was every bit of traditional Americana. He grew up on a family farm in Delphos, Ohio. Proof of his family roots were found in his granddaddy's land grant from President Polk in

1849. Farm life taught Peltier the virtues of honesty, integrity, patience and love of family. Strength of character, humility and patience shine throughout Peltier's career.

His parents taught him to observe the Pleiades, Big Dipper and Jupiter at age 5. Soon followed an interest in auroras as seen in non-light polluted Northwest Ohio as well as meteors. At age 15, Peltier asked himself, "Why do I not know a single one of these stars?" So in 1915, fate led him to borrow Martha Evans Martin's *The Friendly Stars*.

He started by reading of and locating Vega. By lifelong tradition, he experienced first light with **all** of his scopes by viewing Vega with them.

A number of times, approximately every two weeks, he went back to the library to renew *The Friendly Stars*. The librarians caught sight of this behavior and much later in life; they presented Peltier with that very same copy as a gift. He immediately recognized little smudges that he had inadvertently seasoned the book with.

Peltier's first scope was a 2 inch refractor; French in construction with a heavy brass tube. He purchased this from the A. S. Aloe Company of St. Louis during his second year of high school. The cost was \$18, earned by picking strawberries at the going rate of 2 cents a quart! Still, he needed a mounting. So with a 6-inch diameter fence post, some wood scraps and a discarded 20-inch grindstone, he built a unique and rock solid mount. Said Peltier, "What could be more simple? Yet some people will pay out good money for a ready-made mounting that has no individuality whatsoever." It's a shame that Peltier's passing came nearly 20 years before the Westminster Astronomical Society was established because we have several members of like ingenuity. L.P. could have fit right in with the WAS.

Because of a curlicue, Peltier dove head first into variable star observing. It all began when he picked up the 1907 edition of William Tyler Olcott's *A Field Book of the Stars*.

Olcott made an inviting appeal within his book to all would-be astronomers with small scopes to write to him. He would teach them by correspondence how to become a variable star observer. He became life secretary of the organization he founded, the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO). Peltier enthusiastically wanted to join so pen in hand, he filled out the application. To his dismay, he noted afterward that one needed at least a 3-inch scope to be considered. This is where the curlicue comes in because the "2" had sprouted one. Peltier decided this was a tiny white lie he could live with and sent his application in.

By return mail, a trial set of finder charts and instruction was delivered. Peltier became so enthused and addicted to these finder charts that he eventually memorized most of the details and began a 46-year love affair. He said, "A variable star was a completely new experience; it was not just something that was THERE, it was something that was HAPPENING!" By age 18, Peltier became experienced with observing novae (Nova Aquila of 1918) and with solar eclipses (partiality was experienced at his farm in Delphos on June 8, 1918).

After 190 nights of observational records of variable stars were submitted to the AAVSO, an amazing thing happened. The Telescope Loan Department sent him a 4-inch refractor!

At this point a semi-permanent observatory was built amidst the farm's dairy cows. Before long, AAVSO offered to bump him up to a 6 inch! This refractor was a wide field, perfect for comet hunting. It took three long years before Peltier bagged his first quarry.

At age 25 and still on the farm, Peltier at last found his first comet suspect on November 13, 1925 (a Friday the thirteenth!). He knew of the need to telegraph its position in the sky to Harvard College Observatory for confirmation. He was without car and discovered that the local telegraph office was closed. So that night he **bicycled** in darkness to the telegraph tower of the Pennsylvania Railroad. With message in hand he faced the telegraph operator complete with green eyeshade who bellowed, “You gotta telegram?” Confirmation of the comet came from Poland 6 days later.

Since there is more to life than astronomy, Peltier took a wife (Dottie) and they honeymooned in the Great Southwest. It was obvious that Dottie was to be his gal because she was born during that night in 1910 when Earth passed through the tail of Halley’s Comet. Leslie and Dottie ate a lot of steaks. In fact they celebrated New Year Eve invariably with steak. This part of the book is quite anachronistic because hardly anyone these days eats as much red meat as these two. Texas was a favored stop on the vacation as prime sirloins were 25 cents per pound. During their adventures they ran into an old friend, Dr. Van Biesbroeck, a double star expert with Yerkes Observatory. He was invited to dinner with the Peltiers. To Dottie’s dismay, she discovered that “Dr. B.” didn’t touch his steak and ate only the parsley garnish. Apparently Van Biesbroeck was a vegetarian!

Peltier wrote *Starlight Nights* during the cloudy nights of two years. I found this book to be inspirational because it captures the joy and energy released when one of us discovers an interest so captivating that we give it our “all”. The MDA library edition is special because it has neatly penciled annotations from its original owner, the late George Thompson. I could tell from the notes that Mr. Thompson was a “Peltier kind of guy”.

Call For Submissions

Wanted...articles, calendars, and other astronomical fare for the
Mason-Dixon Astronomer.

Please submit your work to the editors before the 20th of each month.

<mailto:jaci@home.com>

Thank you!