



VBAS Highlights for March

Public Programs for March

Our next member's meeting will be held on Friday, March 16th at 7:30 pm. VBAS Member Meetings are held on the 3rd Friday of each month at 7:30 p.m.; they're open to the public and are free. Dr. Rob Suggs of NASA's Meteoroid Environment Office will describe the lunar impact monitoring program at Marshall Space Flight Center. Using 2 computer-controlled 14 inch telescopes, Rob's team has been recording the dark portion of the moon for the past year, and has detected over 35 probable meteoroid impact flashes. Rob will describe the observational program, the data analysis, and preliminary results from these observations. He will also discuss the hypervelocity impact test program which will enable development of an improved engineering model of the meteoroid ejecta environment needed for design of lunar landers and EVA systems for the Constellation Program. Further information is available at www.nasa.gov/centers/marshall/news/lunar/.

Dr. Bill Cooke will be presenting a planetarium program on Pluto on March 10, Mitzi Adams will present her Easter show on the 24th, and Gena Crook will give a children's show on observing the Moon on the 31st. Planetarium programs start at 7:30 PM. Admission to planetarium shows is free for VBAS Members, \$3.00 for Adults, \$2.00 for Children 6-11, and free for children under 6. Observation of the night sky through various telescopes normally follows each planetarium program, weather permitting.

President's Message

On page 2, Jeff Delmas discusses membership renewal month, and the upcoming VBAS "Yard Sale".

Messier Marathon

The VBAS annual Messier Marathon is coming up on April 20, immediately following the member's meeting. See page 2 for details.

Letter to the Editor

Starting on page 3, founding VBAS member Ted Paludan gives us a special treat: stories from the early days of VBAS. Page 4 also features a nice photo of Saturn, by John Miele.

VBAS Member Meeting Minutes

Page 7 has the draft minutes of last month's members meeting.

Steve Sloan
Via Stellaris Editor
steve@sloan3d.com



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Deadline for April 2007 Via Stellaris submissions is Friday, March 23.



President's Message

by Jeff Delmas

March is Membership Renewal Month!

This is our first year of a new membership renewal system to have all memberships expire in February and renew in March. By now, most members should have received annual notice of membership renewal by email. The new system helps ease the process of renewal for everyone, especially our membership secretary, Linda Farnell, who's done an excellent job in this transition year. While you're renewing your membership, please also consider renewing your Sky & Telescope or Astronomy magazine subscription at the same time. Each of these magazines is available through VBAS at a discount of about \$10. Even if your magazine renewal is later in the year, if you renew each year with your membership, it will help simplify our process, and assure that you continue to receive your favorite magazine uninterrupted.

VBAS "Yard Sale" Scheduled for March Meeting

We have quite a few items that have piled up over the years, doing the society little or no good. Many of these items still have some value, so we decided to hold a "yard sale" at the March members meeting on the 16th. Included in the sale will be numerous computer parts, disc drives (including SCSI drives), power supplies, amplifiers, monitors, etc. There is

Messier Marathon Set for April 20

Don't forget to make plans to bring your telescope to the April 20th members meeting, to participate in the Spring Messier Marathon at VBAS. That evening will be three nights past the new moon, so we'll start with a crescent moon. Saturday, April 21 is the rain date for the marathon. Make your plans now to attend this event, to rack up as many Messier objects in your log book as you can in one evening. This

also a good selection of photographic darkroom equipment and supplies. We'll organize the items and set them out in the planetarium for review at the meeting. At this time, we're not sure if we'll auction the items or simply sell them outright at yard sale prices, but all you bargain hunters out there should be sure to make plans now to attend the meeting on March 16th!

Jeff Delmas

is a great opportunity for newer observers to learn more about the night sky, and to learn observing techniques from more experienced members.

I am one of the original founding members of the VBAS (originally the RCAA, Rocket City Astronomical Association). As a Life Member, I am happy to have been on the mailing (or email) list for many years, but I am sorry that it has been a long time since I was active or even attended a meeting.

A couple of recent items attracted my interest; the renewal of the agreement on the land, and the "50th Anniversary".

The 50th anniversary was about two years ago because the organization was started in late 1954 or early 1955. I don't have exact dates, because I prudently destroyed all of my older diaries prior to my marriage in November 1955. I can reconstruct some dates from old checks and clippings. I came to Huntsville in 1951 to join the Von Braun Rocket Team; I was 20 years old and fresh out of Auburn.

In late 1954 or early 1955, a Huntsville High School student, whose name I have forgotten, proposed to his parents that he would like to start an astronomy club. He was put in touch with several adult scientists, including Conrad Swanson, Ernst Stuhlinger and Wernher von Braun. Somebody invited me to the initial meeting at a private home a little east of California Street. We formed the "Rocket City Astronomical Association". Now all we needed was a telescope and an observatory. Von Braun had scheduled a business trip to the Los Angeles area soon, and he offered to look for a telescope. When he returned, he told us he had visited Mt. Wilson and made inquiries. By then he was famous enough to be welcomed in such places. They had referred him to an instrument maker in Pasadena, whom he visited. The man had an observatory in his back yard, which included a reflecting telescope of his own manufacture. It had a sixteen and half-inch mirror. He wanted to replace it, and he offered the optics for \$700. Von Braun brought the offer to our next meeting. We had no dues and no treasury yet. I stood up and offered \$100, if we could find the other \$600. Before the evening was over, six others, including Von Braun, had furnished the sum. That was March 2, 1955; my check No. 525 to "Sam Pruitt, Treasurer, RCAA" was dated March 6, 1955. (\$100 was a lot of money at that time; my gross income before taxes and deductions

was around \$500 per month, but I was not married nor expecting to be married in early 1955.)

We began to meet regularly, and formed an actual incorporated organization with a constitution and bylaws. We began to solicit donation of materials and funds. Wilhelm Angele had joined us early-on, and he presented us with three alternative observatory design concepts. The simplest was a sort of lean-to, which Von Braun referred to as "an out-house", which led us to vote for the most elaborate, which still stands. Now we must find a high-altitude site. My hobbies included a collection of topographic maps of our area. (At that time I had no idea that twenty years later I would earn a Ph.D. in Geography.) Dr. Stuhlinger and I studied them, looking for mountains that were not populated. (He had my maps on the back seat of his car when the Army M.P.'s stopped him and confiscated the maps because they showed Redstone Arsenal. This required a visit to the Provost Marshall to explain that these were USGS maps available to the public for 15 cents each.) Dr Stuhlinger rented a Piper Cub at the airport and he piloted it while we looked for our site. Most of the peaks were privately owned, as a trip to the Court House proved, but two were owned by the Alabama State park Service. I volunteered to explore possibilities with the state. I mentioned the problem in a letter to my parents in Montgomery County.

Dad always made a habit of being acquainted with each governor, so, without my prior knowledge (he had no telephone), he simply visited Governor James E. (Big Jim) Folsom in his office in the capitol. He explained that his "rocket-scientist" son and associates needed a mountain site. Big Jim picked up his phone and called the Director of State Parks. He told him to expect a visit from me and "...to give him anything he needs." Dad wrote me with this news.

By this time, probably Spring of 1955, I was interested in a young woman in Montgomery, so I decided to combine a visit with my parents, a date with the girl, and an appointment with the official. My appointment was with Mr. Sie

that our first choice, Inspiration Point, was in litigation. I chose the other site, which was larger and located in Monte Sano State Park. The terms I recall included a lease for \$1.00 per 99 years. Dr. Stuhlinger and I went to the site with the park manager and placed stakes around the site and a proposed access road. I do not recall how the deal was formalized. My memory may be fogged because later that year I proposed to and married that Montgomery lady. Our wedding was November 12, 1955, so I know all this happened before that date (which I must never forget!).

At one of the early meetings, which were then being held in a classroom at Huntsville High School, there was an unpleasant event. We were getting good response from the community in terms of money and building material donations. Mr. Angele brought a man to the meeting who proposed to make large donations. However, his proposal was contingent upon our amending our constitution and bylaws to specifically bar membership to Negroes. This shocked everybody. Someone commented that such a thing would be illegal. The man seemed surprised by our reluctance, so he loudly proclaimed that his support would be withdrawn unless there was a motion to exclude blacks. There was a moment of stunned silence until I said, "I move that we bar this man from membership". There were seconds from throughout the room and RCAA Chairman, Von

Braun, laughed and accepted my motion. By then the man's face was as red as his neck, and he quickly gathered up his papers and left the meeting with some ugly departing words. After the meeting, Mr. Angele told me I might have been more diplomatic, because the proposed donations were quite large. I told him that we must not tolerate such intolerance. We had no black members at that time, but with two colleges here we must not exclude them. Maybe old meeting minutes include this exchange, but since we never voted on my motion, it may have been excluded.

I was happy to have put in some physical labor on the observatory, instruments, and planetarium. I had not had access to a telescope since I built my own three-inch refractor around 1943 when I was about 12 years old. I first became interested in astronomy when I was in the third grade, 1938-39. My interest in rockets also goes back to that time. I built my first rockets around 1940; it is a wonder I didn't blow my hand off. That is another story.

Ted Paludan, retired from NASA 1979; Emeritus Professor, University of Tennessee Space Institute.

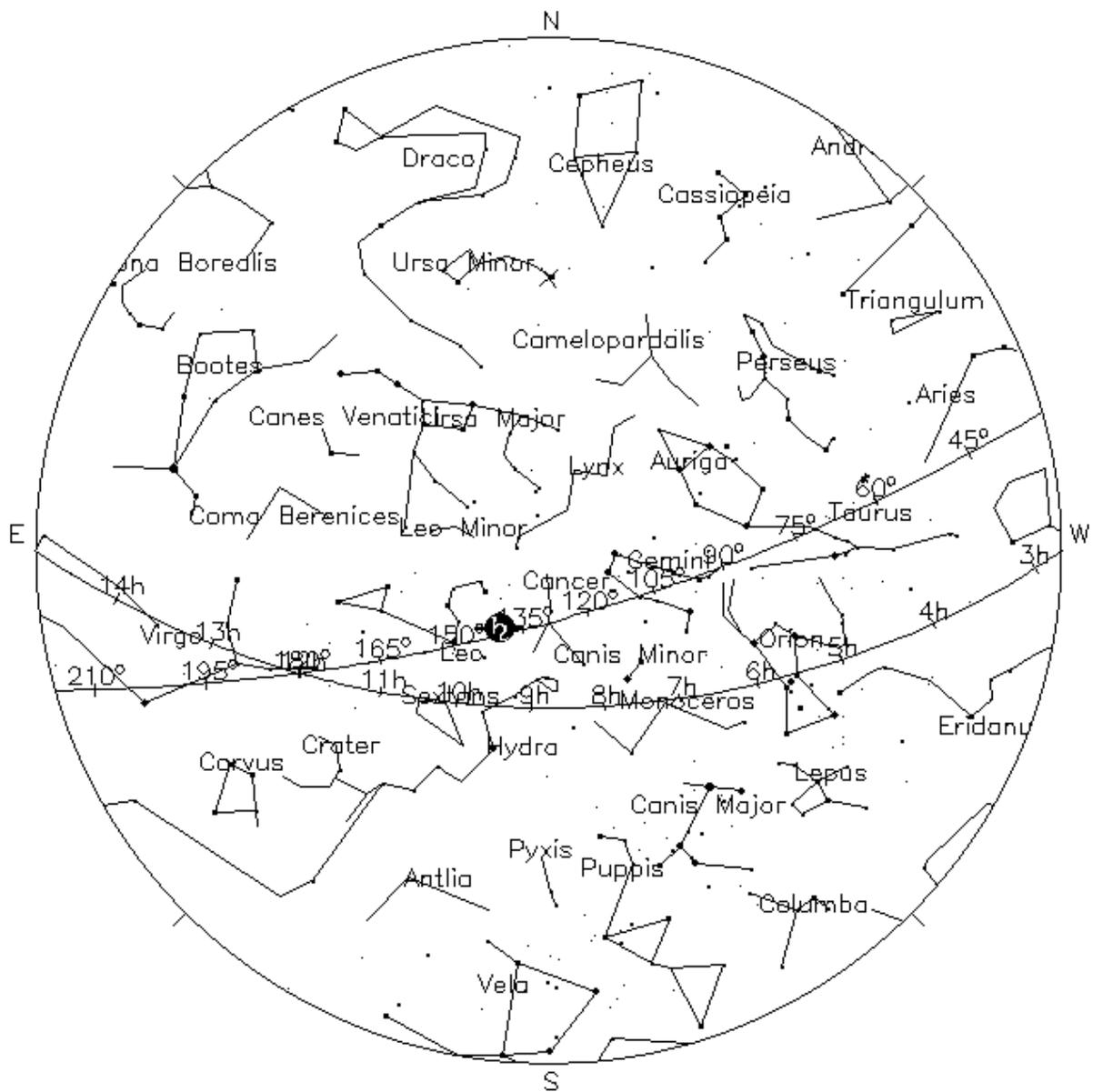


Member John Miele contributed this photo of Saturn he took from his back yard on February 17th. You can clearly see the Cassini division, some banding, and the polar hood. The image is formed from a stack of about 800 frames taken with a Toucam Pro 740 webcam and a C11 with IR suppression filter. Outstanding work, John!

The Night Sky for March, 2007

Here is the view at 9 PM in mid March, 2007, at 34° N Latitude, 86° W Longitude. Jupiter, the lowercase-h symbol, will be almost overhead, in Leo.

Map courtesy of John Walker and YourSky (<http://www.fourmilab.to/yoursky/>).



VBAS Calendar of Events, March through April

Saturday, March 3, 2007, 10 AM to 3 PM

Facilities Working Party

Help perform much-needed maintenance of the VBAS facilities.

Saturday, March 10, 2007, 7:30 PM

Planetarium Show: Plutoing Pluto

Presented by Dr. Bill Cooke

Pluto has long been recognized as the “oddball” of the Solar System. Considering it and other outer Solar System objects about its size, astronomers have been forced to reconsider the definition of a planet. Join MSFC astronomer **Bill Cooke** in a discussion of this new definition - pro and con - and express your thoughts.

Friday, March 16, 2007, 7:30 PM

Regular Monthly Meeting

Visitors are welcome at our members meetings! Dr. Rob Suggs of NASA's Meteoroid Environment Office will describe the lunar impact monitoring program at Marshall Space Flight Center.

March 16-18, 2007, starting Friday evening

Tennessee Spring Star Party 2007

Presented by: Cumberland Astronomical Society

Location: Fall Creek Falls State Park, near Pikeville, Tennessee. The park is 11 miles east of Spencer and 18 miles west of Pikeville. It may be entered from Highway 111 or Highway 30.

The purpose of TSSP is a gathering of like-minded individuals to learn, share, and experience Astronomy under dark skies. Planned activities include dark sky observing on Friday and Saturday nights, daytime speakers and programs, and a concert by John Serrie on the observing field Saturday night. Programs are entry level to professional level. There is no cost for this event, other than food and lodging, which each participant may arrange directly with the park service. Fall Creek Falls State Park has created a special star party package for lodging at the Inn and will offer group camping. You will find this special offer very affordable. (Call 1-800-250-8610 for details.) No camping or RVs will be allowed on the observing field, but nearby camping areas, cabins and rooms in the Inn are available. If you have questions, please contact Lloyd Watkins (watkinslk@comcast.net, 615-824-3005) or Allen Ball (mistal@bellsouth.net).

Website: <http://CumberlandAstronomicalSociety.org>

Saturday, March 17, 2007, 10 AM to 3 PM

Facilities Committee Meeting and Working Party

Help perform much-needed maintenance of the VBAS facilities, and attend this month's Facilities Committee Meeting.

Saturday, March 24, 2007, 7:30 PM

Easter Planetarium Show

Presented by Mitzi Adams

Why does Easter fall on a different date each year? Find out the relationship between the Full Moon, the Vernal Equinox,

and the date of Easter as MSFC astronomer *Mitzi*

VBAS Draft Member Meeting Minutes

VBAS Planetarium, 7:30 PM

Friday, February 16, 2006

by Steve Sloan

President Jeff Delmas introduced the meeting at 7:36 PM. Two guests introduced themselves, along with one new member, Bill Timberlane.

Nominating Committee

Vice President Michael Cowger announced that the first kickoff meeting of the Nominating Committee will be held on Monday evening, rain or shine. The Nominating Committee consists of Michael Cowger, James Brelsford, Mitzi Adams, and Gerry Conrad. Mitzi Adams can attend the kickoff meeting via conference call, but she won't be able to make it in person. The open officer positions are Vice President, Director of Facilities, and Director of Education and Programs. Jeff explained the Vice President/President/Past President cycle. The committee will send an email to the members' list after the first meeting, announcing the open positions.

Membership Renewal

The first annual membership renewal is coming up this month. Memberships expire on February 28. Linda will send a notice soon.

Spring Messier Marathon

The VBAS Spring Messier Marathon will be held on April 20, after the regular members' meeting. April 21 will be the rain day. The Messier Certificate is administered through the Astronomical League. They have many different certifications. To get the certificate, you can't use a Goto telescope.

Work Sessions

John Young asked Jeff to announce that tomorrow is a work session. They plan to rewire the power outlets under the projector panel, repair the power line behind the Stuhlinger, and replace the water heater. John found a five gallon water heater for \$200.

Restrooms

We have made a tentative agreement with architect Gerry Simpson. He will design the new bathroom addition, in exchange for a VBAS Life Membership. He recently made an external assessment of the building when no one was around. He created his proposal based on Autocad sketches we gave him.

We have a speaker lined up for the March members' meeting.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:51 PM.

After the meeting, Michael Cowger introduced the program. Richard Norman reported on C16 training. There are group training sessions going on now, and the next sessions are planned for fall. Members can ask for private training at any time of the year. Doug Horacek gave a show-and-tell about his collection of telescope eyepieces, and his experiences buying them.

Contributions to Via Stellaris

We welcome contributions to our newsletter that may be of interest to the astronomical community. Contributions are best sent by email to Steve Sloan at editor1@vbas.org. If you don't have access to email, you can send articles in either Word or ASCII format to Steve at 2110 Vilaret Dr, Huntsville, AL 35803.

Membership and Renewal

The VBAS currently has four categories of membership. All four include free admission to the planetarium shows; subscription to this newsletter; membership in the Astronomical League; and use of VBAS library and equipment. The four categories of membership, and the dues for each, are: REGULAR at \$24.00 per year, FAMILY at \$36.00 per year, STUDENT (must be full-time student) at \$12.00 per year, and LIFE at \$500.00. Newsletter Only is also available for \$12.00 per year. Membership renewal occurs for all members annually on March 1st.

All VBAS memberships will be renewed in March 2007. If you have sent us membership renewal money during the year, your membership has been renewed until March 2008. If you have questions regarding membership, please contact Linda Farnell.

Please send your renewal to the Membership Secretary at VBAS, P.O. Box 1142, Huntsville, AL 35807. Make checks payable to the Von Braun Astronomical Society. If your mailing or email address changes, please report the new address promptly to the Membership Secretary, Linda Farnell, at 534-5060, to avoid missing issues of *Via Stellaris*.

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Steve Sloan, Via Stellaris editor