



AU AstroNews

The Newsletter of the Astronomical Unit

February 2001

Sponsored by the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Wow!

Thanks to Dave Balch for his rousing presentation last month on his total solar eclipse experiences. It was standing room only in Farrand Hall to kick off the new year. Because of advanced publicity, including newspaper notices and a local radio show, we had many non-members show up for Dave's talk.

February's Speaker

At this month's meeting, Dr. Paul Fieseler of JPL will tell us about the ongoing **Galileo** mission to Jupiter – the probe itself, its accomplishments, and what lies in its future. He'll speak about Galileo's visual and infrared telescopic cameras, the discoveries from the past year or so (particularly on volcanic Io), how the spacecraft is commanded, and plans for the remainder of mission until Galileo is "crash-landed" in 2003.

Also, just in the past few weeks, Galileo has teamed with several amateur astronomers in Argentina and England to make what Dr. Fieseler believes will turn out to be a rather surprising and serendipitous discovery, which he hopes to be able to share us.

March's Speaker

At our March meeting, Chris Butler will present "**Our Little Corner of the Galaxy.**" Science and maritime artist Chris Butler is well known as an entertaining and informative lecturer. From astronomy to history, his career as an artist has given him a unique perspective on a wide variety of subjects. His slide presentation will feature a rich selection of Chris's famous art and humor. More details will appear in next month's newsletter.

Volunteers

We've had **great** volunteer turnouts since the last newsletter! (Please forgive any errors of omission, since I missed the Museum Star Party.) Thanks to Chris Baer, Warren Bitters, Greg & Gretchen Brinser, Laurence Harms, Arthur Harris, June Kelley, Kathryn MacCurry, Pat McPartlin, Edgar Ocampo, Helen Osenga, Wayne Rothermich, and Jim Williams for volunteering at the public and outreach events since the last newsletter. Even with Harding School getting rained out, we reached 599 pairs of eyeballs.

Last month's Star Party at the Museum featured large crowds and a crashed car! Don't miss the excitement of AU outreach!

Because of the large crowds last month, the "Palmer Pit" area got very congested, and one of the telescopes was knocked over. (It was an AstroScan, so it bounced!) For February's Star Party, Steve wants us to set up our scopes in a long row along the driveway to help with the visitor flow.

Help!! We have some **big** outreaches coming up that could use some extra scopes: **Hope School** on January 31, **Harding School** on February 7, **Adams School** on February 22 or 28 (in negotiation right now), and **Hollister School** on March 1. Contact Edgar at eocampo26@earthlink.net or 964-0914 to volunteer!

AU Events Coming Up

Friday, February 2, 7:30 PM – Monthly AU meeting in Farrand Hall at SBMNH. Hear about the Galileo mission!

Sunday, February 4, 7:30 PM – Outreach Observation for Camp Ramah Elderhostel in Ojai. Contact Edgar to help out.

Wednesday, February 7, 6:15 PM – Outreach Observation for Harding School. Last month we got rained out!

Saturday, February 10, 8:30 PM – SBMNH Monthly Public Star Party. Will it be as wild and crazy this month?

Friday, February 16, 7:00 PM – Monthly Westmont Public Observation.

Monday, February 19, 7:30 PM – Outreach Observation for Camp Ramah Elderhostel in Ojai.

Thursday, February 22 or Wednesday, February 28, 7:00(?) PM – Outreach Observation for Adams School, being arranged.

Saturday, February 24, dusk – Monthly Dark Sky Observation at the Gun Club and/or Figueroa Mountain. Contact Paul Winn at strg8zn@home.com for details.

Thursday, March 1, 6:30 PM – Outreach Observation for Hollister School.

Moon Mania Continues

In last month's issue, we mentioned that Saturn's retinue of moons had grown to 28. It didn't stop there! Two more iceballs have been detected in orbit around Saturn, and a whole swarm of new moons have been found around Jupiter, bringing its total to 28, and leapfrogging it past Uranus in moon population. Some of these babies are only 3 kilometers in diameter, and are being found with the Canada-France-Hawaii telescope using adaptive optics.

VCAS Hosts John Dobson

John Dobson will speak at the VCAS meeting on Friday, March 16, 2001, at 7:30 PM in the Forum

Auditorium of Moorpark College. If you missed his visit to the AU in February of 1999, you missed a real entertaining show, although it was more Dobsonian cosmology than amateur astronomy. If you like iconoclasts, don't miss John Dobson.

VCAS Astro Swap Meet

The Ventura County Astronomical Society is having a swap meet. Buy, sell, or trade astronomical stuff. It will be held at the Charles Temple Observatory on the campus of Moorpark College on Saturday, April 7, from 10 AM to 3 PM. For additional information, contact Mike Chibnik at (805) 522-7203, or chibnik@pacbell.net. Sorry Bill, but you'll have to leave some of their inventory available for other customers.

Mir Is Going

An unexplained loss of power aboard Mir has hastened plans to dock a Progress unmanned supply ship with the aging space station. The supply ship's thrusters will be used to command a controlled destructive reentry into the ocean off Australia in early March. The power outage caused Mir's gyroscopes to fail, and Mir's small thrusters are now being used to maintain the station's flight attitude. The thrusters have a limited fuel supply, which makes the rendezvous with the Progress critical. An uncontrolled descent could allow large hunks of debris from the station to survive the fiery plunge, and impact on inhabited territory.

Messier Marathon

This year's fun-filled Messier Marathon will be held on Saturday, March 24, from dusk to dawn the next day. Hunting down all 110 Messier catalog entries is much easier if you're organized, and search in a systematic fashion. Come to the Gun Club well prepared with a set of Telrad circle finder charts and a checkoff list made available by Joe Mayenschein on his website at

<http://www.qsl.net/wb9sbd/marathon.html>

The list is in two formats: M\$ Word (.doc) and Corel WordPerfect (.wpd). The finder charts are in Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) form. The documents have the suggested order in which to search, as well as locations, magnitudes, and level of difficulty.

For those without easy web access, we'll have Messier Marathon observing aids available at the February and March meetings.

Oh, SETI Can You See?

The Optical SETI Telescope, an approach first championed by Nobel prize winning scientist Charles Townes, of the University of California at Berkeley, will begin searching the skies early next year. The 1.8 meter scope is being built in Harvard, Massachusetts, and is meant to search for communications involving pulses of laser light.

For years, various SETI projects have scanned the heavens at radio wavelengths. So far, no extraterrestrial messages have been detected. Some experts think we have been looking for the wrong kind of message, and that a technologically advanced civilization might be more likely to communicate using pulsed laser beams, rather than radio.

The new telescope will scan the Northern hemisphere's sky once every 200 clear nights in search of laser pulses. It will be equipped with a special CCD camera having an array of 1,024 ultra-fast detectors which can spot flashes of light as short as a nanosecond, or billionth of a second.

Professor Paul Horowitz, of Harvard University, the project leader, states that current technology could generate collimated laser pulses that would appear up to 5,000 times brighter than our sun, as seen by a distant civilization in the direction of the beam. Interstellar laser communication is thus feasible, at least if you know where to aim your beam.

The project is being funded by the Planetary Society.

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Current annual membership rates are:


Single \$15 Family \$25

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