

## Louisville Astronomical Society History

### Founded: October 24, 1933

On March 5, 1933, the first day in office for new president, Franklin Roosevelt, a group of U of L astronomy students met at the home of their astronomy professor Dr. Walter Lee Moore ( LAS President 1933-1943, 43-44 and 53-54) to discuss formation of an amateur astronomy society in Louisville. That year two other groups of young people were studying astronomy in Louisville. Charles Strull (LAS president 1935-36) was conducting public astronomy programs at the YMCA and O.W. McCarty was teaching astronomy at the Louisville Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

On October 24, 1933, these three groups (Including Dr. James G. Baker (student) and his future wife Elizabeth Breitenstein) met at Doctor Moore's home on Finley Hill off New Cut Road to form the Louisville Astronomical Society. *The LAS was formed to promote interest in astronomy and to advance public interest in astronomy.* Dr. Moore became the first president and dues were set at 25 cents.

In 1934, the LAS went on the air when LAS Secretary Mildred Shapinsky began fifteen minute astronomy programs on Sunday evenings. In the early 1930's, the LAS initiated a lifelong tradition of public service by conducting countless public observations at Dr. Moore's home, at Iroquois Park and at Cherokee Park. Over 600 attended the club's observation of Finsler's Comet in 1937. The club also took observations outside of Louisville such as its 1937 program in Owensboro which drew over 500 people.

In the winter of 1935-36, Dr. Moore conducted public astronomy lectures at U of L in order to raise money for an LAS Observatory. \$125.00 was needed, enough to purchase a large 20 5/8 inch mirror blank from the Corning Glass Company. The blank cost \$84.00 and it was taken from the glass used for the 200 inch Hale Reflector at Mt. Palomar. The blank arrived in 1936 and the long process of grinding and figuring the mirror began.

In 1936, rising costs necessitated a huge increase in dues from 25 cents to one dollar.

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The LAS was incorporated in 1936 and adopted, as an additional purpose, the construction of a public observatory for the Louisville community. Initial plans for the observatory were developed in 1938.

Although WW2 delayed construction of the observatory, LAS members were involved in the construction of a smaller observatory on the U of L campus during the war years. In 1945 Dr. Moore, Stanley Thorpe (LAS President 1939-40) and others completed the construction of a smaller observatory housing a 12" Alvin Clark reflector. The observatory was available for use by U of L astronomy students and on numerous occasions , by the public. Public programs were routinely conducted by LAS members.

After World War II, LAS members resumed their efforts to complete the 12 inch telescope and build a suitable domed observatory on Finley Hill. Others who were critical to the construction of the mounting, dome and observatory were Thorpe, Lewis Aker (LAS president 1937-38, 47-48) William D. Johnson (LAS President 1954-55, 76-78) and Kenneth McElwain (LAS President 1948-49).

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In 1953, younger members of the LAS formed the Louisville Junior Astronomical Society to serve area amateurs between 12 and 18 years of age. The LJJAS flourished for more than 20 years under the sponsorship of Virginia Lippard (LAS President 1957-58) and produced a number of professional astronomers and physicists. Incredibly, the LJJAS produced 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> place finishers in the prestigious Westinghouse Science Talent Search- Daniel Kleinman 3<sup>rd</sup> Place-1962, J. Richard Gott III 2<sup>nd</sup> Place-1965, Larry Goad (4<sup>th</sup> place- 1966) This was out of 20,000 annually.

Alumni of the LJJAS include the aforementioned J. Richard Gott III professor of Astrophysics at Princeton University ( LJJAS President 1964-65) John F. Kielkopf, Professor of Physics, U of L , (president of LAS 1965-66, 73-74), Edward F. Novak, Senior Physicist, Mound Laboratories, Larry Goad, Adoptive Optic Research, National Optical Astronomy Observatories (Kitt Peak). Dr. Gott was named the nation's outstanding junior astronomer in 1963 and received the Robert J. Trumpler Award for best doctoral thesis in astrophysics in 1975.

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In 1955, the LAS Observatory was completed and dedicated as the Star Lane Observatory in a public ceremony. The dedication was held during the 1955 convention of the Mid-East Region of the Astronomical League being hosted by the LAS. At that convention, the LAS took a leading role in the creation of a new region for the League, the Great Lakes Region, of which the LAS is still a member.

Owned and operated by the LAS, the observatory's 21 inch reflector possessed light gathering equal to 4,600 human eyes. During its two decades of use, the Star Lane Observatory became the hub of public programs and observations conducted by the LAS and LJJAS. More than 500 people and members of the public attended a Mars observation conducted during a favorable opposition of that planet in 1956.

The observatory was kept in constant use by the members of the LJJAS who were given keys to the facility upon passing a test on the use and care of the instrument. The educational benefit afforded by those teens is impossible to measure, in having the unfettered use of a 21 inch reflector.

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In 1958, the LAS celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a week long program including public observations Star Lane, lectures at the Louisville Free Public Library and a banquet at the Brown Hotel. The LAS hosted conventions of the Great Lakes Region of the Astronomical League in 1962, 1964 and 1969.

The 1969 conference was chaired entirely by members of the junior organization. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the LJJAS conducted astronomy programs at the libraries an under-12 known as the Louisville Stargazers.

In 1963, Dr. Moore gave the first series of lectures at the new Rauch Planetarium located on the U of L campus. Since then, LAS members have given frequent public programs at the planetarium and the new one which was built on the campus behind the parking garage.

In 1972, the Star Lane observatory was disassembled due to overwhelming light pollution at the Freys Hill site. It was donated to U of L where it served as the primary scope in the Walter Lee Moore observatory. It is currently in storage at the observatory, having been replaced by a 24" Plane Wave.

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In 1980, the LAS initiated plans to construct a new LAS observatory at a dark sky site. These plans were postponed due to the untimely death of LAS President Steve Lengel, age 26. At the time, the LAS had been granted an extraordinary grant by the Perkin Fund and had raised more than \$45,000 toward the construction of a new observatory.

Virginia C. Lippard (LAS President 1957-58, LNAS Sponsor 1953-1971) received the Astronomical League award, the highest award the society can give for outstanding contributions to astronomy at the national and international level. She was nominated on the basis of the many outstanding achievements of the former juniors at the national and international levels.

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On October 2, 1993, the LAS celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a banquet for over 120 members and supporters at the University of Louisville. The two day event featured talks by Dr. J. Richard Gott of Princeton University and John Kielkopf of the University of Louisville. Distinguished Achievement Awards were given to each speaker who are both honorary members of the society and to Dr. James G. Baker, the LAS's first vice president. Distinguished Achievement Awards and other recognitions were given to more than 20 other present and past members who have contributed to the long and successful history of the organization. This event was the largest gathering of current and former LAS members, and of amateur and professional astronomers in the club's history.

LAS members stay heavily involved in the scientific community. The LAS annually sponsored special awards at both the Louisville Regional Science and the Kentucky High School Olympiad. The late Frank Lovell, Joel Gwinn and Chuck Allen are judges and board members for the Louisville Regional Science Fair. Chuck and Sally Lambert also served as chair and vice chair of the League's National Young Astronomer Award which annually presents a \$3,000 telescope prize to the outstanding high school age astronomer in the United States.

In 1994, Doug Haggard was elected Trustee and Chuck Allen was elected Vice President of the Astronomical League, a 14,000 member national federation of over 220 astronomy societies throughout the United States. Tom Rausch and Scott Conner served as Representative and Vice-Chairman, respectively of the League's 1200 member Great Lakes Region. Chuck, Tom, and Sally have also organized and run highly successful astrophoto, CCD and scope design contests through 1991 at the Great Lakes through 1991.

The LAS conducts an annual observation at Patoka Lake in Indiana drawing 200+ annually, 8,000 since 1985. LAS reached its highest membership level in 2023 at 235. In August, 1993, the LAS set an all-time attendance record when over 3,000 people attended the club's tv-advertised Perseid meteor observation at Long Run Park.

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### Curby History

From 1980 to 2000, further discussion took place about the site of an observatory. After considering both sides of the Ohio, it was decided that the location would be in southern Indiana. NASA satellite imagery was used to find the darkest spot within fifty miles of downtown Louisville.

That place turned out to be forty acres on Curby Road in Curby, Indiana, fifty miles from downtown. We call it Curby after the closest small town but its official name is The James G. Baker Center for Astronomy to honor one of our founders. The forty acre LAS James G. Baker Center for Astronomy Observatory site was purchased in the year 2000 for \$43,000. with funds from the Perkins-Elmer Fund and money raised locally.

It is four ten acre tracts of contiguous land with four acres cleared for the observatory, multi-purpose building, camping and overnight viewing. The remaining 36 acres are wooded to block out ambient light from nearby farms. The criteria were to find a property within fifty miles of downtown Louisville that was at least a 4.0 on the Bortle scale of sky brightness. NASA satellite images were used for this purpose. The land was found by Mike Plaiss and Brian Sieg.

From 2000 to 2003, the infrastructure was put into place including septic, electricity and water. The observatory foundation was poured and construction on the roll-off structure was begun with completion in 2004. Shortly after completing the observatory, we received a 7" Meade refractor, a set of 2 inch eyepieces and a 10 foot Observadome as a donation from Alan Kane all of which we sold for \$7600. Alan generously gave us the use of his Asia Link office building at Reamers Road and Lagrange Road and it became the first Urban Astronomy Center. We used it for meetings, scope work shop, scout instruction and observations until they decided to sell the property. We had to move. We had several yard sales to clear out inventory and we began looking for another location.

### **UAC Established**

We found one quickly- the Root Cellar building at E.P. "Tom" State Park. At 2000 square feet, this former pottery shop was perfect for us. After painting the steps and interior, we had our first star party in May of 2007. Fifty guests enjoyed the UAC. We were on our way!

Star parties back then were very similar to today's events. The field at the UAC would fill up, sometimes with a dozen or more scopes. Many times, the crowds would get up to 250 guests. That was a good ratio, 1 scope to 25 guests.

We had no idea how powerful the UAC was until one year in the future. In 2013, the board once again decided to go for the Astronomy Magazine Out of This World award even though we had tried for four years prior. The competition was tough.

The year before was won by the New Hampshire Astronomical Society, a club that put telescopes in libraries.

Our current program with the Louisville Free Public Library System is based on the NHAS model. We now have ten scopes out. Congratulations to Tom Bibb for getting it all started and to all who have attended the library star parties.

The **Out of This World Award** was awarded based on service hours and projects. I had been encouraged to keep entering by the editors. So, on the 2013 award application the Urban Astronomy Center was listed as a jumping off place for the 67 members who contributed hundreds of hours of time to put on more than 100 events. You can imagine the joy and gratitude we felt when all of our hard work paid off as we were proclaimed the winner of this prestigious award for 2013.

***That's right. We were proclaimed as the best outreach program in the universe!*** The UAC gave us the ability to do presentations using a large projector for years and then switching to a purchased 75 inch TV and large speakers supplied by the late Don Ernst at both Curby and the UAC. These took place at meetings and included Jet Propulsion Laboratory speakers like Tracy Drain from JPL. Today's UAC is much the same. The equipment room has been moved to the center room of the three and has been refilled with used scopes due to deaths in the LAS family.

Over its 90-year existence, the LAS has dedicated itself to the provision of programs and observations for the public. The LAS has conducted more than 2700 separate public programs and observations including adult education courses, Boy Scout and Girl Scout merit badge programs, public parks observations, National Astronomy Day Programs, state park programs and lectures on university campuses.

During its 20-year existence, the LHAS consisting of junior high and high school age students, conducted more than 200 public programs for schools, churches and scout groups and taught regular weekend astronomy programs for an under-12 group known as the LAS Stargazers.

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### **Many great members who shared the Night Sky with us have passed away.**

Here is a partial list-

**Ed Sharp-** Founder of the **Big Four Bridge Observing Group**. Ed and his volunteers Chris Allred, Steve Swinney, Ted Erne, Tom Empson, and many others shared the night sky with tens of thousands.

**Don Ernst-** One of our best sidewalk astronomers, I can still hear him asking if I wanted to look through his 16 inch scope. Nancy is donating it to the club.

**Don Tabbutt** – Former Board Chairman, his board was responsible for getting the observatory built.

**Richard Stearman-** Great teacher, very intelligent man producing excellent astrophotography.

**Frank Lovell-** Past president. Mensa club member.

**Larry Loucka-** Great presenter and past Observatory Director.

**Don Spain-** LAS Chairman of the Board, Renaissance Man, Naturalist, Observer, Author and Artist.

**Charles Keeton-** an enthusiastic member. His donated scope bought \$1,200 of new equipment with the proceeds.

**Mike Murphy-** One of our best sidewalk astronomy observers. He was always ready to set up his scope.

**Don Tabbutt** – Former Board Chairman, his board was responsible for getting the observatory built.

**David Arnold-** Another reliable LAS member.

**Dennis Fewell- Great Sidewalk Astronomer**

**May they all rest in peace.**

**John Dobson Visit**

In September of 2007, it was our pleasure to host John Dobson, yes **THE** John Dobson, at Roger and Dee Curry's home. John appeared at many locations during his stay including the Urban Astronomy Center, U of L Observatory, Crosby Middle School After School Astronomy Club and on the sidewalks along Bardstown Road in a Mile Of Scopes. He sure had a sparkle in his eyes as he experienced sidewalk astronomy with over 2000 guests attending.

**8/20-8/22 2017 Black Out at Big Bear Solar Eclipse Event.**

What started out as a scout event, turned into a 100-society member two-night travel program at Big Bear Resort on the west shore of Kentucky Lake, a 500 student lecture, 50 girl scouts at their camp site on Kentucky Lake and 400 boy scouts and family members at their camp.

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