

## FRAC'S First Year

**By Bill Warren**

**A Club of Our Own.** I got started in astronomy in December, 1993, when my wife bought me a 3-1/2" Meade refractor for Christmas. I spent the next 2-1/2 years observing on my own in my backyard. During that time, it never occurred to me that there might be anyone else in the area who was interested in astronomy.

Then, in April, 1996, I saw an article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that mentioned that the Atlanta Astronomy Club was meeting next month at the Fernbank Science Center. I decided to go.

At the meeting, AAC president **Art Russell** asked visitors to stand and identify themselves. I told them I was Bill Warren, from Griffin, and I joined AAC that night.

After the meeting, two men came up to me and introduced themselves. One was **Larry Higgins**, AAC's observing chairman and a Griffin resident; the other was a friend of his, **Ken Walburn** of McDonough. Larry suggested that I ride with them to the meetings.

During the next few months, we talked often about starting a local astronomy club for people who didn't want to fight Atlanta's traffic to attend AAC meetings or travel 60 miles to the S to attend meetings of the "Macon club" – the old Middle Ga. Astronomical Society. It was Larry's idea and I liked it, but Ken and I didn't think we were experienced enough in astronomy to start a club of our own. We gave in, though, when Larry said he'd handle the details such as finding meeting and observing sites and guest speakers. We agreed to meet in January to form the club.

**The Organizational Meeting.** Larry, Ken and I met at my apartment at 638 Pine Hill Road in Griffin on Jan. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1997. The first order of business was *selecting a name for the club*. I suggested the "Griffin Astronomy Club" – clever name, huh? – but Larry thought we needed a name that would better describe the regional nature of our club; after all, we would be drawing our membership, not just from Griffin, but from the entire area between Atlanta and Macon. Larry suggested that we call it the **Flint River Astronomy Club**. I agreed to serve as the newsletter editor, and named it the *Flint River Observer*.

Our second order of business was to define the goals of our new club. We listed three goals: to teach our members what they need to know about astronomy to enjoy their membership in FRAC; to educate the public through public observings; and to have fun.

Our third order of business at that meeting was to devise a set of bylaws. I agreed to do that, basing them largely on models provided by the Astronomical League.

Larry wanted to include a provision in the bylaws whereby the club's founders would have veto power regarding changes in the club's direction after the leadership changed hands and we were no longer in charge. I agreed with him in principle, since we didn't want to risk our club evolving into something other than what we originally intended for it to be. (You have to remember here that this was a planning session, a formation meeting. There were just the three of us, and none of us had any idea whether the club would make it, or what it would grow into if it survived.) I forgot to include the provision in the bylaws, though, so it wasn't in there when the bylaws were passed by voice vote at our first meeting. It isn't in there now, or in the amendments.

Our final order of business at the Jan. 16<sup>th</sup> organizational meeting was to name a slate of officers to nominate for election at FRAC's inaugural meeting. Since there were only three of us and we had no idea whether anyone else would be interested in attending our first meeting or joining FRAC, we decided to nominate Larry for President, me for Vice President and Ken for Secretary/Treasurer. We set the annual dues at \$10 a year.

**The First Meeting.** FRAC's first meeting was held on Thursday, Feb. 13<sup>th</sup>, at the Boy Scout hut in Sunnyside. Eighteen people attended the meeting, and all of them joined that night. Seven of those charter members are still in FRAC: **me, Ken Walburn, Smitty, John Wallace, Keith Cox and Tim & Celia Astin.**

Our officer nominees were elected unanimously and the bylaws passed likewise. **Melanie Handy** was named our first Alcor.

Our first program consisted of Larry's using a small overhead projector to show photos of familiar deep-sky objects. I was so inexperienced at the time that practically the only objects I recognized were the **Sombrero Galaxy** and **Ring Nebula.**

After the meeting, we went out into a field adjacent to the Boy Scout hut, set up our telescopes and looked at the sky together for the first time as a club.

### **March '97. Highlights included:**

\*Our first issue of the *Observer*;

\*Our first article: **Smitty's** "*News Flash: FRAC Members Will Display Universe to Public*";

\*Our first article series began: **Art Russell's** year-long, Messier-oriented "*Beginner's Star Hops*";

\*Our first official club observing was held on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1997, at Sunnyside;

\*Our March 13<sup>th</sup> meeting at the Boy Scout hut featured guest speaker **Jerry Armstrong** of the AAC. Jerry, the astroartist who painted a space scene as a doorprize at the 2001 PSSG, spoke on "*Comets*";

\*On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 16 days after our first club observing, **Melanie Handy's** younger brother **Gary**, who had attended that observing and enjoyed it immensely, suffered a heart attack and died while playing golf in Griffin.

Also, our first publicity: **Larry Higgins** represented FRAC on Griffin's WCOM-TV on March 8<sup>th</sup>, and on Griffin radio station WKEU on March 13<sup>th</sup>. A reporter from the *Griffin Daily News* interviewed **Ken Walburn** and **me** at our March meeting, and his article appeared shortly thereafter. A photo taken by a *Griffin Daily News* photographer at the March meeting appeared in the paper's "Camera On The Go" section on March 21<sup>st</sup>.

### **April '97.**

\*At the March observing, **Keith Cox** told us that his father owned some farmland 3 miles W of Williamson that contained a level, grassy area that would be good for observing. Larry and I checked it out, liked what we saw, and asked Keith to ask his dad if FRAC could start using his landing strip for our observings one or two evenings a month. Mr. Cox agreed, and we had our first observing at what we referred to as simply "Williamson" on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1997. It was a special **Comet Hale-Bopp** observing, and drew 27 participants, including 13 visitors.

\*Our first three public observings were cancelled in April due to bad weather.

\***Keith Cox** was named our first club Librarian, although we had no books in our library.

\*In April, FRAC moved its meetings to the media center at Beaverbrook Elementary School. We established the night following our Thursday meetings as a monthly observing night for BB students and parents.

\*Our speaker on April 10th was **Dr. Richard Schmude**, physics and astronomy professor at Gordon College. His topic was “*Mars*”.

### **May ‘97.**

\*FRAC officially became a Partner-In-Education to Beaverbrook

\***Smitty** was named FRAC’s first Observing Chairman;

\*We conducted our first two public observings, for Beaverbrook and for the Amer. Cancer Society’s “Relay For Life” at Orrs Elementary School;

\***Neal & Cindy Wellons** joined FRAC on May 8<sup>th</sup>;

\*Our speaker on May 8<sup>th</sup> was AAC’s **Rich Jakiel**, his topic “*The Virgo Cluster*”. Rich brought three books with him to donate to our club library.

\*I began referring to our “Williamson” site as “**Cox Field**” in the newsletter and elsewhere, and the name caught on;

### **June ‘97.**

\*”Hi, I’m Suzy. My mama’s in heaven.” Those words greeted us at our July meeting. They came from 9-year-old **Suzy Wellons**. Her mother **Cindy** – Neal’s wife -- died in a car accident on June 11<sup>th</sup>, slightly more than a month after joining FRAC. We didn’t find out about it until that July meeting.

\***Art Russell**, the AAC president, was our speaker on June 12th. His topic was “Star Hopping.”

\*FRAC officially became an affiliate of the Astronomical League in June ’97.

### **July ‘97.**

\*Our speaker on July 10<sup>th</sup> was AAC Observing Chairman **Phil Sacco**. His talk was on astrophotography.

\***Dr. Richard Schmude** joined FRAC.

### **August ‘97.**

\*BB principal **Ken Bozeman** authorized the purchase of a 6” Orion Dobsonian reflector for the school;

\*In lieu of a club meeting in August, we scheduled a trip to Villa Rica to observe with the AAC and see their 20” telescope. It rained, so we cancelled the trip.

\*Thirty members and guests showed up at Cox Field on Aug. 12<sup>th</sup> for our special **Perseids Meteor Shower** observing – a record that still stands

today as being the largest single gathering for any club-oriented FRAC observing or meeting.

### **Sept '97.**

\*We showed telescopes and talked about astronomy at Beaverbrook PTA's annual "Eatin', Greetin' Meetin'," a barbecue supper held in the school cafeteria on Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. That event took the place of our regular club meeting, since it was on the same night at the same time.

### **October '97.**

\*The speaker at our Oct. 9<sup>th</sup> meeting was AAC's **Jerry Armstrong**. This time, his topic was "Vesta and the June Meteors." **Ken Walburn** said, "Is that anything like Gladys Knight and the Pips?" We found it thrilling to hold in our hands meteorites that were known to be half a billion years older than the Earth itself!

\***Mike Stuart** joined FRAC in October '97.

### **November '97.**

\***Ron Harrison**, a teacher at the Griffin Branch of Macon College, was the guest speaker at our meeting on Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>. His topic: "*Weather In Space*." "Probably cloudy," someone grumbled.

### **December '97.**

\*FRAC entered a float in Griffin's annual Christmas Parade on Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>.

\***Rich Jakiel** was back for a return visit as guest speaker at our Dec. 11<sup>th</sup> club meeting. His topic was "*The History of Observing Spiral Galaxies*"; and

\***Tom & Katie Moore** joined FRAC in Dec. '97.

### **January 1998.**

\***Phil Sacco** spoke at our meeting on Jan. 8<sup>th</sup>. His topics were cold weather observing and "*Using Star Atlases*"; and

\***Smitty** contributed a planisphere at the Jan. meeting to be used as our first door prize.

## **Summary of FRAC's First Year**

At our January, 1997 organizational meeting, **Larry, Ken & I** expressed the hope that, through hard work, FRAC's first year might expand

our club enrollment to as many as, say, 8-10 members. Eighteen people showed up for our first meeting, and all of them joined as charter members of FRAC. Over the next 11 months, we doubled in size, with 36 members enrolled as of Feb., 1998.

We had seven different guest speakers that first year, including several who addressed FRAC twice and six of whom were, had been or would become officers of the AAC. Including the Feb. talk by **Doug Chesser**, *four* of our meetings featured speakers who either were or would become presidents of AAC. At the same time, all three of FRAC's officers were members of the AAC, and **Larry Higgins** had been AAC's Observing Chairman when I met him. Even before I met **Smitty**, he was deeply involved in AAC and its activities. So the ties between our club and theirs was strong from the first, as I pointed out in a Dec., 1997 article entitled "*FRAC and AAC: The Best of Two Worlds.*"

**FAST FORWARD** to May 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999, and the **Griffin Mayfling Arts & Crafts Festival**. The crowds were good, and FRAC had a booth set up. We got two members from Mayfling that year.

From the Aug., 1999 "President's Message" in the *Observer* by **Smitty**: "I want to give a hearty FRAC welcome to our newest members, **Steve & Dawn Knight**. Armed with a 4-1/2" equatorial reflector, the Knights are proving to be just the kind of members we like to attract, namely, enthusiastic observers who enjoy spending time outside under the stars. Although they've been members for less than a month, Dawn & Steve logged more time at Cox Field in July than all but three of our members."

And the rest, as they say, is history.