

FRAC's First Year

by Bill Warren

A Club of Our Own

I got started in astronomy in December, 1993, when my wife Louise bought me a 2-1/2-in. refractor for Christmas. I took it outside that night, set it up and looked at Orion Nebula for about three hours because that was all I could find. Then I went back inside and said, "I need a bigger telescope." The next day we exchanged it for a 3-1/2-in. refractor.

I used that 'scope for 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.

One evening in April, 1996, Louise and I were visiting a couple we knew. The lady said her next door neighbor had just bought a telescope, and he was probably using it right now in his backyard. She said she'd take us over and introduce me to him.

There were two guys, the telescope owner and a deep-voiced guy who sounded like he knew a lot about telescopes. He was Larry Higgins.

Larry said he was a member of the Atlanta Astronomy Club, and he asked me if I'd like to go with him to an AAC meeting. I said yes, and he said we'd stop by McDonough to pick up a friend of his, Ken Walburn, who was also an AAC member. I went, joined the AAC, and we started carpooling to the meetings.

During the next few months, we talked often about starting a local astronomy club for people who, like us, didn't want to fight Atlanta's traffic to attend AAC meetings or drive 60 miles to Macon to attend meetings of the Middle Ga. Astronomical Society. Starting a new astronomy club was Larry's idea and

Ken and I liked it, but we didn't think we were experienced enough in astronomy to start a club. 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. 16th, 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 Larry 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 in order to enjoy their membership in FRAC; to educate the public through public observings; and to have fun. Those are still FRAC's goals, and they appear in the bylaws.

Our third order of business at that meeting was to devise a set of bylaws. I agreed to write them, and I based them on a model provided for beginning clubs by the Astronomical League (A. L.).

Our final order of business at the Jan. 16th organizational meeting was to name a slate of officers for nomination 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.

The First Meeting: Thursday, Feb. 13, 1997

Larry put an announcement in the *Griffin Daily News* that a new astronomy club would be holding its first meeting in Sunnyside, a little town just north of Griffin, on Feb. 13th. (We chose our monthly meeting dates as the 2nd Thurs. of every month in order to avoid conflict with the Atlanta Astronomy Club meetings, which were on Fridays.)

FRAC's first meeting was held at the boy scout hut at Sunnyside. Eighteen people attended the meeting, and all of them joined the club that night. Our officer slate was unanimously voted in, the bylaws were read and approved, and the members voted unanimously for FRAC to join the A. L. **Melanie Handy** was named our first Alcor.

We also voted to set our annual dues at \$10. It stayed that way until the A. L. raised their dues from \$2.50 to \$5.00 for each member, so we raised ours to \$15.

Our first program consisted of Larry using a small overhead projector to show photos of familiar deep sky objects. I was so inexperienced at the time that practically the only object I recognized was Ring Nebula.

After the meeting, we went out to 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, 1997:

*Our first issue of *The Observer*;

*Our first article: **Smitty's** "News Flash: FRAC Members Will Display Universe to Public." (It was rained out.)

*Our first article series began: AAC president Art Russell's monthly year-long, Messier-oriented "Beginners' Star Hops";

*Our first official club observing was held on March 7, 1997, at Sunnyside.

*Our meeting on March 13th at the boy scout hut featured guest speaker Jerry Armstrong of the AAC. Jerry is an excellent astroartist: he painted five scenes of the Wetumpka meteor impact that appear in the Chamber of Commerce building in Wetumpka, AL, and he painted a space scene as a doorprize for the 2001 Peach State Star Gaze. Jerry is also an expert on meteorites. His topic was "Comets."

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

April, 1997

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

*Keith Cox was named our first club Librarian, although we had no books. Members were urged to look through their astronomy resources and see what they might contribute to our library.

*In April, FRAC moved its meetings to the media center at Beaverbrook Elementary School in Griffin. (My wife Louise was the librarian, so we had somewhere to store our club library when we got some books.) We established the night following our Thursday club meetings as a monthly observing night for BB students and parents.

*Our speaker on April 10th was Dr. Richard Schmude, a professor at Gordon State College. His topic was “Mars.”

May, 1997

*FRAC 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 in Griffin. (Four previously scheduled public observings were clouded out.)

*Our speaker on May 8th was the 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 observing site at “Cox Field” in the newsletter, and the name stuck. We used Cox Field for about 15 years.

June, 1997

*FRAC officially became an affiliate of the Astronomical League.

Our speaker on June 12th was the AAC president, Art Russell. He talked about “Stargazing.”

July, 1997

*Our speaker on July 19th was AAC observing chairman **Phil Sacco**. His talk was on astrophotography.

August, 1997

*This was the only month in FRAC's history that we didn't have a meeting. In lieu of a meeting, we scheduled a trip to Villa Rica to observe with the AAC and see their 20" telescope. It rained, so we cancelled the trip and the meeting.

*Thirty members and guests showed up at Cox Field on Aug. 12th for our special Perseids Meteor Shower observing. It was an attendance record for any FRAC event that stood for more than a decade.

September, 1997

*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. 11th. That event served as our club meeting, since it was on the same night at the same time.

October, 1997

*The speaker at our Oct. 9th club meeting was AAC's **Jerry Armstrong**. His topic was "Vesta and the June Meteors." In the Nov. newsletter I had Ken asking, "Vesta and the June Meteors? Is that anything like Gladys Knight and the Pips?" It was thrilling to hold in our hands meteorites that were half a billion years older than Earth itself.

***Mike Stuart** joined FRAC in Oct., 1997.

November, 1997

***Ron Harrison**, a teacher at the griffin Branch of Macon College, was the guest speaker at our meeting on Nov. 13th. Ron's topic was "Weather In Space."

We'd had several observings clouded out lately, so Larry grumbled, "Probably cloudy."

December, 1997

*FRAC entered a float in Griffin's annual Christmas Parade on Dec. 7th.

***Rich Jakiel** was back for a return visit as guest speaker at our Dec. 11th club meeting. His topic was: "The History of Observing Spiral Galaxies."

***Tom & Katie Moore** joined FRAC in Dec., 1997.

January, 1998

***Phil Sacco** spoke at our meeting on Jan. 8th. His topics were "Cold Weather Observing" and "Using Star Atlases."

***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 said that, through hard work, FRAC's membership might eventually expand to as many as 12-15 members. Eighteen people showed up for our first meeting, and all of them joined as charter members.

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., 1998 talk by new AAC president **Doug Chesser**, *four* of our meetings featured speakers who either were or would become presidents of the AAC.

At the same time, all three of FRAC's officers were members of the AAC, and Larry was AAC's vice president of observing when I met him. And even before I met Smitty, he was deeply involved in the AAC. So the ties between our club and theirs was strong from the beginning, as I pointed out in a Dec., 1997 article entitled "FRAC and the AAC: The Best of Two Worlds."

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