

THE FLINT RIVER OBSERVER

NEWSLETTER OF THE FLINT RIVER
ASTRONOMY CLUB
An Affiliate of the Astronomical League

Vol. 14, No. 1 **March, 2010**

Officers: President, **Bill Warren** (770)229-6108, warren7804@bellsouth.net; Vice President, **Larry Higgins**; Secretary-Treasurer, **Steve Bentley**.

Board of Directors: **Tom Moore**; **Joel Simmons**; **Tom Danei**; and **Felix Luciano**.

Alcor/Webmaster, **Tom Moore**; Ga. Sky View Coordinator, **Steve Bentley**; Observing Coordinator, **Dwight Harness**; NASA Contact, **Felix Luciano**; Event Photographer, **Tom Danei**; and Newsletter Editor, **Bill Warren**.

Club mailing address: 1212 Everee Inn Rd., Griffin, GA 30224. Web page: www.flintriverastronomy.org.

Please notify **Bill Warren** if you have a change of home address, telephone no. or e-mail address.

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Club Calendar. Tues., Mar. 2: rainout date (if necessary) for Jackson Road Elem. (Griffin) observing, 6:30 p.m.; **Thurs., Mar. 11:** club meeting (7:30 p.m., Stuckey Bldg. on the UGa-Griffin campus); **Fri.-Sat., Mar. 12-13:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Fri.-Sat., Mar. 19-20:** Cox Field observings (at dark); **Mon., Mar. 22:** Orrs Elementary (Griffin) Pre-K observing, 7:00 p.m. **Thurs., Mar. 25:** Orrs Pre-K rainout date.

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President's Message. As a matter of personal preference and policy, I never bring up the subject of joining FRAC when talking with prospective members, probably because I don't want them to think

that I'm after their money, or that FRAC is competing with the AAC, Charlie Elliott or MGAS clubs.

Instead, I talk about the friendly nature of our club. And it's true: we *are* a friendly group. We may not have as much to offer as larger clubs, but friendship is never in short supply in FRAC. We like being together, and we take special pains to make visitors feel welcome among us.

We're a close-knit group, but not clannish. We tend to attract people who enjoy socializing and having fun with astronomy. That doesn't make us better than – or even different from -- other clubs; it merely defines who we are and what we do.

This winter has been abysmal because the weather has kept us apart except for meetings. I realize that it's not always easy for you to work FRAC meetings and observings into your schedules even when the weather cooperates. I appreciate the patience you've shown when all of our Cox Field observings for the past three months have been cancelled due to bad weather. What we need right now more than anything else is **John Fogerty** forecasting the weather, predicting a "good moon on the rise!"

At any rate, this month's *Observer* is the 134th regular edition that I've prepared for FRAC. That comes out to 750+ pages, or roughly the length of **Stephen King's** latest novel. (King wrote, "I get paid millions of dollars for doing what I'd do anyway if I weren't getting paid for it." **Prof. Stargazer** and I know exactly what he meant. Except for the part about the money, that is.)

-Bill Warren

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Last Month's Meeting/Activities. FRAC started off February with three outstanding indoor presentations.

First, **Steve Bentley** and **yr. editor** talked to about 20 adults at a Barnesville crisis intervention center; they were so interested that our 45-min. presentation extended to 90 min. Then we went outside and Steve showed them the **Sun** via his new solar telescope (which, incidentally, is absolutely stunning).

Then, two days later, **Dwight Harness** and **yrs. truly** gave a solar system presentation for 110 remarkably well-behaved 4th-graders at Orrs

Elementary School. It was supposed to be a 30-min. show, but they had so many questions that we extended it to nearly an hour.

Finally, on Feb. 9th, **yr. editor** visited Crescent Elementary School in Griffin for a solo after-school presentation on the solar system for 30 Science Club students. While we were talking about solar and lunar eclipses, a student asked the following intriguing question: “If I was standing on the **Moon** during a lunar eclipse, would I see a solar eclipse while everyone on Earth was seeing a lunar eclipse?” Our response was, *Yes, if it was a total eclipse the Earth would completely block out the Sun as seen from the Moon.* But were we right? The more we thought about it, the more wrong that answer seemed. So you tell us: Is the correct answer Yes, or No?

Either way, though, it was a brilliant question, and one that we’d never encountered or thought about before. And we thought: *Here’s a kid who needs to get into astronomy.* But he left before the presentation concluded, so we didn’t get a chance to talk to him.

That same evening’s Crescent observing was cancelled due to overcast skies. Hopefully, it will be rescheduled for a later date.

An enthusiastic band of thirteen intrepid FRACsters braved the frozen tundra of the Georgia roadways to attend our club’s 13th birthday party on Feb. 11th. We were happy to see each other again and partake of **Betty Bentley’s** scrumptious red velvet and carrot cakes.

Besides Chef Betty-Ar-Dee, the attendees included: **Steve Bentley & Brianna Mills; Cynthia Armstrong; Dwight & Laura Harness** (who, continuing our “13” references, entered her teens the very next day); **Dr. Richard Schmude, Jr.; Charles “They’ll Never Take Me Alive!” Turner** – that’s an inside joke; if you don’t understand it, go to our website’s “Newsletters” link, click on the Oct. 2009 issue, and read on p. 3 about Charles’s unfortunate encounter with a Spalding Co. deputy sheriff); **Steve Knight; Mike Stuart; Tom Moore; Larry Higgins;** and **yr. editor.**

February was our election month, and the nominees selected by our nominating committee in Dec. ran unopposed. (That means they won, **Ken Walburn.** And before you ask -- *Yes*, the vote was

unanimous.) So our officers and board members for FRAC’s next year are: **Bill Warren**, president; **Larry Higgins**, vice president; **Steve Bentley**, secretary-treasurer; and **Tom Danei, Dwight Harness, Felix Luciano** and **Joel Simmons**, board members.

Also at the meeting, Steve Bentley gave this month’s NASA update in **Felix Luciano’s** absence. Steve talked about the Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) that NASA launched on Feb. 11th. Its 5-year mission is to observe the **Sun** from its deep interior to its outermost layers of solar atmosphere at eight different wavelengths in order to learn how the Sun’s magnetic field generates violent solar events like the solar wind, solar flares and Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs). The images sent back to Earth will have ten times the resolution of high-definition TV.

Finally, Charles Turner donated four doorprizes at **GSV ‘10** two framed astrophoto prints by the world-renowned team of **Tony & Daphne Hallas**, and several other unframed, slightly flawed prints to be auctioned off as doorprizes at future FRAC meetings.

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This ‘n That. It never fails: every time someone mentions the **Sun**, the name “**Stephen Ramsden**” crops up sooner or later. Stephen’s obsession with the Sun is rivaled in FRAC only by **Dr. Richard Schmude’s** passion for the planets and variable stars.

Turns out that Stephen’s talents extend not just to showing, talking about and photographing the Sun, but to drawing it as well. He displayed several of his incredible chalk drawings recently, and **Tom Moore** sent out Stephen’s **Van Gogh**-like rendition of NASA’s SDO launch referred to above. Lovely.

*We’re proud to announce that **Orrs Elementary School**, our Partner In Education, tied for first-place honors among all schools in the state in the **2009-10 Georgia Schools of Character** competition. Orrs became the first school ever to win the award in their first year of character education competition.

To understand how important Orrs’s win was, consider this: *every school in Ga. on all levels from elementary through high school participates in the*

Schools of Character program, and there is only an overall winner, not winners from each level. So in earning a 1st-place tie with an elementary school in Cherokee Co., Orrs beat out all of the other elementary, middle, jr. high and high school character education programs in the state.

The two schools will represent Georgia in the national Schools of Character competition.

(Incidentally, FRAC literally had a hand in Orrs's winning, since **yr. editor** wrote their 7-pp. application letter.)

*When we visited the Wetumpka impact crater in Oct., '08 many of us wondered aloud, *How old is the crater?* How long ago was it that the 1,100-ft. meteor slammed into the shallow sea where present-day Wetumpka is located?

Well, we now have a definitive answer, and one that was startlingly close to what **Dr. David King**, the Auburn geologist who oversees the site and conducted our tour, guessed it was. In his Dec. '09 *Wetumpka Impact Crater Newsletter*, Dr. King wrote that "Preliminary results from a respected age-dating laboratory at Arizona State University, which is using a new age-dating technique, has yielded the first absolute date for Wetumpka. The date is *83.4 million years.* (*Our emphasis. –Ed.*) The samples came from the two crater-center wells drilled in 1958. If this date holds up to further testing (using new core samples drilled in June '09), it will closely confirm the original estimate that I made in 1997."

During our tour, Dr. King guesstimated a date of about 80 million years, but said that a more sophisticated dating method was needed to verify or pinpoint the date with any precision.

***Alan Pryor's** wrist surgery was complicated, but it went fine. He'll get the cast off on Mar. 3rd. He says, "I miss being out at the field. It has been so long." Yes, it has, Alan, for all of us.

*The following poem was submitted by longtime FRAC member **John Wallace**, along with his annual dues. (John and **Heidi** moved to Athens a number of years ago to be near their married daughters and grandchildren.)

Refined

To appreciate a
dark sky at night
the heavens aglow with
points of light
enjoying a good cigar
or mayhap a pipe
with a snifter of brandy
or a glass of wine,
are all one needs
to be quite refined.

* * *

Upcoming Meetings/Activities. The rainout date for our Jackson Road Elementary observing is 6:30 p.m. on **Tues., Mar. 2nd**. We'll post directions to the school on our website if the observing is necessary.

Our club meeting will be held as usual at **7:30 p.m.** on **Thurs., Mar. 11th**, in the Stuckey Bldg. on the UGa-Griffin campus. **Steve Bentley** and **Bill Warren** will conduct the solar system presentation that we use for daytime school appearances. (Among other things, we'll show you how to set up the program and use our powerpoint projector, in case you'd like to borrow it and the flashdrive containing the program to conduct a presentation of your own. We even have a script that supplements the material being shown.)

Our Cox Field observings will be held on **Fri.-Sat., Mar. 12th-13th**, and again on **Fri.-Sat., Mar. 19th-20th**. Hopefully, global warming will have returned by then and we won't have to endure more arctic weather at The Cox.

At 7:00 p.m. on **Mon., Mar. 22nd**, we'll conduct an observing for the Orrs Elementary Pre-K classes and their parents.

To get to Orrs from, say, Hampton, come S on Hwy. 19/41 like you're going to Cox Field, but get off the 4-lane at Ga. Hwy. 16 (the Griffin-Newnan exit). Turn left (east) toward Griffin, go over the 4-lane and turn left at the 2nd stoplight. Go past The Home Depot on the right, and turn left at the 4-way-stop. Go one block, and turn right onto the road that leads to Orrs.

Turn left into the parking lot in front of the school, and you'll find our telescopes set up near the gym.

The rainout date for the Orrs Pre-K observing is 7:00 p.m. on **Thurs., Mar. 25th**.

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Observing Report: Felix Luciano. "Hi, folks (Felix wrote on Jan. 26th), I had me a good observing a few nights ago. It sure was nice visiting some old friends."

Date: Jan. 22, 2010 (the day before the First Quarter Moon)

Time: 7:35-8:45 p.m.

Location: Jonesboro

Temp: 41°F, very humid

Equipment: Orion Classic XT8 Dob (fl 1200), telrad, 9x50 CIRA finderscope, 12mm & 14mm Radian eyepieces (mainly the 14mm due to its larger field of view [fov]), and a dew heater due to the high humidity.

***Trumpler I**, a small asterism in *Cassiopeia*. (This is Felix's "Six of Dominoes," probably his favorite deep-sky object. You can see his photo of it in the "Photos" section of our fracgroups site. -Ed.) A small splash of faint light, two almost-parallel lines of stars made the cluster, with the western line showing the brightest member components, some five stars.

***NGCs 869/884 (the "Double Cluster"** in *Perseus*.) A bright splash of starlight, the two clusters filling the 14mm Radian fov!

***Kemble's Cascade/NGC 1502**, an asterism and open cluster in *Camelopardalis*. Kemble's Cascade is a line of 15-17 bright (mag. 8-10) stars oriented NW-SE and stretching more than 3° across the sky. Near the SE end of the Cascade lies NGC 1502, a small, bright, triangular cluster. **Father Lucien Kemble**, a Franciscan friar and Canadian amateur photographer, discovered the Cascade. **Walter (Scotty) Houston**, a writer for *Sky & Telescope*, named it for Fr. Kemble.

***The Great Orion "S"**. A large, S-shaped line of at least a dozen bright stars weaving over, between

and under **Mintaka (Delta Ori)** and **Alnilam (Epsilon Ori)** in Orion's Belt. Impressive in binoculars.

***Melotte 31** in *Auriga*, a large, elongated group of about three dozen stars mentioned by **Sue French** in her "Deep Sky Wonders" column in the Jan. '10 issue of *S&T* (p. 65).

These were the lunar features I observed that evening:

-The craters **Messier** and **Messier A** (which had two very bright, very long rays projecting away to the west);

-**Cassini**, a very large crater showing a small crater on its floor;

-**Posidonius**, a very large crater showing a fractured floor;

-**Vallis Alpes**, the "Alps Valley" that dissects the **Montes Alpes**, or Alps Mtns. Vallis Alpes contains a fault that, according to the *Virtual Moon Atlas*, measures 79 mi. long by 7 mi. wide.

-**Hercules**, a large, roundish crater with a smaller crater on its floor.

-**Atlas**, a crater lying slightly east of Hercules. Atlas (87 km in dia.) is larger than Hercules (69 km in dia.), but Atlas seemed to be a little smaller due to the viewing angle.

-**Mare Vaporum (Sea of Vapors)**, a circular mare showing a very fractured surface to the lower right.

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NEAL WELLONS: Armchair Astronomer

article by **Bill Warren**

There are basically two kinds of amateur astronomers: those whose primary interest is observing (although they may also enjoy reading about astronomy); and those who prefer to learn about astronomy primarily through reading rather than observing. Folks in the latter category are known as "armchair astronomers."

Some observers consider stargazing to be the only acceptable form of astronomy. And that's unfortunate

– and untrue, too – since it implies that you aren't really worthy to be considered an astronomer unless you have binoculars and/or a telescope and use them regularly.

Enter **Neal Wellons**.

Alan Bolton has never met Neal, but he probably feels like he knows him. When Alan and **Sally** joined FRAC, it took me several months to stop referring to Alan as “Neal,” because he and Neal are startlingly similar in appearance, almost like identical twins with different surnames. The resemblance is so uncanny that I've sometimes wondered if, when Alan cuts himself shaving, Neal bleeds too, and vice versa.

Anyway, Neal was a member of FRAC almost from the beginning. He joined FRAC in June, 1997, along with his wife **Cindy** (who died tragically in an auto accident the same month they joined); their teenage son **Cody** (who later set up our FRAC website and served as our first webmaster); and their very special 9-year-old daughter **Suzie**. (When I met Suzie for the first time she offered her hand and said, “Hi, I'm Suzie. My mama's in heaven.”)

Like Alan, Neal was a *very* likeable guy, easy to talk to, highly intelligent, and he knew a lot about astronomy. Neal served as our Alcor (A. L. correspondent) from April '98 through Oct. '02, and during that time he seldom missed a meeting.

Unlike Alan, though, Neal was almost totally uninterested in observing. He had an 80mm refractor and built a nifty tripod for it, but he seldom used it. He just wasn't interested in visual observing, astro-photography or traveling from Hampton to Cox Field. He participated in several public observings (especially those held at the school at which Cindy had taught), and he was excellent in that capacity. But I could count on two hands with fingers to spare the times that Neal brought his telescope to Cox Field during his years in FRAC.

Neal was, purely and simply, an armchair astronomer – in fact, that's how he described himself. With the possible exceptions of **Larry Higgins** and **Smitty**, Neal had the largest library of astronomy books of anyone in FRAC.

In the years before surfing the Internet and sending e-mails became our national way of life, we sent out the *Observer* via hard copy. For 2-3 years Neal was

responsible for preparing copies from the master copy I brought him every month and mailing them out to our members. So I had ample opportunities to explore and admire the bookshelves jam-packed with astronomy titles beside his front door.

Neal's two areas of interest were *cosmology* (the study of the origins and composition of the cosmos, or universe) and *SETI* (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence). He read his cosmology books at night, and in the morning he set his computer to download data collected from SETI radio telescope transmissions from around the world. When he got home from work, he'd send his data to SETI headquarters, and if the data his computer had collected that day were to indicate the presence of intelligent life beyond Earth, he would get credit for discovering it.

On two occasions, Neal served as guest speaker at FRAC meetings. His topics were – guess what? – cosmology and SETI. To this day, they remain the only occasions in which either of those topics has been addressed by FRAC speakers.

Neal is still alive and well, I'm happy to announce – but alas!, he is no longer in FRAC. He found his teenage sweetheart, courted and married her, and Suzie, now 20, has two mamas (one in heaven). She loves them both. The Wellonses still live in Hampton, but cosmology, SETI and FRAC are no more than distant memories in the happy Wellons household.

Still...

Over FRAC's 13-year existence, few members have had as great a positive impact on its members as Neal Wellons. He taught us one and all that astronomy is a state of mind, independent of how it is practiced.

The blind poet **John Milton** wrote, “They also serve who only stand and wait.” In Neal's case, those words might read, “They also serve who only read to learn and grow.”

So don't let anyone tell you that “armchair astronomers” are unworthy of inclusion among the ranks of amateur astronomers. Like the old **George & Ira Gershwin** song sez, “It Ain't Necessarily So.”

As with everything else in life, astronomy's ultimate value is personal, depending on what you hope to get out of it, and how. The “armchair” part is

important only if it defines where you learn and grow as an astronomer.

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FRAC'S LAWS

humor by Bill Warren

It could be rain
It could be snow
The weatherman will never know.

-**Willard Scott**, NBC weather forecaster
Nov. 27, 1995

Truer words were never spoken, Willard. But *we* know, those of us in FRAC who depend on the weather to at least occasionally give us a decent night for observing.

Sir Isaac Newton had his Laws of Motion. Well, FRAC has its own Laws of Cloud Motion, which are equally valid but less well known. (We don't reveal our laws to non-members until after they've joined the club.)

***FRAC Law of Cloud Motion #1:** "Distant clouds at rest will remain at rest until acted upon by an outside force, such as a FRAC member setting up his telescope."

***FRAC Law of Cloud Motion #2:** "Cloudy skies over Cox Field will remain until you've packed up your telescope and gone home." (They wanted to watch you observing.)

***FRAC Law of Cloud Motion #3:** "Clouds always move toward whatever object you're trying to observe, and away from Cox Field after you leave."

***FRAC Law of Cloud Motion #3a:** "No matter how cloudy Cox Field was when you left, the sky will be clear by the time you're halfway home. And if you decide to go back and try again, the skies will remain clear until you finish setting up your telescope."

There are, of course, other considerations besides clouds. It's cold in winter (another minor FRAC law: "*In cold weather, the wind blows only if you're under-dressed*"), and warm weather brings mosquitos and high humidity. But beyond even those factors, there are other natural laws regarding observing that FRACsters are well aware of:

*The odds that you'll remember a critical piece of equipment that you've forgotten (e.g., your eyepiece case) before you leave home – or before you leave Cox Field – are roughly the same as your winning a Nobel Prize in astronomy this year;

*When a piece of equipment falls to the ground at Cox Field, it will be either your most expensive eyepiece, or the smallest, hardest-to-find screw in your telescope. (Corollary law: the lost screw cannot be replaced. It existed nowhere on Earth except in *your* telescope);

*The battery for your tel-rad will fail only if you don't have a replacement;

*The act of taking an astrophoto or ccd-image at Cox Field will be accompanied by a latecomer's headlights flooding the area, or someone opening a car door or lighting a cigarette or cigar; and

*The only person at Cox Field whose car battery will go dead will be the last one to leave.

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Many a night from yonder ivied casement, ere I went
to rest,
Did I look on great Orion sloping slowly to the west.
Many a night I saw the Pleiads rising thro' the mellow
shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver
braid.

-**Alfred, Lord Tennyson**
Locksley Hall (1842)

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