

Rappahannock Astronomy Club

Minutes, December 16, 2015, Meeting

In attendance:

Dave Algert
Bart & Linda Billard
Don Clark
Ron Henke
Glenn Holliday
Jerry Hubbell

Scott Lansdale
Tim Plunkett
Ryan Rapoza
Myron Wasiuta
Tom Watson

The meeting began a little after 7 p.m. Twelve members were present.

Program

Myron Wasiuta presented "A Tribute to Mark Slade." He told us a little about the beginnings of our club, originally called the Triangulum Astronomical Society and started in the early 1990s by Al Ventura. Myron told us he was a former president of the club and also served as club historian. The club was where he got to know Mark Slade, and he said he organized his presentation as a chronology of his experiences with Mark.

Myron said Mark's wife, Laura, was originally from Minnesota, and they would go there for visits in the summer. Eventually Mark lobbied her for a winter visit because the short summer nights gave him little darkness to enjoy the night sky. Going in the winter gave him the opportunity to see and photograph auroras.

Mark loved photography and always had his camera with him whenever possible. Much of what he did was film-era photography. More recently, he had started doing digital photography, but he became inactive about 2009–2010 when he and Laura began building their house. Myron noted the club website has a gallery with Mark's photographs, including auroras, and encouraged us to view it. Mark would call up Myron and arrange to visit whenever he found a promising aurora prediction. Myron mentioned some of the film types and techniques Mark used, including ordering Kodak PPF 400 in bulk and keeping it in the refrigerator because it was his favorite and was not readily available.

When Myron moved into his current house, Mark asked him how he could have chosen the one lot with a streetlight right next door. Together they talked with the neighbor, offering to put a shield on it, and assuring him it would actually increase the amount of light going down into his yard. Eventually the neighbor agreed, and Mark and Myron installed the shield. (Mark had access to a bucket truck.) Myron said the shield is no longer there, but trees now block the glare into his yard. Apparently the utility company did not replace the shield when the lightbulb needed replacement, and perhaps lost it. Someone did come back later and applied some black tape.

Mark and Laura moved into their new house in May–June 2014. He had laid cables for an observatory and purchased components over time as he found good deals. He purchased the dome in 2006 or 2007.

Myron showed the telescope he and Mark put together in 1994 in anticipation of the Comet Shoemaker-Levy impact with Jupiter. They also got an early digital camera, which Myron showed us. They had set up a remote observatory of sorts at Myron's house. The telescope mount was permanently set up in the yard and covered with a tarp when not in use. They would take the telescope out and mount it, and had cables run to the house so they could control the telescope and take images from indoors. Clouds forced them to wait until July 20 to get images of the impact areas, and the seeing was much worse than for the earlier images Myron showed us from tests they made in preparation for the event. He pointed out they recorded the images by photographing the computer monitor, which was Mark's idea.

Myron showed us another test photograph with multiple images of a planet. He explained that Mark showed him how to make multiple images on one frame of film so that he could try different exposures to see what worked without using up a lot of film.

Comet Hyakutake visited in 1996. Myron said it was the comet of the century, better than Hale-Bopp. It got publicity in the paper, and the club had almost 500 people visit the star party at Caledon on March 23. He showed us spectacular images, including one with the tail spanning more than 25 degrees, past the handle of the Big Dipper and into Draco. At the time, Myron and Mark had a roll-off roof observatory housing the earlier observatory telescope with a rebuilt aluminum tube, and Mark would bring his 10-inch telescope to do deep-sky photography while Myron did planetary photography.

They planned for Comet Hale-Bopp for about a year, considering type of film and where to go for dark skies and the right backdrop. Myron showed photographs with structure in the comet nucleus. There were “hoods” that changed in structure over time. One of the pictures shows a curved tail that the comet sported shortly after perihelion.

Myron showed pictures of the observatory he and Mark built in the backyard of his current house. Part of the deck was isolated for their Dobsonian telescopes. The dome was located at the other end of the deck, with a concrete footer underneath for the telescope pier.

Mark witnessed the 1966 Leonid meteor storm, and he and Myron planned to see another in 1998. It turned out to be something spectacular. The Earth passed through a cloud of larger than usual particles from the comet that year, and the shower produced many fireballs.

Old Business

- Treasurer’s Report—Tim Plunkett reported two expenditures and two dues payments, along with a small donation, for November. He said in lieu of a check reimbursement for drink purchases at the November meeting, he applied the amount to Jerry’s 2016 dues plus a donation, as requested. The other expenditure was the check for the club’s donation in support of the Mark Slade Remote Observatory project. Tim also recorded Ron Henke’s 2016 dues payment, the first at the new dues rate. The number of paid memberships for 2016 is now six.
- Update on the Next Newsletter Status—Linda Billard said she had nothing to report on the next newsletter because she would not begin working on it until after the New Year. Linda asked Myron if he could contribute an article, and he said he had a number of articles he could revise if needed and provide for the newsletter.
- Communications Committee Report—Glenn Holliday said he had no news to report. Don Clark said payments were coming due for the club website hosting and maintenance of the raclub.org domain name. Jerry Hubbell moved to approve the expenditure and was seconded by Tom Watson. The motion passed without objection.
- Event Calendar and Caledon Schedule for 2016—Ron said Stafford would like presentations before the two star party outreach events we have scheduled with them. He displayed a tentative Caledon star party schedule prepared by Scott Lansdale and explained that it included one each month based on the consensus that more than one outreach/star party event per month was not unreasonable. The proposed dates were January 16, February 13, March 12, April 9, May 14, June 11, July 9, August 6, September 10, October 8, November 5, and December 3. In some months, the Caledon date coincides with the outreach event date, which we agreed was not the intention in including a Caledon star party in the same month with another outreach event. We discussed various adjustments, such as having a Friday evening star party, moving the Caledon date up a week, or moving it back a week. The week earlier or later choices seemed more desirable, but with some concerns about the Moon phase. Glenn suggested moving up a week could result in the Moon setting too early for much evening viewing. Jerry suggested the Moon can provide interesting viewing even a few days from full, when a terminator is still visible. Bart Billard suggested a few of the dates might be moved up a week without completely losing the Moon as an attraction—for example the star party date that had a 60-percent Moon phase. Ron noted that the March date is traditionally a Messier Marathon date, which means it should be moved up to the 5th, also taking care of the conflict with the Marine Corps museum event.

Ron raised the subject of advertising our star parties. There was agreement that when we had done so in the past we seemed to get more visitors. David Abbou mentions them in his monthly column, but Weekender announcements have not been submitted in some time. Ron assigned the communications committee to find out what we can put in for publicity. Tom suggested some social media have ways to make geographically targeted entries for publicizing

an event. Ron told him he just volunteered to bring an example of what we could do to show at the next meeting.

Ron said May 14 is the date of Northumberland Preservation's annual meeting and pot luck picnic. It offers good planets and a 60-percent Moon phase, and there should be a larger than normal crowd. He also said that when he was at Belmont the previous Saturday, Scott Busby expressed a willingness to open Belmont for more functions. Ron suggested we think about whether another meeting date could be changed to a Saturday at Belmont, noting it could be one for which no program has been lined up. It was pointed out that meeting at the Heritage center (which is only available on the third Wednesday of the month) allows us to have visitors. Ron said he would ask Scott for more information about what he had in mind.

New Business and Astronomy News

- Astronomical League Meeting in Virginia—Ron said the annual meeting is to be hosted by Northern Virginia Astronomy Club August 10–13. He noted that could be the weekend of the club picnic.
- Mark Slade Observatory—Jerry said a meeting for the group to form a commission to manage the observatory had been scheduled for January 9 at 3 p.m.

Next Meeting

The next meeting is on Wednesday, January 20, 2016, at the Central Rappahannock Heritage Center. We will be doing a remote observing workshop, starting with planning and scheduling observations, and we will see and work with resulting images in February.