

50 Years of WVAS

By George Wyncott



West Lafayette Observatory

As mentioned in *The Nebula's* November 2020 article "A Historical Tidbit", Lafayette industrialist and amateur astronomer Eugene Lowman offered to build an observatory on the grounds of West Lafayette's new Cumberland Elementary School in the mid-1960s. At the time, the school was on the outskirts of town, mostly surrounded by corn fields. The school system accepted his offer and the West Lafayette Observatory (WLO) was constructed circa 1966.



Gene Lohman 1961

Gene was the nephew of noted astronomers Vesto and Earl Slipher of the Lowell Observatory who both grew up near Mulberry, IN. Gene knew other amateur astronomers in the area and they started observing at WLO and met there to talk about astronomy and public programs. They were the pioneers of the club we now know. Others at-

tended the meetings and joined the group, among them were Russ Kaspar (still in high school at the time), Ruth Merriman, and Rick Stark – who are also current WVAS members. Russ' mom (Lillian Kaspar) drove him from Frankfort to the meetings and she also attended those meetings and participated in discussions. The club officers discussed naming the club something like "Lafayette Astronomical Society" but Lillian suggested they choose a more inclusive name. Eventually the name chosen was "Wabash Valley Astronomical Society" to include the west-north-central part of Indiana.

Members of the new club decided to formally incorporate and be recognized by the state of Indiana as a non-profit scientific and educational organization. Members of the initial Board of Directors were Eugene Lowman, Bruce Moore, Gunnar Kullerud, Richard Bash, Kennerd Fickle, Robert Curtis, and John Jaecker. Attorney Charles B. Kemmer submitted the

proposed Articles of Incorporation to the state and they were approved and signed by the Indiana Secretary of State, Larry Conrad, on April 23, 1971. Wabash Valley Astronomical Society, Inc. was born!

During the early years of the observatory and WVAS, there were no interior walls in the building and no restrooms. These were subsequently added.

In 1973 the officers were Bill Ditsler, John Jaecker, and Ruth Merriman. John drafted the first club bylaws. Ruth was the club secretary and she wrote and distributed the mimeographed monthly newsletter, initially called the "Amateur Astronomer Newsletter" and then "Scope". WVAS provided awards to the Regional Science Fair for astronomy projects in the junior and senior divisions.



Gene Lohman with his original 12.5" telescope that was installed at WLO

Besides meetings, the club held monthly open house events for the public, mostly using Gene Lowman's 12.5" home-built Newtonian reflector telescope mounted upstairs under the modified silo dome.

They had specialty groups for interests such as telescope-making, research-oriented observation, and astrophotography.

Rick Stark led the telescope-making group and they ground a 10" mirror eventually used by Jim Sat-



10" Newtonian reflector built by Jim Sattler on equatorial platform built by Scott Sudhoff



8" binocular telescope built by John Mahony, Jim Sattler, and Jim Mettler

tlar to build a Newtonian reflector telescope for the club.

A Dobsonian mount for it was built years later by John Rubacha who joined in 1987 and who was also a Teaching Assistant for Purdue astronomy classes that utilized WLO. Scott Sudhoff built an equatorial platform for the Dobsonian mount in the mid-1990s. In addition to the 10" reflector constructed in the 1970s,

an 8" binocular telescope was built in 1998 thanks to John Mahony, Jim Sattler, and Jim Mettler.

Over the next decade the club apparently diminished in size but remained together. Mike Abell joined in 1980 and designed the club's first logo for Lisa Wieland's newsletter. Lisa and Jeff Wieland joined in 1982-1983. Regular club meetings were not being held at that time and Lisa was pointed at club president Wilbur Freeman by crashing a Purdue astronomy class observing session. When the dome lights came back up, there were suddenly two more "students": Lisa and Jeff. Lisa did not remember the name of the teaching assistant that night, but he gave her contact information for Wilbur. She contacted Wilbur and she and Jeff met with him and started making plans to hold meetings again. Lisa did not recall how many members were on the roster when she joined. Lisa became the newsletter editor and renamed it "The Nebula," not knowing that there had been an original newsletter called "Scope." She eventually became Vice President for a short time. Besides Ruth and Lisa, over the years other members have edited the newsletters when Lisa paused doing it to finish her math degree at Purdue. Other editors included Bill Annis, John Rubacha, and Jeff Wieland, and additional members have assisted with printing and distribution. The biggest public event during that period was for Halley's Comet in 1986, with the event being held at McCutcheon High School. At this event, Lisa met Mike Abell and other club members and soon the membership began to grow again.

In 1996 and 1997 WVAS held public viewing events for comets Hyakutake (at WLO) and Hale-Bopp (at the Tippecanoe County Amphitheater) that were each attended by hundreds of people. George Wyncott joined in 1989 and filed for WVAS' reincorporation which was granted by the state in 1993. Ed Harfmann joined in 1994. George and Ed applied to the IRS for 501(c)(3) status and that was also eventually granted in July 2000. Past WVAS presidents include Bill Ditsler, Alan East, Steve Edwards, Franz Frederick, Wilbur Freeman, Ben Geesa, Ed Harfmann, Chris Johnson, Jim McIntyre, Jim Mullikin, Don Nelson, Jim Sattler, George Wyncott, and currently BJ Austin who joined

in 2007. There may have also been other presidents that we have no record of.

WVAS has held countless meetings and public open house events, provided astronomy outreach to many groups, held club star parties, and helped build the Prairie Grass Observatory at Camp Cullom in 2001. Since 2003 we've been the primary sponsoring club for the regional Indiana Family Star Party, also at Camp Cullom. We very much look forward to our next half-century of providing astronomy outreach and camaraderie with like-minded amateur astronomers.



Prairie Grass Observatory in 2007

Gallery of WVAS History and Past Events:



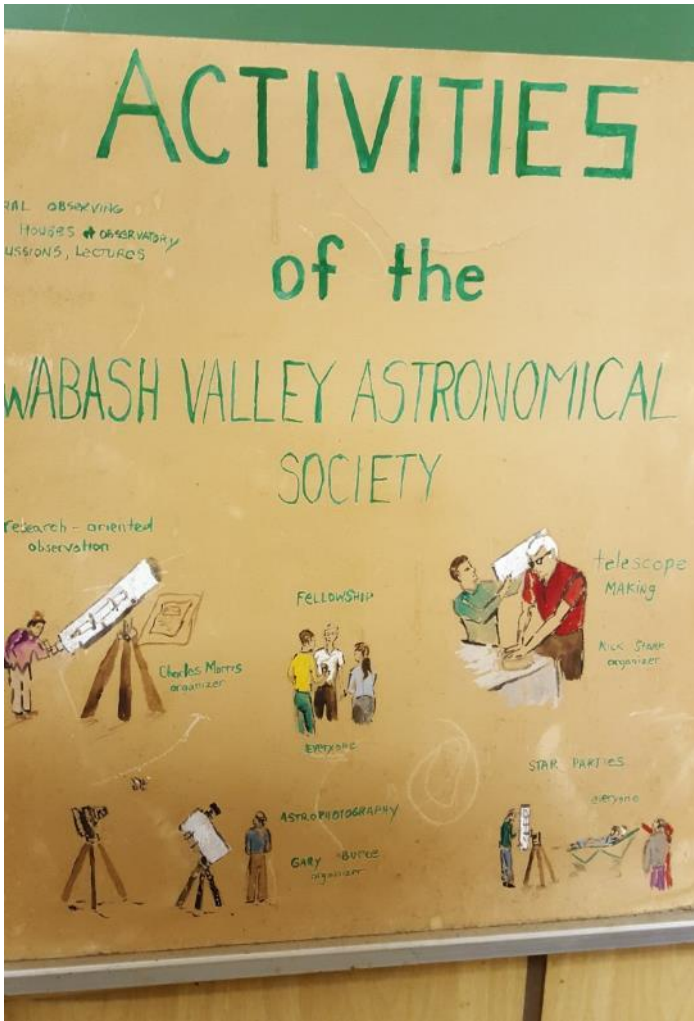
Russ Kaspar's observatory circa 1971



Window display at Tippecanoe County office building, 1990



Original club logo by Mike Abell



Original WVAS activities poster



George Wyncott presenting at Hershey Elementary Astronomy Night, 2006



Indiana Family Star Party at Prairie Grass Observatory, 2010



Charles Lewis (seated) sharing his telescope at SIA, 2001



Jim Sattler demonstrating solar projection at Teacher's Delight, 2011



L to R: Andy Schilling (in red) and Ed Harfmann (in green) share their ETX telescopes for solar observing at Turkey Run State Park, 2011



WVAS members during 2017 total solar eclipse trip to Princeton, KY.
L to R: Ben Angelo, Marilyn & Leah Sameh (under aqua umbrella),
Dominic Angelo (at 8" telescope), Deedee Wieland (seated), and Lisa
Wieland (with hat)



L to R: Scott Sudhoff (standing just outside tent in yellow WVAS T-shirt)
and Bill Hayward (inside tent, behind table in yellow WVAS T-shirt) at
Tippecanoe County Outdoor Explore event, 2016