

Nighttime Discoveries

Astronomer believes astronomy is about having fun looking at the night sky

By Jeanie Senior

Steve Stout, interpretive specialist at Goldendale Observatory, has spent some 30 years at a job he loves.

As befits an astronomer, he measures his tenure in scientific terms. As of early September, “I’ve worked there for 390.17 lunations (cycles of the moon),” he says.

Steve, who has a degree in physics from Pacific Lutheran University, has

been interested in astronomy most of his life. He grew up in Odessa, and remembers star-gazing from the back steps of his grandparents’ house on clear summer evenings.

When his parents gave him a book about the constellations, he was hooked. Later that year he got a telescope “and I set my goals to be an astronomer,” he says. “I took all the math and science in high school that I could.”

Now, he says, “I’m basically an amateur astronomer whose dream has come true,” working at a facility that has one of the largest public telescopes in the nation. For Steve, astronomy “is not about science and research; it’s about having fun looking up at the sky at night,” he says.

Steve was initially hired by the corporation that operated the observatory for the city of Goldendale. He became a Washington State Parks employee in 1981 when the state bought the observatory and the five acres where it is situated, on a 2,100-foot-elevation butte 1½ miles from downtown Goldendale.

Steve is now the only full-time staff person, working a schedule unique to an observatory. Open hours are 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. to midnight Wednesday through Sunday from April 1 to September 30. From October 1 to March 31, the observatory is open Friday through Sunday, from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

The centerpiece of the observatory is a 24-inch reflecting telescope built by four amateur astronomers from Vancouver, Washington, who donated the instrument to the city in 1973. At that time, according to Steve, it was the largest amateur-built telescope of its kind in the nation in a public observatory.

Using donations, a grant and a bank loan, the city constructed the observatory

building, including a 20-foot dome to house the big telescope. A smaller dome next to the building houses a smaller telescope, which Steve uses to project live images of the sun on a video monitor.

What is remarkable about the Goldendale Observatory, Steve says, is that it is so accessible. Many other public observatories have limited open hours, and some require viewing appointments made weeks in advance.

“Pretty much we have visitors every day we’re open, and we have visitors from all over the world,” says Steve. An average of 20,000 to 30,000 people visit each year.

“To see the most you should come when the sun sets and you can see stars, galaxies, nebulae, the moon and more planets,” he says.

On a clear sunny day, however, Steve can position the telescope to see Venus. With the help of the smaller telescope, recent eruptions on the surface of the sun “were most amazing,” he says. “We had one of those ‘oh wow’ moments.”

Steve has helped people find “their” star, which they have named through the International Star Registry. It was a lot easier 30 years ago when the program first began.

“Over the years the stars available get fainter and fainter and it’s a challenge to locate them,” he says.

Summer in Goldendale—from May through September—offers a 95 percent chance of clear skies. The percentage drops to 65 percent in October and to 45 percent from November to February. It then climbs to 55 percent in March and back to 65 percent in April.

Three major events have caused thousands of additional visitors to flock to the observatory. The most notable was the total solar eclipse in 1979. Goldendale was in the center of a key viewing area,





Astronomer Steve Stout focuses a telescope for solar images at the Goldendale Observatory. Opposite page, Steve stands in front of the observatory, a place he has worked for more than 390 lunations, or moon cycles.

and the observatory hosted a crowd of national and international media.

The telescope also offered stunning views of two comets' passage: Halley's in 1985-1986 and Hale-Bopp in 1997.

Staying in the Dark

The nonprofit group that first operated the observatory approached the Goldendale City Council and the Klickitat County Commission in 1978 and got the two bodies to pass enhanced lighting ordinances for property within a 10-mile radius of the observatory. The ordinances encouraged local individuals and businesses to install shielded lighting to protect the darkness of the night sky.

"Observatories need to be very, very dark to observe all these incredible things," Steve says.

Fortunately, bright lights have not proliferated since then, although Steve says there is still room for improvement.

A few years ago, a group of observatory supporters mounted a campaign to get better shielding on lights. Among the people they talked to was then-general manager of Klickitat PUD, Tom Svendsen, regarding the unshielded lights in the PUD parking lot.

"After that visit, it wasn't very long that he talked about dark skies in the PUD manager's page in the Ruralite, and shortly after that the lights in the PUD parking lot were changed," Steve says. "The dark-sky supporters were happy."

The International Dark Sky Association, which exists to fight light pollution in the night skies, has granted the Goldendale Observatory silver tier provisional status as an international dark-sky park. The nomination was endorsed by the president of the Boeing Employees' Astronomical Society.

A Second Love

Steve wasn't married when he moved to

Goldendale, and he lived for three years in a trailer near the observatory.

Mutual friends introduced him to his future wife, Barbara, a vocal music instructor in grades K-8 for Goldendale schools. He and Barbara share a love of music that they passed on to their two daughters, one of whom plays French horn, the other the trumpet. Both daughters are grown and married.

Barbara plays clarinet in Gorge Winds Concert Band, and although Steve's work schedule makes it difficult to attend rehearsals, he participates in the group's performances. The band will perform a Veterans Day concert November 8 in Goldendale.

"When I sit in on that one, I will have been playing my trumpet in front of a listening audience for 55 years," says Steve.

Or, as an astronomer would say, Steve has performed for more than 715 lunations. ■