LAKE AFTON PUBLIC OBSERVATORY
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

HISTORY AND PURPOSE

The Lake Afton Public Observatory was created in 1979 jointly by the City of Wichita, Sedgwick County, the Wichita Public Schools, and The Wichita State University. Since its opening in June of 1981, over 175 thousand people have visited the Observatory to see the moon, Saturn, star clusters and other wonders of the universe. Since 1995, the Observatory has been operated by Wichita State University's Fairmount Center for Science and Mathematics Education. Additional funding for maintenance of the building has been provided by Sedgwick County.

The Lake Afton Public Observatory is unique because each visitor is given a chance to look at a variety of celestial objects through the 16-inch telescope. (This is of course assuming that the sky is clear. During cloudy weather, no optical telescope, no matter how large can see through the clouds.) Contrast this to most observatories where the sole purpose of the observatory is for astronomers to study the sky. At these installations the public is rarely allowed in to see the telescope, let alone look at something through it. In fact the Lake Afton Public Observatory is one of only a dozen or so observatories in the entire country that were built so that the average person could have a place to enjoy the heavens.

PROGRAMS

The Lake Afton Public Observatory is also unique because each of its programs revolve around a specific theme. For example, one Observatory program is entitled Exploring the Milky Way. The theme for this program is the different kinds of objects which are found within our galaxy. During the program everyone has a chance to look through the telescope at a planet, star cluster, and cloud of gas. The program concludes with a view of a spiral galaxy. As people view these objects, the staff discusses each of them and how they relate to the galaxy as a whole. Other Observatory programs focus on the moon, planets, the lives of stars, distances in the universe, and other astronomical topics. An average of about 7,500 people attend a public or school program each year.

Another popular activity at the Observatory is the monthly photography program. During these programs anyone with a 35mm single-lens reflex camera can attach it to the telescope to photograph objects such as the moon, Saturn, Jupiter, star clusters, or even a distant galaxy. There is even a bulletin board at the Observatory for the photographers to show off their celestial snapshots.

The Observatory serves both the public with programs on Friday and Saturday evenings, and school groups with evening programs on Tuesday and Thursday and daytime programs to observe the sun on selected Wednesdays. Information on current programs, program times, and information about events in the sky is available in a recorded message by calling (316) 978-7827 or at the Observatory's Website: www.wichita.edu/lapo.
EXHIBITS

An evening at the Observatory involves much more than just looking through the telescope. A portion of the Observatory is a hands-on museum with a number of exhibits and displays about different topics in astronomy. One popular exhibit is the astronomy computer games. Here a visitor can try to land a spacecraft on the moon, use clues to find the base of a space pirate before the bomb the pirate planted on your ship explodes, or go on a scavenger hunt through the solar system. As with all of the exhibits at the Observatory, these games are entertaining and educational. Although people have fun playing them, they also walk away from them knowing a little bit more about the universe they live in.

Other exhibits at the Observatory give people a chance to use a small telescope on their own; learn which objects in the sky can be seen with an ordinary pair of binoculars; explore the properties of light using lenses, mirrors, and colored filters; understand stellar evolution; explore the connection between the colors and temperatures of stars; and make a telescope.

SCHOOL RESOURCE MATERIALS

When school groups visit the Observatory, we feel that it is important that they have more than just a "field-trip" experience. To complement their visit, we have developed an extensive outreach program with the area schools. This program includes: learning centers (portable versions of Observatory exhibits) which can be kept in the classroom for two weeks; instructional games which teach astronomical concepts while students have fun; and two 130 page books of classroom activities which help teachers teach a unit on astronomy. It should be noted that the items used in the outreach program were conceived of, developed, and constructed by the Observatory staff.

STAFF

The Observatory staff consists of a Director (1/5 time), Program Manager (3/4 time), and two part-time student assistants who are also students at Wichita State University. The staff is responsible for all of the public and school programs which occur at the Observatory.

The Observatory also has a volunteer program. The majority of Observatory volunteers fall into two groups: Explainers and Exhibit Assistants. Explainers assist a regular staff person during our public programs. They help with the telescope, explain to visitors what they are seeing through the telescope, and answer questions about exhibits. Explainers worked about 90% of the public programs during the past year. Exhibit Assistants, on the other hand, assist the staff with the development and construction of exhibits and displays.
OBSERVATORY ANTIC DOTES

Over the years many interesting things have happened at the Observatory. Here are just a few.

One evening a five or six year old girl discovered Saturn on her own with a small telescope and rushed back inside to get a staff member to go back outside with her so he could see what she had done.

Another evening a group of cub scouts had spent about an hour exploring the Observatory and only when it was time to leave did they discover the "Fun With Light" exhibit. They kept on playing with the lenses and mirrors for more than 20 minutes after their scout master offered them an ice cream cone if they would leave immediately.

The oohs and ahs that the Observatory staff hear when a child (or an adult!) see Saturn or the moon through the telescope indicate that they are doing something that they have never had a chance to do before. In fact many people remark that Saturn and the moon look just like a picture when seen through the telescope.

One of the Astronomy Computer Games, Planet Trek, keeps track of how long it takes a player to find their particular set of planetary features. If the player is fast enough, their name is entered into a record. Students will play the game over and over again until they get the best score. Other times they will play just so they can knock one of their friend's name off of the record list.

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