

Shoalhaven Astronomers – Genesis

by Frank Gross (Founding Member)

In the beginning all was chaos. Amateur astronomy in the Shoalhaven was a ragtag confederation at best. A lot of people who were interested in astronomy didn't know that there was a multitude of others in the area interested in the same thing. I know, when I bought my 8-inch Newtonian with equatorial mount I usually invited only close friends that lived on my street to see things which I had "discovered". However, in 1985 something happened which first brought together a few of these astronomically minded people. That something was Halley's Comet. I had received a phone call out of the blue from a Harold Clarke of Berry asking about the possibilities of photographing this event. Harold travelled out to my place in Falls Creek a couple of times at 4am so that we could photograph the apparition. I remember getting the whole family (my son Blake was only 4 and my daughter Gabrielle was 8) so we all could witness that rare sight in the sky. I pointed it out in the eastern sky to them. They all said "That's nice Dad" but you've never seen how fast they whipped back into the house and to bed again! However, Harold and I lingered for 45 more minutes and took many timelapse photos, all of which I still have.

I had met a few interested people who, along with myself, were members of the Falls Creek Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade so expanded our amateur astronomical sphere to the area of Falls Creek. A few names come to mind: Peter Walker (Brigade captain) and Sean McHugh (Brigade member). When invited for dinner at each other's houses, the evening would usually include going out to our respective telescopes and having a look. However, Sean knew of others that might be interested. There was one chap at Sean's work at HMAS Albatross by the name of David Hawksworth who was interested. David knew of others in his sphere of influence by the names of Peter Sky, Kruno Ratkovic and David Gardener. Over a period of two years, Kruno had collected, through advertising on Shoalhaven Community Radio, the names, addresses and phone numbers of eight potential members of a future Shoalhaven Astronomical Club.

I found out that David Hawksworth, David Gardiner, Kruno and Peter had been travelling up to Wollongong to attend meetings of that astronomical society from time to time. David Hawksworth suggested to Kruno that we have a meeting and invite all those in the Shoalhaven who might be interested in forming a club. Kruno promptly handed over his list of eight names and Peter volunteered his flat. Word was sent out by word of mouth and a small column in the local newspaper that a meeting was to be held in anticipation of forming an astronomical club. The following people showed up at Peter Skye's home on October 13th, 1991: **Simon Berryman, Harold Clarke, David Gardiner, Frank Gross, David Hawksworth, Neville Jewell, Sean McHugh, Paul Murphy, Kruno Ratkovic, Ian Scott, Peter Skye and Mark Town.**

We all agreed that the Shoalhaven needed an astronomical club and we decided to set the ball rolling to get one started. We also agreed to have another meeting, perhaps the first proper meeting as a club, at Ian Scott's Veterinary Surgery on the Wool Road, Old Erowal Bay. We decided to take a different route regarding the name of the club too. Other astronomy clubs banally called themselves "Sutherland Astronomical Society" or "Canberra Astronomical Society" etc. We were going to be different so the name **Shoalhaven Astronomers** was put forward and accepted. I have always loved the name of our club.

David Hawksworth became our interim leader until we could formally have a vote for president, VP, Treasurer etc. David also volunteered himself to produce our first newsletter *banally* called **Shoalhaven Astronomers Newsletter**. Ian's surgery was small and crowded but at least we had a meeting place. Astronomical slides were shown by Frank Gross; home-made telescopes were brought and shown to the members; talks were organised and presented by the early members; and expeditions to astronomical venues were organised, the first of which was Mt. Stromlo in Canberra. Our numbers were growing as

other people found out about our club and joined. By the third meeting three new members joined us: **Chris Higgs, Dusty Jones and Chris O'Hanlon**. The vet surgery was getting more crowded than ever so we discussed moving to a new, bigger venue for our meetings. Vincentia Public School was proposed and agreed upon. Here we had all the mod cons. There was room to spare, numerous toilets, excellent tea making facilities but also light - lots of it! When we went outside to do some viewing, we always had to contend with the exterior security lights. After only two meetings we decided to move the club venue to a place suggested by Frank Gross, namely Falls Creek Public School (wink, wink, nudge, nudge... Frank lived only two kilometres from it!). Importantly, it was more central to the club members and it had a dark viewing area surrounded by very tall trees.

We soon started talking about have a Public Viewing Night which was held on July 3, 1992 at Harry Sawkins Park next to the Council Chambers on Bridge Street, Nowra. Chris Higgs brought a newly constructed base pedestal for his 20 cm telescope. Mark Town showed off his 18-point mirror mount designed to hold the primary mirror of the 12.5 inch telescope that he was constructing. Sean McHugh showed us all his wonderfully crafted rich field 150mm Newtonian. David Hawksworth introduced us all to the wonders of the "stepper motor" and how it can be used to very accurately control the motions of a telescope. For the January Newsletter we were all introduced to a star map of the heavens as they appeared in the Shoalhaven area. This was printed out as an extra page using the usual dot matrix printers (hot stuff!) at the time.

Things were heating up for the club too. We had things to show off and we had things to look forward to in the subsequent meetings. March 1992 brought more innovation to the meetings. We all had to decide upon a new cover for the newsletter. Two designs were forwarded and voted upon. The Saturn motif was chosen and from that point on we had a front cover to our newsletter. By the end of 1992, we were settled as a group of budding amateur astronomers who gathered in the house of the Principal of Falls Creek Public School. More importantly we had a dark sky viewing area just meters away from the residence. At this time, Ian Scott began to compile **Astrobites**. This were an informative "bits and pieces" from various sources such as *Nature* and *Sky and Telescope* magazines. Ian was always on the hunt for space related titbits. Once he handed me a veritable wad of hand-written copy to be included in the newsletter. I remember at the time being very grateful for the copy but when the time came to type them into the computer, many words were undecipherable – it seems that, like doctors, vets also suffer from illegible handwriting. There were many times that I had to call Ian by phone or even make an executive decision on what the word might be. In those days, the final text was presented to the editor on a 5.25 inch floppy disk. This was soon replaced with the latest in computer wizardry - the 3.5 inch disk, which could hold a "massive" 1.4 megabytes of information.

Our first elections were held at the **1992 AGM** with the following results:

President: David Hawksworth
Treasurer: Frank Gross
Secretary: Jack Apfelbaum
Observation Officer: Eugene O'Conner
Public Officer: Jim Watt
Librarians: Dusty Jones and Chris O'Hanlon

It was at this time that **Skywatch** appeared, with the byline of Eugene O'Connor. This was an informative column that outlined objects to look for in space. It was also about then that **Rheem Machines** appeared in print for the first time.

Some of our members had very special talents, one of whom was **Jack, the Gadget Man** as he came to be known. Jack Apfelbaum invariably came to meetings with a new contraption that he had concocted and that he wanted to show off. They were all astronomically related and made from spare parts found

lying around his workshop. Then there was our computer wizard, **Jim Watt**. He used to bring his brand new 486 PC and show members the wonders of what it could do. We would all stand by with our jaws dropping to the floor wishing we could have one. We watched in wonder as he printed out a sky chart on the latest dot matrix printer, which was slow and loud but the end result was something that could easily be published in our newsletter.

The main issue in September 1992 was **insurance** and members were divided over it was necessary. Some were afraid that they might lose their homes if someone fell and sued the club. Eventually the club accepted that it was needed and David Hawksworth found a policy at the right price through the WIA (Wireless Institute of Australia). The newsletter at the time also had a "For Sale" section and one of the first ads was submitted by Kruno Ratkovic – a Commodore 64 desktop for \$328 with an additional chess program for an extra \$35. The Treasurer's report for September 1992 notes assets at \$370.

After the pleasure of having our meetings at the Falls Creek Public School's Principal's residence, which afforded some comfort, the club was informed that it would have to move to a **classroom** instead. There was really no choice, so members had to accept the offer. Although it meant sitting in small student chairs at small student desks, most members agreed that it was not that bad. For one thing, there was a chalkboard now for diagrams during lectures. This was in 1992, when Voyager 1, after 15 years of travel, had reached a distance of 7.4 billion kilometres from Earth.

In April of that year, the members, including some wives and children embarked on an excursion to **Tidbinbilla**, via a stopover at MacDonalds in Goulburn. The visitors centre had just been upgraded and maintenance was being done on the main antenna so we were able to see it being moved to different positions. After gaining admission to the main compound we were all taken to the canteen for a coffee before beginning the tour of the base. Whilst in the main control room we could "see" signals from the Magellan probe which was orbiting Venus and performing radar mapping of its surface. After leaving Tidbinbilla the group made its way to the Downer Club. Although it is a social club complete with poker machines and bars, there are also three domes off the side of the main building which house a 6-inch refractor, a 14-inch Celestron and a 16-inch Newtonian/Schmidt Cassegrain. Our group used the 14-inch through which we observed Jupiter, the Orion Nebula, the Jewel Box Cluster, Omega Centauri and the Sombrero Hat Galaxy. Even allowing for the lights of Canberra they were still splendid viewing.

See also

Minutes of the last meeting at Vincentia Public School (May 1992) and the Parkes Expedition