

Chasing the Stars: How the Astronomers of Observatory Hill Transformed Our Understanding of the Universe

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Filled with fascinating astronomy-related facts, *Chasing the Stars* covers the first century-plus of the University of Wisconsin's Washburn Observatory and the science it inspired.

Built on a Dakota effigy mound in the 1880s, the buildings on Observatory Hill are sites from where many "observed the Moon, a planet, a comet, or a double star on a clear night." This history of the observatory celebrates those visitors, among whom are storied scientists and innovators. Those profiled include the site's inaugural director, astronomer James Watson, who was "stingy with telescope time," believed he'd discovered Vulcan, and did discover twenty-two asteroids total. Later, George Comstock used now obsolete tools to produce early "evidence of the vast range that exists in stellar luminosities." And Joel Stebbins brought astrophysics and photoelectric photometry to the site during his tenure as director—in addition to hosting parties on the hill.

Stimulating tidbits arise throughout, speaking to astronomer Maria Mitchell's notion that "We especially need imagination in science. ... it is somewhat beauty and poetry." Among the book's curiosities are a dog named Tycho (as in Brahe), stories of chasing total solar eclipses, and an image of an astronomer outfitted in a full fur suit for winter observing. There's an anecdote about shrinking the universe, and another about a troublesome lover's lane; the story of the Oscar Meyer Observatory; and coverage of a busy month spent uncovering "twenty-nine new nebulae and sixty-two new double stars." Computers, in this context, are women with spreadsheets compiling star catalogs. Funding was once generated by selling the astronomical time to the railroads, and confrontations of contemporary issues like light pollution are also covered. All help to make *Chasing the Stars* a thorough, enlightening history of an important scientific site and the personalities who brought it to life.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2024)

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