

MEMORIES OF PAUL ROBINSON
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Synopsis of a Presentation at the Association's 40th Anniversary Dinner, Holiday Inn, Clinton NJ, November 6, 2005

I met Paul Robinson in Spring of 1961 through Charlie Temperly. Those who knew Charlie remember what an enthusiastic salesman he could be! "Six of us are building ten inch telescopes and there's room for one more person. We're meeting at Paul Robinson's house and he has a machine shop in his basement. *If you ever wanted to build a telescope there will never again in your lifetime be such an opportunity.*" Who could turn down such an offer?

At Paul's place I met John Schultz, Herman Broennie, Marc Schneider, and Jack Painter. (I already knew Jack as he played trumpet in a local "pickup" rag time band in which I played an electric mandolin)...We gathered in a comfortable, paneled room in Paul's basement, surrounded by examples of another of Paul 's interests semi-precious stones and lapidary work. The other end of the basement was a workshop and contained, among other things, the metal-working lathe now in the Observatory workshop, and a Foucault test setup.

With his vision, common sense, energy, quick wit, and enthusiasm, coupled with his business experience, Paul provided the leadership for our diverse group, and he encouraged learning activities during the telescope construction. In 1963 our group went to Caratunk in northern Maine which was on the path of a total solar eclipse. Paul and I drove up together and with all the people converging on the area, we felt fortunate to find a Bed & Breakfast arrangement provided by a lady who had apparently lived in the area for many years. But when we asked where she was going to watch the eclipse, she said, "I'm not! I've been hearing how it can hurt your eyes and I'm going into the bedroom and put a pillow over my head. What a terrible thing to happen in our town."

So we got no help from her . . . but we located a quiet road in a nearby valley and our group convened there. The day of the event it appeared as if our hostess would not need her pillow - threatening gray clouds were approaching from the northwest and soon obscured the sun. When it started to rain, telescopes, cameras, tripods and other equipment were hurriedly stowed back in vehicles. Paul noted that there was a bright patch of sky approaching from Canada, and just seconds before totality, what remained of the sun suddenly appeared. Shadow bands swept across the landscape . . . the sun became a black disk silhouetted against silvery white streamers in a very dark blue-green sky . . . the planet Mercury was visible, the temperature dropped sharply. Suddenly the eerie stillness was shattered by a thunderous boom as astronaut Scott Carpenter's plane, racing the moon's shadow along the path of totality, shot over the valley. Birds, which had gone to roost when it became dark, fluttered out of the trees. Then, the "Diamond Ring" appeared . . . the shadow bands returned, moving in the opposite direction . . . and it was over. In 1970 the group traveled to North Carolina to see, a solar eclipse, and in 1972 witnessed another on the Gaspé Peninsula.

And so seven individual men were building seven telescopes. Where did the facility in Voorhees Park come from? Like so many of our achievements, it had its start in Paul Robinson's mind. One day, after we had been meeting for some months, Paul said, "I've been thinking. We need seven telescopes like a boy needs two heads. *We should pool our resources and create an instrument that is large enough to share with the community, especially the young people.*"

Paul was a visionary with the ability to get things done; he had retired from Western Electric as the Chief of Engineering and Drafting Methods. He started looking at potential sites for a larger instrument. He made phone calls in search of material and support.. With his own money he started a fund --- the next donor was his friend and neighbor, Richard Bender, who owned a factory in Georgia.

The acquisition of the massive telescope mount resulted from Paul's telephone call to Warner & Swasey, The mirror blank was obtained through Paul's acquaintance with Stanley Brower, President of Laboratory Optical Corporation.. Paul's search for a site for the observatory culminated in the long-term lease of the acreage in Voorhees Park from the State of New Jersey.. The availability of the former dome of Princeton University's observatory was learned from Joe Richey, K2AT, who, like Paul, was a Western Electric retiree.

Under Paul's leadership, the organization steadily grew, and we had the venerable Clinton law firm of Gebhardt and Kiefer incorporate it as the New Jersey Astronomical Association¹.

At the NJAA annual dinners, guests included state officials (our "landlords"), Cot. Edwin E. Aidrin , Sr., a famous air pioneer and father of the astronaut, Dr. Karl Henize, astronaut, and Dave Garroway, TV host with a serious interest in astronomy, and later on, Buzz Aidrin himself.

We almost didn't have a Paul Robinson. In July, 1915, five hundred Western Electric employees of the Chicago plant lost their lives during a company picnic when the steamer Eastland capsized. Paul and some others managed to clamber up the side as it rolled and stood on the hull until rescued. Of the tragedy, Paul said, " It has lived long and strong in my memory. Many fellow workmen and friends have been gone since that terrible day."

In 1974, with mixed emotions, Paul and his wife, Lillian, a former concert pianist, moved to California to be near their children and grandchildren. Paul and I kept in touch until his death in Sante Cruz, California, on February 12, 1988. He was 92.

Paul got to visit the Observatory that bears his name once after he moved to California. If he were to return today he would be pleased to see the active membership, the upgrading of the telescope, the Solar System Walk, and the programs being offered at the Edwin E. Aidrin Education Center. But he would be most happy that the "young people," so precious to him, are receiving the benefits of these assets.