

TO DAVID, WITH THANKS!

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Abstract: In this issue of *JAHH* we recognize David DeVorkin, who celebrated his 80th birthday on 7 January 2024. Many readers of this journal are familiar with David's distinguished career as an historian of astronomy and as Senior Curator of the History of Astronomy and Space Sciences at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. In this paper I offer some personal reminiscences of my time with him, beginning with him offering me my first teaching job.

Keywords: David DeVorkin; Historical Astronomy Division; Van Vleck Observatory; Central Connecticut State College.

1 INTRODUCTION

I am honored to have been invited to contribute to this special issue of the *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage*, honoring David DeVorkin on his 80th birthday. I have known David for forty-nine years; however, as I warned Wayne, I am not an historian of astronomy.¹ I can therefore offer only some personal reminiscences.

2 THE CENTRAL CONNECTICUT LINK

I first met David DeVorkin in early September of 1975. He was, at that time, a member of the faculty at Central Connecticut State College (CCSC),² located near the center of the state in the city of New Britain. I was just starting a two-year graduate program at Wesleyan University in Middletown, about a half-hour drive to the south.

Just before the start of classes, Art Upgren (who at that time was Chair of the Astronomy Department at Wesleyan) introduced me to Dr. DeVorkin. David was looking for a graduate student to teach an Introductory Astronomy lab class at CCSC, and Art recommended me for the position. I was somewhat nervous about accepting—at that time I had no teaching experience aside from some tutoring at the high school level. But David assured me that he would provide help and guidance, and so I accepted the job.

To say that David helped me with my first teaching job would be an understatement! Prior to the first lab session he devoted considerable time to showing me the astronomy laboratory room, the equipment within, and the planetarium and rooftop observatory. He made sure I had a parking pass and the needed facility keys. And he introduced me to some of the other faculty and administrators at CCSC. He also provided copious course materials, but emphasized that, while I was welcome to use his syllabus,

I was also free to make any changes I wanted.

Needless to say, I was very nervous the night of the first session! But David was present for most of it, introducing me to the seventeen students in attendance and providing a planetarium show to orient them to the night sky. After that night I was pretty much on my own, though David regularly checked in to enquire how I was doing. I think I did reasonably well; my student evaluations were good, and I was asked back to teach the lab during the next two semesters. I felt privileged to visit David's home and to meet his lovely wife at the parties he frequently hosted.

3 VAN VLECK OBSERVATORY

Wesleyan University is home to Van Vleck Observatory, built in 1914 (Figure 1) and featuring an historic 20-inch Clark long focal length refractor (Figure 2).³ During my first year there the Astronomy Department was housed on the third floor of a modern science building. The Observatory was located atop a hill a short distance away. The primary research program at that time was the determination of parallaxes and proper motions of nearby stars (see Glass et al., 2011). I fondly recall many clear nights obtaining plates with the Van Vleck 20-inch refracting telescope! I learned that David had also conducted astrometric observations with large telescopes early in his career. He recently related to me:

When I was a first semester senior, I took a job at Lick ... After very thorough training in safety measures with large manual telescopes, I observed at the 36 inch and the Carnegie double astrograph [see Figure 3] providing astrometric data for Vasilevskis. I was there from January 1965 and returned to UCLA in September. Loved it!! It help-



Figure 1: Van Vleck Observatory at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. The large dome houses the 20-inch Clark refractor (<https://historicbuildingsct.com/van-vleck-observatory-1916/>).

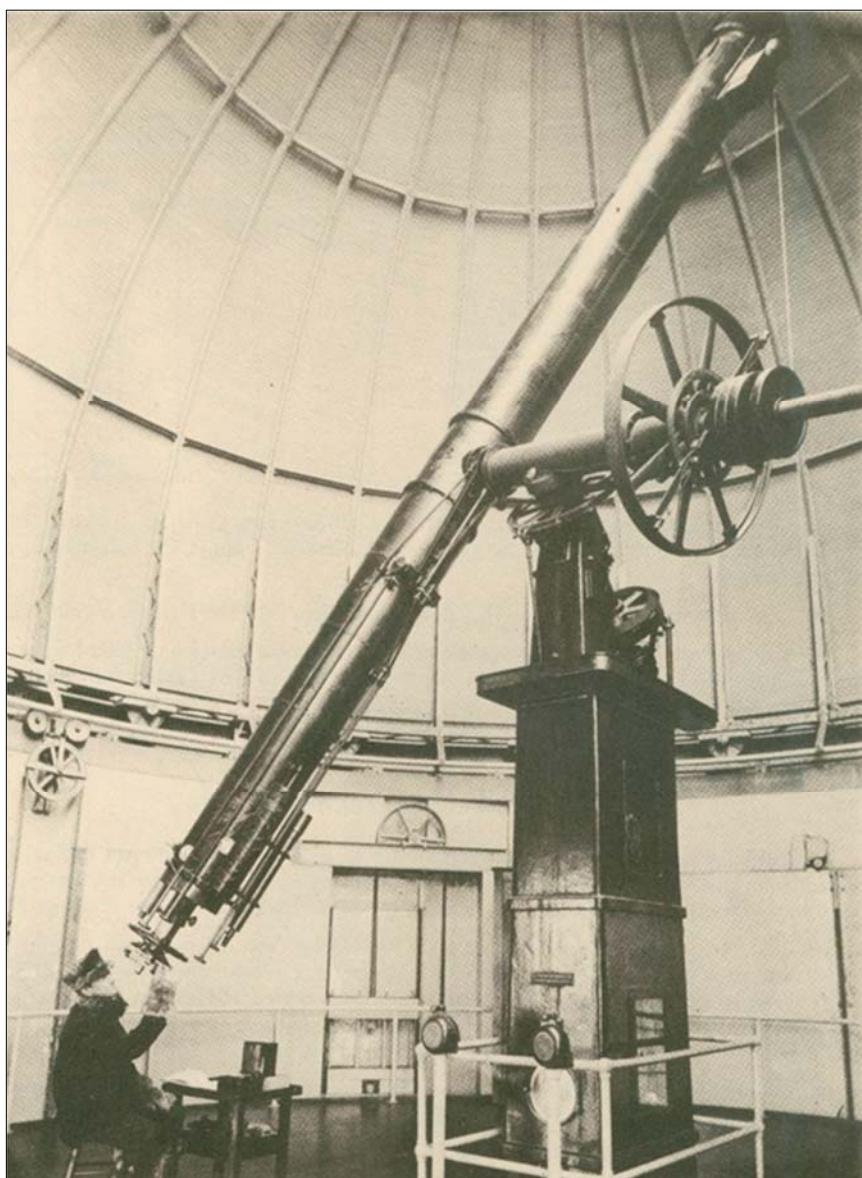


Figure 2 (left): The 20-inch Clark refractor (after [Slocum et al., 1938: 18](#)).

ed me get a job at Yerkes in June 1966 to commune with the 40-inch and WW Morgan – I worked for Bill van Altena – parallaxes, proper motions -- many many stories leading to being an historian.

4 DAVID AND THE TROUVELOT PRINT

In the summer of 1976, as a result of increasing demands for space in the science building, the Astronomy Department in its entirety moved to the Observatory. Dr. Upgren allowed me to claim a small office next to the dome housing the refractor, provided I “fix it up”. I painted the walls and cabinetry, installed carpeting, and then started to decorate. In the junk room (aka the transit room, which had not been used for observations in many years) I found a nice picture of Saturn ([Figure 4](#)), which I attached to my office wall with thumbtacks.

Figure 3 (right): A young (age 20) David DeVorkin observing with the Carnegie double astrograph at Lick Observatory (courtesy: David DeVorkin).

A few months later, while David DeVorkin was touring the country conducting oral interviews, he came to Wesleyan and stopped in to say 'hi'. When he saw the picture, his jaw dropped and he said "That's an original Trouvelot print! Do you have any idea how much that's worth?" I sheepishly guessed that it was probably worth less now that it had been tacked to a wall.

5 MEETINGS AND THE HAD

And that was the last time I saw David, for a couple of decades. Upon completing my Master's degree program I entered the Doctoral program in Astronomy at The Ohio State University.

Then in 1981 David left the CCSC to eventually become Senior Curator in the Space History Division at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. And he became one of the earliest members of the newly-formed Historical As-

Figure 4: Etienne Léopold Trouvelot's drawing of Saturn, as observed on 30 November 1874. This original print, published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1881, was thoughtlessly tacked to an office wall by the author (photograph: Ken Rumstay).



tronomy Division of the American Astronomical Society.

I believe I next spoke with David at the Centennial Meeting of the AAS, held in Chicago during the late spring of 1999. For that event he edited a collection of papers on the history of the AAS (Figure 5). I joined the Historical Astronomy Division (HAD) later that year, and have thoroughly enjoyed the talks at their annual meetings. Of particular note was the January 2008 meeting in Austin, Texas. At that meeting David received HAD's LeRoy E. Doggett Prize (Figure 6) and presented an excellent plenary lecture on "Astronomy and Its History on the Nation's Mall." The HAD mem-

bers present at that meeting ended the day with a celebratory dinner at Louie's 106, a lovely restaurant with excellent Continental cuisine.

I enjoyed numerous opportunities to reconnect with David at HAD meetings during the ensuing years. One particularly memorable one was in January 2010, when the AAS met in Washington, D.C. Until the practice was discontinued in 2012, the AAS traditionally held a society banquet on the evening before the final day of the meeting. Some were admittedly better than others, both in terms of the food and the after-dinner entertainment. But the one at the 2010 meeting was excellent! David had arranged that the banquet be held at the Smith-

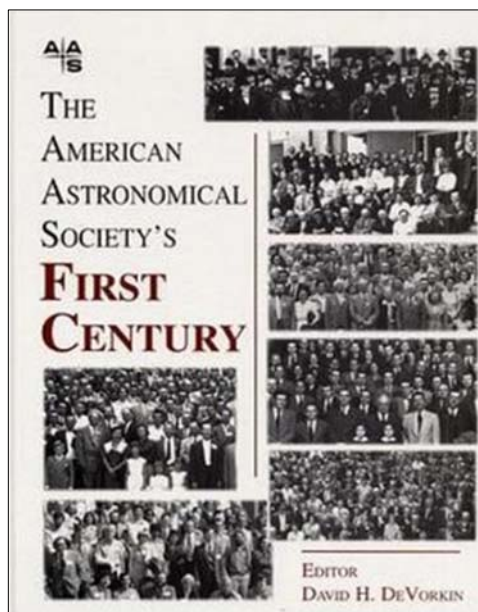


Figure 5 (left): The monograph, edited by David, to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the American Astronomical Society (photograph courtesy American Institute of Physics).



Figure 6 (right): David DeVorkin (center) receives the 2008 LeRoy E. Doggett Prize from HAD Prize Committee Chair Donald Yeomans and HAD Chair Sara Schechner (photograph courtesy the AAS Historical Astronomy Division).

sonian's National Air and Space Museum, after closing to the public for the day. After enjoying a sumptuous buffet we were entertained by the 'Capitol Steps', a local comedy troupe that specialized in political humor. Following that, we were given free rein of the Museum for an



Figure 7: The observing cage from the 100-inch telescope at Mt. Wilson Observatory was on display at the National Air and Space Museum in January 2010 (photograph: Eric Long, courtesy Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum).

hour. I can still hear David's final admonition to the crowd: "Try not to break anything!" One notable exhibit in the 'Explore the Universe' Gallery was the observing cage (not a replica, the real one) from the 100-inch telescope at Mt. Wilson (see [Figure 7](#)). Finding myself alone there, I took the opportunity to sit in Hubble's chair.

By this time I was well aware of David's accomplishments in the field of astronomical history, and had read his highly acclaimed biography *Henry Norris Russell: Dean of American Astronomers*. But it wasn't until I became HAD's Secretary-Treasurer in 2016 that I came to fully appreciate his many accomplishments. To learn more about the Historical Astronomy Division I browsed through numerous documents and past issues of *HAD News*, its biannual newsletter. In addition to winning the 2008 Doggett Prize, David devoted sixteen years to HAD as an officer in various capacities:

Chair: 1997–1999
 Vice Chair: 1995–1997
 Past Chair: 1997–1999
 Secretary-Treasurer: 1985–1993
 At Large Committee Member: 1981–1983

He has presented 35 papers at HAD meetings, contributed numerous articles to *HAD News*, and has contributed to HAD's annual meetings in countless ways ([Figure 8](#)).

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, it has truly been a privilege to have

known David DeVorkin; he has been an inspiration to me. On behalf of the American Astronomical Society's Historical Astronomy Division, I would like to thank him for all he has done for us. And I would especially like to thank him for hiring me 49 years ago, starting my life-long teaching career!

7 NOTES

1. The reader may wonder how I ended up serving as Secretary-Treasurer to the American Astronomical Society's Historical Astronomy Division for eight years. The answer is simple: this is an appointed position, not an elected one. And in January 2016 I was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time (when the then-Secretary-Treasurer announced his resignation).
2. The CCSC became Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) in 1983.
3. World War I delayed completion of the 20-inch telescope, with Clark optician Carl Lundin grinding the Schott lenses and optimizing them for photography by minimizing both coma and vignetting. (Upgren et al., 1995: 347). Dr. Upgren joined Van Vleck Observatory in December 1966 and expanded the Clark telescope's research pro-

gram. At this time it was "... the smallest long-focus refractor in the world used for parallax and proper motion studies." (Glass et al., 2011). When National Science Foundation funded ended in the late 1990s this research was closed down.



Figure 8: David DeVorkin (right) mans the HAD booth at the January 2020 meeting of the American Astronomical Society in Honolulu (photograph: Ken Rumstay).

8 REFERENCES

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Professor Kenneth Rumstay was born in Berlin, Connecticut in 1953. He received his BSc in Planetary Physics and Chemistry from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1975, followed by a BA in Astronomy from Wesleyan University (1977) and a PhD in Astronomy from The Ohio State University (1984). He served on the faculty of Valdosta State University in Georgia for thirty-seven years, teaching courses in Physics and Astronomy. From 1996 until his retirement in 2021 he was Director of VSU's observatory and planetarium, which provides the largest public science outreach program in southern Georgia. In 1989 he helped found the Southeastern Association for Research in Astronomy (SARA). His research interests include galactic and extragalactic HII regions, optical variability of active galactic nuclei, and the manner in which astronomy has been portrayed in popular print media.



A member of the American Astronomical Society's Historical Astronomy Division since the year 2000, Ken became (by pure happenstance; see the first Note, above) its Secretary-Treasurer in January 2026. He served in that position for eight years, and found it very rewarding.