

Astronomy Day

By Frank Dibbell, Lead Docent, Cameron Park Rotary Club Community Observatory

Saturday April 24th is National Astronomy Day. What is Astronomy Day, you might ask? When did it start? Why should I be interested? Well, let us start at the beginning.

Astronomy Day started back in 1973 when then Astronomical Association of Northern California (AANC) President Doug Berger began a grass roots movement to bring the joy of Astronomy to the general public. Before that time, local Astronomy Clubs would invite the public to attend evening outings called "Star Parties" to view the wonders of the heavens. The only problem was that most clubs held their events at out of the way locations away from city lights because that is where amateur astronomers liked to go. For this reason, public programs held by local clubs were poorly attended.

In 1973 Doug Berger got tired of trying to talk people into driving miles into the middle of nowhere to see the night sky, so he came upon the idea that, if we cannot bring people to the telescopes, let's bring the telescopes to the people! And that is what he did. Doug communicated this idea to member clubs in the AANC, and in the spring of 1973 local San Francisco Bay Area astronomy clubs brought their telescopes out to local malls and other public places and set up shop!

Within a couple of years, Astronomy Day became a national event, being held on or about the first quarter moon in the month of April. I was fortunate to have been a part of some of these early Astronomy Day events in the Bay Area. In 1978 I ran an Astronomy Day station in, of all places, the Great America theme park in Santa Clara. We were set up by the gazebo in Town Square, and with all the lights you could barely see the sky. But Saturn was high and very visible, so approximately 5,000 park visitors got a great look at the ringed planet that evening. For many it was their first glimpse through a telescope. To say they were impressed would be an understatement.

Astronomy Day is now international in scope. England, Canada, New Zealand, Finland, Argentina, Malaysia, the Philippines, New Guinea, and many more countries are hosting Astronomy Day activities. In addition to local astronomy clubs, science museums, observatories, planetariums and nature centers now host programs to bring astronomy to the visitors of those facilities. In addition to enjoying the heavens above, one can get their questions about Astronomy answered, and find out how they can get involved with Astronomy, if that is what they wish.

This year CPRC Community Observatory in Placerville will be hosting an Astronomy Day Event from 4:00PM – 10:00PM on Saturday, April 24th. The event is starting in daylight hours to include the wonders of viewing the Sun through specially made telescopes that enable the viewers to safely view sunspots and solar flares. During the Twilight Hours there will be presentations about Solar Viewing; our Solar System; the Space Station and Astrophotography. During the evening, in addition to the regular observatory telescopes, docents will be manning their own telescopes to provide more opportunities to observe the wonders of the night sky. This

will be a rain or shine event, so dress in layers and join us on April 24th. For more information and driving directions go to www.communityobservatory.com