

First Class Stargazing

By LuAnn LePere and Jackie Hurley, (Mother and Daughter) Docents – Cameron Park Rotary Community Observatory

There is a place in El Dorado County that comes to life by night. By day, it is a conspicuous round paved depression in the earth adjacent to the Cameron Park Rotary Community Observatory. As soon as the sun sets, however, it becomes the gateway to the night sky, welcoming visitors to lounge and watch the greatest show in the universe.

It is the “G. Arthur Cort Sky Theater”, a recent addition to the observatory experience. Its specially slanted concrete benches are reclined to just the right angle for leisurely stargazing without the inevitable neck-crick of the standing stargazer. It is a perfect venue for star tours led by a volunteer docent, pointing out constellations from the center of the structure for the visitors seated on the periphery. Visitors can spot owls, deer, rabbits, and other local wildlife while watching the dark sky. The area is surrounded by the songs of frogs and crickets, experiences that are a central part to life in El Dorado County. This darker foothill location creates a welcome location for gazing solo or in groups of up to 40 likeminded Earth-bound celestial travelers.

The new sky theater is a continuation of the dedication this Rotary Club has shown in giving back to the community in El Dorado County. The observatory was conceived by the Rotary Club of Cameron Park as a community service project to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Rotary International. The Rotary Club members raised all of the funds and donated time and materials to build the observatory and the sky theater on land owned by the El Dorado County Office of Education adjacent to the El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College.

The sky theater was patterned after a similar one in Bidwell Park in Chico. The driving force behind this new theater was Rotarian, Arthur Cort. A civil engineer, Cort designed the theater and supervised its construction. The Cameron Park Rotary Club built the theater during this exceptionally wet winter with donations of materials from local businesses and thousands of volunteer hours from Rotary Club members. In appreciation for all his efforts, it was dedicated and named for Arthur Cort on January 11, 2011.

The G. Arthur Cort Sky Theater is just another of the wealth of resources available free to the public at the observatory. The theater is located just off the driveway of the observatory, nestled in the grassy foothills behind the El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville. Bring the whole family for an unforgettable experience in the foothills of El Dorado County. See the stars through the 14-inch reflecting telescopes on a clear dark night. Follow planets or the moon as they travel across the sky. Special presentations for the sky theater are being planned for the warmer months. See the observatory website for the announcements of these educational and entertaining events.

The observatory is open free to the public from 8-10PM on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, weather permitting. Please check the website www.communityobservatory.com for weather closures and other important information regarding visiting the observatory.