

REMEMBRANCE OF JOHN DOBSON

From Eric and Becky Clifton

The entire astronomical world was saddened by the recent passing of John Dobson, especially those of us in the PAS who had the pleasure of his company during his Peoria visit a dozen years ago ... and, especially, Becky and I.

Rest in Peace, John ... I hope you're enjoying the view of Andromeda from the other side!



Here is Becky's description of our "Three Days of Dobson" from the 2002 StarLite.

Three Days of Dobson By Rebecca Clifton

It happened innocently enough. Travel arrangements had finally been made and confirmed about how to get this 80-something year old guy from Naperville to Peoria to Champaign. Hotel accommodations had been finalized. Only follow-up phone calls to the local media remained.

In preparing final press releases before the "big event", I sat down in front of the computer and started my search for interesting tidbits, 'sound bites', if you will, about John Dobson.

What had been scheduled as a 30-minute 'quick-look' turned into a 5 hour odyssey through the life and times of what was becoming a very unique person. No longer did John Dobson translate into "Geezer Geek". He had been transformed into a sort of living legend. Growing up in Peking, China, playing behind sandbags during the Boxer Rebellion, research chemist, worker on the Manhattan Project, pianist, Vendanta monk, revolutionary telescope designer, lecturer, world traveler and student of the Universe ... a poor man and, yet, rich (and enriching) beyond belief. And I knew he had to stay in our home.

I informed my husband that I'd cancelled the hotel reservations and that Mr. Dobson would be a guest in our home. It just had to be that way. Period. Eric was a bit perplexed at my sudden shift from astro-spouse boredom syndrome into fervent Dobson scholar mode. But he put up no argument. Deep down inside I think that this was a wish come true for my husband. (He'd already volunteered to be John's driver as they dashed from place to place during John's three-day stay.)

And so, John Dobson arrived in Central Illinois (which gave a whole new meaning to the term 'optically flat' compared to the mountains he is used to). After a tour of StarHouse, Woodford county's *only* observatory, we were welcomed by a delicious

dinner at the home of Rich and Margo Tennis. John gave the blessing in Sanskrit---then translated, with a twinkle in his eye, "for those who aren't quite fluent in ancient tongues." The meal was magnificent and John was mesmerizing! I had the pleasure of sitting next to him and was totally enraptured as we discussed nutrition, botany, rock music, and only a little astronomy.

The PAS members' meeting that evening was the first real event on John's busy Peoria schedule. If you were there, you got a real treat. Delivering his cosmology presentation in a casual, easy-going, charming manner, John frequently emphasized a point with a small curtsey in the direction of Jolie Nordstrom (Rodney's daughter).

John Kenny's Thursday afternoon astronomy class at Bradley also received the benefit of John's visit to Peoria. When asked how many telescopes being built around the world today use his design or some variation, he shrugged and answered simply, "About half."

And later that night, energy never waning, John was the featured speaker at the Peoria Academy of Science's Annual Banquet. He talked a bit about cosmology, a bit about astronomy in general, and a lot about the San Francisco Sidewalk Astronomers . . . his preferred topic.

You see, John really doesn't seem to give a fig about the fame his telescope mount design has brought him. He dislikes the name "Dobsonian Mount", but he likes the term "Dobsonian Hole" . . . that small batch of sky directly overhead where aiming a Dobsonian gets difficult. He doesn't much stand on ceremony. He really gets a kick out of being known for his "Dobsonian Method of Print Distribution." Flyers ("how do you think they got their name") were flung over the heads of his audience by a grinning John who admittedly loves to watch people's reactions to his method. Living legends are allowed to have senses of humor!

Friday turned out to be a busy day, too. A tour of NorthMoor that morning had to be canceled when John decided to take an impromptu nap on our family room floor. OK. It's not so unusual for an 87 year old guy to want to recharge with a quick forty winks. What was unusual is that the most antisocial of our five felines decided to curl up for a nap right along side of John. If you are a cat person, you know just how finicky cats tend to be. They pick their company very carefully. Evidently, John passed muster.

Friday afternoon saw John and a half-dozen PAS members arrive at Tony Stolin's home in Pekin for a solar star party. There, John declared that Tony's new hydrogen-alpha telescope gave the best view of the sun John had ever seen. That was a great laud for Tony, who was walking on air afterwards. John Dobson does not hand out unwarranted compliments. And, he does not seem to impress easily. So, Tony -- you did good! (P.S. That was Friday . . . on Monday, an equally-impressed Scott Swords ordered a telescope just like Tony's!)

That evening our star party at Jubilee took full advantage of the only clear night in a week-and-a-half. Jubilee was jumping. David Kobilka brought his Astronomy class and his Earth Sciences class from ICC. About 25-30 PAS members joined the festivities, many with their own equipment. Add to that extended family and friends and guests of all ages, drawn by the beautiful Spring skies, the many telescopes, and, of course, John. Altogether, we had about 80-90 people on the hilltop that night.

I had expected John to sort of "hold court" at Jubilee. After all, he's in his element . . . surrounded by inquiring minds and telescopes to match. But, he surprised me. He went from scope to scope--like the rest of us. He occasionally wandered away on his own to gaze up and get lost in the enormity of it all . . . like the rest of us. He gave forth an astronomical fact or two . . . like the rest of us. But, mostly, he just looked up --with a smile on his face and serenity in his eyes-- enjoying people who were enjoying astronomy.

Saturday morning came. Time for breakfast then good-byes. It was truly bittersweet. This houseguest, this living legend, this man had come not only into our home but into our hearts. You see, while he "wasn't on stage" or "scheduled", we talked. And talked. And talked some more. John and I formed a friendship that I will treasure the rest of my life. John Dobson is much, much more than an astronomer. He is a scholar . . . in every sense of the word. He is a gentleman . . . in every sense of the word. And, yes, he marches to the tune of a very different drummer. He is all--and so much more--than his biographers have told.

After I had given John one last hug and we had waved our last good-byes, Eric and I just sort of looked at each other and without speaking walked back inside. And our house actually felt empty! A living legend had crossed our path. An incredibly unique and wonderful person had come into and gone out of our lives in the course of just three and a half days. But, undeniably, he had left his imprint . . . not only on both of us, but on every mind that he touched in Peoria.

Thanks to my husband, I have been given some wonderful experiences---meeting Dr. J. Allen Hynek; meeting Dr. Clyde Tombaugh; touring Mt. Hopkins; observing at Yerkes; experiencing eclipses. The list is long and rewarding. But, nothing-- NOTHING-- compares to having met and become friends with John Dobson.