

# A Child of the Stars

By Lorelei Parker Power



It was around the end of World War II, somewhere down a dirt road under clear country skies, when a very young passenger asked her mother, “Why is the moon following our car? Will it follow us all the way home?”

But her mother was driving and wanted her quiet, not her curiosity, “The moon only follows bad little girls,” she lied.

And a very quiet child lived under a fearsome moon, for many moons, before finally learning the truth about it. Along the way, against those odds, she developed a love for the night sky. Some thirty years later, she gave that story to her own daughter, along with a solid lesson on perspective, in both factual and philosophical terms. It’s been another thirty-something years since then, but I can still remember joking, “The moon was following grandma!” and seeing something further heal within my mother’s eyes. She was always more of a “Socrates” than an astronomer, promoting creative “cognitive tools” rather than funding actual astronomy equipment. Still, I would always be

impressed with my own love for the night sky and how it began with the physical truth of the moon.

I was raised with a love for science, encouraged in a home where it was given that, regardless of age, sex, race, and any other difference, whether real or perceived, every human being was born with an equal right to be curious and free to seek the truth. Those types of discussions usually happened naturally, camped-out under starry skies, where I’d dream of one day becoming an astronaut and going to the moon. And I’ll never forget the time when all the women took the children “skinny dipping”; it was during my first lunar eclipse. Holding hands, we floated in the water and it felt like we were floating through the Universe (of course, we were!). Afterwards, lying on our backs in deep grass, we traced the constellations in the air with our little fingers. Shouting at the sight of shooting stars and satellites, we imagined aliens (both carnivore and vegetarian) visiting our world in highly advanced space ships....and hushed

giggles invariably dissolved into loud silences.

With such an encouraged imagination, I discovered a deep longing to know the Universe. I wanted to understand the existing connection between the energy of stars, planets, and Earth’s life forms –and me. I did a lot of sleeping under the stars and my family had acquired a lot of camping gear to do it comfortably enough, but we didn’t even own binoculars, let alone a telescope! Despite sorely lacking astronomy equipment, I was hooked. I planned on having my own telescope when I grew up and had my own money. I was still so young that the whole idea of kissing boys, marriage and making babies was “gross”, but already my “dream house” was nestled under a big dark sky, and it had an observatory in the backyard.

I couldn’t have endured the wait without astronomy magazines, my first independent step towards making those dreams happen. Science and astronomy magazines were my most immediately affordable

“scope,” providing me with a view to the heavens, current science and technology, and “futuristic” gadgets available to the amateur astronomer. Owning and operating my own observing station was entirely possible –people were doing it! It seemed there was always some new gadget to marvel at in every issue. The celestial images easily surpassed anything I’d seen in the old astronomy textbooks –which, although revered, reeked of mold and were always given with the caution, “some facts contained within may now be obsolete.”

I was well on my way to becoming a “lone wolf” observer when I finally picked up my first telescope in my young adulthood. It was an affordable, light-weight, non-intimidating refractor, good enough for planetary and moon viewing. In other words, I wasn’t worried about breaking it. It was perfect for a beginner and I could easily carry it by myself. I figured I didn’t have to ‘have it all’ at once; the planets would keep me busy for some time before I would need an upgrade. However, on first light as I observed Jupiter, I instantly realized that I had been spoiled by years of viewing the best of photos produced

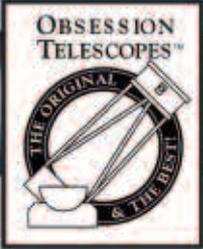
by the advanced equipment of amateur astronomers published in the astro magazines. There was no denying it would take better gear to keep me doing astronomy and not just reading about it.

It was in the aftermath of that disappointment when I met my future husband and astronomy partner, Wayne. He arrived on the scene as “first light” had evolved into a BBQ. Through the dark, I focused on the passion for astronomy in his voice, lending me solid encouragement with perfect timing. And he never made fun of my beginner scope. As an adult I’d never met another amateur astronomer and, as if on some cosmic cue, here was this “neat” guy, an active amateur astronomer, with far better gear! Providence? I had no idea! I couldn’t say it was a “dream come true”; however, because I just hadn’t “dreamed” of whom I might marry. I was more of a mind that it would be hard enough to find a good friend in a mate, let alone a mate who also loved science and astronomy. But one shared lunar eclipse later, and we knew we’d be sharing our astro gear for life.

Eventually we made astronomy our busi-

ness, SkyShed Observatories; making our vocation our avocation thanks to Wayne’s unique observatory (and pier) designs. Today there are several observatories in my backyard: a SkyShed Roll-off and a couple of Wayne’s latest creation, the SkyShed POD. Now we each have our own personal observing dome. After years of sharing astral observing agendas out of necessity of compromise (as much as we enjoyed that), we’re well equipt to execute individual plans for individual observing sessions simultaneously. An intercom hook up between our observatories will allow us to communicate our targets, so we can still share our views, switching “space stations” throughout the night if we choose. The best part for me is I am no longer restricted by the size and weight of our larger scopes; they’re ready for action!

Our observatory business brings us into contact with a large variety of observers. More and more, we are meeting the women astronomers who are out there observing and searching for observatory options too. But lately we’ve been noticing a seemingly new trend of more families coming to astronomy as a unit wanting to observe together, and to



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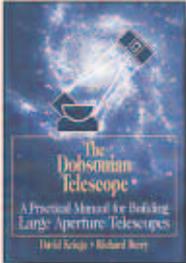
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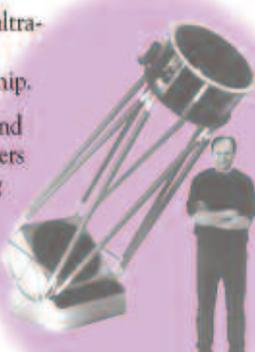
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## A CHILD OF THE STARS

do so more easily on a regular basis. Although we don't have children, I can still appreciate the difficulty of maintaining astronomy pursuits whilst trying to rear the children you love, managing a household, and making a living. It becomes more feasible when the family shares the interest and the passion, co-operating to get out under the stars together; mapping observing missions together; planning astro gear purchases, openly, through the front door; planning family vacations around celestial events and astronomy "parties."

I've spoken with amateur astronomers concerned with guiding and encouraging their families in astronomy. They want to give their children something logical and concrete to help them navigate their way through those teenage years, where fiction and folly might otherwise find a foothold. They want to involve their kids, at appropriate age levels, in the process of choosing, operating, and eventually even maintaining and upgrading their astronomy equipment. They want to provide a strong family foundation with a meaningful core family activity where science and philosophy invariably lead

to more questions which, even when unanswered, point to who we are and what we are capable of – something far greater than a child might otherwise believe.

Recently, a very young but serious child made one of our favorite telephone inquiries (about a pier). The questions were well spoken and the father could be heard prompting the child, encouragingly. No time was wasted; no one was trying to be cute. We don't know if that pier ever sold; we just hope that little astronomer is somewhere observing, even more interested in outer space.

Many single-father amateur astronomers want to especially encourage their daughters to find inspiration in female astronomer role models. They appreciate "her" experience may be different from their own. Those role models are out there, better documented and more accessible than ever before, especially with the Internet. You can look all the way back to the late fourth century to find Hypatia of Alexandria; historically considered the first notable woman in mathematics, as well the first notable female astronomer. Her wise father, Theon, is well worth reading

about too. He had educated Hypatia himself and was the first and foremost promoter of her studies and her work. Perhaps Theon had been a widower, so little was clear about her mother (was it 1 or 12 kids she had? were the 11 other kids just not interested?). Be warned the ending to Hypatia's story is brutal, and what was done to her would hardly be encouraging to any young observer.

There are so many "female firsts" in science and astronomy; you don't have to dig back through the centuries in order to find inspirational role models. Take the more recent as well historically critical example of Dorrit Hoffleit (1907-2007), who earned her Ph.D. in astronomy in 1938. You can read about her many accomplishments but as an astronomer, especially, you've already benefited from her work and the 'tools' she provided. I appreciate how hard it was for her to get her hands on the "cool tools" back in the day (and earning forty cents an hour for work which paid male counterparts a dollar), so I appreciate how easy it is today. Dorrit must have been some character! Having reached 100 years old, she was considered the oldest active female astronomer and possibly the oldest active astronomer – period. She never married and she had no children; the world inherits her time "at the scope."

Researching women in science, astronomy and technology today, you'll find diverse profiles in all age ranges of women having fun doing science and astronomy or in some way contributing to our "hobby." ATT will introduce some of those astronomical women in this column. The FUN part really needs to be stressed – Science IS exciting, the tools are fun. Tools empower and facilitate contribution to the advancement of Humankind. There are enough universal questions left unanswered to keep everyone busy for lifetimes, providing interesting diverse career options for all. That's cool! – Or as a kid might say, "Hot!" So where did anyone get the idea that astronomers are "nerdy"? I would encourage, you don't have to lose yourself, or your "sexuality," to pursue science. You won't have to be "nerdy" to be taken seriously. History speaks volumes: both male and female role models stand as leading examples for all, the Human experience being central, beyond sex and gender perceptions.

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such a role model at your next star party, or purchasing your next piece of astronomy equipment from her. And you'll be meeting more "Theons" in the future than you'll find in the past. You may even be someone's Theon now:

*"One of the reasons I bought a POD was to introduce my daughter to astronomy - perhaps she'll carry the interest into adulthood.... Women tend to have a different perspective on things than men, and (secure) men can always learn something from the diversity they offer. I bet this applies to perspectives on astronomy, too."*

*-Mark, Amateur Astronomer*

There are no guarantees that you won't be someone's best or only hope for encouragement. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." I found a bit of "Theon" in several male role models in my life. I looked amongst teachers for male perspectives and found wonderful influences.

And I was well-supported there when I had to achieve a "female first" of my own just to be able to take Woodworking and Metal Shop in grade school. I had to "prove" with an essay and presentation that a girl should be allowed to use those tools (I simply asked them to consider the intellect, not the gender). That class was the only way I could have gained access to such machinery and access to that teacher. At 12 years old, I was not above begging, but it wasn't necessary; the school board was open to making the change. My appeal and subsequent performance in using those hard won "shop" tools opened that door for those who might follow, allowing the girls and boys to choose the tools they would learn (hopefully that option remains, almost three decades later). I'm entirely grateful for both experiences.

It's ironic to be here writing about that. Even though I pursued astronomy tools over carpentry tools, that knowledge and experience will continue to balance any fear of using any tool, whether it threatens to "bite" or break. If "men are from Mars and women are from Venus," it's of no consequence to a telescope. You'll never view the Earth through yours, but a good observer will perceive the Earthlings. 



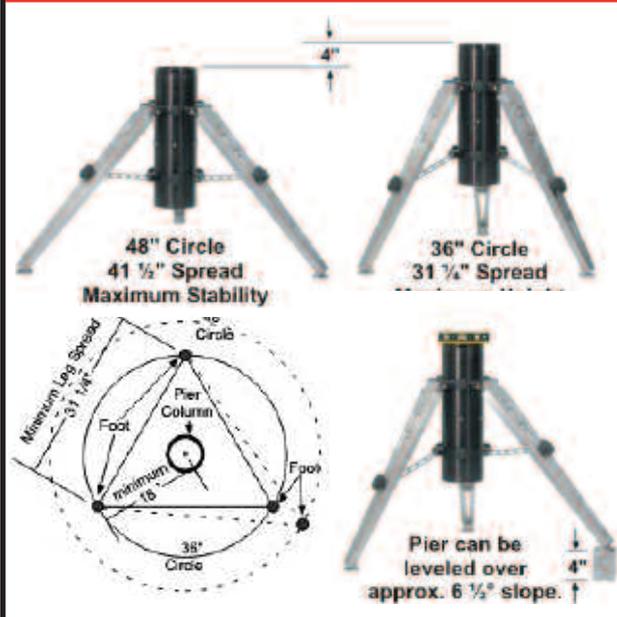
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