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The Oberlin College Observatory

Gabriel Hitchcock

In the mid-1800s, professor Charles Churchill came to Oberlin to teach astronomy and physics. With him came a 5" refracting telescope, donated by Alvan Clark's telescope manufacturing company. With a length of 4 meters, this telescope was more than sufficient for the budding astronomy program. When Peters Hall was constructed in the 1880s, in order to accommodate the increasing the popularity of his courses, a single tower of Churchill's design was added to the northern section of the roof. Meant to eventually house an observatory, from 1898 until 1929 a single painted canvas over a wood frame protected the new, 6" Gaertner telescope, the professor, and students from the elements. Then, in 1929, the green dome as we know it today was constructed to house the telescope.

My own experience with the observatory was unforgettable. The first evening it was open during my freshmen year, a sea of eager students flooded into Peters. We became briefly yet inevitably lost, but eventually making it up to the roof. Packed like sardines under the stars, we swarmed around the few telescope piers, each of us eager for our own look. I moved up to the telescope, bent down to the eyepiece (not the most comfortable when you're 6'2"), and peered through to see . . . something. Rather bright, sort of red, it looked not unlike a *Synapse* article endpoint (see the end of any article). The student assistant patiently explained that this was mars and I should let someone else look. Just as I was about to move away, a brilliant beam of green light shot across my vision, arching up toward mars. This, of course, was Dave Lengyel, the Observatory and Planetarium Coordinator. Laser pointer in hand, arms outstretched, Dave wove a story around us that started with Mars and ended with Sagittarius. I was enchanted, and so were my fellow sardines. We stopped swarming and started listening intently, impatient to hear what this intriguing figure had to say.

Today, the observatory houses seven traditional and two solar telescopes, as well as the components to build a few more. Of these, four can be mounted at any given time on motorized piers scattered across the roof of Peters. These piers, resting on shock absorbing daises, can be easily manipulated by students to pinpoint astronomical bodies. The trouble is, according to Dave, is that light pollution from the city, from Mudd, and more recently from Walmart, interferes with the quality of this experience. That is not to say that visiting the Observatory is a waste of time. Far from it. The tech savvy student assistants and Dave's effervescent personality, mixed with the thrill of identifying your own stars has become a hallmark of the Oberlin experience. Still, Dave looks forward to the day that Oberlin will invest in the astronomy program once more. "I'd like to see a new observatory built north of the Quad, with a retractable roof and right on the ground." Keep hoping, Dave, and we'll keep attending the public viewings. ●



This photo by the Oberlin Observatory shows the passage of the International Space Station in front of the moon.



Dave points out the benefits, and drawbacks, of a having an observatory in the middle of campus. Photo credit above and below: Sawyer Brooks



After opening the dome, Dave and I remove the covering from the 14" reflecting telescope. Next, he hands me a controller and says "go on, press it." I do, and the dome begins to spin around us. "Whoa" I respond.

