February Meeting with Gerry Dyck
Friday, February 3, 7:30pm
North Scituate Community Center

Our February speaker is Skyscraper member Gerry Dyck, who will give a two-part presentation on poetry and astronomy. In the first part, entitled The Poet and the Sky, he will recite and comment upon examples of poetry with astronomical themes – from ancient Egypt, mediaeval Persia, the King James Bible, to major English-speaking poets such as Shakespeare, Milton, Tennyson, Whitman and Frost. Among the lesser-known poets to be quoted will be Alfred Noyes, a part of whose epic poem Watchers of the Sky was recited at the First Light Ceremony of the 100-inch Hooker telescope on Mt. Wilson. It contains the following memorable lines which could well serve as a motto for any amateur astronomer:

I know that I am dust and daily die,
Yet, as I trace those rhythmic spheres at night
I stand before the Thunderer’s throne on high
and feast on nectar in the Halls of Light.

The presentation will conclude with a cycle of original poetry and music called The Ancient Face of Night. It is a new arrangement of music, words and images originally composed for the visit of Clyde Tombaugh and the 75th anniversary of the AAVSO. It includes a variety of verse, some serious, some light hearted, such as:

One Ursa is Major and circles the pole;
The other one plays a subordinate role.
One Leo is Major and prowls through the night;
The other is Minor and keeps out of sight.
One Canes is Major and prances so tall;
The other is Minor, not Serious at all.

Phases of the Moon

Other notable events: Mercury at superior conjunction on the 7th. The Moon will be near Mars on the 9th. Venus is 1.4° from Uranus on the 10th. The Moon at perigee on the 11th. Saturn, Spica and the Moon form a line on the 12th. Neptune is in conjunction with the Sun on the 19th. Mercury is 5.5 degrees to the left of the very young crescent Moon on the 22nd. The Moon is near Venus on the 25th and Jupiter on the 26th. The Moon at apogee on the 27th.

Seagrave Memorial Observatory
is open to the public
weather permitting
Saturdays: 7:00-9:00 pm
President’s Message

Tom Thibault

Dear Skyscrapers Members,

Well, it appears Old Man Winter has decided to take it easy on us this season. I can only assume he feels badly for the beating he laid upon us last winter—the likes of which I do not wish to see for many years to come. Can you believe Groundhog Day has already arrived? Let’s all hope Punxsutawney Phil emerges from his burrow and fails to gaze upon his shadow. If we’re lucky, the remainder of this year’s winter will be mild, allowing us to take in the pleasures of the gems displayed in the winter sky.

January’s Meeting featured the film “The City Dark”. Francine Jackson shared the film that Frosty Drew received from the town of Charlestown, RI. The membership was treated to a great film, soda, and popcorn. The film was well done and informative. We are at risk of losing that connection we all have with the universe. As light pollution washes out the stars of the night sky, we all need to support the efforts to stop this trend. We can all do our part by voicing our concerns to our elected officials and educating the public. Francine extended an invitation for our use of the film for those purposes. Feel free to contact Francine if you have an interest.

February’s Meeting will feature our own Gerry Dyck. Gerry will be providing us with an entertaining presentation of “Astronomical Poetry” through the ages. I personally enjoy the rhythm of music while enjoying the serenity of viewing. In most cases, poetry is music without the accompanying instruments. The solitude during viewing has the ability to inspire and a good verse can be the result. So, come join us as Gerry presents a number of examples of verse scribed in the past.

Now that we’re in 2012, Skyscrapers has a busy agenda. Our elections and budget approval are quickly approaching. Maintenance and property improvements are in the planning. Public Nights and Outreach Programs will continue our mission to educate our members and the public. Before we know it, October will be creeping up and our premier event AstroAssembly will be upon us. So, I urge all with an interest to get involved, to volunteer when you can and join in the activities that makes Skyscrapers such a great organization.

Feel free to approach any member of our Executive Committee, Trustee’s, Observatory Committee, and Outreach Coordinators if you have an interest in becoming more involved in the organizations activities. We welcome all membership contributions and input. Skyscrapers is an outstanding organization and it’s all because of our membership.

I look forward to seeing all of you at our February Meeting.

Clear Skies
Observing Venus

Dave Huestis

If your evening commute takes you in a westerly direction, you may have wondered what that brilliant object in the sky was back in December. At first you might have thought it was the landing lights of a plane making its approach to Green State Airport. When it’s coming right at you it doesn’t seem to move much. After a short time of viewing you most likely realized it wasn’t approaching, though it did seem to be moving closer to the horizon.

If subsequent evenings were clear, the object was continuing to shine brightly in the same area of sky. I hope you weren’t fooled into thinking “extraterrestrial spacecraft” during your first sighting. Those later observations should have helped you to determine it was a celestial object. I’m talking about that brilliant beacon Venus.

Venus dupes more folks into alien spaceship-mode than any other planet. (Jupiter and the bright star Sirîus significantly contribute to UFO sightings as well.) This confusion occurs most often when Venus is low in the sky and our atmosphere spreads the planet’s light out like a prism. It appears to shimmer, shake and even gyrate around the sky a bit. I could relate many humorous stories of people jumping to the wrong extraterrestrial conclusion.

Well, Venus is going to be visible for several months, culminating in its transit across the face of the Sun on June 5 (visible from here in Southern Rhode Island – a future Transit of Venus guide will be forthcoming as we near the date) so I thought I’d bring you up-to-date on the journey of our heavenly neighbor.

We can’t see the rocky surface of Venus since the planet is enshrouded in clouds of sulfuric acid. What do we see when we look through a telescope? All we can observe are Venus’ highly reflective clouds. And they reveal no detail to the modest telescopes of amateur astronomers. However, we can watch Venus go through phases very much like that of our Moon.

Since Venus is closer to the Sun than the Earth is, it orbits our star faster than we do. When coming around from the far side of the Sun, Venus tries to and does catch up with and passes us. Because the position angle between the Earth, Sun and Venus is constantly changing, we see Venus change phases. (Remember, one half of Venus is always illuminated, and it is our ever changing viewing angle that presents the various phases.) Please review the graphic at the following web site: http://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/~barnes/ast110_06/rots/0520a.jpg . A picture is most definitely worth a thousand words.

Venus was on the far side of the Sun from the Earth (at superior conjunction) on August 16 of last year. Venus was then in full phase, and could we have telescopically observed it at that time from the Earth, it would have presented a small image. Once Venus moved away from the Sun’s glare could we glimpse the planet very low in the southwestern sky at sunset. That was back in early December.

Each night Venus climbed a little higher in the sky after sunset. Only then could we train our telescopes on our neighbor as it rose above the atmospheric turbulence on the western horizon. Through a telescope, Venus no longer appeared full. The planet was catching up to us each and every day, so as time went on, Venus’ image looked a little bigger as it approached the Earth, even though the illuminated portion of the planet was decreasing due to the ever changing viewing angle.

If you received a telescope over the holidays or you already had one, now is the time to put it to good use. At the beginning of February, Venus will appear 75 percent illuminated as seen from our Earthly vantage point. It will look like a waning gibbous Moon, without the craters of course. On March 27, Venus will have reached its greatest separation from the Sun and its highest elevation above the western horizon. At the same time Venus will appear like a first quarter Moon, being 54 percent illuminated. One day before this event (on the 26th), the crescent Moon will pass close to Venus. It will be a very beautiful sight. Venus will then begin its nightly descent towards the horizon and the

The changing phase and apparent size of Venus

www.theSkyscrapers.org
occurred around 2:16am. For me the brightest one were brighter than the stars in the bowl of sporadics. Less than one-fourth of the total counted a total of 15 meteors, 13 of which below Leo.

Reddish Mars was also very prominent northeast, while Leo was rising in the eastern overhead. Ursa Major was prominent in the east, as well as to scan to a point directly south and begin the reversal of the cycle all over again, going from crescent to last quarter to waxing gibbous to full. However, in 2012 a special event will happen. Usually when Venus passes between the Earth and the Sun (called inferior conjunction) it passes either above or below the solar disk as seen from the Earth. On June 5, Venus will pass between the Earth and the Sun. These transits of Venus occur in pairs eight years apart. The last one was on June 8, 2004. The next one will be in 2117! During the transit, Venus will be nearest the Earth, only about 26,864,000 miles distant.

Continue to monitor Venus as the days progress. By May 2, the planet will appear just 25 percent illuminated. The planet will also begin its plunge toward the horizon. The phase will then quickly change, from 15 percent on May 13 to only 5 percent on May 24, all the while getting larger and brighter as it approaches the Earth. At that time the planet will appear approximately four times larger in a telescope than it did way back in December because of its nearness to us. We will then quickly lose sight of Venus in bright twilight.

In less than a month Venus will then emerge in the morning sky as a thin crescent, and begin the reversal of the cycle all over again, going from crescent to last quarter to waxing gibbous to full. However, in 2012 a special event will happen. Usually when Venus passes between the Earth and the Sun (called inferior conjunction) it passes either above or below the solar disk as seen from the Earth. On June 5, Venus will pass between the Earth and the Sun. These transits of Venus occur in pairs eight years apart. The last one was on June 8, 2004. The next one will be in 2117! During the transit, Venus will be nearest the Earth, only about 26,864,000 miles distant.

In addition, a few days later on April 3, Venus will pass in front of the Pleiades star cluster in the constellation of Taurus. Binoculars or low power on a telescope will provide the best view of this sky scene. Also, it will look its best before the sky gets completely dark.

I have compiled the following report from myself and other Skyscrapers members.

I set up a chair on my porch with a blanket and sleeping bag for warmth and prepared to watch the Quadrantids for a couple of hours. I expected to see at least a few meteors. I was prepared to stay out longer if any meteors appeared. I had my chair set up in the best location to see the sky. I had a telescope set up to my chair with a red light on it to avoid light pollution. I also had my camera set up to photograph any meteors that appeared.

Quadrantid Meteor Shower Observing Reports

If you went outside to watch the Quadrantid meteor shower this morning from anywhere in Southern New England, I hope you have thawed out by now. Like me you may have been somewhat disappointed in the numbers of meteors that were seen.

I would have loved to remain out under the beautiful sky, but the slow rate of meteor production was too low. I forced myself to retire at 2:51am. The temperature had dropped to 9.7 degrees F. As I had said in an earlier column, predictions can be off. If anyone had better meteor counts from 3:00am until dawn I hope you will post a comment.

Too bad the milder weather we experienced for the last three months of 2011 didn’t stick around for another few days. More productive shooting star displays will be coming up later in 2012.

Until then, keep your eyes to the skies.

David A. Huestis

Quadrantid Observing Report Submitted by Steve Hubbard of Auburn, Massachusetts

Steve started observing at about 2:10am. The temperature was 12 degrees F with a light occasional wind. Steve reports he observed a Quadrantid go thru the bowl of the Big Dipper at about 2:19am. He estimated it at 1st magnitude in brightness. (I think this is the one I reported as my best one at approximately 2:16am.)

Steve saw six more Quadrantids and quit at 3:15am. He reports that he didn’t check the temperature then…he was too cold and just wanted to get inside. Six other Quadrantids were all 3rd or 5th magnitude. He looked primarily towards the north pole, as that’s where the predicted meteors were supposed to be. Steve said, “I do remember one other one at maybe 3rd magnitude going thru Leo. As far as I could tell, all of the ones I saw were Quadrantids.”

Steve concluded, “Rather disappointing…especially given the temperature we had to deal with.”

Current Observing Projects

Neptune is out of sight but you can still see Uranus and it will be 1.4” below Venus on the evening of the 10th. Please send your reports or images to ssiok@cox.net.

Don’t forget to keep logging your observations of delta Cephei (see December 2010 issue) and send your reports to geraldpdyck@yahoo.com.

Please send other observing reports and photos to Jim@distantgalaxy.com.
433 Eros
Glenn Chaple’s Sky Object of the Month

Last November, astronomers were treated to a fly-by of the near-earth asteroid 2005 YU 55. An 11th magnitude object, 2005 YU 55 raced across the sky at an astounding rate of one degree every 10 minutes. Viewing the event required a telescope of 6-inch aperture or larger.

Very rarely does a near-earth asteroid become bright enough to be seen with small backyard scopes. A notable exception is the asteroid 433 Eros. The number “433” indicates that Eros was the 433rd asteroid to be found and catalogued – the honor going to the German astronomer Carl Witt, who spotted Eros in August of 1898. Eros is normally a faint object, but every few decades it passes near enough to brighten to 7th or 8th magnitude. One of those favorable apparitions is currently underway.

Around the time of its nearest approach on January 31, Eros will be 16.6 million miles from earth - 80 times more distant that 2005 YU 55 was during its November visit. Eros’ motion, therefore, won’t be as frenetic, but you’ll detect a definite displacement in a matter of minutes, especially when Eros passes a background star.

During the 20th century, studies of Eros hinted that it might be an elongated body. In 2000, Eros was visited by the NEAR Shoemaker spacecraft, which orbited and imaged the asteroid for a year before making a soft landing on its surface. NEAR Shoemaker confirmed that Eros is indeed elongated, with dimensions of 22 X 8 X 8 miles.

Eros’ last close encounter was in 1975. It won’t be a small-scope target again until 2056, so you won’t want to miss this opportunity. For more information about the Eros encounter, refer to the February, 2012, issues of Astronomy (pages 48 and 49) and Sky and Telescope (page 52). For a printable finder chart, log on to http://media.skyandtelescope.com/documents/WEB_Feb12_Eros.pdf.

The Nerdiest Video Game Ever
By Dr. Tony Phillips

NASA has a job opening. Wanted: People of all ages to sort, stack, and catalogue terabytes of simulated data from a satellite that launches in 2015. Agile thumbs required.

Sorting terabytes of data? It’s more fun than it sounds.

In fact it’s a game: Satellite Insight. The Space Place Team at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory created the entertaining app for iPhones to get the word out about GOES-R, an advanced Earth science satellite built by NOAA and NASA.

Described by the Los Angeles Times as possibly “the nerdiest game ever,” Satellite Insight may be downloaded for free from Apple’s app store. Be careful, though, once you start playing it’s hard to stop. Some reviewers have likened it to Tetris, one of the most popular video games of all time.

GOES, short for “Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite,” is the workhorse spacecraft for weather forecasters. NOAA operates two (at a time) in geosynchronous orbit, one above the west coast of N. America and one above the east coast. They monitor clouds, wind, rain, hurricanes, tornadoes and even solar flares. The GOES program has been in action since 1975.

GOES-R is the next-generation satellite with advanced technologies far beyond those of the older GOES satellites. It has sensors for lightning detection, wildfire mapping, storm tracking, search and rescue, solar imaging, and more. Many of the sensors are trailblazers. For example, the Advanced Baseline Imager has 60 times the capability of the current imager—16 channels instead of 5. It has twice the spatial resolution and five times the temporal refresh rate, including the 30-second imaging of weather systems over a region of 1000 km x 1000 km. Also, the Geostationary Lightning Mapper can count and pinpoint lightning bolts over the Americas 24/7. It’s the first such detector to fly on a geosynchronous satellite, and it could lead to transformative advances in severe storm warning capability.

All in all, GOES-R represents a “huge technological leap from the current GOES.” We know this because Satellite Insight tells us so. The app has an informative “Learn More” feature where players can find out about the satellite and the data they have been sorting.

New iPhone game is first NOAA app and only the second NASA game app. Just as with the real GOES-R, the challenge with Satellite Insight is to keep up with the massive influx of weather and other environmental data.

Which brings us back to sorting data. It’s a bit like eating Cheerios; just don’t tell the kids it’s nutritious, and they love it. Helping GOES-R gather and stash data from all those advanced sensors is just as satisfying, too—a dose of Earth science wrapped in thumb-flying fun.


This article was provided by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, under a contract with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.
**January Reports**

**Ed Haskell, Secretary**

**Jim Crawford, Treasurer**

E-Board Meeting Minutes – 7:00PM, Jan 4th, 2011

Attendees: Tom Thibault, Jim Crawford, Jim Hendrickson, Pat Landers, Steve Siok, John Leonelli, Dave Huestis, Bob Napier.

Points of discussion:

**Venus Transit** – determine if there was an interest in hosting an event this June. It needs to be determined if the transit can be observed from Seagrave or whether an alternative site is needed. Possibly Frosty Drew or Beavertail State Park. Dave will investigate both locations. It was noted that John Briggs is involved in organizing an event at Mt. Wilson in CA and any member with an interest should contact John.

**Public Night** – Our Trustees raise the question regarding temperature considerations. Lack of snowfall has not required the closure of Seagrave, but concerns were raised regarding cold evenings and wind chill. Our unheated observatories do not lend to extended viewing in these conditions. It was agreed that our Trustees would make the Go/No Go decision based on these conditions. Temperatures with wind chills below 20 degrees, was noted as the cut-off for the next two months.

**Annual Elections** – It was noted that this year’s open positions are as follows: President, 1st Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Member at Large, and Trustee. All present were asked to speak to members that may have an interested in these positions.

**Membership Dues** – the listing of past due members was reviewed. It was decided that after repeated notifications and attempted contact that those listed will be removed from the Active Membership List. Those individuals are invited and welcome to return and apply for membership at anytime.

**Outreach Donations** – Conrad informed the group that he and Bob Forgiel are drafting suggested donation fee structure as a guideline for Skyscrapers’ Public Outreach Programs. As we are a non-profit organization, donations for our Outreach Programs are optional. All donations are to support the society in order to continue educating the public. This document is to provide suggested guidelines for future Outreach Coordinators.

Meeting adjourned at 9:00 PM.

Minutes submitted by Tom Thibault.

Meeting of January 6, 2012

The meeting was called to order by President Tom Thibault at 7:30 pm.

Member Francine Jackson, also Director of Frosty Drew Observatory, presented The City Dark, a feature documentary about the loss of night. This 84-minute movie stresses the importance of retaining the night, for effects including human health, animal preservation and the retaining of one of our natural resources. The movie is a well done documentary and serves as a clear exposition of why citizens who are less involved in astronomy than ourselves should care about this important issue.

There were no amendments to the Secretary’s Report and Treasurer’s Report.

The First Vice-President reports that Gerry Dyck will present on poetry in astronomy. Gerry’s presentations are always well done and this one promises no less.

Historian Dave Huestis showed a recovered copy of the Society’s Quarter Century of Skyscrapers.

There was no Old Business.

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**Budget as of 1/19/2012**

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**Cash Assets**

| **Citizens** | $8,599.99 |
| **Capital One** | $11,520.06 |
| **Total** | **$20,120.05** |
The Family Membership of David Mapura was approved.

Comments for the Good of the Organization were:

Steve Hubbard reminded us of Dan Lorraine’s trip to California in April with time rented on the historic 60” telescope at Mount Wilson Observatory for the group’s use. When George Ellery Hale completed this instrument in 1908 it was the largest in the world. This is the instrument on which Edwin Hubble did much of his research which was the first observational support for the expanding universe.

Francine Jackson observed that it has been a couple of years since Skyscrapers last met at Frosty Drew Observatory and extended an invitation to meet there this year.

John Briggs is organizing time at Mt. Wilson for the transit of Venus.

Jim Hendrickson reported on mail received from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory congratulating Skyscrapers on our continuing public outreach programs.

Meeting adjourned at 9:25pm
Respectfully submitted,
Ed Haskell, Secretary

As if we have nothing else to worry about these days, the argument as to how to refer to our celestial neighbors has come back to us. Apparently, calling our closest neighbors by a proper name doesn’t seem to make sense to other astronomy-minded people. To many of us, our next-door sphere is the Moon. It is one of hundreds of moons in our solar system. Every one has its own name, and ours just happens to be Moon. We should be glad we have such a proportionately large satellite revolving around us, and should give it its due respect.

At this time of year, we’re spending more time indoors, because of the weather. February is normally the coldest, worst-weather month we have. It happens to be right in the middle of our winter season, as witnessed by our celebration of February 2nd, Groundhog Day. This is one of our four cross-quarter days, those at the midpoint of each season. We all know legend has it that if the groundhog sees his shadow on that date, that we will have six more weeks of winter. Sorry, to say, whether he does or doesn’t, as February 2nd is right in the middle of the three months of the winter season, we’re having six more weeks of winter, anyway.

And, because February is normally the coldest, snowiest month of the year, next week’s full Moon is normally called the Snow Moon; however, because the snows often cover whatever plant life might be still on the ground, and new shoots aren’t able to push themselves above ground, food is scarce, resulting in the Hunger Moon. Especially vulnerable at this time of year are wolves, who also have to be sporadic feeders, causing them to howl from hunger. From this, came the Wolf Moon.
Directions to Seagrave Memorial Observatory

From the Providence area:
Take Rt. 6 West to Interstate 295 in Johnston and proceed west on Rt. 6 to Scituate. In Scituate bear right off Rt. 6 onto Rt. 101. Turn right onto Rt. 116 North. Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.

From Coventry/West Warwick area:
Take Rt. 116 North. Peeptoad Road is the first left after crossing Rt. 101.

From Southern Rhode Island:
Take Interstate 95 North. Exit onto Interstate 295 North in Warwick (left exit.) Exit to Rt. 6 West in Johnston. Bear right off Rt. 6 onto Rt. 101. Turn right on Rt. 116. Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.

From Northern Rhode Island:
Take Rt. 116 South. Follow Rt. 116 thru Greenville. Turn left at Knight’s Farm intersection (Rt. 116 turns left) and follow Rt. 116. Watch for Peeptoad Road on the right.

From Connecticut:
• Take Rt. 44 East to Greenville and turn right on Rt. 116 South. Turn left at Knight’s Farm intersection (Rt. 116 turn left) and follow Rt. 116. Watch for Peeptoad Road on the right.
• Take Rt. 6 East toward Rhode Island; bear left on Rt. 101 East and continue to intersection with Rt. 116. Turn left; Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.

From Massachusetts:
Take Interstate 295 South (off Interstate 95 in Attleboro). Exit onto Rt. 6 West in Johnston. Bear right off Rt. 6 onto Rt. 101. Turn right on Rt. 116. Peeptoad Road is the first left off Rt. 116.