

SHARING ASTRONOMY ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

Letters from Michael Ottink, my astronomical pen pal in Holland, brought news of his astronomy club, the European Space Agency, and the objects he observed. As a result of a classified ad I had placed in *ASTRONOMY*, Michael and I had been corresponding for two years. I had often wished I could meet my pen pal, and in 1985 I finally did.

Mike wrote to tell me he would be visiting Florida with his Dutch astronomy club to see Wubbo Ockels, a Dutch *Spacelab* payload specialist, liftoff in the space shuttle. I was overjoyed with the news. Mike said he would also have time to visit me at my home in Alexandria, Virginia.

At the beginning of November Mike sent me a postcard from Florida that said he would be arriving at the Alexandria bus terminal on Friday, November 8, or Saturday the 9th. By 8 p.m. on Friday I figured his bus would arrive on Saturday. But as soon as I gave up hope, I heard a light tapping on the front door. Outside in the dark stood a tall, slender figure with a bag in each hand. "Is that you, Mike?" I said. He smiled and nodded.

After introducing Mike to my parents, he went through his bags and pulled out two strange-looking rocks. Mike told me they were meteorites he had purchased in Florida. My eyes lit up as Mike gave me one as a gift.

Time flew by that weekend. We were always busy doing something, but the little time we had at home we spent discussing how we lived in our different countries, our ideas on astronomy, and the space programs of our respective nations.

For two nights Mike and I tried to find Halley's Comet, but we were unsuccessful, much to our dismay. It was something we had wanted to see together. We did see many other celestial sights in that memorable autumn sky. For once I was stargazing with somebody who knew about everything from eyepieces to M42.

Monday came and Mike had to leave for Florida to meet his group and fly back to the Netherlands. I felt as if an old friend were moving away.

About a week after Mike left, I ventured outside into the crisp November night, this time without my astronomical friend. I pointed my telescope at where I thought Halley was. Lo and behold, there it was in my telescope's field of view, that special sight that had evaded Mike and me. I smiled and felt that, somehow, my astronomical friend across the miles was looking too. — *David Abbou* □

ASTRONOMY Forum

On The Road With Comet Halley



Illustrations by Todd Graveline

VIRGINIA

There it was, Halley's Comet, its tail arcing westward away from where the Sun should be. Thousands of stars gleamed in the morning sky as if to greet this once-in-a-lifetime visitor from afar. I stood marveling at this spectacular glowing sight. . . .

My alarm clock went off. Reality set in. Too bad it was only a dream.

I awoke rubbing my eyes and squinting at the digital numbers on my clock radio — 4:25 a.m. Great, I thought. It was March 18, 1986, and I figured by what *ASTRONOMY* and other astronomical publications were saying that Halley would be something like the dream I had only minutes ago.

I ventured outside into the chilly air, the 11x80 binoculars around my neck, and immediately looked up. It was worse than I had expected. Scorpius was barely visible and Sagittarius was not visible at all. Light pollution was all over the sky, especially where Halley should have been in the southeast.

I raised the binoculars to my eyes and looked in the general vicinity of the comet — nothing. Man's curse of artificial lighting was preventing me from seeing one of nature's glories. I ran around like it was the end of the world, trying to avoid the unavoidable light pollution that was staring me in the face. I knew then I had lost this battle.

I walked inside and looked at my mother who was laboring at her morning chores in the dark house. She saw the disappointment on my face and frowned. I put my binoculars back on the table and took off my jacket.

"Wait a minute!" I thought. "The streetlights were blinking off when I was walking inside. Surely other manmade lights would be off by now, too." It was 5:13 a.m. I had to race the oncoming dawn to see the comet.

Outside, all the manmade lights

were off, but dawn was lighting up the sky ever so slightly. However, I could see Sagittarius a lot better than before. I raised my binoculars and looked to the east of the Teapot — there it was! It was white and diffuse and I could even make out a slight tail pointing away from where the Sun would soon rise. I had only a minute or two to behold this magnificent sight.

It was over as quickly as it began. The light of dawn erased the comet from the grasp of my binoculars, but not from my memory.

As I walked inside, my mother was still cleaning. She looked at me and smiled.

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