

Mingo Creek Park Observatory: 20th Anniversary

Good afternoon!

My name is Larry McHenry, an amateur astronomer from the South Hills and I have lived in the Pittsburgh area since 1990. I've been an amateur astronomer since the mid-70's, (a little over 50 years), and belonged to a number of astronomy clubs over the years such as the Kiski Astronomers, and the Oil Region Astronomical Society (ORAS), and a past member and officer of the AAAP.

So, what is my connection to the Mingo Creek Park Observatory?

As President of the AAAP from 2000 to 2003, back in early 2002, I served on the Mingo Creek Park Observatory Committee as one of its principal founders, and was instrumental in the creation of the observatory and helped oversee its construction in 2004. In 2005, I served as the 1st Director of the new observatory facility, for its first full year of successful operations. After rotating off as a Director in 2006, I continued to serve on the Observatory Committee for a number of years.

But none of that would have been possible without the vision and perseverance of Dick Haddad. Dick and his charitable contributions are well known in the South Hills, so I won't go into details on that, but most people probably didn't know that Dick was also an amateur astronomer. Dick's love for the hobby and his desire to share astronomy with the people of Western Pennsylvania led him to reach-out to the AAAP in late July of 2001.

Dick called and left a message on my answering machine on the 29th, and I was able to return his call on the 30th for an interesting discussion. Dick's proposal was to construct a new 'South Hills Observatory' operated by the AAAP with the primary purpose of educating the public in astronomy.

Dick Haddad was a master at fundraising for charitable projects and was confident that he could obtain the necessary funding to build a public observatory.

Having been a regular participant at the club's various South Hills functions over the years, such as the astronomy talks at the old Borders Books store and star parties at the South Park wave pool, I knew that from the 560+ membership of the AAAP, there already existed a sizable base of members that would support a 'southern observatory'. I also had been instrumental in recently helping the club acquire a planetarium projector and dome which was in need of a new home. With this in mind, I felt that Dick's proposal had merit and would be a great asset for the local astronomical community.

During our discussion, we touched on where the best location would be for a new observatory and planetarium. To be an attractive educational facility, it would need to have sufficiently dark skies, away from most of the suburban light-pollution glow of Pittsburgh, but not too far of a drive for the public to attend. It should be in an existing public park with good roads, and easy access, where the AAAP could partner with local government for land and site maintenance. From my South Hills amateur astronomer connections, I was aware of club members using Mingo Creek Park in Washington County, and that would make for a great location for the new facility, which I suggested to Dick.

We concluded our discussion that evening, both of us optimistically excited about Dick's proposal. With a few months, Dick had reached-out to the Washington County governmental and parks officials, and had secured preliminary funding for going forward. After the Observatory Committee was formed, many additional club members stepped up to help assist with the project, providing operational leadership and hands-on construction activities. As they say, the rest is history!

In conclusion:

Dick Haddad's vision of having a place in the South Hills where the students of the night sky, both young and old, could gather in an educational setting to explore the wonders of our universe has been fulfilled!

I am privileged to have assisted Dick Haddad in his endeavor and congratulate the AAAP in keeping his spirit alive at the Mingo Creek Park Observatory.

Thank you.

Larry McHenry