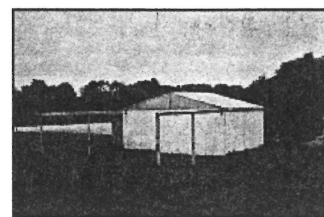


IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Cincinnati Country Day School's Observatory



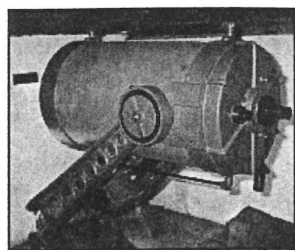
Not many people know that it exists, but tucked into the CCDS campus near the south parking lot is an observatory. Built in 1967, the Dickinson Observatory has piqued the interest of amateur astronomers for 35 years. Providing the impetus for it were an inspiring teacher, dedicated students, and a generous parent.

Physics teacher David Laird was gifted with the ability to stimulate learning. As the faculty advisor for the Astronomy Club, he awakened students' interests in the evening skies. When Philemon Dickinson's sons attended, he donated a Newtonian reflector telescope to CCDS. It was stored beneath the school cafeteria, and when the Astronomy Club met, it had to haul the cumbersome 6-foot long scope outside and set it up on a tripod – a time consuming task. It

became evident that it would be much easier if the scope could be stored near a dark part of campus. So Laird organized a design contest for a low cost structure that would house the scope. Mr. Dickinson donated funds, and the concrete block 14' by 14' Observatory became a reality. The interior lights ran on batteries and a power converter provided 110-volt power.

In the 60's and 70's the Astronomy Club thrived. Boys (CCDS was all male then) watched the evening skies twice a week. They recorded lunar occultations, identified constellations, watched comets, and calculated astronomical data. Laird took a group to the Florida panhandle for a solar eclipse – they traveled by Greyhound Bus- but alas – the sky was overcast. Besides the donated telescope, Mr. Laird offered students the use of his personal Unitron Refractor, which he stored in the observatory. He also constructed a field telescope built of parts purchased at military surplus sales. Laird's "astrocamera" was utilized by many students. Laird and some scholars cooperated with the U.S. Naval Observatory by recording occultation (when one object crosses another) data, reducing data, and sending in their observations. His students planned experiments, calculated the orbits of asteroids, and timed and monitored grazes on the moon's surface. They took nighttime field trips to the Ohio countryside, Kentucky, and Indiana. Laird successfully wrote a grant for the current telescope, a 14 inch Celestron Schmidt-Cassegrain, which was installed in the observatory in 1977, only two years before his premature death due to leukemia.

That Celestron is the dominant feature of the observatory's interior. To expose it, the roof must slide back onto exterior rails protruding from the building. About six people fit inside comfortably, but only one can view at a time. The telescope is mounted on its own separate foundation, assuring that body movements do not cause vibrations. The observatory now has electricity and some additional accessories.



Though there was waning interest in the observatory in the 80's, resurgence occurred in the 90's. Teachers Janet Chahrour, Matt Dahl, and Brock Miller studied astronomy and opened up the building for students. The telescope was cleaned up and restored. With help from the Oganowski Fund, improvements were made on the building, and eyepieces and filters were purchased. Programs were offered for kindergarteners through high schoolers. Sky Parties, with hot chocolate for the little ones, were held to observe constellations. Once the exterior rails were so covered with ice that teachers melted the ice with alcohol burners and hammered it so the roof could slide back. (Winter is normally the best season for viewing because the sky is clearer.) Middle Schoolers were offered extracurricular viewing nights, and some did astrophotography. For two years, an Astronomy Seminar elective was available to Upper Schoolers.

During a partial solar eclipse in the mid-90's, hundreds of students gathered near the observatory to watch the spectacle through special viewers.

Amateur astronomers at CCDS have faced some challenges. Cincinnati is on the western edge of the Eastern Time zone, so it is dark late. Also, Cincinnati is often cloudy, and light pollution has an impact. Students who gaze at the stars must be willing to come back to school at night, and have a willingness to brave the cold weather. Yet groups large and small, including parents, have met at the observatory to gaze, and to track the Hale Bopp and Hyakutake Comets.

Through the Celestron telescope, remarkable sights have been viewed. Visions of the Orion nebula, the rings of Saturn, and four of Jupiter's moon have thrilled observers. The Dickinson Observatory remains a village treasure, one that has created an awareness of the magic of space.

Thanks to Janet Chahrour, Matt Dahl, Bill Hopple, Brock Miller and Jeff Spain for assistance with this article.