Always Looking Up

By Cliff Hedgepeth

It was a cold, winter evening in late 2000. I had just taken my 7-year-old granddaughter, Taylor, home to the small town of Newsoms, Virginia. As we stepped from the car she moved out into the front yard and said, "Granddad come here. See those three stars? That's called Orion's belt!"

Well that started it. I had always had interest in the solar system but knew very little about deep space. Our son, Taylor's uncle, gave her a Meade 50 mm refractor for Christmas and we were excited at our first looks at Jupiter and the moon. We soon found that the little refractor was difficult to use and set our sights on something better. We found a shareware program called "Distant Suns" that helped us to learn the sky. And subscribed to *Astronomy Magazine.*

It didn't take long to realize that we needed something a little better so Taylor and I started saving our money. Shortly thereafter we pooled our resources (Put her $20 with my $200) and ordered our first scope., an Orion EQ mounted 130 reflector.

In early 2003 we found BBAA and started working on our observing programs. We had a lot to learn. We would go outside and look at M42, Jupiter and M45 until one night I spotted a naked eye faint fuzzy and point it out to Taylor who immediately searched her atlas and found it to be "The Beehive". Alright! We're on a roll now! She started working on her Sky Puppy and I the Lunar program both of which we completed by the 2003 BBAA picnic.

Our 130 Orion

The Sky Puppy

Shortly after the picnic we received the permanent loan of an original Celestron C8. We could really find stuff now. Taylor would log for me and look but had no interest in pursuing any more awards. She enjoyed helping me and meeting BBAA folks.

I pressed on with trying to find the Messiers. This was my biggest learning tool. I learned about filters, averted vision and the celestial sphere. We would star hop to an object and confirm it by its coordinates on the C8's large setting circles. By March 2004 I had seen 70 Messiers and got my second certificate.

It would take another year and a half to complete them in July 2005. I had observed quite a few of them with binoculars while observing with the scope so in September 2005 came the Binocular Messier.

While doing these I had also been logging Globular Clusters and learning to classify them using the Shapley-Sawyer system . In November 2005 I received the Globular Cluster Certificate for finding and classifying 50 globulars. By this time I had graduated to an Orion XT 12 Intelliscope.

2003 Fall ECSP with C8

The next one was two years in coming and by far the most challenging one. Open Cluster Club. This one required that I find 125 Open Clusters and classify them using the Trumpler system. Should be easy, wrong. These were 125 specific clusters ranging from second to fifteenth magnitude. Some were next to impossible to pick from the surrounding star field. DSS images and eyepiece charts proved invaluable to finding these.

The next one was easy, the Double Star Club. The requirement is to log and sketch 100 specific double stars. 2 dots are easy to sketch plus the doubles are bright ones. I might add that electronic setting circles can be used on this one and the two star cluster clubs.

Then I noticed something in looking over my records. I had completed the requirements for the Urban Club from my house in Franklin. A good reason for keeping good records that can be cross-referenced. I use a program called AstroPlanner for that. Sky Tools will also allow for that.

The next one was an easy one but a good learning experience. The Northern Constellation Hunter. No scope required. Just a pencil and paper. Sketch 38 Constellations but only from sight and sketch only what the naked eye will see. Some are quite dim but it really helps learn the sky.

Sir Patrick Caldwell Moore had long fascinated me so I had been pursuing his program for a couple of years. It requires 70 objects from his list be found using the old fashioned method and sketching one. I chose NGC 457, one of my favorites.

Well that brought the total to nine. I had been logging the Herschel 400 for three years now and I was finally down to five left. This was just prior to 2008 Spring East Coast Star Party. I was so excited, almost there! Then I found with all the rain we had that I couldn't get my equipment trailer out of the yard. Boo! So I came without scope and my old college classmate (we call them Brother Rats at VMI), Bruce Bodner, came to the rescue and allowed me to use his scope to find them. Saturday morning I presented my log to Georgie. The Herschel 400 are 400 objects seen

by William Herschel and are bright for the most part. There are a hundred or so that are dimmer than 11th magnitude so it is obtainable with an 8" scope. Just takes time to wait for the seasons to change.

My 12 and me

This also qualified me for Master Observer Club, which required the completion of ten programs to include Herschel 400, Messier, Binocular Messier, Double Star, and my first The Lunar Club. It took over five years but it was a great learning experience. It helped me develop skills and see things I would not have been able to see five years ago. There are so many people that helped me to learn the skills necessary. But the spark was a little girl. She has graduated to teen things but still goes, every now and then, stargazing with old granddad.

My sidekick