

# Recovering the location of “The Shack”



**Matt Considine, STM : November, 2023**

To date, it has been believed that “The Shack” was a predecessor building to the original Clubhouse of the Springfield Telescope Makers.

Photos found in a “miscellaneous” file in the NARA’s collection of Russell Porter material have not been able to be matched up with the current Clubhouse location. These photos show not only the more commonly known view of “The Shack” but also other images of it being built and used...

Circa 1905/1906 (?)



View to South

View to N-E



View towards East

Circa 1905/1906 (?)



RWP's niece, Miriam E Marsh (see Bert's book, p26)



Views to North



View to East

In 1956 and 1957 articles, Gladys Piper Skinner – one of the original telescope makers taught by Porter – writes that the location was below where the Clubhouse currently exists:

**“A favorite spot was to an old shack on Breezy Hill just a short distance below the top of the hill, where Stellafane and the Observatory now stand.** As the members ate their picnic lunches, then lay back on the grass waiting for the stars to come out, little did they think that the telescopes beside them were to lead Russell Porter and Oscar Marshall away across the continent to help design and make the wonderful 200 inch telescope at Mt. Palomar.” (emphasis added)

*Springfield Reporter*, Aug. 15, 1956  
also, p173 *Vermont History* Vol XXV, No 2, New Series, April, 1957

But to date there has been no hard evidence of where exactly “The Shack” was located...

## 2022

In 2022 rock outcroppings in the photos were identified that seemed like a similar formation.

A visual survey found the anchor point of a post as well as a cable tie-down, both anchored into rock.

The anchor point of the post was recognized as a feature visible in one of the Shack photos.

2022

Anchor post

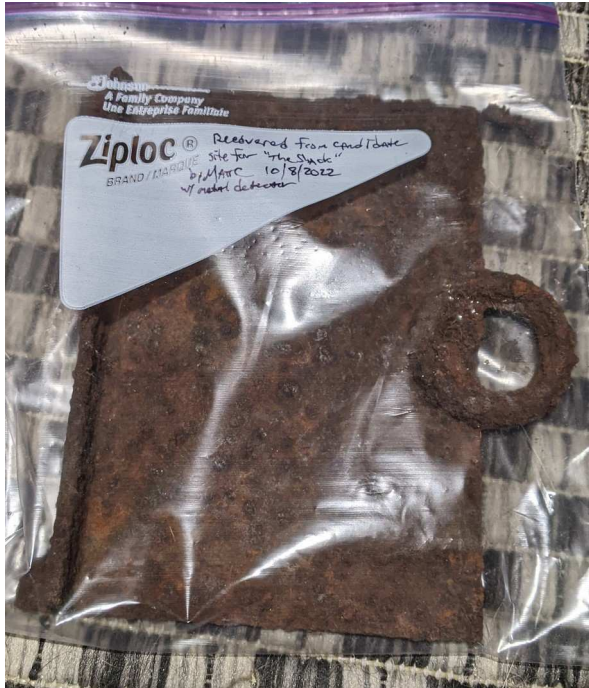


Anchor pin visible

Rope tie-down (?)

# 2022

Returning to the site with a metal detector, a piece of an old cook stove was found (and, later, broken glass, a broken bottle and can lid, suggesting that the site had been occupied.)





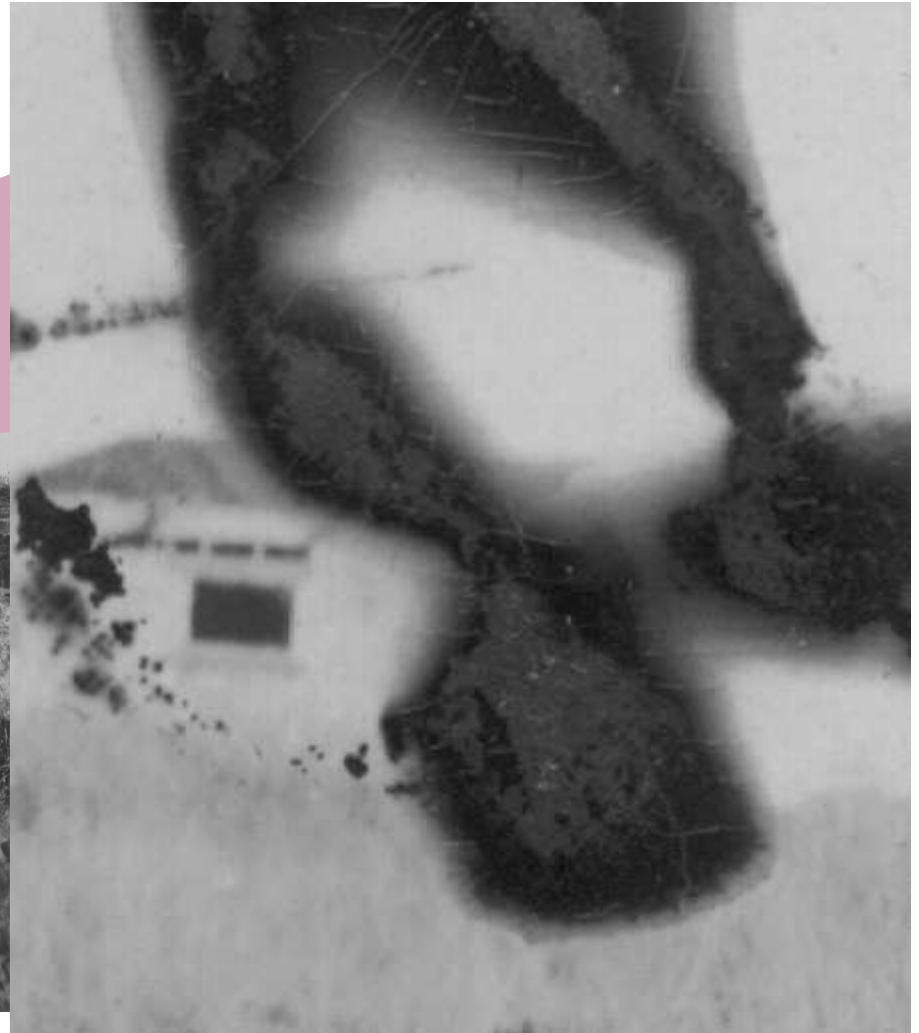
# 2023

In reviewing old photos, a reexamination of a view (STM0224) of the old well used by the Club was made. While the photo had been seen before, this time it was recognized that it's view was toward where the Shack should be. In this case, to the ESE. It's appearance today from the same angle is also shown.



**2023**

While the horizon to the East looks fairly clear, in the upper left corner of the image, a view of a structure with a window opening and a roof line is visible. Circa 1925, I believe The Shack has possibly lost its porch roof by then.



2023



RWP at The Shack, with a cup and ladle

## 2023

Comparing The Shack details from the three photos, we can gain some confidence that the NARA RWP “Ladle” photo was taken near the well and that the Old Well photo shows the remnants of The Shack in the 1920’s.

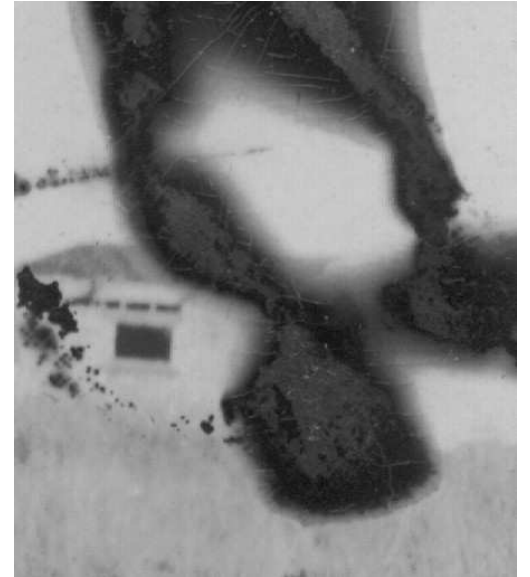
Traditional photo:  
West wall through door from  
South 1905ish?



NARA RWP photo:  
West wall from South West



Well photo :  
West Shack wall from West  
1920s?



# 2023

But we're not done ...

The STM Secretary's minutes reflect that the original Stellafane site was built on land owned by Porter and a couple of others (Charles G. Richardson, Ozara S. Davis and Annie/Miriam Marsh). The 200' by 300' parcel was acquired by STM in 1928.

Reviewing the original deed of land given to Porter and his friends shows that the parcel was intended to include land the group had leased and on which they had already built (as of 1907). The original lease referenced Richardson building a cabin ("L' Habitat" aka Miller's Cabin) and the deed for the purchase referenced buildings already being in place – note: buildings *plural*.

# 2023 (from 1937 map at Clerk's office : South is "up")

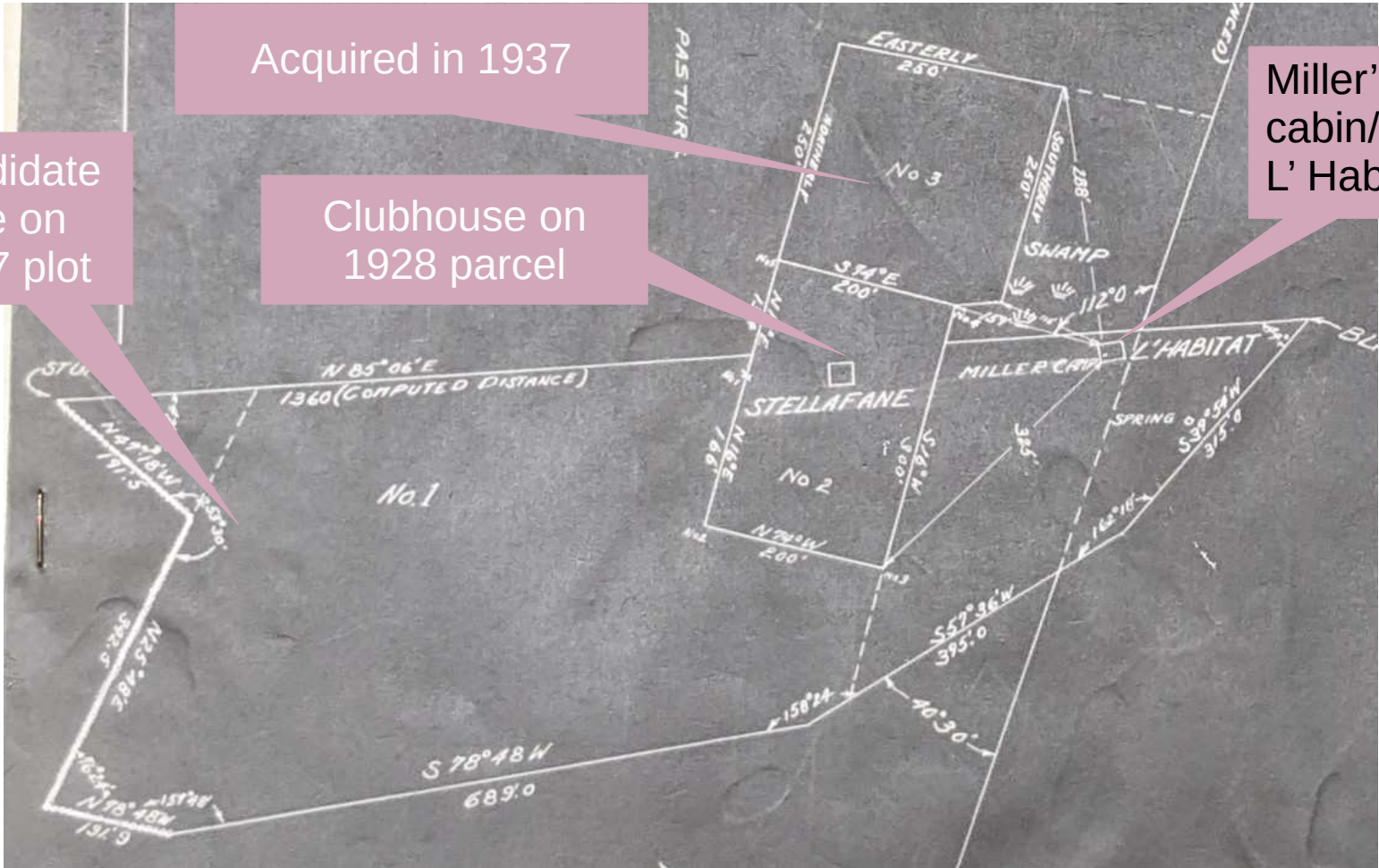
Acquired in 1937

Candidate site on 1907 plot

Clubhouse on 1928 parcel

Miller's cabin/  
L' Habitat

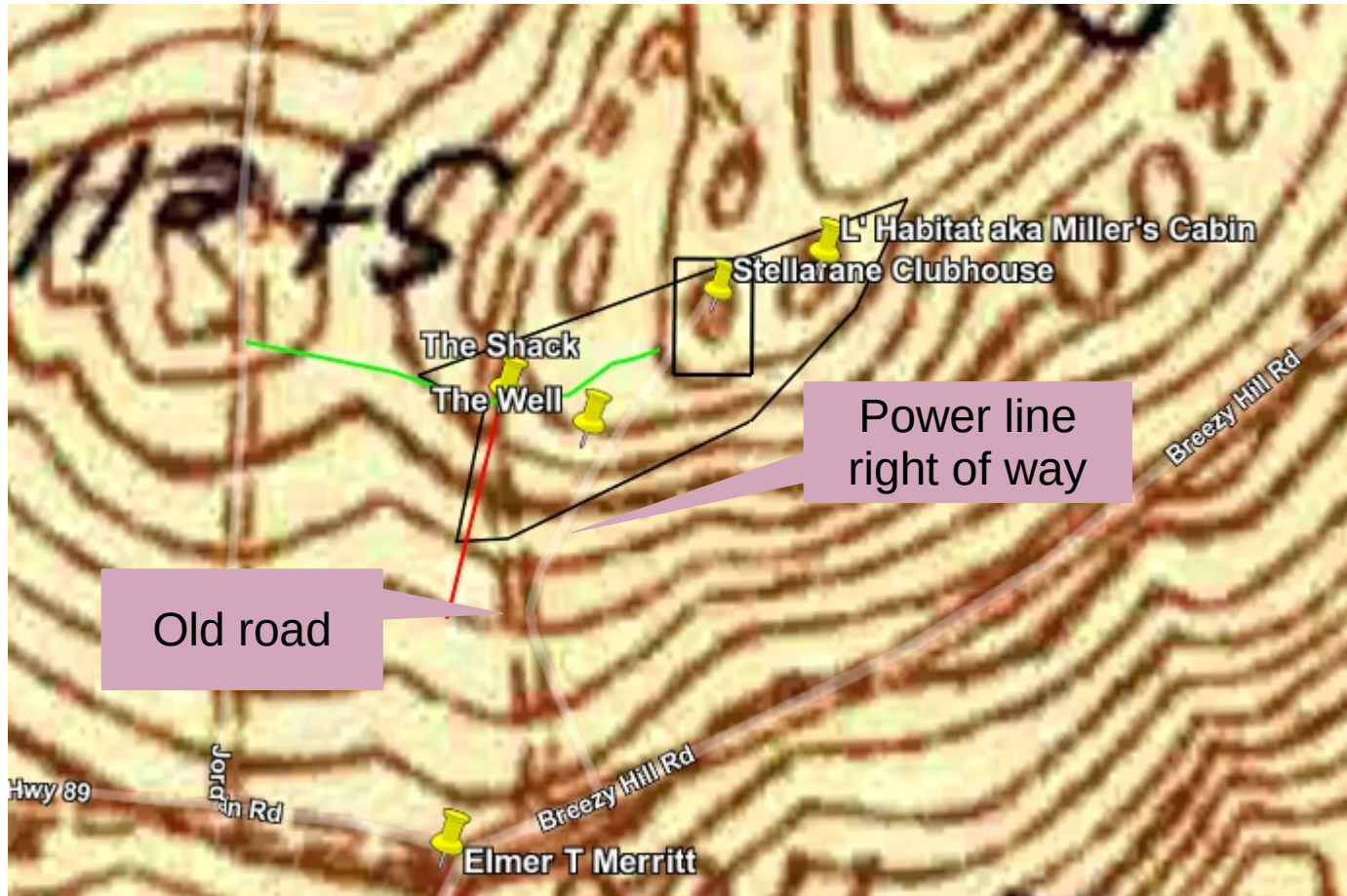
The two structures explain the shape of the old parcel.



# 2023 (relative to Google Earth with a 1928 USGS topo map. South is “up”)

Red line  
is sight  
line  
towards  
Mt  
Ascutney

Green line  
shows current  
access  
to  
Clubhouse



Old road

# 2023 (relative to Google Earth. South is “up”)

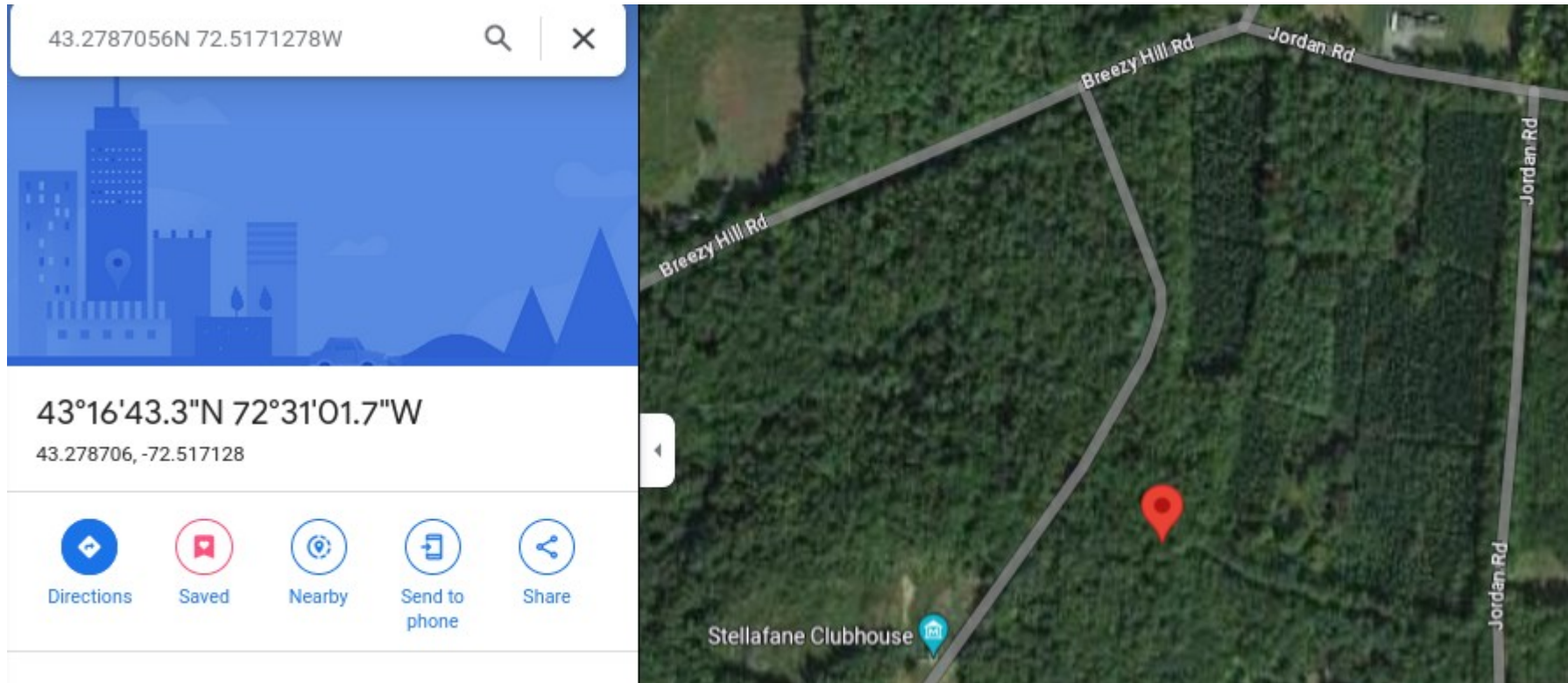
Red line  
is sight  
line  
towards  
Mt  
Ascutney

Green line  
shows current  
access to  
Clubhouse





# 2023 (relative to Google Maps. North is “up”)



# Appendix 1 : A timeline

**1900:** Charles Godfrey Richardson and Walter Woolson Brown lease land from Elmer T Merritt, on which it is stated they are going to build a cottage. The property is on "Mount Merritt" (now known as Breezy Hill). Elmer T Merritt lived down at the junction of Jordan Rd, where we have the "Stellafane" sign and he owned "the hill." This "cottage" was what we now know as Miller's cabin, because it predated Miller owning the property. And on old maps - for example Oscar Marshall's 1914 map, it's called "The Habitat" or "L' Habitat".

**3/30/1906:** By now Richardson and Brown have been joined by Ozora Stearns Davis, Porter, Porter's sister Annie S. Marsh and her daughter Miriam E. Marsh and they buy the property from Merritt. When you map out the boundaries described in the deed, you get a sort of oval shape that starts where I believe The Shack was and ends just past where "Miller's" cabin is. In other words, they bought a piece of property that covered both buildings. And the 1906 deed refers to "buildings" – plural.

This happens just before Porter joins the Cook McKinley expedition in May/June of 1906. So I think the photos from NARA that show The Shack being built date from before 1906 and show some (all?) of the above group.

## Appendix 1 : A timeline (cont'd)

**9/1906:** Brown sells his interest in the property to Richardson.

**1907:** Porter is back in Springfield, according to his NARA diary

**1908:** Porter is in Port Clyde, according to his NARA diary

**1919:** Porter is back in Springfield

**1924:** Annie S Marsh (Porter's sister) interest in the property transfers to Miriam Marsh. Annie S Marsh dies in 1925.

**1923-1924:** The Clubhouse is built on the property owned by Richardson, Davis, Porter and Marsh (Marsh and Davis separately sign club register in later years)

**1927:** Ozora Davis writes a poem about The Shack that is included in the club's secretary's report. Transcript is attached.

**1928:** The Richardson, Davis, Porter, Marsh group give 200' by 300' to STM, along with a little piece contributed by Merritt it seems. Note that this does not include the part of the land that included The Shack.

## Appendix 2 : From the Secretary's reports

**Page 1 Dec 7, 1923:** *At this meeting, which was held Dec. 7, 1923, at the house of O.S. Marshall, one of the charter members of the organization, a formal organization was effected by the election of certain officers. This step was taken in consequence of the original voluntary association, heretofore spoken of as "The Springfield Telescope Makers," building a bungalow this present season on land owned by one of the members, Mr. Russell W. Porter. [...]*

*Mr. Porter to date has attended to the financial side of the work involved in constructing the house for the club."*

*On the election of a secretary-treasurer this officer took over these duties, and all transactions made by Mr. Porter have been recorded herein – see p. 224.*

## Appendix 2 : From the Secretary's reports

**Page 9 Springfield Reporter 7/24,1924** : “[...] The headquarters or home has been given the name of Stellarfane, which means literally “star sanctuary,” and is situated about four miles from the heart of the village on a hill perhaps better known as “Breezy Hill,” a title applied to the locality by the founder, a long-time editor of the Springfield Reporter, L. W. Stiles. The site is owned jointly by Mr. Porter and his sister, Mrs. Marsh, together with Charles G. Richardson. The “Habitat,” a log cabin owned by Mr. Richardson and constructed by him several years ago, occupies a slightly point on a ledge eminence a few rods to the west of the newly erected home of the Telescope Makers. Stellarfane[sic] was erected late last fall, made suitable for occupancy during the winter by the presence of a liberal sized fireplace and a good cook stove. In the early spring the kitchen was added on the south side of the main structure, thereby removing the stigma of ugly appearance which so much annoyed “Ted” Miller who made a run up there on one of his bare-headed mid-winter tours for which he is celebrated.

Stellarfane is still in an unfinished state [...] If the present forlorn business situation will continue in its forlornness until after Calvin Coolidge is elected to the presidency next November, Stellarfane will have dressed itself in suitable paint and its “dooryard” will be put in order.”

## **Appendix 2 : From the Secretary's reports**

**Page 46 March 18, 1927:**

*“The president, R.W.Porter, recommended that the Telescope Makers take steps to perpetuate itself and its property in some way. The land on which Stellafane stands being jointly owned by Mr. Porter, Charles G Richardson, Ozora S. Davis, and Miss Meriam Marsh; Mr. Porter was authorized to interview the several individuals, to effect either a relinquishing of land interest, or that they should join the organization. It was further voted to request R.E. Flanders to submit plans of incorporation at the next meeting.”*

**Page 78 Stellafane Burning the Mortgage Oct 6 1928 :**

*President Porter next stated that the proceedings for obtaining clear title to a plot of land 200 feet by 300 feet, including therein the site of Stellafane, have been fully completed, and payment made for the same; in evidence of this transaction he presented to the Springfield Telescope Makers Inc, a quit claim deed, with instruction to the secretary-treasurer to have this deed recorded in the office of the Springfield Town Clerk.*

## Appendix 3 : Ozora Stearns Davis poem, Feb 1927

*The trembling steps of the Pioneer  
Are felt by the yielding snow.  
And only the trees and the gentle breeze  
The thrill of his heart can know.  
The rushing years with their hopes and fears,  
They never can turn them back,  
To the days long gone, when, with hope and song,  
He worked on the first rude Shack.  
Its single room was small and bleak  
And the stove was a tiny box;  
The door swung free to all good friends,  
With never a thought of locks.  
From the Friendly Maples the song was sweet,  
And cool was the draught from the spring.  
Over the boulders the Shadows played  
Like light on a grackle's wing.  
Say, Russell, do you remember when  
We cooked the sausage and tea;*

## Appendix 3 : Ozora Stearns Davis poem, 2/26/1927

*The thick corn bread with bacon spread  
When all of the world was free?  
One and another has passed the Bourne  
While you and I remain  
Facing the future with fearless hearts,  
In spite of a moment's pain.  
For the years to come are best of all,  
And the heavens are vaster far,  
With the glory of God still sounding forth  
From galaxy, sun and star.  
So the Pioneer fares bravely on  
And blesses the day again  
That brings his steps to the crumbling Shack  
And the beauty of Stellafane.*

Ozora S Davis 5725 Blackstone Ave. Chicago, Illinois  
February 26, 1927



## Appendix 4 : References

N. Flanders, "Times-Reporter" August 1969:

*One of the places that the club would hold star-gazing meetings was near an old shack on Breezy Hill. When the club decided to build a larger telescope they looked for a place for it on several of Springfield's more prominent hills, including Hawks Mountain. But they finally decided on the Breezy Hill site. They decided to call the spot Stellafane, or "Temple of the Stars"*