

The Stellafane Convention

~ AND WHY YOU SHOULD COME ~



Amateur telescope makers set up in preparation for competition judging. The Stellafane clubhouse and Porter Turret Telescope are in the background. Photo: Phil Harrington

Every year in the dark of a mid-summer new moon, amateur astronomers and telescope makers travel great distances to gather on a beautiful rural hilltop in Springfield, Vermont. This is The Stellafane Convention, the oldest and one of the largest assemblies of night sky enthusiasts. It has been hosted here at the birthplace of American amateur telescope making by the Springfield Telescope Makers (STM) since 1926.

A SPECIAL PLACE

“Stellafane” means Shrine to the Stars. Time has also made it a shrine to the history of American astronomy. People who come here feel a rare connection to that history, and to each other in our common astronomical pursuit. Longstanding friendships are nurtured here—many folks return year after year to see friends they encounter nowhere else!

TALKS & DEMOS

The Stellafane Convention is a wonderful opportunity to learn about astronomy and telescope making from talented amateurs and professionals who generously share their expertise. We present a broad range of talks and demonstrations from beginner to advanced (for children as well as adults), on all phases of telescope making and observing.

THE COMPETITION

To many, the telescope competition is the heart and soul of The Stellafane Convention. Expert optical and mechanical judges pick the best amateur-built telescopes in several categories, from basic small Newtonians to more esoteric compound telescopes. Special awards are also made for design innovations.

Winning at Stellafane is a real honor. Quite aside from awards, the competition is a rare chance for amateurs to compare notes, for prospective telescope makers to examine the designs of others before undertaking such a project, and for all to enjoy the ingenuity of these talented instrument builders.

OBSERVING

The dark skies of rural Vermont provide fine observing conditions. All are encouraged to bring and use their telescopes, home-built or commercial.

THE RAFFLE

The Springfield Telescope Makers (a non-profit organization) hold a fundraising raffle at the Convention, with the drawing held before the Saturday evening keynote address. The donated prizes typically include many thousands of dollars worth of very desirable

equipment and accessories, and your odds of winning are great!

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Each year on Saturday evening a notable expert in some astronomy-related field gives the Convention’s keynote address in our outdoor amphitheater (or indoors if the weather doesn’t cooperate).

THE SWAP TABLES

Stellafane’s non-commercial swap tables always draw an eager crowd of bargain hunters in the early hours of Saturday morning.

CAMPING

Although many stay in motels and inns in the Springfield area, camping out has been traditional at The Stellafane Convention from the very beginning. Camping is primitive. Port-a-potties are provided. There is



Perseid meteor over Stellafane clubhouse and Porter Turret Telescope. Photo: Dennis di Cicco

plenty of room, including space for RV parking. Hot meals are available from a catered food tent.

THE HISTORY

In 1920, when a decent astronomical telescope was far beyond the average worker's means, Russell W. Porter offered to help a group of Springfield machine tool factory workers build their own. Together, they ground, polished, and figured mirrors, completed their telescopes, and began using them, soon becoming thoroughly captivated by amateur astronomy.



By 1923 they had formed a club, the Springfield Telescope Makers, and had built Stellafane, our now legendary clubhouse. In 1925 their activities drew the attention of Albert Ingalls, an editor at Scientific American. He visited the

club, and soon began publishing articles by Porter and others about telescope making. This generated interest across the country, and the club decided to invite other amateurs to visit. On July 3, 1926, 29 people came to Breezy Hill, and The Stellafane Convention



The first Stellafane Convention; Porter and Ingalls on the right

was established. It's been held every year since, except during the Second World War. The convention grew rapidly, and today around a thousand enthusiastic amateurs make the pilgrimage to Springfield.

THE SITE

The original Stellafane site on Breezy Hill remains the location for the telescope competition, and of course is where the Stellafane clubhouse and Porter Turret Telescope are located. In 1986, faced with the loss of access

to an adjacent field that had been the Convention's camping area, the STM, with the support of members who mortgaged their homes, purchased a 40-acre farm across the road from the original Stellafane site. This became known as Stellafane East. In 1998, STM member Harty Beardsley donated another adjacent 45 acres, ensuring that the Convention has room for growth.

THE STELLAFANE CLUBHOUSE



The clubhouse was designed by Porter and constructed by the members. The pink color may simply have been that of donated paint, but it has been hallowed by long tradition. Although it's

now a tight fit with today's larger membership roster, the Springfield Telescope Makers still hold meetings at Stellafane. The original site, including the clubhouse and the Porter Turret Telescope, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989.

THE PORTER TURRET TELESCOPE

The Porter Turret Telescope was constructed in 1930 by the club. Porter, who had endured more than his share of winter cold on polar expeditions early in his career, developed a design that allowed the observer to remain indoors and comfortable on the coldest winter nights. Extensively renovated including new optics in the 1970s, the Porter Turret remains an excellent instrument, and is operated during Convention, night and day (for solar observation).



The primary cell (foreground), boom, and turret of the Porter Turret Telescope. Photo: Paul Varella

THE MCGREGOR OBSERVATORY

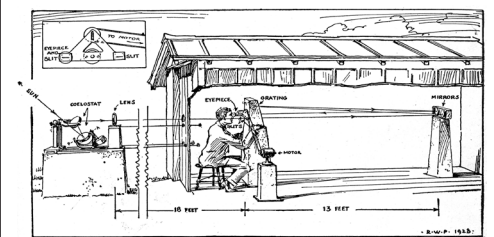
The McGregor Observatory at Stellafane East was constructed by the club between 1989 and 1995. It houses a unique instrument—a 13" f/10 Schupmann telescope mounted on a massive computer controlled



The Milky Way over the Schupmann Telescope. Photo: Dennis di Cicco

alt-az mounting. For a time it was the largest operating Schupmann in the world. This design, which combines reflective and refractive elements, yields a coma-free and essentially apochromatic image, and is ideal for planetary observation. The Schupmann is operated during Convention.

THE ANDREW SIMONI OBSERVATORY



Now under construction on Breezy Hill, this building will house a c.1930 spectrohelioscope acquired and donated to the club by member Matt Considine. An invention of George Hale, the spectrohelioscope produces an image of the sun in any selectable visual wavelength. We hope to have the spectrohelioscope complete and operational at the 2016 Convention. The Russell Porter drawing above shows the basic layout.

The 2016 Stellafane Convention is scheduled for August 4-7. To learn more, visit the STM web site at stellafane.org. Registration begins in early May. Sign up for announcements at stellafane.org/about/announce.html