

## Walking With AAVSO Giants—a Personal Journey (1960s)

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**Abstract** Through pictures, anecdotes, and remembrances, the authors recount the inspiration, friendship, and camaraderie Roger S. Kolman shared with such legendary AAVSO figures as Leslie Peltier, Clinton B. Ford, Carolyn Hurlless, Thomas A. Cragg, Margaret Mayall, and others during the decade of the 1960s that led to his fifty years as an AAVSO member and observer, and a career as a physicist, astronomer, and educator.

### 1. Background

The idea for a presentation at the AAVSO's 100th Anniversary Meeting arose when AAVSO historian Thomas R. Williams and AAVSO staff member Mike Simonsen requested information regarding the origin of the so-called "August Orgies" in Delphos and Lima, Ohio, in the 1960s. After some conversations, we decided to set up a narrative on how the "Giants of the AAVSO" had inspired a new, young observer. Since I was unable to attend the centennial meeting personally, Mike and I decided that we would prepare the material through a series of interviews, Mike would give the presentation at the Historical Session, and I would participate by remote connection (Skype). We then prepared this narrative with Mike providing the prompts (in italics) followed by my responses.

### 2. 1961 got it all started

*Mike: How did you get started in observational astronomy in general and the AAVSO in particular?*

I had a friend across the street from me who had a Tasco 60-mm refractor. We did quite a bit of observing with it, mostly the moon, planets, and a few deep sky objects. One evening we were looking for M81. My friend was searching for it without success. After about forty-five minutes I asked him if I could try to find it. He dismissed my comments, but finally agreed to let me try. I quickly found it. This led to my purchase of the scope from him.

We went to the Adler Planetarium each month since we had no other place to purchase *Sky & Telescope*. In December 1961 I read an article by AAVSO Secretary Clint Ford entitled “Sidelights on Observing Variable Stars” (Figure 1). To think that an individual with a small telescope could make observations of scientific value excited me. I wrote to AAVSO Director Margaret Mayall for information and was sent a packet of material. I made my first observation of R Leo on April 12, 1962. I was hooked! My enthusiasm led to my correspondence with Margaret and Clint on a regular basis. To their credit, they answered every letter I sent. Finally, even though I was four months shy of the lower age limit for membership, Clint told Margaret, “Let the kid in” (perhaps remembering that he, too, was allowed to join at age 15). My membership commenced on May 11, 1962.

### 3. Meeting Dick Wend

*What local mentoring help made you take off as an observer?*

In those days the AAVSO published a list of members along with contact information. Richard E. Wend was one of the names on this list (Figure 2). He lived only a couple of miles from my home and only two blocks from the high school I attended. After several attempts at meeting Dick (he was a travelling salesman), we finally got together. By this time I had a 4-inch Dynascope. We immediately clicked. This led to a friendship that lasted almost fifty years, until his death in 2009.

A few months after we met, Dick felt that I should have a larger telescope with which to observe variables. He assisted me in obtaining a 6-inch Dynascope. This telescope proved to be a short-term solution to aperture fever!

One evening I was visiting Dick and he showed me a 16-inch mirror blank on which he was working. I spotted a large tube in his basement that I thought was an old water heater. He told me that this was a tube for a 10-inch Cave reflector that he had. It had no mount. We talked about it and he said we could sell the Dynascope and he would help me assemble the 10-inch. I was working as a junior draftsman at a local railroad engineering company. I designed a mount for the scope, the company fabricated it for me, we sold the Dynascope, and the 10-inch Cave became my main scope until the 1980s.

### 4. First trip to Delphos

*When did you first get the chance to meet Leslie Peltier and Carolyn and Don Hurlless?*

Dick Wend and I enjoyed discussing the AAVSO and the many great observers of the 1950s. He was a long time member of the Milwaukee Astronomical Society (MAS) and a friend of such luminaries as Ed Halbach, Walter Scott Houston, Bill Albrecht, and A. R. Ball. I was in awe when I met

and observed with all of them, except Ball, whom I never had the chance to meet. Dick brought up the possibility of meeting the celebrated observer Leslie Peltier, which greatly excited me. He contacted Carolyn Hurlless (Figure 3) and a visit was scheduled for November 23, 1963. This was, of course, the day after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, so our trip began on a somber note.

We had a great time visiting with the Peltiers and the Hurlesses. Talk and viewing went far into the night. Carolyn suggested contact with Curtis Anderson and a correspondence began with him and many other AAVSOers. Carolyn could not keep up with all of the correspondence and ultimately launched an informal newsletter which she called *Variable Views*. She did this with a “ditto” spirit duplicator machine sending a compilation of notes and observations to those on her subscriber list. Incidentally, Leslie commented to Carolyn after our visit “I thought they would never leave.” I guess my enthusiasm was overwhelming to him. Carolyn felt otherwise and she told us that she was looking forward to another visit, soon.

## 5. 1964—first AAVSO meeting

*When did you first attend an AAVSO meeting?*

My first was the AAVSO Spring Meeting in 1964, held in St. Louis. Dick Wend and I made the trip where I gave my first paper. This eighteen-year-old was quite nervous, about to speak in front of an audience that included Clint Ford, Tom Cragg, and many others about whom I had read. Margaret Mayall took me to the side and told me to just speak to her—not to pay attention to the rest of the audience. This settled my nerves and the talk went well. Following a question and answer session, J. Allen Hynek (at the time the Department Head of Astronomy at Northwestern University) came up from the bar with a martini in hand and said, “That was a fine talk, young man. Margaret has been saying some fine things about you.” I almost lost it then. This was my first face-to-face meeting with many of the Giants of the AAVSO.

## 6. August 1964—Schoonover Observatory dedication and the first “August Orgy”

*Tell me about the legendary “August Orgies.”*

The Lima (Ohio) Astronomical Society (LAS), in concert with the City of Lima, built the Schoonover Observatory. The main instrument is a 12-1/2-inch Cassegrain reflector. The city financed the building and LAS managed it. Carolyn invited AAVSOers from around the country for this event. We had the opportunity to meet Carolyn’s protégés, Ernst Mayer (who served as AAVSO President), Paul Sventek (who served several terms on Council), and Vicki Schmitz (who went on to become a highly regarded lawyer and judge). Carolyn knew how to pick them!

Headquarters for the gathering was the Hurless home in Lima that was buzzing with activity. Sessions went far into the night. Among those attending from out of town were Tom Cragg, Clint Ford, Chuck Scovil, George and DeLorne Diedrich, Diane Lucas, Art Stokes, John Ruiz, Ed Oravec, Newton Mayall, Leslie Peltier, and Curtis Anderson.

Speaking of Curtis Anderson (Figure 4), I must say that he was a most remarkable man. Carolyn met him at the 1959 AAVSO Spring Meeting at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. He was an imposing figure standing at six feet, eight inches. Observing with a 10-inch reflector from his home in a Minneapolis suburb, he submitted prolific numbers of variable star observations—many of them Inner Sanctums (13.8 magnitude or fainter). Shortly after the meeting, he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. His case was particularly aggressive and, by 1961, he was confined to a wheelchair. In spite of this, he continued to observe at virtually the same rate as before his confinement. Meeting him was an additional inspiration to me, seeing how the passion he had for variable stars could help him overcome his great handicap. He was awarded the AAVSO Merit Award in 1965 and was a member of AAVSO Council from 1965 to 1969. During his time as an observer, he contributed 600 consecutive monthly reports! Sadly, he succumbed to his disease in 1976. In more ways than one he was a Giant of the AAVSO!

*Tell me about the SS Cygni contest you had with Carolyn Hurless.*

We had an observing session at Leslie's observatory in Delphos, Ohio. Carolyn had brought her 8-inch reflector from Lima and I brought my 10-inch reflector from home. During the evening a discussion arose about who could find SS Cygni (which was our favorite variable) using the star-hopping technique. Each of us felt that we could do so faster. Finally, Curtis Anderson said, "Why don't you have a race and settle this once and for all?" We agreed.

Each of us put our telescopes in a neutral position, Curtis made the call, and we were off. In a few seconds, we each found the field and SS Cygni. I made the call first, just ahead of Carolyn. She maintained she found it first, but had not made the call. In reality, it was too close to call. Each of us maintained we won. Those in attendance got a good laugh out of the race.

## **7. Ford Observatory dedication, 1965**

*I understand that the next August Orgy took place on the road. Tell me about it.*

We had learned that there was going to be a mountain near Wrightwood, California, named after Leslie Peltier, and an observatory placed on the mountain. The observatory was to be named after Clint Ford and would house an 18-inch telescope donated by Claude Carpenter. Once we were invited to the dedication, Dick Wend and I planned a western vacation.

Dick had been a long time member of the Association of Lunar and Planetary

Observers (ALPO), so he asked ALPO leader Walter Haas to set up a meeting in Las Cruces with Clyde Tombaugh on the way out to Mt. Peltier (Figure 5). I brought my 6-inch *f*/4 richest-field telescope (RFT) along so I would not miss any observing time. Upon arrival at the Tombaugh home, Clyde saw the 6-inch RFT in the back seat of Dick's car and got excited. "I haven't seen one of those since I made one in 1920-something." We then exchanged views through the 6-inch and Tombaugh's 16-inch telescope.

Tombaugh's telescope was a behemoth! It was of long focus, since he was a planetary observer. It looked like an oil derrick. Tombaugh wanted to show us Jupiter, which was not easily accessible to the eyepiece. Being very practical, he had a long plank near the observing platform. He pulled out the plank, and told Dick and me to stand on one end to weigh it down. He then walked out to the end of the plank to reach the eyepiece and observe. When he was done, he walked back and said, "Okay, now it's your turn." Dick and Clyde stood on the end of the plank to weigh it down for me. Now, I was much skinnier then, but it was still pretty scary. However, this was a chance to observe with Clyde Tombaugh, so I wasn't about to chicken-out. After I finished, Clyde and I stood on the plank for Dick. Another interesting tidbit is the fact that Tombaugh, being the practical man he was, used a peanut butter jar for the secondary cover, and a garbage can lid for the mirror cover.

We did a great deal of sightseeing on the way to Wrightwood. Finally, we arrived, settled into a motel, and were off to see the Ford Observatory.

We arrived a few days before the dedication and found that there was much to do before the site would be suitable for visitors. We pitched in to help with the preparations. While cleaning up things, Dick called out to me, "What kind of snake is this?" There was a rattler coiled up in front of him. Fortunately, I had been a pitcher on my high school baseball team. I told him to stand very still, picked up a rock, and sent the snake to its maker. We threw the snake off the side of the mountain. Later, when we told the story to Larry Bornhurst (one of the Ford Observatory group), he said, "So where are the rattles? You didn't save the rattles? My kids are saving them!"

There were no "facilities" available, but bizarre as it may seem, there was a toilet just sitting there in the middle of the observing field on top of the mountain! So we fashioned a porta-potty out of some leftover plywood and made a sign: one side said "Be careful, in use"; the other side said, "It's Okay now."

Thomas A. Cragg was a solar observer at the 150-foot tower at Mount Wilson Observatory in Pasadena, California. He arranged a tour for us and, while we were in the 60-inch telescope dome, we heard that word had spread among the astronomers on the mountain that Leslie Peltier was visiting. They stopped what they were doing to come meet the legend in person—a Giant of the AAVSO.

## 8. The 1966 meeting in Chicago

The AAVSO held its 1966 Spring Meeting in Chicago. I was now 21 and of age to be included in the legendary “Clint Ford Hospitality Suite.” I had heard about it, but had never been allowed in because of my age. Now, I was allowed in! It was awesome. He had a room filled with all kinds of liquor and beer. Early on, the partying was rather mild-mannered. Then Carolyn Hurless said she was pretty tired and told everyone “goodnight.” A minute after she left, Clint said, “all right, let the fun begin!” He then proceeded to quote limerick after limerick, many of which would make a sailor blush. Clint loved his limericks and he knew a LOT of them. I was now indoctrinated!

## 9. The 1968 meeting in Lima, Ohio

*In 1968, you gave two papers at the Lima, Ohio, meeting. Tell me your memories of that meeting.*

I do recall that among the speakers at that meeting were: Newton Mayall, Leif Robinson, Clinton Ford, Charles Scovil, Marv Baldwin, Carl Anderson, Robert Cox, Walter Scott Houston, Lawrence Hazel, Tom Cragg, Cyrus Fernald, and Art Stokes. I was shocked when Margaret Mayall asked me to chair one of the sessions. Giving two papers was a treat, but chairing some of the Giants of the AAVSO was unbelievable!

## 10. Conclusion

My first exposure to the AAVSO came in the form of an article in *Sky & Telescope* magazine (December 1961) about amateurs observing variables, written by Clint Ford. I was so impressed by the fact that ordinary people using backyard telescopes could contribute to science that it impacted the rest of my life. I became a physicist and now teach astronomy courses at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois.

I joined the AAVSO as a teenager in 1962, which makes me one of the longest-standing members of the AAVSO. My first variable star observation was R Leo in April of that year. In 2012, I will reach the fifty-year mark (Figure 6). I have witnessed decades of development and have known many of the famous personalities in AAVSO history personally. Sadly, almost all the AAVSO Giants of the 1960s are gone now, but their influence and legacy lives on through me and the generations of dedicated observers that have followed in their footsteps.



Figure 1. Clint Ford, about 1963.



Figure 4. Oravec, Kolman, Peltier, Hurless, Cragg, Anderson, Ford: Delphos, Ohio, 1964.



Figure 2. Dick Wend, 1964.



Figure 5. Kolman, Tombaugh, Wend, 1965.



Figure 3. Carolyn Hurless, in Peltier's "Merry-Go-Round" observatory, 1964.



Figure 6. Roger Kolman, observing with his 18-inch reflector.