

## Variable Star Observers I Have Known

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**Abstract** I would like to share with *JAAVSO* readers some personal recollections of a few of the outstanding individuals I have become acquainted with through forty-five years as an AAVSO member. In one manner, or another, all have played an important role in the AAVSO's 100 years of service to the astronomical community.

### 1. Introduction

By virtue of my forty-five years as an active visual observer with the AAVSO, as a small part of our celebration of 100 years as amateur scientists contributing to the field of variable star monitoring and solar observation through the auspices of the AAVSO, I would like to share with you some personal recollections of a few of these individuals (Figure 1). Some of you who have devoted decades to the association, as I have, will undoubtedly recognize these names immediately. For others of you who have joined the organization more recently, but perhaps have perused the volume *Advancing Variable Star Astronomy*, it may add a degree of more personal familiarity to those individuals otherwise known to you only as written names on a page. In one manner, or another, all have played an important role in the AAVSO's 100 years of service to the astronomical community.

### 2. Clinton B. Ford, observer par excellence

I first met Clint Ford in 1962 when I discovered Stamford Observatory and joined the Fairfield County Astronomical Society which runs it. He became president of the Society a couple of years later. We became quite good friends. I think he saw a potential observer in me. At the time I was building myself a 4-inch refractor, and I had never heard of variable stars. The observatory's 22-inch telescope was still under construction. Clint bribed me by loaning me a 10-inch reflector he had just replaced with a new 12.5-inch in his backyard observatory. His one requirement was that I build an observatory in my backyard to house the telescope, since the 10-inch would be too big to haul in and out. The paint on the observatory had hardly dried when he came over with some strange blueprint star charts and a gleam in his eye. He taught me how to make variable

star estimates, and as the saying goes, the rest is history. Eight years later I was president of the AAVSO.

Clint first started observing variables at age fourteen in Michigan where his father was a math professor at The University of Michigan. Clint was too young to be accepted formally as an AAVSO member until he turned fifteen in 1928, so he became a member the year I was born. Also in 1928 he had the privilege (for one of his tender years) of attending his first AAVSO meeting, where he met such dignitaries as Leon Campbell, William Tyler Olcott, and David Pickering. This cemented his interest in variable stars. In Michigan near the family home Clint had an observatory at the top of an old tower, where he used a borrowed 3.5-inch Clark refractor. He made many observations from that location, and from the family summer place on Cayuga Lake in central New York State. He spent part of one summer as an assistant at Yerkes Observatory where he used an 8-inch refractor for his observations. Through three years at Carleton College in upper New York State, and later at the University of Michigan for his senior year and his studies for his Master's degree he continued observing as time permitted.

The war years proved difficult for observing, but again, whenever he could he stuck with it. He spent part of the war as a Naval Reserve Lieutenant teaching navigation at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, where he used their observatory's 12-inch.

Clint and his first wife, Alice, built a home in Suffield, Connecticut, in 1948. In Suffield he built his first roll-off roof observatory, which housed the 10-inch telescope. That telescope was built by a friend of Clint's and was pretty good. It would regularly reach the mid-14th magnitude range even in not so good Connecticut skies. That meant that Clint was often able to reach the "Inner Sanctum" (positive estimate fainter than 13.8 or fainter-than estimate fainter than 14.0) and he liked to observe the fainter end of the variables' cycles.

After Clint's divorce and remarriage he moved to Wilton, Connecticut, to work for the Perkin-Elmer Corporation. There he built his second roll-off roof observatory, a slightly larger version of the one in Suffield. The new observatory housed a 12.5-inch scope made by Cave Optical Co. in California. By that time Clint knew Tom Cave quite well, so he got a fine telescope. With it he was able to reach into the mid-15th magnitude range. Clint willed his 12.5-inch scope to Ithaca College where it is in use again.

While still in Michigan, Clint had become friends with Claude Carpenter, who owned an 18-inch telescope. When Claude retired from his job with the Post Office he moved to Southern California and set up the telescope in a rickety observatory out in the desert. Several other amateur friends got together and found a site in the mountains near Wrightwood, California, where they built a new observatory to house the 18-inch. Since Clint supplied most of the funds for the building they named it after him. The project made the cover of *Sky & Telescope* for March, 1966, with a feature article inside.

The 18-inch was a big brute of a scope, and being a Newtonian it required climbing on a ladder or platform to get to the eyepiece. At first the eyepiece location in the usual spot opposite the attachment point of the Declination axis sometimes made it impossible to reach. Clint eventually solved that problem by having a rotating top end built. At any rate, once the 18-inch was operational the limit was about 17th magnitude. Now we were getting somewhere! Clint used to go to California with his wife three or four times a year, usually for two or three weeks spanning the dark of the Moon. At first they stayed in a local motel, but that got old pretty soon so Clint bought a three-bedroom house for his visits and for use by the local observers. I stayed there on many occasions when we went to California together after his second divorce. Altogether Clint made 61,874 observations in his lifetime.

Clint was Secretary of the AAVSO for forty-four years so he always had a report to give at meetings. His writing style was rather dry and old fashioned. I suppose it was a product of his times and his educational background. I always found it rather stuffy but I never complained. Later when we got into the chart making we differed strongly on many issues and I let him know my opinion. John Griesé used to say we sounded like an old married couple—always bickering.

We knew that there were far more visually observable variables than the AAVSO had charts for. Clint had gotten a bunch of material for new charts from Dr. Charles Olivier of the University of Pennsylvania. He started drawing charts from that material but the photos supplied were of poor quality and very hard to work with. He constructed what he called his “e-maker” (e-scale charts) with a couple of mirrors and an opaque projector to enlarge the photos. Soon after our 22-inch Gregory-Maksutov telescope came on line in Stamford I began taking photos for the new charts, and then assisting with the drawing of them. Clint was not a good draftsman and it drove me nuts to see what he turned out. First I made up a chart form to get away from his sloppy outlines. Soon computers came along and we were able to start at least drawing the chart forms and the lettering that way. The next step was a program to take the irregular star dots from my photos and make them into perfectly round dots that we could scale any way we wanted to. The program was written by our local Society member Gil Wiengarten. We called it very scientifically “Roundify.” At last we could make charts entirely using the computer. There was still a bit of art in it since we had to choose the disk scale that would make it look like the sky. Local Society member Bob Leitner and I designed the computerized chart forms and consulted with Janet Mattei on final details.

Clint and I often went to various scientific meetings together. In 1988 we went to a reunion of astronomy graduates and staff at Cornell where many notables including Carl Sagan gave talks. Clint was involved with Cornell in supplying a part of the funds for them to use the 200-inch at Palomar.

Clint was prevailed upon by Dorritt Hoffleit to write his memoirs. They

are called *Some Stars, Some Music* and make fascinating reading. Copies are still available from AAVSO Headquarters. I highly recommend this booklet. Also, Dorrit Hoffleit wrote an obituary of Clint after he died in 1992 that was published in *JAAVSO*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 144-146.

### **3. Danie Overbeek**

At the 1972 AAVSO Meeting we met South African observer Danie Overbeek and his wife Jeanne. After the meeting we all met at Clint's house in Wilton. We all got along famously and they said "You simply must come visit us in S.A." Of course we never thought it would happen, but in 1975 Clint and I did just that. We spent twenty days touring South Africa with Danie and Jeanne, and had a great time. We talked to every astronomy Centre in the country (sixteen of them) about amateur astronomy in the U.S.

Danie had his observatory on top of his garage, ten feet from his kitchen door. It was accessed by climbing a vertical ladder up the side of the building. He had a home-made 12-inch reflector of rather short focal length, ideal for variable work. The finder had a mechanical shutter type arrangement so that he could cut down the aperture when using it on very bright variables. When he needed to go back into the house he wore a set of WW II red aviator goggles to preserve his night vision.

Danie worked for South African Airways as head of their pilot training department. Since they bought their planes from Boeing, he was frequently in the United States to check out the latest simulators and we got together now and then.

While in Cape Town we met Reginald de Kock, who held the AAVSO's lifetime record at that time with 160,777 variable star observations. Danie later exceeded that mark by a considerable margin with 292,711 visual observations. [*Ed. note: there is a memoria page to Danie, who died in 2001, at <http://www.aavso.org/memorium-danie-overbeek>*]

### **4. Wayne Lowder**

Wayne lived not too far from Stamford and became a member of our Society. He often came to visit and observe because we had better skies than he did at home. He used binoculars and his own 8-inch and a 10-inch telescope we had. He was so interested in variables that he taught himself to read Russian so he could do research in the library at Harvard and find out what they were writing about stars that might prove to be of interest. Wayne was one of those who checked each new chart we turned out. We called him "The electronic eyeball" because his estimates were so good. He would even make new sequences by eye-estimates. Wayne made 208,571 visual variable star observations, many of them highly-precise estimates of small-amplitude variables. [*Ed. note: there is a memorial page to Wayne, who died in 2003, at <http://www.aavso.org/memorium-wayne-m-lowder>*]

## 5. Ed Oravec

Ed lived in nearby Westchester County, New York, only a few miles from us, and like Wayne he often visited us since our skies were better than he had at home. He brought his own large binoculars and did mostly bright stars. His observations were extremely accurate. Ed doesn't observe any more, but he made 170,453 visual observations between 1943 and 2003.

## 6. John Bortle

John Bortle was another member who came from Mt. Vernon, New York. He did both binocular and telescopic observing, and was also interested in comets. That was a subject for which he became world famous. He later married and moved to a far better location in Stormville, New York, where he built his own observatory. In those early years at Stamford Observatory we also had as members Bill and Florence Glenn from the Bronx, New York. They were also binocular observers and came very often to observe. It was this total group who dreamed up and proposed the two new AAVSO publications: *The Journal of the AAVSO*, and *AAVSO Circular*. We proposed them to Margaret Mayall, and with her approval and input both were started. John Bortle became editor of *AAVSO Circular* which dealt with rapidly varying stars such as CVs and novae, and Bill Glenn became editor of *AAVSO*. I was production manager and typist/layout editor of *AAVSO*.

That group was also the genesis of *The AAVSO Variable Star Atlas*, since we realized that there was no atlas of the heavens that showed where all our "pet" variables were. I proposed that as a trained draftsman I could make such an atlas if we could find a suitable base atlas giving us the stars. We finally got the right to use *The Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory Atlas*, and I was off and running. [Ed. note: John is still going strong and has just passed the 200,000 visual variable star observations mark.]

## 7. Tom Cragg and Claude Carpenter

I first met Tom at a Spring Meeting in Tucson, Arizona, in May 1972. Of course we went to Kitt Peak and I got my first look at really large telescopes. Tom was in his element, having worked with the 60-inch and the 100-inch at Mt. Wilson, where he was the Solar Observer and jack of all trades. He and Clint Ford were old pals and Tom was a very amiable guy, so we all got along well. We went on from there to California to observe with the 18-inch at Ford Observatory on Mt. Peltier near Wrightwood. I think it was on that trip that I first visited Mt. Wilson. Naturally Tom showed us around, and I also briefly met Larry Bornhurst, who was one of the founders of and did most of the actual building of Ford Observatory. Larry had his own little dome on Mt. Wilson.

Tom Cragg had the use of a wonderful 6-inch Clark telescope at Mt Wilson. His eyesight was so good that he regularly broke into the 15th magnitude range.

On that same trip I also met Claude Carpenter, who owned the 18-inch scope in Ford Observatory. He was a bit of a character. You didn't want to cross him or you could expect a tongue-lashing. All bark and no bite, of course. In general he was a likeable person. He was older than the rest of us and rather set in his ways, having lived as a bachelor most of his life. [Ed. note: Claude died in 1992. There is a memorial page to Tom, who died in 2011, at <http://www.aavso.org/thomas-cragg>]

## **8. John W. Griesé, III**

John Griesé showed up at the Observatory as a high school student in the early 1970s. He lived across the road from Richard Perkin (of the Perkin-Elmer Corp.) and had observed with Perkin's 24-inch reflector on a few occasions. He joined our group and began observing variables, eventually becoming my assistant at Stamford. He helped in taking photos for the chart work and also ran the public open house nights for years. He taught Adult Education courses throughout Connecticut. He studied for and got his Master's Degree and is now going on studying for his Ph.D. John was elected to the AAVSO Council where he served from 1985 to 1990. John has made nearly 22,000 visual variable star observations so far.

## **9. Fr. Ronald Royer**

On one of our trips to Ford Observatory I met Fr. Ronald Royer (now Msgr. Royer). At the time he was one of several priests at his church, but later he became the Rector. He was a regular guy who had started observing variables in his teens and continued even through his studies for the priesthood. He had his own 12-inch scope in the backyard of the church. He was also one of the founders of Ford Observatory, and frequently went there to observe on his days off. On one of our later trips to California, one night John Griesé and I stayed at the Rectory, which was also the residence of the local Bishop. As I recall, that was on our trip to the Riverside Telescope Makers Convention at Big Bear. He has made nearly 10,000 variable star observations so far, mostly visual but some PEP and CCD, too.

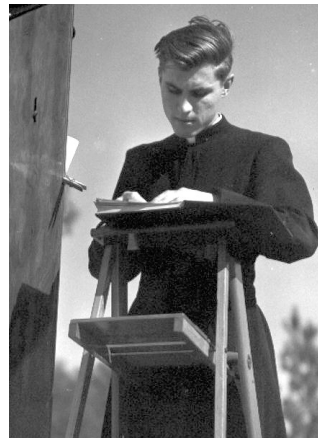
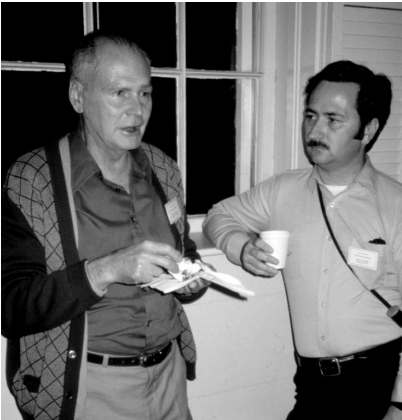
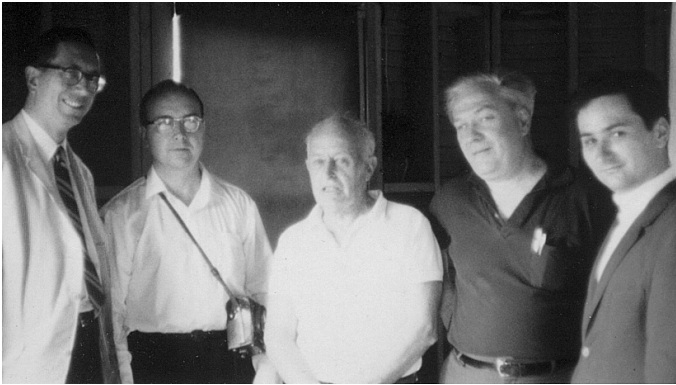


Figure 1. AAVSO Observers: *top*, Ed Oravec, Charles Scovil, Leslie Peltier, Clint Ford, John Bortle; *middle left*, Danie Overbeek and John Bortle; *middle right*, Wayne Lowder; *bottom left*, Tom Cragg; *bottom right*, Fr. Ron Royer.