

VARIABLE STAR OBSERVING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Danie Overbeek
Box 212
Edenvale
1610 South Africa

*Presented at the First European Meeting of the AAVSO
Brussels, July 24-28, 1990*

Abstract

The work of the South African Association of Astronomers is described.

The year 1989 was another successful one for the South African Association of Astronomers. Fourteen members from Botswana, Zimbabwe, and the Republic of South Africa reported 19,090 observations. These were recorded by the Director, Jan Hers, and forwarded to the AAVSO and the Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand (RASNZ). Special requests for observational data were received from AAVSO Headquarters, the RASNZ, and the South African Astronomical Observatory, with whom we have a good working relationship.

The sun was closely monitored during the year by means of daily sunspot counts and the recording of solar flares on VLF radio SID/SES monitors, as well as on a magnetograph operated by one of the members. A good VLF and magnetic record was obtained of the violent flare activity of March 11-13, 1989. This activity resulted in an Aurora Australis, which was visible in Natal for the first time in recorded history.

The sunspot counts and analyses of flare records were forwarded to the AAVSO Solar Division for submission to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency.

The computerization of variable star reports was an important development during the year under review. For nearly ten years the Director had attempted to put all current and previous observations made in Southern Africa in an electronic data bank but found that he was unable to keep up with the more prolific observers. Now the bulk of the observations reach the Director on diskettes and he has merely to add the minority of handwritten reports before sending the diskettes to the AAVSO Headquarters. Needless to say, this procedure saves much time at AAVSO Headquarters. The entering of archival data is continuing.

One of our members continues to make photoelectric measurements of a high standard, albeit on a modest scale.

On the debit side, we must report a worry that is perhaps not unique to our organization. The majority of visual variable star observations are made by individuals who will no longer be active in the 21st Century. It appears that not enough young, dedicated observers are being recruited to fill the gap. Young people lean towards the latest developments in technology and I believe that this is also true in amateur astronomy. Perhaps a conscious effort should be made to exploit this tendency and to encourage such people to develop automatic or semi-automatic photoelectric telescopes. It is possible that, whereas the 20th Century was the century of Pickering and Peltier, the next one will be the century of amateur photoelectric work.