

Obituary

Michiel Daniel Overbeek (1920-2001)

Danie Overbeek passed away on 2001 July 19, at his home, after suffering a heart attack.

Born in 1920 and growing up in Ermelo in the Transvaal, Danie went to the University of the Witwatersrand to do a Mining and Metallurgy course in 1939 and 1940. After serving in the South African Air Force during the second World War, and being mentioned in Despatches in 1943 (Oak leaf on Africa Star), he joined the South African Airways and South African Railways where he spent his working life doing maintenance, training, civil engineering research and administration, retiring in 1980.

► came and looked at sunspots from the raised area behind the Gayton Road Library. Again, the spots were much admired and the sizes produced the usual gasps. The appearance of the groups had changed from the previous days and one spot had gone round the rim and disappeared. I had to demonstrate that the spots *were* on the Sun, not dust on the front plate of the telescope. This was useful - I could show that the image remained visible, although the quality changed, when parts of the aperture were covered up.

In all three cases, I was able to put up a projector screen and use that to show the image. The superior quality of this over the usual piece of white card is noticeable. You have to get volunteers to hold the screen steady, and use your observers to shadow the screen on which the image appears. The image was about 50cm in diameter. I used the shadow of the telescope, as the means of alignment on the Sun. The method is easy to demonstrate quickly and it emphasises the need for care with the most powerful light-source any of us are ever likely to see.

Having been used always to regarding Saturn as the great crowd-puller, I am rather pleased to find that the Sun exerts nearly as great an effect. The speed with which the Sun slips out of the field of view is another thing which fascinates (and gives the optics a rest). This is not the first time I have shown sunspots to classes, but it most definitely is the first that I was able to do so on three successive days. All these venues were in suburban London, which highlights the point that, even with modern levels of light and other pollution, astronomy at this popular level is still possible around the big city. I wonder if others have found the same in, say, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow or Belfast?

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Danie's astronomical interest started at a very young age. When he was just five years old, he once went to his parents in terror to report that 'the stars are moving', but when about three years later he heard his grandfather identify Mars, he was so intrigued at the fact that heavenly bodies have names that he started to read all the astronomy books he could lay his hands on. When he was about 15 he made his first telescope from a reading glass and a pocket microscope, moving on to spectacle lenses and then in 1937 he bought a commercial telescope for about \$4.48! In 1951 he constructed a 6-inch Newtonian and started observing occultations and variable stars. This led in 1953 to the building of a 12.5-inch Dall-Kirkham Cassegrain reflector, which became his main astronomical observing tool for more than 47 years.

He married an old school girlfriend, Jean, in 1945 and they brought up two boys and two girls. In 1958 he obtained a BSc degree in astronomy from UNISA.

Danie received many honours for his astronomical achievements. He served as chairman of the Johannesburg centre of the Astronomical Society of South Africa in 1956 and president of ASSA in 1961 and 1999 — a rare feat for someone to be elected president more than once. He was elected an honorary life member of both ASSA and the Johannesburg centre. In 1984 he received the highest honour from the ASSA when he was awarded the Gill medal. In 1986 he received

a merit award from the AAVSO and in 1994 received the Director's award and a prolific observer's merit award from AAVSO. The Astronomical Society of the Pacific presented him with their Amateur Achievement Award in 1996. The Minor Planet Centre announced in November 2000 that minor planet 5038 had been named Overbeek' in his honour.

Danie was the first amateur astronomer to detect the effects of a gamma ray burst, with a SID/SES receiver that he had constructed. He also built a seismograph in 1990 and monitored the Earth's activity continually.

Danie's contribution to astronomy in South Africa was enormous. He was mentor and friend to all who wanted to do serious astronomical observing and encouraged observers in all corners of the country. He contributed over 250,000 variable star observations to the AAVSO over a period of nearly 50 years, and was one of their key observers in the Southern hemisphere when critical data were required for scheduling satellite observing time. About 3000 of these observations were also communicated to the BAAVSS, via the exchange programme with the RASNZ for stars on both groups' observing programmes.

The passing of Danie Overbeek has signalled the end of an era, and he will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

Brian Fraser



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