

Gov. Smith's telescope still searching for a home

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ST. ALBANS — A telescope on display at the University of Vermont offers more than just a look at the stars. — it also provides a glimpse of St. Albans' past.

The telescope, a nine-foot long, 1,110-pound piece of equipment, originally scanned the heavens from the estate of the late Gov. Edward Curtis Smith on Congress Street.

UVM actually has no formal documentation about who made the donation of the telescope to their school, but anecdotal evidence points to the Smith estate.

Ralph Paquette, 83, of St. Albans worked for 40 years as caretaker at the Smith Estate, then called Seven Acres. Paquette, who now lives on the Newton Road, performed jobs like keeping up the lawns and stoking a hand-fired coal furnace first for Edward Curtis Smith and later his son J. Gregory Smith.

"They were real nice people to work for," said Paquette on a recent excursion to the site of the Smith Mansion that burned in 1987.

Mowing 70 acres of lawn with a hand-push mower took weeks, and in the summer acres of flower beds needed weeding, but Paquette never shied.

"Oh heck, it was a wonderful job," he said. Paquette remembers the building where the telescope was housed when the Smiths were alive.

Then the observatory was located behind the mansion itself. The 20 x 20 structure has since been moved next door, behind a home that used to be the Smith's laundry woman's residence.

Restored and re-painted, the observatory looks

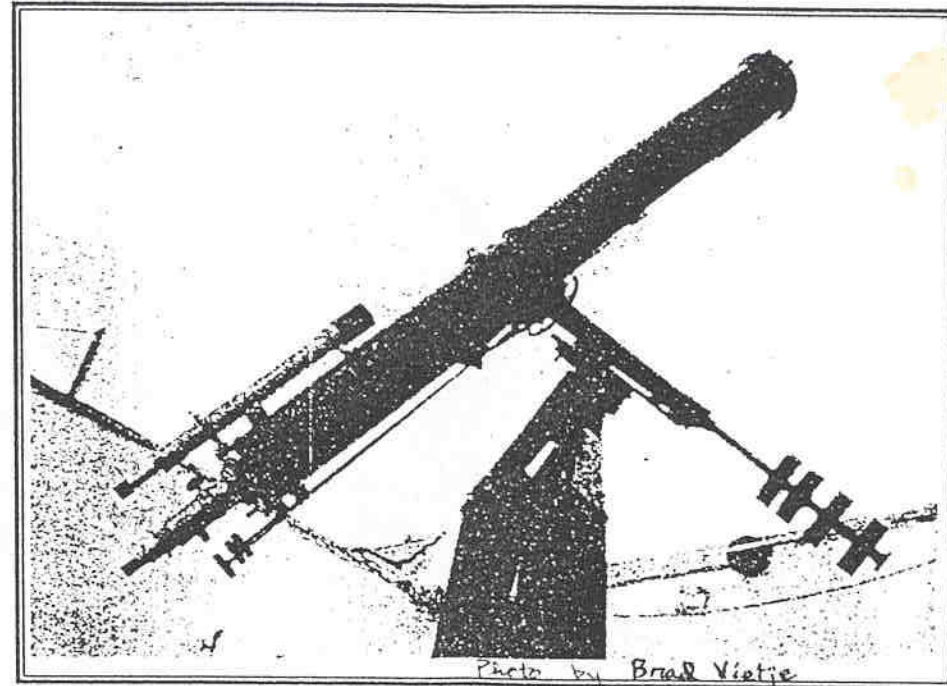


Photo by Brad Vietje

a bit like an oversized dollhouse, but inside sits a huge round wooden base where Paquette said a glass dome provided a view of the night sky.

Paquette said he never actually saw the telescope itself, but remembers hearing about it and

whoops!

saw the observatory building behind the mansion.

UVM records dated 1939 refer to a newly acquired nine-inch equatorial telescope that came to the attention of a Professor A.D. Butterfield. Before the telescope could be set up, Butterfield

retired, and with the onset of World War II demanding attention, the telescope was put into dusty storage at the University for 30 years.

Interest in the Clark telescope — so called for its 1905 manufacturer, Alvan Clark — revived when the Junior Vermont Astronomical Society in 1968 heard about a large aperture telescope lens somewhere in storage at UVM.

When the lens, tube and telescope base were found, the Vermont Astronomical Society submitted a proposal to UVM's physics department asking permission to mount the telescope in an observatory they would build and maintain.

Seeing that the telescope would be too costly for the University to house and mount, the physics chair agreed to loan the scope to the VAS which built an observatory on a site in Underhill.

The telescope was installed on July 20, 1974, but the lease expired three years later and the VAS was forced to build a new site in Williston. Shuffled again, the telescope was installed in Williston in 1983, but permanence wasn't in the stars for the telescope.

In the summer of 1989, the VAS was forced to abandon the Williston observatory and they began an unsuccessful search for a home for the instrument. When none was found, the telescope equatorial mount, and the telescope tube were crated and returned to the UVM Physics Department.

In the meanwhile, 1980 saw the birth of an astronomy program at UVM with a new teacher hired and new courses offered. With the growing interest grows the hope of establishing a student observatory, and installing the Clark telescope there.

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The scope is an unusual one both because of its unique historical context, but also because of its refracting nature.

"Refracting" refers to the large light-gathering element which is a refracting lens in the case of this telescope a 9-inch diameter lens.

Most telescopes today are reflecting telescopes that use mirrors to show an image.

Professor Don Manley at UVM said large refracting telescopes are not made much anymore because making high-quality lenses is difficult, and the Clarks, manufacturers of the biggest and best lenses, died out.

While there are modern instruments that would do what the nine-inch Clark can, Manley said it would cost about \$150,000

and the Clark's quality and history make it a better tool for student use.

The UVM Clark will be on display at UVM's astronomy night Thursday, but it isn't currently used for observation. Manley said he hopes the display will attract some attention and help bring the telescope back into use.

But the telescope will be on display during UVM's event which is free and open to the public Thursday between 6:30 and 10 p.m. in the Cook Building Lobby. Also that night a lecture called "large telescopes past and future" will take place at 8 p.m. in Angell Hall, Room B106 and other telescopes and astronomical instruments and astrophotographs will be on display as well.

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what manley said was ... "Today it would cost about \$150,000 to buy a 9" refractor with a comparable mount!"