

AAVSO Member Stories

How They Became Interested In Astronomy

Version 1, March, 2021

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Preface

For over 100 years, AAVSO has been the home of individuals with a deep passion and love for astronomy. Currently, we are a community of over 1500 non-professional and professional astronomers, enjoying observing variable stars and at the same time advancing humankind's knowledge and understanding of the universe. People often ask me, what is the background of our members?

This document contains brief answers from our members to a simple question I often ask - "What do you remember about the first event in your life that excited you about astronomy?" It usually comes back to one person and one event—sometimes a parent, teacher, or close friend—who first got them to "look up!"

Members are sending me their personal stories. When did they first learn about variable stars? Why did they first get involved with AAVSO?

It's fun listening to their stories—hearing what personal event drew them to astronomy, how they felt when they first looked through a telescope, and what they experienced when they attended their first AAVSO meeting.

This is the first version of this document, containing stories from sixteen members. I hope other members will submit their personal stories for future updates! Please, send your story to me at president@aavso.org.

Gordon Myers

AAVSO President

About the AAVSO

We are the AAVSO. Our members live all over the world and use every kind of telescope—from binoculars to sophisticated private and AAVSO-owned observatories. We monitor and measure stars that vary in brightness. We select stars that interest us and follow their antics on a nightly, weekly, monthly basis, adding our visual magnitude estimates and our CCD and CMOS data to the ever-growing AAVSO International Database we call the AID.

For more than 100 years the AAVSO has served as an umbrella organization for our members. First, we teach the necessary skills and techniques that observers need to make efficient and accurate measurements. Second, we provide the necessary resources in the form of star charts, comparison star magnitudes, and tools for measuring the images that observers take with their cameras and telescopes. Third, we accept, validate, and archive our observations for research in the astronomical community.

To supply these services, the AAVSO engages volunteer help and a paid, professional staff to direct and focus our efforts. We offer the following services to every member:

- Expert help in choosing scientifically interesting stars
- Accurate and up-to-date finding charts with comparison star data
- Comprehensive database of variable stars (VSX)
- Observing sections focused on specific areas of variable star astronomy
 - Long-period and short-period variable stars
 - Cataclysmic variables, novae, and supernovae
 - Exoplanets, gamma-ray bursters, young stellar objects
 - CCD and CMOS photometry, PEP, and spectroscopy
 - AAVSONet: on-line telescope access for members
 - Telescopes, cameras, equipment, and instrumentation
- Instruction on observing skills and techniques (CHOICE courses)
- Our peer-reviewed astronomical publication, the JAAVSO
- Annual meetings, forums, seminars, and webinars
- Alerting members to observations needed by professionals
- Access to the archive of variable star data in the AID
- Accessing the AID to upload your own observations

We are proud that our work and our contributions aid researchers, astronomers, astrophysicists, and scientists operating NASA's space telescopes. Our database holds a story told through a century of stellar histories, and members provide new, critically needed observations furthering ongoing research.

In sum, the AAVSO is a world leader in promoting, supporting, and tapping the energies of non-professional astronomers. We foster public interest in astronomy. We offer everyone everywhere the opportunity and the means to make real contributions to astronomy.

Teófilo Arranz

I was born 62 years ago in a small depressed town in a rural district in Castilla, Spain. I started elementary education on a countryside school, but I had to leave abruptly at the age of 14 when I was forced to work as an apprentice in different kinds of jobs without completing high school, let alone university education.

But I have always been curious about science and my curiosity translated into reading every science book or magazine that got in my way. Among those publications I especially liked the ones related to astronomy, since astronomy allowed contributions from amateurs, including some kind of new discoveries.

Noone has ever had any kind of influence on my attraction to this science, I've always been a self-taught individual.

But the true revolution arrived with the Internet availability, which granted communication with all organizations in this field and access to the information they provided. And that's where the AAVSO came up.

At the beginning it wasn't easy, especially due to my inability to speak English, but I have been overcoming the language barrier little by little, and I have been getting used to the AAVSO daily routine by using automated translators

Along with my basic studies, my work life has been limited to poorly qualified jobs with low salaries, so it has taken me a lot of time and effort to be able to buy the equipment I now have and that I use to study the variable stars that bring so much pleasure into my life.

Reverend Kenneth Beckmann

Many thanks for asking me to share my thoughts about my memories of forty three years a member of the AAVSO.

I have been an amateur astronomer most of my life. As a youth, my earliest recollections were of a small handheld refractor I received for my birthday. I later purchased a 4 1/4 inch Edmund Scientific Newtonian telescope along with a copy of Norton's Star Atlas. I remember reading about the accomplishments of amateurs and professionals in Sky and Telescope Magazine during the 1960's and 1970's.

During the late 1960's, an English schoolmaster, G. E. D. Alcock visually discovered his first nova, Nova Delphini 1967. I read with special interest the article in Sky and Telescope Magazine which described his discovery and visual nova search program.

In 1978 I became a member of the AAVSO and began searching for novae visually as well as observing variable stars. I memorized as much of the northern summer Milky Way as possible to about the 7th apparent magnitude. I also purchased Skalnate Pleso's Atlas of the Heavens and Tirion Star Atlas. I still have both copies. I also have several star other atlases which aid me in my continued search for galactic novae.

I was especially grateful to the AAVSO's late director, Dr. Janet A. Mattei, along with Elizabeth Waagen, Associate Editor of the Journal of the AAVSO, who have demonstrated an enthusiasm for my work as a visual nova hunter. With their encouragement, I continue a visual nova and photographic search today. I believe these types of search are an essential approach for advancing our knowledge of galactic novae in the Milky Way Galaxy.

I am grateful to have received the AAVSO Nova Award in 1988 during a fall meeting of the AAVSO. I am thankful to Dr. Stella Kafka, our current director, for presenting A Certificate of Recognition in 2016 for my contributions to variable star astronomy and the search for galactic novae. Both awards express to me a genuine support and recognition that the AAVSO values the work of amateurs in variable star astronomy. Both awards are proudly displayed on the wall of my study.

I have nothing but immense appreciation and gratitude for the work of the American Association of Variable Star Observers, their director, staff, office holders and members. I immensely value my membership as well as the AAVSO's professional courtesy, counsel, support and continued friendship.”

Thomas Bretl

I first became interested in Astronomy in 1957, partly because of Sputnik and partly because my best friend's father had always had an unfulfilled interest in it. My first useful telescope was a 4.25" Palomar Jr. Newtonian reflector from Edmund Scientific, and a very nice man from the Milwaukee Astronomical Society helped adjust the scope (we lived in Pewaukee, WI). Later that same man agreed to be a mentor for a club we formed. More than 20 kids, all about 12 years old, joined, and we met around a picnic table in our kitchen (a tight squeeze). My best friend and I often called each other on the phone and asked, "do you want to go astronomy tonight?" To us astronomy was more of an activity than a subject area.

I don't remember how I first learned about the AAVSO, but I started making visual observations near the end of 1974, and joined the organization in 1975. In 1977 I became especially interested in observing cataclysmic variables (with a homemade 12" reflector), and fondly remember phone calls to Janet Mattei to report outbursts of SS Cyg. I think my first AAVSO meeting was in Iowa sometime in the late 70's or early 80's, but I have been unable to find any record of it. I think I took my Zenith Heathkit computer with me and showed how I used it to keep track of my observations. I have attended quite a few meetings since then, and especially enjoyed those that took me and my wife to interesting parts of the world (like Hawaii, Big Bear CA, and Calgary). It was in Hawaii that I met some of the folks who produced the charts, and after retiring in 2008 I became an active member of the Sequence Team.

Scott Donnell

I first became interested in astronomy while in the 2nd grade. A substitute teacher asked the class if stars were round like the sun or had points. She said she would take our answers the following day. That evening I looked out the 2nd story window of our house (it was February and below zero outside) and saw a few bright stars with distinct points (because the screens were still on the windows and the fine screen mesh created diffraction spikes). Being 7 years old I was unaware of diffraction and only knew what I observed - stars with points. The following day when the teacher asked the question I was the first to enthusiastically raise my hand and proudly report my findings. The rest of the class laughed hysterically at my ignorance and the teacher politely but condescendingly corrected me by saying that I was wrong - that stars are round like the sun. Yet I knew what I saw and I was driven starting then to learn more about the stars.

Without any support from my parents and no money for a telescope, I made do with making homemade star charts while sitting at a table outside at night and reading books from the library. In high school I joined a local astronomy club headed by Stephen Walther - soon to create the magazine "Astronomy". While in high school I built my first telescope - a 6 inch F/8 that I still have to this day.

I continued my education to obtain a BS in physics and mathematics and an MS in astrophysics. But that was as far as I would take it in academia and instead made a career in space systems engineering. Having bought property in a rural area of Colorado I build an observatory and with it a desire to have my observing count for something. That's when I discovered the AAVSO in the early 1990's. I started with visual estimates of long period variables and submitted my observations into the AAVSO database. In 2004 I added a 12 inch SCT and a CCD camera and started making CCD observations of LPVs.

Since then I've worked to improve the quality of my observations, to include carefully determining transformation coefficients and generating quality flat fields. I've maintained membership in the AAVSO over the years as I feel it has so much to offer and the organization is constantly working to improve its offering to its members. Most recently I added a spectrometer to my equipment and have begun exploring all that spectroscopy has to offer. I should mention that the spectroscope was procured from AAVSO member Paul Hemphill, whom I met at the AAVSO annual meeting in Nashville a few years back, Since then Paul and I have maintained a friendship and I visit him every year to discuss all things astronomy and AAVSO over whiskey and cigars.

Finally, I believe that astronomy is a community focused effort and, in addition to my AAVSO membership, I've been an active member of the Colorado Springs Astronomical Society - initially as it's Vice President, then President, and currently Treasurer and Trustee. My goal has been to support our members in advancing their knowledge of astronomy and instrumentation while creating an environment that is welcoming and non-intimidating to new members and novices. During my tenure as an officer our organization has grown from 60 members to 200

and our annual Rocky Mountain Stare Stare in southern Colorado has seen significant improvements in programs and attendance. I certainly did not do this alone, but as part of an effective team of leaders and enthusiastic members that work collaboratively toward best outcomes.

For me satisfaction comes not from high praise or acknowledgment, but rather from seeing the positive growth in an organization in which I've contributed my efforts, in contributing my observations that may be of use to the scientific community, and in the relationships I've developed with the talented and dedicated individuals I've had the pleasure to work with.

Alfredo Glez-Herrera

What was my first contact with astronomy?

Well, in 1982, when I was 15 years old, Spanish public television broadcast the Carl Sagan series Cosmos for the first time ... and I was forever fascinated. I always say that, like so many thousands of fans, I am a son of Carl Sagan.

At that time, people were already beginning to talk about the Halley and in 1984 I bought my first telescope. The comet went and I spent my time observing the moon and planets, but in 1987 something extraordinary happened... supernova 1987a. In a pre-internet era, books and magazines were the main source of information and an article appeared in a Spanish popular magazine, in which Albert Jones appeared next to his telescope and I thought: "wow, an amateur discovering things in the sky". In 1988, I saw on public television an episode of the Heather Cooper series "The Stars" titled Stardoom, in which I met two of my astronomical myths, Albert Jones and Robert Evans, since then I knew that variables were what I wanted to dedicate. I decided that I had to know more about that world and in the following years I was buying books that talked about the subject (my favorite is Supernovas by Paul and Lesley Murdin). In 1989 I bought several books on astronomy, among them "Observing Variable Stars" by David H. Levy and "Estrellas Variables" (Variable Stars) a small book written by our past president, Jaime Rubén García, and that same year I became a member of Red Mira (a Spanish association of variable star observers) beginning to send my observations to the AFOEV (I miss Emile Schweitzer, who for years sent me hundreds of variable star charts) and the AAVSO. In 2005 I decided to go one step further and become a member of the AAVSO. I am fortunate to live in Spain, which as you know is one of the best countries in Europe to practice astronomy and I am fortunate to belong to a group like the AAVSO where with modest tools and great enthusiasm, a true contribution to science can be made.

Kevin Gurney

My first astronomical experience was as a young child, seeing craters on the moon through a tiny, hand-held refractor. Much later, as a graduate student in the 1980's, I found time to help make an 8.5inch reflector. I enjoyed a whole season of exploring deep sky wonders through the eyepiece with this home-brew kit, mounted on an 'agricultural-style' Equatorial mount. But then the rest of life intervened...

Fast forward to 2013, when my wife and I bought a dog. It fell to me to take him out in the evening for a last 'run around' in the garden and, as he was doing what dog's do, I found myself looking up. There were stars! Further, I recalled some from my youthful experience with the Newtonian telescope. The old friends beckoned...

I gradually became fascinated again and, as retirement was approaching, I could see the perfect way to keep myself busy. My dear wife indulged the new interest with a wonderful birthday present – a Celestron Nexstar C8. I carried on where I left off as a student with visual observation, but being a technophile, I noted how things had moved on apace since I last observed. A small video-cam was my entry into imaging, followed by a CCD camera, and proper equatorial mount. Camping holidays, away from the city lights where I live, always had to be accompanied by a van full of astro-gear!

I then became aware that spectroscopy was accessible to amateurs and I couldn't resist the challenge. I started with a simple Staranalyser but quickly progressed to proper slit spectrographs. I now do mainly spectroscopy and some photometry from my home observatory. I am continually amazed by our ability to see stellar dynamics going on in variable stars light years away, from the comfort of my own backyard using a small telescope.

Franz-Josef (Josch) Hambsch

I am a retired nuclear physicist of German origin but living since 1984 in Belgium. My astronomical interests started with a book of the constellations from the famous Kosmos Verlag in Germany when I was around 10 years old or so. It took however until the age of 18 when I bought my first telescope an 11.5 cm (4.5 inch) f/8 Newtonian on a simple equatorial mount. I lived a few years in Frankfurt/Main and used it from the attic window to observe the moon as not much more was visible from the city even several decades ago. When we moved to Darmstadt I bought a 2nd hand C8 around 1980 and used it visually from the balcony of our apartment.

Then we moved to Belgium for my work and the telescope moved with me, though during several years my astronomical activity was on a very low level. Around 2000 when I bought a decent mount and build a roll-off-roof observatory, astronomical activities changed drastically. By then CCD's had entered the amateur world already for some years and I also decided to buy an SBIG ST8 CCD. The first years I was interested in getting pretty pictures. I joined an organization in Germany (International Amateur Observatory, <https://www.ias-observatory.org/index.php/en/>) which has built in the meantime several observatories in Namibia on Farm Hakos. I went several times between 2001 and 2012 to Namibia to enjoy the incredible weather and darkness over there and of course the Southern Sky. One of the images taken got Astronomy Picture of the day in 2006 (<https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/ap060915.html>).

By then already a change in interest had taken place. In 2003 a Gamma Ray Burst (GRB030329) was announced and I could follow it from my Belgian observatory over several days. As a scientist I got excited by this event and started to observe besides the deep sky also variable stars. The latter took over with time and by now I am only doing variable star observations and follow up. During the past 15 years I took first partnership with two American fellow amateurs in a telescope rental in New Mexico close to New Mexico skies. Unfortunately weather conditions though better than in Belgium where not too good due to the so called "monsoon period" in Summer time and lots of snow in winter time as well as lots of wind during many clear nights.

Since 2011 I have found the ultimate place to put a private observatory, namely the Atacama Desert in Chile. I am in the tenth year of remote observations from this place. It averages to about 320 clear nights, has perfect internet connection and a very knowledgeable landlord helping promptly in case of problems whatever kind. If I remember well I am a member of the AAVSO since around 2009 or so. I have participated in several AAVSO meetings since then. I have also submitted over 3.5 million observations to the AAVSO database, which is due to the superb remote site in Chile. My activity in follow up of variable stars has culminated in nearly 100 publications in professional astronomical journals as co-author, one of which was in Nature (2016) and Science Advances (2020) and counting.

Simon Jenner

I first started in Astronomy back in the 1970,s when my mum brought me for my seventh birthday two books on star gazing which where a book called sign post to the stars and the phillips guide to the stars.

I used these books to learn the constellations. My whole attitude to astronomy was based on the advice given by the great, late Sir Patrick Moore who said find a area of Astronomy you are intrested in and carry out observation which are useful to the scientific community and send them in by a Amateur society for Astronomy like the Junior Astronomical Society which was set up for beginners here in the UK. I joined the JAS and joined the variable star section and meteor sections because observation can be done by the naked eye.

As I grow older and left home I joined the BAA and the AAVSO. I attended a lot of meetings of the BAA with members of my local astronomy group. My intrest in active observing started to decline when it seemed to me nobody was intrested in any sort of visual observing as being useful and I was never intrested in imaging. As I got older I could not face going out in the cold and dark anymore.

Light pollution seems to be getting worse from my site.I mainly observe the sun these days and send the results into the BAA and the AAVSO. It seems to me amateur astronomy is booming these days but the younger generation do not want to join groups like the BAA or AAVSO. Its full of middle age white man. People are mainly intrested in astro imaging and use social media.

Ken Medway

I became interested in Astronomy after watching live broadcast on BBCTV of the total solar eclipse of 1961 February 15 relayed from 3 different sites along the track of totality across central Europe.

Later my Dad who was working aboard the cruise liner Caronia bought me a 60mm refractor in Yokohama during the 1965/66 world cruise. On 1966 Jun 28 I started my daily solar observations which continues to this day.

I joined the local astronomy Club December 1966 and the British Astronomical Association in November, 1967 whilst still at College.

I was inspired to start observing variable stars after reading Leslie Peltier's autobiography 'Starlight Nights' which led me joining the AAVSO in 1973.

Over the years my observing programme has expanded. From 1976 to 2011 observations were made with my 4 inch f/15 Unitron refractor housed in a sliding roof observatory in my back garden. From 2011 when I moved to my present address observations have continued using a 20cm.f/6 Orion from the back lawn of our apartment block 10 minutes from the centre of Southampton.

Observing in the open means I can often show interested members of the public celestial objects which gives me great personal satisfaction.

Thanks for this opportunity to give a short biography of my astronomical career.

Andrew Pearce

I've been an amateur since 1980. As a teenager, I bought a home made 6" reflector for \$80 and spent about a year looking at everything in the sky I could. I live in Perth, Western Australia and in those days the skies were relatively dark even for a larger city like Perth.

However after 12 months, I wanted more! We had some active local club members who introduced me to visual observations of comets and variable stars. I was hooked! In the early days, I had some fantastic support from Frank Bateson at VSS RASNZ. My first observation was of R Cen back in 1982. However 3 events really stand out for me in my formative VSOing days of the 1980's:

1. Catching VY Aqr on the rise one evening and watching it brighten by 2 magnitudes in a few hours
2. SN 1987A
3. Discovering WX Cet in outburst in 1989, the first recorded since discovery in 1963

These three events really cemented my interest and passion for variable stars. I've had quite a few breaks in VSOing over the years. Living overseas, getting married, having kids. However those early experiences have never left me. When I started having some spare time again back in 2012, that bug came back in a big way. To date, I've made over 125,000 visual and CCD observations and am really enjoying it.

John Percy

My path to the AAVSO was probably like that of many professional astronomer members: I chose to do variable star astronomy for my doctoral research. I evolved from doing theory and observation of small-amplitude Beta Cephei and Delta Scuti stars, to doing observational studies of larger-amplitude variables such as Miras. That led naturally to the AAVSO. My first JAAVSO paper was in 1978; I was still doing small-amplitude variables then, but I recognized the role that skilled amateur photometrists could play. I was also very involved in supervising undergraduate research, and AAVSO data and software is ideal for that. We are still using it.

But there were other paths. As an undergraduate in 1961, I joined the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada (RASC) as a student member, and soon became active as a councillor and eventually as national president. I became aware of amateur astronomers, and the important work that they do in both outreach and research, and the fun they have in doing it voluntarily. My graduate teachers (and subsequently colleagues) were also great supporters of amateur astronomy through the RASC

There were close connections between AAVSO and RASC. AAVSO published its bi-monthly Variable Star Notes in the Journal of the RASC, and is still a major contributor to our annual Observers Handbook. My eminent colleague Helen Sawyer Hogg had been President of the AAVSO, as had other RASC members (particularly a group in Montreal). There were joint AAVSO-RASC meetings, including one in Winnipeg in 1974, where I first met Janet Mattei. Times were right for me to become more active in the AAVSO. The 1980s brought the PEP revolution in amateur astronomy and, as a photometrist, I spearheaded the AAVSO PEP program, along with Janet. We were both interested and active in education; that led to another exciting joint project -- Hands-On Astrophysics. I had become involved in editing conference proceedings (including a small-telescopes conference in Toronto in 1985 co-sponsored by AAVSO); that led to co-editing the proceedings of the first AAVSO European Meeting, and the 1999 "Partners in Astronomy" AAVSO-ASP-RASC conference in Toronto and, I suppose, to my most recent project -- editing JAAVSO for ten years.

One gets hooked on the AAVSO. One reason, of course, is the cause: the amazing contributions that skilled amateurs can make to variable star research. Another reason is the people -- too numerous to name here, but obviously the people at HQ, the officers and council members, the standout observers, the kindred-spirit professional astronomers, and the leaders of our partner organizations abroad.

Michael Poxon

I know exactly what got me started with astronomy (and thence to variables). I was six or seven, and in the country with my parents waiting for a bus to go home. It was a clear night, and I looked up to see the Plough (big dipper to you guys). It was then that I had what I believe is called a 'religious experience'. I went out into the whole universe, and it came into me. When something like that happens to you, you have no choice! So, for me, it was always the starry sky - emphasis on the 'star' bit. From then, variable stars were always the most interesting part of all that. Ever since then, I have been in love with the stars.

Suryansh Saxena

When I was a kid, I enjoyed learning about stars and different cosmological effects. Actually I didn't know much about it but I was just attracted by the fantastic and colorful images of nebulae and galaxies in my books. The image took me to some other world and I thought that someone must be visiting frequently to fill up the colours, these were just childish thoughts that brought me into the world of astronomy. I was now on a mission to search for how and who filled up the colours in these big monsters. After studying in detail I came to know across the true answer for my wrong interpretation, the life cycle of a star, supernova and a term called "Variable Star".

Later I got my first telescope form which I observed several stars, constellations, nebula and planets. They were really amazing to see as what I was seeing in images in books and internet for so long came into reality in front of my eyes, moving at a very high relative speed and difficult to catch in my scope with an altazimuth manual tracking mount. Learnt a lot about using a telescope and watching difficult things with an ease by just pointing and aligning towards the sky. As above stated when I heard about variable stars for the first time, I was not very much interested in it then honestly because I was a just a newcomer in this field, but on studying in detail and deeply I found nothing more interesting than this. It was the one term to explain the formations of many.

Then I connected and started conversating to several space experts and to name one or two are Dr Hakeem Oluseyi, Astrophysicists at NASA, whom most of us have watched on discovery and Dr Stella Kafka director, AAVSO who guided me and solved my personal doubts during my initial days at AAVSO. After joining AAVSO I connected to several people of my interest and passion and made several new friends those were doing the same what I was. At AAVSO I plotted several light curves and one of my favorite star among many I loved to look and observe at was the red giant Betelgeuse. Even I studied about dopplers shift spectroscopy and photometry. Then I had my first AAVSO annual meet which was the 109th annual meet and was conducted online. I had a lot of learning about different topics and got a chance to interact with different experts during this meet. Thankyou AAVSO for making my knowledge deep and interesting. Will keep posting my observations on AAVSO.

Happy Transit!!

Rod Stubbings

G'day! I'm Rod Stubbings and for the past 28 years I have been dedicating my time, resources and sleep to the field of variable stars. In southern Victoria at the foothills of the Strzelecki Ranges.



Tetoora Road Observatory (D03-35), is a registered Australian observatory for optical research on variable stars.

My interest in astronomy started in 1986 when I came across an advertisement in the magazine Reader's Digest for a 65mm Tasco telescope that would allow me to view Saturn's rings and Jupiter's belts. I caved to consumerism and skilled marketing and bought said scope, however I quickly realised that I had no clue where to look and where to point the damn thing. I figured I would need to start at the basics, so I bought the book 'Astronomy without a Telescope', which provided in layman's terms how to navigate the night sky. The general interest in astronomy continued for a few years spending countless hours learning the night sky from charts and getting my bearings in the astronomical world.

I was introduced to the field of variable stars at a meeting I attended at the Latrobe Valley Astronomical Society by a fellow colleague. Since I was already spending a considerable amount of time observing the night sky it seemed like a great opportunity to use my time and resources to contribute to science. And so, equipped with a beginner's book on "The Observations of Variable Stars" from the Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand (RASNZ), I taught myself how to visually observe, record, monitor and measure variable stars.

I made my first observation on the Mira star R Cen in May 1993 after countless hours of star hopping and locating variable star fields. Within the first month, I recorded 10 observations and became a member of the RASNZ. I progressed up through the stages of observing from the naked eye, binoculars, 60mm, 150mm, 250mm, 320mm, 400mm and currently a 550mm custom made reflecting telescope. The transition from each instrument was always a new learning curve with more stars and deeper fields to get accustomed to. My attention eventually

shifted to cataclysmic variables, particularly the U Gem type, as I enjoyed the unpredictability and ever changing nature of this category of stars. When I first started observing it looked very different to how we operate these days. All contact was made by post or phone without the convenience of emails. Professional astronomers needed close monitoring from amateur astronomers so they could undertake satellite observations when these U Gem stars went into an outburst. This program set up by professional astronomers was often referred to as 'targets of opportunity' (TOO). When an outburst was detected it needed to be phoned in to the RASNZ director, Dr Frank Bateson, and he would then alert the relevant professionals. I remember the first time I called in a TOO to Frank, it was the SU UMa eclipsing type dwarf nova OY Carinae and I detected an outburst at 2.00am. I questioned whether I should ring at this time of night or whether he would even be awake. In the end, I decided to make the call which was well received and enabled the satellite observations to take place. Over the years the way we observe, monitor, record and alert relevant authorities has evolved with technological advances and continues to change the way we view the night sky.

As the internet picked up, I came across the Variable Star Network (VSNET) a global professional-amateur network of researchers in variable stars and related objects alert mailing lists, which reported outbursts of stars. While reading the VSNET alerts, I realised that there were numerous observations and outbursts that I had submitted to the RASNZ that were not reported on the alert lists. In early 1997 I decided to send out every outburst detection to VSNET, which soon turned out to be quite a few and more of a second job rather than just a hobby. A few months later I received an email from Frank Bateson, 'I returned at the end of last week from the meeting in Switzerland. You will be pleased to know that your alert notices are being well- regarded worldwide. Keep up the good work.' So I was quite happy to keep sending every outburst detection to VSNET. I chose to concentrate on the cataclysmic variables which were not as commonly studied, and searched through all the catalogues and added the unstudied and fainter dwarf novae to my list. This meant that I was monitoring a lot of stars that were having outbursts at magnitude 15.0 to

15.6. With constant monitoring, I was able to record their maximum brightness, frequency, duration and follow the rise and fall of outbursts; all this information was previously unknown. At this point, I was now averaging over 1400 observations a month and detecting between 30 – 50 dwarf novae outbursts each month.

My involvement with the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO) began in July 1997. I received an email from the Director Dr Janet Mattei (1943 - 2004) "If you would be interested in sending your observations directly to the AAVSO, in addition to the other networks to which you send them, we would very much like to include your observations in the AAVSO News Flashes". This was a further encouragement to continue observing and contributing to the field of science.

June 8, 2002, my 9th year of observing, I recorded 100,000 visual observations, something that was never thought about in 1993. I believe I was the first Australian observer to reach this total.

On July 19th, 2002, I was checking my e-mail and noticed a message from the Director of

the AAVSO Dr Janet Mattei, titled, 'Invitation'. It was an invitation to attend the Pan-Pacific, 91st Spring Meeting of the AAVSO, held at Waikoloa Beach, Hawaii, to receive a Director's Award....." for your very significant contributions to variable star astronomy, particularly to special observing programs." Having been in contact with several observers via e-mail only, the meeting provided great satisfaction with finally seeing the faces of so many talented observers and amateur astronomers. I walked up to introduce myself to Janet Mattei (after all, no one knew this guy from Australia) and was greeted with a warm hug! Finally meeting the staff members was also rewarding for both parties, as I had been only known as 'SRX' (observer code) at headquarters. Being my very first AAVSO meeting, listening to talks and enjoying the social activities was such an experience I regard myself as very fortunate to have been a part of it.

Over the years I have been honoured to receive many requests from Astronomers around the world for notifications on specific stars that went into Outburst to assist their research programs. It is surreal to think that my observations have directly triggered satellite observations with the EUVE and XTE satellites, European X-ray satellite BeppoSAX, Rossi X-ray Timing Explorer (RXTE) satellite, Hubble Space Telescope, Chandra satellite, Fuse satellite, XMM-Newton, Swift Satellite, Australian Telescope Compact Array, the MeerKAT Telescope in South Africa, and the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT). For me, it's the collaborations that make variable star observing so rewarding. It's the networking and meeting other professionals, receiving requests, discussing observing programs, seeing your work triggering satellite observations and publications that keeps me motivated.

In 2015, I decided to upgrade to a larger telescope to further enhance my visual observing. I acquired a 22" f/3.8 Dobsonian telescope and custom-designed to fit permanently into a 3.8-meter traditional domed observatory. I decided on these specifications in order to study my growing list of dwarf novae stars at fainter levels and in a lot of cases at their minimum. Although the telescope is fitted with ServoCat, Nexus with built in GPS and WiFi; this system is not used to find variable star fields. The locations and magnitudes of countless guide stars, along with hundreds of variable stars and their associated reference stars, are all found by memory. Since my upgrade, I am now getting to know these stars and their behaviour at these levels and obtaining more positive estimates. Although I have had the opportunity to switch to computerised observations, I have decided to stick with traditional forms of observing. I still see the need for visual observations and personally find my methods to be more rewarding and observing under the night sky in real time is rather cathartic. After 27 years, one may think that novelty may wear off with the late nights, sleep deprivation and reheating dinners, however I am just as motivated as always. For me, astronomy to me has been more of a way of life than a hobby.

Ray Tomlin

I was raised on a farm in the dark countryside and, like many of us that lived when it was still dark outside at night, was naturally drawn to the night sky.

I sent in my first visual OBS more than 55 years ago. It was tersely rejected because it was not written out exactly in the format that Janet wanted. So I began microscopy and ham radio, thinking that AAVSO must be beyond my abilities.

Next opportunity was 1983 when three of us wired a SYM single-board-computer to an PMT (1P21) on a university 16" Celestron. That got presented at an undergrad physics conference where I suggested that a repetitive dip in our light curve could be a planet. Ten years later, I bought a used CCD camera and did a lot of poor photometry, but learned the trade from the AIP4WIN text. In the last ten years, I could afford better equipment, and thanks to Arne's excellent CCD videos, solidified my observing techniques.

Also reduced scatter by a factor of two by almost always averaging 10 images for each of the last 100,000 observations.

Still learning. Seeing 6 mmag exoplanets has really opened my eyes to even better observing techniques.

Professionally, I was an engineering physicist at FermiLab where I specialized in accelerators, instrumentation, lasers, operations, and experimental cosmology.

End of story. Probably runs about the same as most of the grey-beards in AAVSO.

Frank Vohla

In 1978 I had started to occupy myself with astronomy. My cousin lived in a village at that time and there was a wonderful, dark starry sky. We built first telescopes with eyeglasses as objectives. We were fascinated by lunar craters that we could see with these cheap telescopes. Later came a Fraunhofer 50/540mm, with which already good observations could be made. I was looking for objects that could be observed a long time without getting bored. Thereby I came to the variable stars, which offered the possibility to contribute to scientific research with simple instruments.

Nevertheless, I remained interested in general astronomy and in the following decades participated in local astronomy groups in Altenburg (Thuringia), which conducted public observations, lectures, events at schools and other popular educational events.

In October 1980, during an astronomical youth meeting in Remschütz (Thuringia), I got contact with the AKV, the Observers Group of Variable Stars in the GDR, and became a member a little later. At first I observed Cepheids, but quickly found Mirastars and Semiregulars more interesting. I attended a seminar at the observatory Hartha (Saxony), the headquarter of the AKV, leaded by Helmut Busch in 1982 to improve my knowledge. In this time I buildt a 90mm Newton with which I could observe more objects. Mirastars and Semiregulars are traditionally not much observed in Germany, probably due to the humid climate. This was compensated by contacts to the AFOEV in France. The observations were also published in the bulletin of the AFOEV.

In the 80s I occasionally spent my holydays at the Sonneberg observatory to estimate stars on photo plates of the great archive. Two youth workshops at the Czech observatory Ždanice rounded off the 80s. Mentors were among others Jindrich Šilhan und Miloslav Zejda.

After the entry of the GDR to the FRG, BAV and AKV united in 1992. Since then I am a member of the BAV. In this time I also got a membership of the AAVSO sponsored by L. Snyder.

In May 1997, I attended the spring meeting of the AAVSO in Sion, Switzerland. It was a wonderful experience to participate in this multi-day meeting with like-minded people from many countries. There I also met Janet Matthey first time. Great events thereafter were internationally oriented meetings, such as 2002 with AFOEV in Bourbon Lancy (F), 2008 with BBA/VSS in Cambridge (UK), and 2016 with BAV in Hamburg (Ger).

In the years that followed, I stuck with visual observing because it best suited my lifestyle. I don't have a fixed observatory and the dobson for visual observation is quickly set up. In this point of view, the more or less lucky choice to observe slow variables with large amplitudes was a stroke of fortune. Aperture became cheaper over time.

This made it possible to observe more stars up to the minimum or close to it. So I was able to send my 100,000th observation to the AAVSO in 2015 and my 150,000th in 2020.