

# Star Guide: Preserving regional astronomical legacy

By Tony Berendsen

Passion is something we all have in varying degrees. Every once in a while we learn about someone with extraordinary passion who achieves something really amazing. Over the last couple weeks I've become reacquainted with a fellow ASN (Astronomical Society of Nevada) member Jay Lawson who has set the passion bar really high by completing an awesome project of great personal interest, and at the same time offering a gift to our community through the restoration of a part of Nevada's astronomical history.

The story begins back in the 1930s when UNR Professor Bruce Blair founded the ASN.

Lawson recounts, "After Professor Blair passed away in 1949, his widow Rebecca and Dr. Everett Harris worked with ASN member and ATM (Amateur Telescope Maker) Carl Wells to build a telescope for an observatory on the UNR campus. Built from 1951 to 1953, the telescope and observatory was located at the current location of Lombardi recreation center at UNR. The telescope was a 6-inch, f/15 refractor with a Carl Zeiss objective. The telescope mount was made by Haines Scientific Instruments in New Jersey."



Jay Lawson in the Blair Observatory with the Carl Wells telescope in Sparks. Photo/Ryan Berendsen

The observatory, located on the UNR campus, was open until 1967. Then it was demolished as part of UNR expansion. The observatory telescope, built by Carl Wells, was removed and stored in the basement of the physics building and later the Fleischmann Planetarium, until it found its way to Lawson's house where he and friend Adam Kremers elected Lawson to put the observatory back together in his backyard.

Appropriately, Lawson is the current historian for the ASN.

I asked him why restore the Wells refractor?

"As the current historian for the ASN, I felt an obligation to preserve the memory and contributions of past ASN members like Professor Blair, Carl Wells, T.V. Frazier, Jessie Huntsman, Pete Gavazzi and others. Restoring the Wells refractor is part of that obligation. I built an h-alpha solar scope which is mounted to the Wells telescope and will be dedicating it to T.V. Frazier." Frazier taught at UNR physics and had used the observatory.

"The telescope and observatory were part of many people's lives in the '50s and '60s as interest in the space program and science was on the upswing. The fact that Professor Blair was nationally known in astronomy was no small feat. There is a tremendous amount of history associated with Blair, Wells, and this observatory," Lawson said.

Lawson attributes his interest in astronomy to seeing the moon when he was young.

"I had first noticed the moon in the evening sky in 1962 when I was 4 and living less than a mile from the Blair Observatory. In about 1965, my father worked at Rocketdyne in north Spanish Springs testing rocket engines for the Gemini and Apollo missions, so there was a lot of interest in space exploration. One night I used a riflescope to look at Venus in the evening sky and saw that it was a crescent like the moon. I watched it for many nights and that year my parents bought me my first 60mm telescope from Sears. When I was 11 I wanted a larger telescope, so I mowed lawns all summer then sold my bike to afford to buy my next telescope, a 90mm one from Sears. When I got my first real job out of college, I bought a 6-inch Meade reflector, and in 1986 bought my 16-inch in anticipation of Halley's comet. I could see it months before most people."

The observatory is mostly used privately, but is always available to members of the ASN with prior notification. Several times a year it is open to the public for special events like eclipses and transits. Notification of these public events are made on the Northern Nevada Astronomy Group **Facebook page**.

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