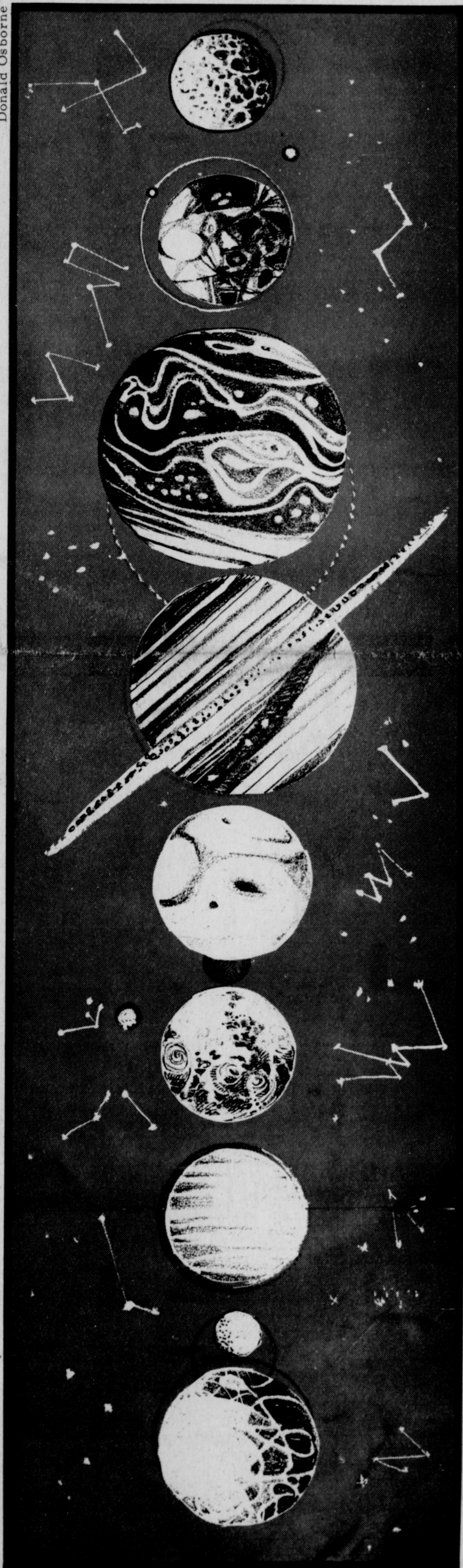




In a dark time the eye begins to see.

- Theodore Roethke

Donald Osborne



The Grand Alignment

In periods when most of the earth's inhabitants are frightened of almost everything, signs are looked for in the lights strewn across the night skies. As in the long ago past when human beings were tormented with their ignorance of the strange planet that was their home, contemporary, more civilized men and women see disasters written large by comets, or, next week, the end of the world because all the planets of the solar system are on one side of its sun. A 'Grand Alignment' that occurs every five hundred years, this time on All Father Wodin's Day, March 10. The result of all this gravitational pull upon this globe by its peers is an array of sweeping predictions of terrible occurrences: earthquakes, volcanos, storms and floods, wars of course, and generally bad luck.

Astronomers and other revisionaries are not so apprehensive. "As far as we know there's never been such a 'Grand Alignment' and probably never will be," is the opinion of LeRoy Doggett of the U. S. Naval Observatory. He told the National Geographic News Service that studies of planetary motion over millions of years have not uncovered a time when the planets would ever be in a straight line or even close to it. What will happen is "An unusual celestial phenomenon with no cosmic consequences or significance." On March 10 the four brightest planets — Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn — will be a full fifty degrees of arc away from the line joining the Earth to the Sun. If all nine planets are included they would be spread out over nearly one hundred degrees of arc, which is the closest they are ever likely to get. Bruce Spainhower of the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry compared the alignment to the odometer of an automobile reading a set of two's: "Of slight interest, but of no significance upon the environment of the Earth." Calculating the forces of gravity upon Earth by the great planet lineup is "nothing anyone would waste computer time on," he said.

A book published in 1974 has been responsible for the current fears of the Grand Alignment. In "The Jupiter Effect," authors John Gribben and Stephen Plagemann argued that the gravitational influence would trigger devastating earthquakes all over the globe. Though the planets are too far away from Earth to have any appreciable gravitational effect — less than one ten-thousandth the forces from the Sun and Moon — Gribben and Plagemann proposed that the planets might influence sunspots and these in turn could influence the rotation of the Earth and cause earthquakes. Six years later Gribben, after making his fortune from such predictions of worldly doom, recanted in a 1980 issue of Omni magazine: "There is no reason to expect a seismic experience," Gribben said. "We got our math wrong. We frightened a lot of people and concerned a lot of scientists."

Gribben's act of contrition has not impressed many scientists, in particular those who, like Spainhower of OMSI, continue to respond to public fears raised by "The Jupiter Effect." "The alignment has become a wide topic of discussion," Spainhower said and gave an average of two to three telephone calls to OMSI per day for the past three years — and "The past couple of weeks have been madness." Spainhower said that the OMSI staff has countered with a planned spoof; a "The World's Not Ending March 10" party which will be held at the museum with special shows at the planetarium featuring old science fiction movies such as "When Worlds Collide," and including a candlelight vigil at the seismograph. "If the world does end," Spainhower said, "everbody gets their money back."

— Michael Paul McCusker



INSIDE

WE DEVOTE MOST OF THIS ISSUE TO OBSERVANCE OF WOMEN'S HISTORY WEEK, MARCH 7 - 13, AND TO INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, MARCH 8.