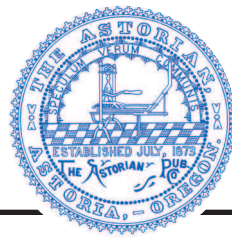


OPINION



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SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



James Young

Rare shooting of a bright fireball during the Leonid meteor shower, Nov. 17, 1966.



James Young

A bright meteor captured during the Perseid Meteor Shower on Aug. 13, 2010.

The art of discovery

James Whitney Young was born in Portland in 1941. He is an American astronomer who worked in the field of asteroid research. He retired in 2009 after nearly 47 years with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at their Table Mountain Facility near Wrightwood, California.

With the advent of powerful lasers, Young became involved with several projects that aimed them successfully, first at the Surveyor VII spacecraft on the moon in 1968, later as two laser-ranging programs developed at JPL in the 1990s found their marks on low and high earth-orbiting satellites, as well as the Galileo spacecraft some 6 million kilometers away. As astronomy team leader, he maintained the optical performance of the telescopes and cameras. His main focus before retirement was the discovery, recovery and confirmation of newly discovered asteroids and comets. He is credited with more than 250 asteroid discoveries, including two near-earth asteroids.

Q: How long have you been coming to Seaside?

Young: My grandfather was an attorney in Portland and he liked to vacation on the beach. He built a house here on South Prom in 1943. I've been here almost every year. My wife Karen and I now have a house on Ninth Street. She's also interested in astronomy.

Q: How did you get interested in the field?

Young: Bob and Hazel Sealy lived on Ocean Vista Drive. My brother and I met them in 1958. He (Sealy) had a telescope. Although I was already into astronomy, he was a key ingredient in my establishing my astronomy career. We started the Seaside Amateur Astronomers group.

Q: Is the North Coast a good place for astronomy?

Young: No, it's a horrible place. It's the moisture and clouds. You need clear skies without moisture. Humidity is terrible. You will find that observatories around the world are located in high elevations, away from light pollution and at dry facilities. We did astronomy here when we had the chance because it was fun!

Q: Did you study science in college?

Young: I went to school, but I didn't finish. My dad had gotten me a job at the bank, which I wasn't interested in, but it was a job. Then along came the Seattle World's Fair in 1962. I got a job offer as the lead guide at the Seattle World's Fair NASA Exhibit and took the job offer at 21.

Q: That was huge!

Young: I quit the bank job and my dad was pretty mad with me. He said, "You know, in six months when the fair is over, you're through."

I became the lead guide for the astronomy exhibit because of my astron-

DISCOVERING ASTEROIDS

Young is credited with more than 250 asteroid discoveries, including two near-earth asteroids.

omy background. We had 32 guides and I taught them astronomy. Ten million people went through that exhibit in six months. We had NASA, astronauts, a cosmonaut from Russia came through. John Glenn was there. It was a big thing — it was so inspiring to be able to do that and continue to learn.

Q: How did you get the job with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena?

Young: One of the gentlemen who came through the exhibit was (senior engineer) Tom Bickler from JPL, who said: "By the way, we're building an observatory. Why don't you apply for a job?"

Q: You were only in your 20s. What distinguished you from other candidates?

Young: They flew me down for an interview. I was picked up and taken to the observatory on a VIP tour: the laboratory director, his wife and quite a few of the mucky mucks — the highfalutin people.

I was green behind the ears but I knew astronomy.

When it got dark that evening, they turned the telescope on, we started viewing, and it broke. Nobody knew what to do. I said, "Have you got a toolbox?"

In 30 minutes I had the telescope running again. I was hired without an interview.

Q: What was your job?

Young: I was hired as a darkroom technician. To be a little technical we did synoptic patrols of Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn by taking spectroscopic plates — photographs — of these planets to investigate their cloud covers in different wavelengths of light.

We observed comets and asteroids. We had star parties. It was an outreach for the community. One thing led to another, and we eventually got a bigger telescope. I started doing real science with an astronomer at JPL and things started rolling.

Q: UFOs — is there any evidence?

Young: It came up with me once, when I was pretty young. I'm not saying yay or nay ... I have no evidence, but when you see something that you can't really account for in normal things, you call it an unidentified flying object.

However, my feeling is little green monsters that are sticky with one eye —

I'm sorry, that doesn't fly with me.

Q: But there was something going on?

Young: I was just standing outside the observatory one night when I saw something go by too fast, too high, too odd-shaped to make any other sense. We never found out what it was.

Q: You are known for identifying asteroids. What's the difference between an asteroid and a planet?

Young: Planets are pretty good size. An asteroid is relatively small. Most of them are found between Mars and Jupiter as they rotate the sun. They are little pieces of material that can be 20, 40 or 80 miles in diameter or smaller. They have permanent orbits. I've discovered a lot of them.

Q: Are they barren objects?

Young: That's right. Rock of some sort, maybe ice, some metals. Mining asteroids might be a feasible thing to do.

Q: Harnessing them? Aren't they moving fast?

Young: So are we. We're going 66,000 mph around the sun. We've already had several spacecraft go to asteroids. They've gone to comets.

Q: Could an asteroid come into our atmosphere?

Young: It could, if it came close to earth. There are about 1,600 near-earth asteroids that have a potential to get pretty close to the earth.

Q: Are we at risk?

Young: It would take a fairly big asteroid to destroy the earth. We think the earth was hit by an asteroid 65 million years ago, which demised the dinosaurs. That's a pretty reasonable theory. It is a theory, not a fact.

Back in 2010 an extremely small asteroid hit the earth and we found evidence of that. But something a mile in diameter hitting the earth would create serious problems.

Q: Are people concerned about that?

Young: Some are. I'm not.

Q: Why not?

Young: You're going to get hit by lightning 1,000 times before an asteroid is going to hit the earth. You don't need to worry about it. It's a waste of time. When you drive out of this driveway,

you're going to get hit by a car before you are hit by an asteroid.

Q: When did you get serious about landscape photography?

Young: I got my start back in about 1980. I ran into some New York-based photographers down in Cannon Beach. I learned a lot from them in the span of the Christmas holidays — how to shoot sunset photography, the waves. That gave me a boost. I was doing astronomy, then I realized I could really move into this.

Q: Your photos of the lighthouse, Terrible Tilly, off the coast are incredible. How long have you been shooting there?

Young: Close to 40 years. Every time I'm up here, when I hear the waves at night, I know the winds are coming, I know it's the back side. If the road is open I go to Ecola State Park.

Q: Can you get closer?

Young: Hikers can. You can drive to Indian Beach and walk up the trail, which is a mile and a half. You're a quarter-mile closer and looking down. I'm 77 and it's getting a little hard to hike that, and if you're lugging a big lens, a 13-pound lens, tripod. The last time I was up there was two years ago.

Q: Are you a student of Terrible Tilly?

Young: A couple of years ago I took the Ironwood boat out of Tongue Point. We went around the lighthouse four times for the event with people from Oregon Public Broadcasting. I know the owner, Mimi Morrisette. I was allowed to be one of the photographers to help document the event. I've flown over in a helicopter, and later flown in a plane with the door off of it so I could do photography in 2015.

Q: Do you continue to use telescopes here?

Young: I do astronomy here when I can. We looked at a comet when we first got here early in December. Last summer I brought both my trackers so both my wife and I could do astronomy here. We did quite a bit of it this past summer. If we get a clear sky, we go down to south of Tolovana Park where there's a big turnout on the highway. It's not bad.

We set up our trackers there in the middle of the night — and we do good photography.

We normally do our best photography at Big Bend National Park in Texas, because it's further south, really dark, and higher elevation.

If we can add everything — no humidity, no lights, no elevation — then we get our best images.

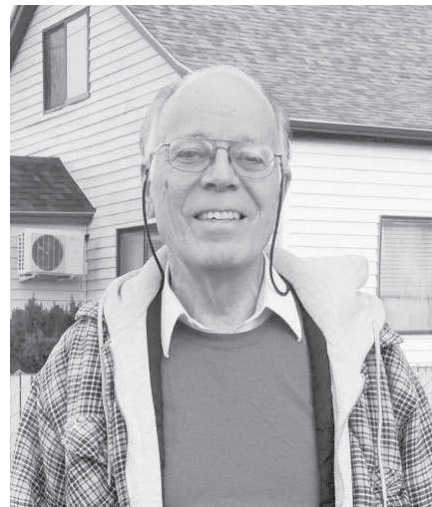
Q: Do you have any secrets to share?

Young: Most of the best pictures aren't planned hours or days in advance. You have to be there at the right time — and guess what: "Click!"

R.J. Marx is editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette, and covers South County for The Daily Astorian.



R.J. MARX



James Young, photographer and longtime Seaside visitor and resident.

R.J. Marx/Seaside Signal