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TEEN-AGERS ARE WATCHING THE MOON

It's science, not romance, that has captured their interest in this age of satellites



By **ALFRED BALK**

ONCE, IF A YOUTH headed outdoors for an evening of moon-watching, it was strictly the soft-lights and sweet-music variety. These days, however, it's possible there'll be no music but a weird beep-beeping; his closest companions will be a sky chart and telescope; even the moon itself will be different—an earth satellite.

There's a growing craze among teen-agers to moon-gaze. Quite possibly just for fun. But also, to add to their own knowledge and to the nation's as satellite-spotters.

You may have had little interest in the sky until recently. Youngsters probably had even less. But suddenly, after the launching of Explorers and Sputniks and the imminent venture of man himself into space, that's all changed. At schools, libraries, planetariums, or at home, youngsters are forming amateur astronomy groups, scavenging telescopes and other equipment, and learning about outer space.

Some 150 teen-agers, for instance, make up one of the largest clubs, the San Fernando Valley Moon-watch Team in Chatsworth, Calif. So active have they become that cowboy crooner Roy Rogers, mayor of Chatsworth, and his wife Dale Evans have dropped in to catch up on all the news of cowhands on Mars.

An all-teen-age group at Millbrook, N.Y., was watching as eagerly as adult scientists throughout the world for the final tumble of Russia's dog-carrying Sputnik II. Three tracking stations made important sightings of the satellite's last moments—including Millbrook's homemade observatory.

It's the same story across the country. You can't go far without encountering a junior astronomy group. Why?

"There has been tremendous publicity about satellites and space," says Leon Campbell, Jr., of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Laboratory. "Tracking a satellite is a challenging, practical objective." So wholeheartedly have youths pitched in that during the International Geophysical Year more than 500 of the 8,000 official moon-watch personnel were teen-agers, Campbell estimates.

It takes little to start a club these days. Top science students and their teachers, leading amateur astronomers, or engineers and scientists from industry provide the know-how for many such groups. About \$50 buys a telescope of acceptable quality. Star maps and guidebooks are available in libraries and at schools, and astronomy magazines report heavenly goings-on.

Civic clubs, business, and industrial firms often help the youths purchase equipment. The San Fernando Valley club,

one of the more fortunate, has some \$6,000 worth of devices financed by 20 sponsors, ranging from Lockheed Aircraft to a Kiwanis Club.

The base of operation may be a school, museum, observatory—or somebody's yard. In Brooklyn, the public library is headquarters for a club. In Chicago, Adler Planetarium is the site of an all-youth moon-watch team, and in New Orleans, it's Holy Cross High School.

In most cases, with some adult help to get them started, clubs are able to make a little ingenuity go a long way. Millbrook's observatory is nothing but a converted silo top mounted on rollers bought at a hardware store. A 12-inch reflecting telescope was made partly from scrap, its counterbalance from ordinary water pipe; it is turned by a small motor that once controlled drafts on a furnace. Actually, an observatory isn't absolutely necessary—only telescopes, and these need not be expensive.

To some, sky-watching may seem of limited value. Eddie Rickenbacker, however, the famed flyer who almost died on a raft in the Pacific after a plane crash, credits his survival, in part, to knowledge of navigating by the stars.

ASTRONOMY CLUBS have proved tremendous antidelinquency forces. Some also have turned lackadaisical students into interested, hard-working ones. They inspire many by the companionship with bright youths who inevitably join these organizations.

"There's much in astronomy of real interest to youngsters if they're allowed to participate in some way," says Albert Shatzel, director of Chicago's Adler Planetarium. "This is the perfect time to become interested in studying the sky and outer space."

Many junior astronomers later do nothing more scientific than filling a fountain pen, but all find the experience helpful. And some go on to brilliant scientific careers. Clyde Tombaugh, who discovered the planet Pluto in 1930, got interested in astronomy as a youth by peering through a homemade telescope mounted on parts from a cream separator and an old auto.

In any case, there's seldom a dull moment among young moon-watchers. One, getting convention-minded, recently asked his mother, "May I go to the Astronomy Prevention?" Another, explaining where he had been, said, "I was out observing."

That's moon-watching, space-age style!

Want to Be a Moon-Watcher?

It's easy to add astronomy to your list of hobbies. If there's an observatory or planetarium nearby, probably an informal hobby group already exists. If not, science teachers, scientists in industry, or even a librarian who has astronomy books can help you get a club started.

Junior astronomical societies exist in a great many cities, and all welcome new members.

Information about their activities is listed by *Sky and Telescope* Magazine, Harvard College Observatory, 60 Garden St., Cambridge 38, Mass.; or The Astronomical League, Science Service Building, Washington 6, D.C.