

2016 SMCAS INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS

Presented by Mike Ryan at the installation of SMCAS officers on July 16, 2016.

On July 3rd, 1960, four high-school boys, as a summer school project in Robert's Rules of Order, formed the San Mateo Astronomical Society in a living room. Among the rules were a motion and majority vote of the members for anyone to go to the bathroom, and five-cent fines for a variety of infractions, such as speaking out of turn.

It was less than three years past the dawn of the Space Age, when you could count the number of orbital satellites on your hands and feet, when the first man had barely stepped into space. NASA was a newly-minted agency, and launch rockets routinely blew up on the launch pad.

It was a time before the Internet, decades before digital communications, personal computers and personal electronic devices created the massive, nearly-instantaneous information society of today, over half-a-century before the appearance of the smartphone.

The push into space was the tip-of-the-spear for John F. Kennedy's New Frontier. The burgeoning growth of space science was becoming standard fare at coffee-table and cocktail-party conversation, with focus on space exploration,

space physics, planetary geology, astrobiology, and the impact of spatial phenomena on the Earth, upon life on Earth, and upon the human condition.

And, as a result, unprecedented numbers of people were looking around for sources of information, for description and explanation of astronomical features and phenomena, for guidance in finding and buying telescopes and complementary equipment, in learning and practicing techniques of observation, and even in reconciling the new knowledge with the structure of their own traditional beliefs.

In a time when you could count on your fingers the number of astronomical professionals in northern California, libraries wanted amateur hobbyists to present the new activity of public 'star parties'. Schools were looking for assembly presenters, and prominent community figures were actively seeking knowledgeable, articulate invitees to help engage their guests at dinners and social events.

Into this dynamic came the new San Mateo Astronomical Society which, from its modest beginnings, rapidly became a knowledge focus in the community. With a small newspaper ad, it quickly grabbed the attention of the executives at the Schlage Lock Company in South San Francisco, and the first president, high-school kid Richard Johnston, handed over the gavel to his successor, Ernie Schlage, the Chairman of Schlage

Lock. He and his company CEO, Hollis DeVines, semi-professionalized the Society, attracting onboard American Can Company foreman Harry Leitner, retired United Airlines pilot, Fred Jacobs, Corporate executives Henry Stephens and Ed Taylor, Marketing executive Floyd Sampson, Watkins-Johnson Electronics manager Roy Henning, county government supervisor Bill Little, and College of San Mateo Astronomy Chairman, Dr. Claude Anderson.

The Society, whose membership rapidly shot up to 94, acquired a stargazing site at a place called ‘Star Hill’ on Skyline Drive, on the grounds of the old Wickett Lumber Company.

We were invited to meet in the San Mateo City Council Chambers, then, soon after, in the planetarium at CSM’s new College Heights campus, where our members had the key to the building, and access to all the facilities, including the projection equipment. When our presentations began to draw 50 or more, we had the use of the large room in Building 18. When we drew over a hundred, we’d use the Music Room, or the Theatre, in CSM’s Building 2. And, as a valuable community resource, we were never charged for their use.

With the move to the College, the Group caught the fascination of a cadre of active CSM students. John Holtzer, Joe Weiland, Jon Bumgarner and Lance Magee became the core of active young men who handled most of the logistics,

setup and teardown, as well as presenting a cordial, helpful intellectual face from the Society to the public.

In June 1962, the Society reserved a couple of tables at the San Mateo County Fair, where I first encountered it. I didn't join up until April 4th of 1963, following a meeting notice in the newspaper, but have been a member ever since.

After I joined, we were invited to set up week-long public displays and presentations at places like the new indoor Hillsdale Shopping Center (with props borrowed from NASA-Ames) , at the San Mateo Public Library, and in the Beresford Park Recreation Center. We performed public sky lectures at CSM, at other local schools, and at the Coyote Point Museum (where I had to shout or pause for the whining roar of landing jetliners), with publicity provided by the hosting organization.

The organization leaders had written an informal set of By-Laws establishing the structure of four officers and five at-large board members, in order to engage some 10% of the membership in support activities. But it wasn't until 1976 that we formally incorporated as the San Mateo COUNTY Astronomical Society, with filed Articles of Incorporation and new formal By-Laws, in order to encourage donations of money, telescopes, telescope-making equipment, magazines, books and atlases, in order to establish a lending library, and a pool of telescopes for members to borrow.

We are meeting today to install our officers and board members for the 66th time in the history of our Society. Truthfully, the task and opportunities have changed drastically from our founding, and the Society's early years. We are no longer an obvious go-to organization for education or information about astronomy and space science. The now-numerous professionals, and the easy abundance of instant information have largely supplanted us in the role of being a community resource. Others don't come to us nearly so much, so we must be much more proactive about carving out a niche and working to maintain our status and access. It isn't easy; much of what we managed to achieve has been lost, and we, like so many organizations of our type, have had to face the dilemma of how to maintain relevance in a world changing more rapidly, and more radically, than any of us in our wildest dreams, could likely have imagined.

But, there are still many among the public who seek a transition environment of knowledgeable amateurs, of semi-professionals, and of a show-and-tell or advisory resource such as we can still provide. Our task and challenge is to ferret out where those opportunities lie, and to prepare ourselves to take advantage of them while providing benefit to others.

We should stay a step ahead of our public with self-study and continuous learning, and hone our presentation skills to make a compelling impression upon our audiences. We should strive to be informed, insightful, accepting, yet open and honest about what exactly is science and how it's properly performed, what is 'known truth' based on demonstrable fact, and what is, alternatively, hypothetical speculation.

We should invoke our own intellects, not live by the logical fallacy of 'appeals to authority', and be neither uncomfortable nor intimidated about questioning assertions and conclusions that happen to be the popular meme at the time, nor should we be hesitant to discuss fact-based alternatives.

Would the new officers and board members please step forward and join me?

These people before you, who volunteer their time, effort and resources for the Society and its membership have proven themselves competent, capable, experienced, devoted and deserving of respect and support. And so, I wish to introduce to you your officers and directors for installation to office this 16th day of July, 2016.

First, our Officers:

Continuing as President: Mr. Marion Weiler

Continuing as Vice-President: Mr. Edmund Pieret

Continuing as Treasurer: Ms. Karen Boyer

Continuing as Secretary: Mr. Currently Vacant

We invite volunteers.

And, finally, your five, oops, make that six, at-large Directors:

Mr. Edward Ching

Mr. Bob Franklin

Dr. Kenneth Lum

Mrs. Mary Ann McKay

Mr. Frank Seminario, and finally, I...

Mike Ryan

I'd like to ask all of those named to face the audience and raise your right hand to promise the following:

We pledge to do our best to promote knowledge of astronomy and space science with technical and historical accuracy and insight. We promise to provide understanding, perspective, mentoring and education, and to encourage and support others in exploring and participating in related activities. We mean to promote the cause of science and scientific method, performed properly and honestly, with full and honest disclosure. We will act to respect and accommodate rational, well-reasoned alternative scientific disclosures, interpretations and conclusions. And in all this, we pledge to serve to the best of our ability, the San Mateo County Astronomical Society, its members, the College of San Mateo, and our community.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you your Board of Officers and Directors for 2016-2017. Thank you.