

CAROLYN J. HURLESS, 1934-1987: AAVSO'S ENTHUSIASTIC AMBASSADOR

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Abstract

Carolyn J. Hurless, a devoted AAVSO member and extraordinary observer for many years, passed away on February 13, 1987. Her accomplishments and special gifts are remembered.

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The most active and leading woman observer of the AAVSO, Carolyn J. Hurless, passed away suddenly on February 13, 1987, after a short illness.

Carolyn was born on November 24, 1934, in Lima, Ohio. She was a member of the AAVSO since 1958, served as Second Vice-President of the Association from 1967 to 1973, and served several times as a Councilor. She became the leading woman observer of the AAVSO, contributing to the AAVSO data files over 79,000 observations of variable stars.

Carolyn first became interested in astronomy at about the age of 13 through her early love of science fiction. Later, by lucky accident, she met astronomy head-on when the President of the Lima Astronomy Club, Herbert Speer, invited her to become a member after he found her name amongst the borrowers' cards of astronomy books at the Lima public library.

She soon decided to make an 8-inch reflector with guidance from a fellow Lima Astronomy Club member. When the fine-grinding of the mirror was finished, Carolyn found that because of her excited efforts she had made a short-focus mirror - much closer to f4 than the standard f8 or f9. Nevertheless, it turned out to be a fine instrument, and she never felt the need to upgrade to something else. Indeed, the short focal length of her 8-inch gave her, as Carolyn herself described it, a "feminine" telescope - one that could be transported with little effort.

Carolyn learned the art of variable star observing from Leslie Peltier, to whom she was introduced in Delphos, Ohio, shortly after joining the Lima Astronomical Society. From then on Leslie's strong influence fired her lifelong interest in astronomy and variable star observing. Carolyn had her first lesson in variable star observing when Leslie showed her SS Cygni. She was at first unimpressed - until, that is, the star began to dim right before her eyes! Carolyn said that, "it was then that I knew I was hooked on variable stars." Carolyn and Leslie observed together regularly at his 12-inch refractor from 1958 until his death in 1981. She observed "inner sanctum" stars weekly with his 12-inch, although she made most of her variable star observations with her 8-inch reflector.

In 1963 Carolyn built her own backyard observatory, "The Starlight Observatory." With her 8-inch set on a tripod mount that Leslie gave her, she began in earnest her long series of variable star observations for the AAVSO. Carolyn Hurless was more than an avid observer - she constantly challenged herself and the limits of her instrument by going after faint stars.

Carolyn was especially interested in helping astronomers with their special observing programs. Whenever there was a request from an astronomer for special observations, she went out of her way to contribute observations so that the astronomer's program might succeed. Also, Carolyn was always full of helpful hints to make observing easier - one of these hints which she regularly practiced herself was to take deep breaths before observing a faint star in order to increase the blood supply to the eyes, thus enhancing visual acuity.

Her boundless enthusiasm for astronomy led Carolyn to many ways of connecting people who were equally enthusiastic. She touched many lives through her informal monthly newsletter **Variable Views**, a publication which made it possible for observers to learn about each other. She started the publication of **Variable Views** at her own expense, with co-editor Curtis Anderson, another of her close astronomical friends and a prolific variable star observer, whom she had met at her first AAVSO meeting in 1959 and who remained a close friend until his untimely death from multiple sclerosis.

Carolyn was an avid correspondent - a letter was never left unanswered. From the first issue of **Variable Views** in 1964, and for 22 consecutive years, Carolyn helped her readership share ideas about astronomy, and increased the feeling of camaraderie among fellow observers around the world. Its pages are filled with the humorous outlook that led Carolyn to become known to her fellow gazers as "the Lima Lurker," due to her practice of sometimes observing variable stars from behind bushes in her attempts to find the best vantage point for certain stars otherwise obscured by trees in her own backyard.

Carolyn invited her **Variable Views** readership to summer gatherings held each year at Leslie Peltier's home and observatory, where many were thus able to meet him and get to know each other. Through these meetings, her **Variable Views** forum, and her local community involvement, Carolyn inspired young people and passed on her love of the stars and her love of observing to many. One example of her ingenuity in communicating ideas may be seen in her idea of constructing a teaching device that she called a "bread board variable." This was made of mounted light bulbs of different brightnesses and intensities, including one "variable" light bulb, in order to demonstrate to novices in a simple way how variable stars actually look in a star field, and to demonstrate the concept of estimating a variable's magnitude. If an audience wanted to know, "what do you really look at with your telescope?" Carolyn said, the bread board variable came out, and "from then on, you've got a captive audience."

Carolyn was an ambassador of good will in amateur astronomy. This extended beyond the USA when she sponsored an amateur astronomer in Czechoslovakia, Jaroslav Kruta, to AAVSO membership. Through regular correspondence, mainly tape-recordings, she taught Jaroslav English, and she introduced several other AAVSO members to him by arranging for them to meet him when they visited Czechoslovakia.

It would be difficult to say which was Carolyn's true vocation, astronomy or music. Through her greatly-enjoyed work as a music teacher, she influenced many young musicians. She had a remarkable talent for connecting her musical ability with her astronomical interest. Carolyn even composed her own musical arrangement for violin and piano of William Herschel's "Mrs. Shafto's Minuet," a part of which was published in **The Herschel Chronicle**, by C. A. Lubbock.

Carolyn Hurless loved the stars, music, and people. Her enthusiasm for astronomy will be missed, but she herself, with those unique qualities that made her a special friend to all who knew her, will be missed most of all.