

Letter to the Editor

The End of an Era

James W. Hanner

18 Alyssum Drive, Amherst, MA 01002; msh_jwh@yahoo.com

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Your readers may be interested in this follow-up to my article on Margaret Harwood, the first—and longest serving—Director of the Maria Mitchell Observatory (Hanner 2015).

At Maria Mitchell Observatory on Nantucket Island, a 45-year era ended on June 1, 1957. The moment of transition was recorded in a letter which came to light in, of all places, Hawaii.

One evening in 1991, during a conversation with astronomer Dr. George Herbig at the University of Hawaii, the subject of Maria Mitchell Observatory arose. Professor Herbig asked if I would be interested in correspondence between Margaret Harwood and himself. The letter (now in my possession) was interesting, then became compelling when one date caught my eye. George Herbig had asked Margaret Harwood to observe the variable star CM Aquilae. The Harwood letter discusses the night's observations and notes the CM Aql magnitude to be fainter than 16.4.

Margaret Harwood had continued interest in this “peculiar” variable. It was discovered at MMO on May 19, 1925, by Margaret Walton (then Miss Harwood's assistant, later to become Director of the American Association of Variable Star Observers, Margaret Walton Mayall. In her publication

“The Variable Stars in the Scutum Cloud” Harwood (1962) refers to the star as a “nova-like variable” and lists 5 maxima between 1914 and 1951 (p. 405). The final and largest of the 165 identification charts is of CM Aql (p. 464). In her announcement of the discovery, Harwood noted the similarity in spectrum to the variable Z Andromedae (Harwood 1925). Recent publications describe CM Aql as a symbiotic variable with a long period of 1,058 days. The object is both a variable and a binary in an orbit bringing the two stars close enough to interact. One star is a red giant transferring material to a hot blue star or possibly a white dwarf.

And so, an era ended. When she opened the dome the evening of May 31, 1957, to observe CM Aql, Margaret Harwood was Director of Maria Mitchell Observatory. At dawn on June 1, 1957, she closed the dome as retired Director.

References

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 Harwood, M. 1925, *Bull. Harvard Coll. Obs.*, No. 826, 3.
 Harwood, M. 1962, *Ann. Leiden Obs.*, **21**, 387.