

OUR FRIEND, LESLIE PELTIER: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

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In 1958 I met Leslie Peltier when the Lima Astronomy Club took a field trip to Delphos, Ohio, to see Leslie and his famous Merry-Go-Round Observatory with its 6-inch "Comet Seeker" refractor. I had already ground my own 8-inch f/3.2 reflector and had spent evenings just "looking around," but I didn't yet know that there was something of great value I could do from my own backyard. That visit proved to be the beginning of a long friendship and many starlight nights.

During the visit Leslie spoke briefly of variable stars. I could tell from his enthusiasm observing was something he loved doing. Shortly after the meeting, I called to ask him if I might come over to his observatory and bring my 8-inch to learn more about these changeable stars. He kindly agreed, and the following week I "met" SS Cygni. Leslie showed me how to locate it in Cygnus, and when it was in the eye-piece, he explained the chart, its sequence, and how to make an estimate.

SS Cygni was bright that night, and I made my estimate. He said it was a good one. My variable star observing was unique, because although he helped me join the AAVSO Leslie wouldn't let me buy a chart or an atlas. He took great pride in introducing me to each new variable personally. I kept taking his charts home to use. Early on I asked: "Surely you have duplicates of all the charts I keep taking home, don't you?" "Oh, no," was the reply, "I have them by memory." No wonder he was always lending his charts.

I knew very little about Leslie when I met him. I only knew that he'd made over 100,000 estimates and had discovered 12 comets and 2 novae. I was to learn a great deal more about this very shy, yet ebullient person. In the spring of 1959, Leslie decided I should sit down while observing. As a designer of children's toys and furniture at the Delphos Bending Co., he made me a little child's chair that fit in the left corner of the Merry-Go-Round. I was six inches taller than Leslie, but I was actually able to maneuver myself and sit in there beside him, and we "toured the Universe," as he said. The observatory turned on a circular track operated from inside by a steering wheel. He had designed the entire unit. I left my 8-inch at home from then on, and in the spring of 1960 I built my own observatory based on a design Leslie drew up.

Not too long after my husband, Don, and I had come to know Leslie and his lovely wife, Dottie, Leslie was given the magnificent 12-inch Clark refractor, along with the building, dome, and transit room, from Miami University (Oxford, Ohio). We will never forget the sight of his grounds strewn with the eight sides of the observatory stacked here, the dome over there, having been sawed in two for transport, and the transit room a little farther over, and lastly a huge stack of boards which was the flooring of the observatory. The full account of the resurrection of the observatory is in Leslie's first book, STARLIGHT NIGHTS.

His book, STARLIGHT NIGHTS, an autobiography, was written in 1963. It received the Ohioana Book Award when it was published in 1965. In 1972 he wrote a beautiful textbook, GUIDEPOSTS TO THE STARS, and in 1977, THE PLACE IN JENNINGS CREEK. The latter is about the Peltier

homestead called Brookhaven. It tells about the grounds and the historical nature of the house. I urge all to read STARLIGHT NIGHTS, with Leslie's whole account of his beginnings in astronomy, picking 900 quarts of strawberries at two cents a quart to earn money for his first telescope, the loan of the famous 6-inch refractor from Princeton, known as the "Comet Seeker," and the gift of the 12-inch Clark.

Leslie's modesty about himself was unsurpassed, but we learned about him through others. He wrote articles for Nature Magazine, Popular Science, Popular Astronomy, and Sky & Telescope. He was a member of the International Astronomical Union, Emeritus member of the American Astronomical Society, honorary member of the AAVSO, member of the Astronomical League, and honorary member of the Lima Astronomy Club. Of all these organizations he attended only a few AAVSO meetings, and three meetings of the Lima Club. One of those times he was a speaker.

Though Leslie's education was a one-room schoolhouse and three years of high school (1915-17), his need to know led him all his life. He was a board member of the Delphos Public Library, and his own home library is a treasure of nature and astronomy books. For pleasure reading, his choice was the Western novel.

Because of his astronomical discoveries and devotion to observing, and all the nature articles he had written, Bowling Green State University (Ohio) awarded him an Honorary Doctor of Science Degree in 1947. He was awarded his high school diploma from the graduating class of 1975 when they adopted him as an honorary member. In 1934 Leslie was awarded the AAVSO's FIRST MERIT AWARD which read: "His faithful and untiring service has placed him in the front rank of variable star observers and his discoveries have won him international fame." In the same year, Dr. Harlow Shapley referred to him as "the world's greatest non-professional astronomer."

Leslie accomplished all he did because he was a private person. He lived exactly as he wanted to. He did nothing he didn't wish to do, and was able to say "no" very easily. He was very uncomfortable with those who sought him out because he was famous, but to those fellow variable star observers who visited, he was a warm and welcoming individual. When local groups from the Delphos area came to see him and the observatory, he was always happy to share the beauty of the night skies. Sometimes after these visits, we'd go down the hill behind the observatory, fix a fire, and roast marshmallows while sitting on a log. For Don and me, a visit to Peltier land was like going to an island in a sea of world troubles. The picnics in the summer, the winter visits, all had an air of tranquility. People travel thousands of miles a year seeking what Leslie had right in his backyard.

In addition to observing, Don and I had a section of garden area beside the observatory where we could raise whatever vegetables we liked. This entailed about 3 trips a week during the growing season, and these daylight visits were as enjoyable as the night-time ones. Leslie's strawberry patches were his pride and joy, but his watermelons and cantaloupes were also a sight to behold.

Don and I missed very few AAVSO meetings over the past 21 years, and we always felt Leslie's spirit with us at those meetings. We told him we were representing him, too, and this always pleased him.

Last May 10, a Saturday, I spent about four hours in Delphos getting started with the garden, and Leslie and I took a few breaks to

discuss crops and world events. I left at about 5:15 pm and Leslie continued working. He passed away about 9 pm, back by the observatory, while working near the garden.

There is no way to describe adequately the feeling I have when the first clear night of each week arrives and I have nowhere to go. Empty is probably the best word. However, the ultimate objective in Leslie's teaching me the art of variable star observing was to "carry on" his work.

Leslie's own words best sum up his way of life:

"Were I to write out one prescription designed to help alleviate at least some of the self-made miseries of mankind, it would read like this:

ONE GENTLE DOSE OF STARLIGHT
TO BE TAKEN EACH CLEAR NIGHT
JUST BEFORE RETIRING."

He will be greatly missed by all who loved him.



Leslie Peltier at the eyepiece of the 12" Clark refractor.