

Earliest RASC Star Party Antecedents II

How Old is the Term?

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Abstract

Building on the work of the second author, this paper provides citations for the astronomical use of the term “star party” in the popular press ca. 1920, which is two decades earlier than it commonly occurs in the astronomical literature, as reported by the first author in the June 2017 *Journal*. Here we present evidence that “star-gazing party” was in common use by the popular press to refer to “an occasion for astronomical observation involving more than one person” by the final decades of the 19th century.

Evidence beyond the earlier finding

The first author published data indicating that the term “star party,” the meeting together of people to do observational astronomy, was an American coining, dating from 1939–1940, and localized to the mid-West of the United States (Rosenfeld

2017). This conclusion was based on mining the historical astronomical literature for occurrences of the term “star party,” and analyzing the internal features of the texts. That paper also observed that observational star parties were centuries older than the introduction of the term, and discussed a simple typology of star parties. In addition, the time frame for the adoption of the practice by the Toronto Astronomical & Physical Society (the nascent RASC) was found to be 1890–1900. This was a sign that the Society was coming to see education and public outreach (EPO) as part of its mission. That change has had a profound effect on the RASC. As the Society membership has greyed, EPO has somewhat paradoxically gained a greater proportion of its energies and resources, to the point where EPO has become paramount in the organization’s sense of its own mission.

After that publication appeared, the second author then discovered a definite instance of the astronomical use of “star party” from 1922, and an equivocal one from 1901, and brought them to the attention of the first author (Muir 2017a). The 1922 article reads:

“Miss Helen Whitaker, instructor in astronomy at Washburn college, will give a “star party” tonight at Washburn Observatory. With the aid of the big telescope she will exhibit an assortment of stars to students and the public as 7:30 o’clock. The public is invited to attend. The telescope as the Washburn observatory [sic.] magnifies 750 diameters, and has been in use there since 1902” (Anonymous 1922).¹

The 1901 example occurs in an article by an astronomically inclined Lutheran pastor, intended to excite local interest among the citizenry of the tri-cities of Geneva, Batavia, and St. Charles, Illinois, in a forthcoming lecture by Sir Robert Ball (1840–1913), the Lowndean Professor of Astronomy and Geometry at Cambridge University, and Director of the Cambridge Observatory: “Let us go out in a big “star party” and listen to Sir Robert Ball when he sails the infinite azure” (Hemborg 1901). The meaning of the term, while astronomical, does not refer to observing.

Spurred by the second author’s success in locating citations of the astronomical use of “star party” in the popular press earlier than those found in the astronomical literature, the first author gratefully followed his lead. The combined result of their researches follows. The earliest astronomical use of the term “star party” we have (yet) found remains that from 1922, but there is no reason to think that this need be the earliest occurrence of the term. More significantly, we have discovered that “star party” appears to be a contraction of an earlier form, namely “star-gazing party” (e.g. the title of Anonymous 1902; note there was some temporal overlap in the employment of the two terms). In what period can the earliest citations of “star-gazing party”—an occasion for astronomical observation involving more than one person—be placed?

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Star-gazing party—earliest common citations?

In an appreciation of the noted American telescope maker John Clacey (1857–1931), it is recounted that:

“At this time, in the early 80’s, amateur astronomy was on a high wave of popularity. Wealthy people in the vicinity of Boston were buying small telescopes and star-gazing parties were the latest fad. Clacey made large numbers of four and five-inch lenses for these enthusiastic amateurs... He loves to tell of the “telescope parties,” held on the spacious lawn of his Glendale [MD] home [ca. 1895-], for the school children of the village, and of their surprise and amazement at seeing the features of the moon, the rings of Saturn, of the components of a double star” (Anonymous 1930, 474–475).

Clacey’s reminiscence of star-gazing parties being common in early 1880s New England is retrospective, and reported in print a half-century after the time in question. The earliest contemporary citation of star-gazing party used in an astronomical sense uncovered in the course of this study dates from 1887. The passage in *The Indianapolis Journal* is immediately arresting, because it appears to imply that young female astronomy students are more dedicated to observing than are their male counterparts:

“The astronomy class of Boston University arranged for a “star gazing” party, with telescope and other accessories to take place on the Common. The night selected proved rough and threatening, but the girls were all there. Not a boy put in an appearance. The weather was too cold for them” (Anonymous 1887).

There are problems with taking this story as literal fact, however. Boston College didn’t accept female students till the 1920s (nuns, as it happens; Higgins 1986, 59–61). In the 1880s, the institution functioned as a seminary. And it doesn’t appear to have acquired astronomical equipment till ca. 1928 (Udías 2003, 239–240). The story may be true in its essentials, but the author has misidentified the institution, or the story may be wholly fabricated protestant polemic to cast aspersions on the “manliness” of Catholic male students, and was not intended primarily to say anything positive about the fortitude, or aptness of female students for astronomy. It does, however, count as evidence for the astronomical use of the term, whether the story is fact, or fiction.

It is important to note that there is nothing in the passage in the 1887 *Indianapolis Journal* article to hint that the author thought he or she had invented the astronomical use of the term, or that it was novel. The column in which it occurs, “Concerning Women,” is generally in support of female emancipation. It is difficult to say whether the rhetorical strategy of its author would be helped or hindered by the

use of a neologism, or a word of rare occurrence. If Clacey’s reminiscence is reliable, then it is reasonable to expect citations from earlier in the 1880s, and before.

For a fuller view of how writers in the popular press understood “star-gazing party,” the best course is to examine the context of its occurrence in the texts themselves. Doing so allows some unexpected aspects of the social practice to emerge.

Star-gazing party—contexts of use

Before turning to the astronomical citations of the term, something should be said about those that are not.

Many 19th- and early 20th-century instances of “star-gazing party” (and “star party”) are non-astronomical. Numerous false positives occur when searching through large bodies of texts, either by rapid visual scanning of non-digitized printed texts, or through computer-assisted searches of digitized corpora. In the context of such work they are the equivalent of unrecorded nebulae or clusters to an 18th-century comet hunter, or plate defects posing as astronomical objects on a glass plate to an early 20th-century astronomer, or hot pixels in an digital image to a astrophotographer of the present.

Very common are references to activities of service organizations with “star” in their name, or hosting parties featuring symbolic, or decorative stars. An example of the former is the American Masonic-related Order of the Eastern Star.² For the latter, the following should suffice:

“The Oriental Lodge Entertainment. Oriental Rebekah Degree Lodge, No. 90, gave a “star-gazing party” in Prospect Hall, Odd Fellows’ Building, last night. The walls of the hall were decorated with stars, and stars were distributed during the grand march” (Anonymous 1891).

As disappointing as these occurrences are, they are constituents of the wider background in which “star-gazing party” might refer to astronomical activities. The non-astronomical “star-gazing parties” could always be invoked in references to the astronomical ones, or vice versa. One example is the star-gazing party as a metaphor in political commentary:

“Idaho is politically star-gazing, its several parties—republican, democratic progressive, socialist and prohibitionist—endeavouring to read aright the signs of the times” (Anonymous 1914a; 1914b).

Another is the brand of American humour, which is taken by the courtship opportunities to subvert the astronomical business of star-gazing:

“Query. Has that star-gazing party yet decided the question, Why astronomy and courtship go together?” (Anonymous 1892),

and

“The double wedding dance of October 16 was well supplied with brides and whiskey, (not that the same party supplied both) and, in consequence some parties were star gazing” (Anonymous 1908).

Turning now from the ridiculous to the sublime, a significant aspect of the social practice of star-gazing parties is how often it attests to female participation in astronomy. Women function as formal, or informal students, and as experts.

One cultural club mixed astronomical activity with knowledge of classical music, ancient history and literature, and art criticism:

“The Eidelweiss Chautauqua Circle, of Mount Vernon met on Tuesday evening with Miss Ada Foggin, and when the roll was called each member gave the name of a celebrated composer and two or three of his principal works. After this came a map drill on Greece, conducted by Frank Hickock, and a study of the constellations for January and February by all of the members. Miss Jeanie Pearson then gave a concise but short outline of Homer’s “Iliad.” Each member was called upon to state which article in this month’s “Chautauquan” had been most interesting to him, and why, and the exercises closed with a reading from Ruskin. After the meeting adjourned the members formed themselves into a “star-gazing” party, and proceeded to locate in the heavens a number of the constellations they had been studying. As the night was particularly bright and clear, the work proved very interesting” (Anonymous 1897a).

From this report, it appeared that the aim was to cultivate a broad, rather than a deep knowledge of the subjects. If the members were encouraged to make relevant allusions between the fields, the experience could have been quite stimulating.

Some of the star-gazing parties were covered in the society pages of newspapers, meaning that the cultivation of an interest in astronomy among the women of the upper-middle classes and above in those local areas was seen as appropriate. The venue for the following event was an academic teaching observatory, the same observatory as was noted in the citation from 1922 (see above):

“A star gazing party which spent last evening at the Washburn observatory included Miss Grace Osborne of Coffeyville, Miss Grace Mason Welch, Miss Florence Welch, Miss Ethel de Obert, Miss Pearl Burdge, Miss Agnes Burdge, Miss Ida Denis, Miss Emma Dennis,

Mrs. Hiram Landrus, Mrs. Smith and Miss Miriam-Bunker” (Anonymous 1905).

Some all-female educational institutions did not discourage impromptu star-gazing parties, particularly if a major celestial event was to be experienced, like the apparition of Halley’s comet:

“Star-gazing parties among the students of astronomy [at St. Mary’s Academy] have been frequent throughout the year, but those of the past week were somewhat out of the ordinary, being held in the morning instead of the evening. Halley’s comet was the wonder-worker that took a good number of sleepyheads out of their cosy beds an hour or two before the rising signal eager to get a view of the object they have been hearing and reading so much about all year. The comet was found by the telescope, of course. Tuesday morning, between 4:30 and 5 o’clock: and, in addition to four or five of the sisters, about a dozen girls had the satisfaction of looking at it before it faded in the light of day. Another large party was on hand at an early hour Wednesday morning, and again each one was rewarded for her zeal by a clear view of the misty little object. After the reports of its being visible to the naked eye, there was another observation party on the roof Friday morning, but scarcely any change was noted in the appearance of the comet, nor did any of these succeed in seeing it without a glass” (Anonymous 1910).

The citation above refers to voluntary and apparently course-related star-gazing parties within the context of academic courses, in an institution provided with observational instruments. Less serious, although not necessarily frivolous, is the recommendation of star-gazing parties as summer-camp activities for young women requiring relief from the tedium of professional life in the city:

“The business girl who is exhausted by hard work in a city environment that offers little relaxation can take things as easily as she likes...A marshmallow roast around the camp fire at night, a watermelon feast, or a star-gazing party are forms of recreation that even the weariest of city-dwellers will be ready for when the day is over” (Anonymous 1921).

Not only female professors and instructors of astronomy could fulfil the role of astronomical expert. Inez A. Budd (ca. 1851–1911), spouse of a former Governor of California, instituted her own “planet parties,” invitation-only affairs, in her private observatory. Her astronomical erudition is particularly noted by the writer (without further research, it is difficult to judge at this remove if such praise is purely the product of social deference, or is in fact merited):³

“[From the] San Francisco Examiner. There is something absolutely new under the sun, or perhaps in this

instance the old saying should be paraphrased into something absolutely new under the moon. It is the “planet” party;” and to Mrs. James H. Budd, of Stockton, wife of the ex-governor of California, belongs the honor of having originated it. ¶That statement in itself bespeaks something out of the ordinary, for there is nothing frivolous about Mrs. Budd’s “planet parties,” mysteriously alluring though the title sounds. They are a new form of instruction, made doubly interesting from the delightful entertainment they afford. And what could be more romantic than a “planet party?” ¶It is intensely interesting to both young and old alike, for the “planet party” is star-gazing in the most literal sense of the term. ¶It takes the guests from the restricted limits of the parlor and the drawing-room out into the open air, across the green, grass-carpeted lawn, though the shadows of the towering trees and up the winding stairs of the observatory to revel in the glory of an autumn night under a clear, star-lit, sky. There through the big telescope the wonders of the heavens are brought down to be viewed in turn by each of those present, and following this amusement refreshments are served to please the inner man. Truly, whether it be spring, summer or autumn, the “planet party” is well calculated to turn a young man’s fancy to thoughts of the most tender sentiments.

Mrs. Budd’s “planet parties,” however, are the most sedate and exclusive little gatherings imaginable, for Mrs. Budd is very earnest in her chosen work, and brings to her entertainments a vast deal of scientific knowledge, which she imparts in a most pleasing manner. Fortunate, indeed, do those consider themselves who have had the pleasure of attending one of them. They are exclusive for two reasons. In the first place Mrs. Budd owns the only telescope in Stockton of any considerable size, and in the next place it naturally follows that the top of an observatory that is only ten or twelve feet square, will not accommodate a great many people. Through Mrs. Budd’s telescope something more can be seen than the little twinkling lights in the heavens. In the object glass of her ‘scope they assume distinctive form. Jupiter and his moons can be seen, together with Saturn and his rings and moons. The sight of these planets is absorbingly interesting, and Mrs. Budd’s “planet parties” are considered the hit of the season” (Anonymous 1901).

Did women play a particularly large part organizing and participating in star-gazing parties during the period from the 1890s to the 1920s? Was their participation chiefly in gender-exclusive star-gazing parties? Was the nature of their participation in star-gazing parties the same regardless of gender composition, or did it vary? Was female participation in star-gazing parties important in establishing or normalizing

their participation in science? More extensive work would be necessary to begin to answer any of these questions.

We earlier mentioned Halley’s comet as providing opportunities for star-gazing parties, in connection with St. Mary’s Academy. The Rev’d Joel Metcalf’s daughter also singled out the experience of a star-gazing party for Halley’s comet as memorable:

“Once in a while, we had star-gazing parties [ca. 1910?], when parishioners and other friends would come to exclaim over the rings of Saturn and to ask if Mars were inhabited. But nothing equalled the pleasure of “demonstrating” Halley’s comet to an awe inspired group of young and old” (Stoneman 1939, 25).

Spectacular meteorite showers, or rather, meteorite showers expected to be spectacular, could also provide the reason for holding star-gazing parties. These were planned for the Leonids of 1897, and 1899—as it turned out, the Leonids were underwhelming both years:

“Several early morning star-gazing parties are being organized for the meteoric shower season” (Anonymous 1897b; 1897c).

“—Many of our people are arranging “star gazing” parties for the evenings of November 13th, 14th, and 15th, as it is said the meteoric display [of the Leonids] about that time will surpass anything of the kind since 1866. Don’t miss it” (1899a).

“The shower of fiery meteors scheduled for last evening failed to appear. It has only been postponed, however, and between midnight tonight and 5 o’clock tomorrow morning the sky will rain meteors of all ages, shapes and sizes. Several star-gazing parties have been organized in Butte to stay up all night and watch the display as it only occurs once in every 33 years” (Anonymous 1899b).

“LEONIDS NOT VISIBLE HERE. Fruitless Vigil of Many of Ottumwa’s Astronomers. The shower of Leonids which has been booked for this part of the terrestrial world for the past three or four nights, and which, it is said, would surely shine forth in all its brilliancy last night failed to make its appearance as scheduled, much to the disappointment of many. In Ottumwa there were a number of “star gazing” parties, the members of which, while they were disappointed in regard to the announced purpose of the assemblies, have no special regret for having been together. The evening and a good portion of the morning were spent in social games and periodical trips to the door or window to see “if the stars were falling.” Astronomers tell us that the meteoric shower may be visible tonight. Chicago, Princeton and Washington all report failures last night. Yale and Harvard saw nothing and were in despair

because an impenetrable fog hid the skies thereabouts. The University of Kansas, at Lawrence, had better luck. There more than a score of the meteors were seen, with the naked eye, between 1 and 3 o'clock. Goodsell observatory at Northfield, Minn., counted eight at about 5:30 a.m., the clouds having lifted for a few minutes on the morning breeze. Thus far Webster City and her many ton meteor, which fell yesterday, are entitled to first honors" (Anonymous 1899c).

"The meteoric display which was scheduled for this week has so far failed to appear and on that account the numerous star-gazing parties which were held have not been very successful" (1899d).

We close by remarking that it is curious that the star party, a cultural practice which is now so central to North American amateur astronomy, has attracted so little historical attention. ★

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Endnotes

- 1 This "Washburn Observatory" is actually the Crane Observatory of the Washington Municipal University, Topeka, KS, and not the Washburn Observatory of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. On the Crane Observatory, see Stearns 1947, 26-27. The principal instrument was a refractor with a 29.21-cm, F/14.52 O.G. by Brashear, on a Warner & Swasey mount.
- 2 Snoek 2014, 413. Leslie Peltier was a member of this organization; Peltier 1967, 201. Regarding astronomical star parties, Leslie Peltier was very ambivalent about the utility of the style of observing they fostered in his day—perhaps rightly so; Peltier 1967, 40, 176.
- 3 The former is probably the case, given that "Mrs. Budd had devoted the last years of her life to religious and astronomical studies. She studied astronomy in connection with her biblical interpretations, having had an observatory at her home. She taught a religious sect and had her class at the house Saturday. Recently Mrs. Budd had her sect incorporated. It is designated "Christ's Doctrine Revealed and Astronomical Science Association[!];" Anonymous 1911.

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