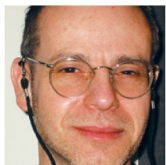


## Earliest RASC Star Party Antecedents?



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### Abstract

This article seeks to establish how far back star parties can be found in the RASC.

### The thing antedates the name<sup>1</sup>

By the time this number of the *Journal* arrives in your virtual inbox, or through your very-real letter box, the serious annual spring-to-autumn star-party season will have commenced. At those locales, amateur astronomers gather to observe, commune, and learn, in observing environments vastly superior to the urban skies to which they are habituated. There are star parties, of course, that run in urban or semi-urban settings where amateur astronomers—and some professional astronomy educators—offer celestial vistas to the public in a regular or semi-regular cadence throughout the year.

Most of us think we know what a star party is, but there are surprisingly few formal definitions one could cite, if the need arose. Surprisingly, standard works decline to define “star party.” The latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which responsibly cites usage on both sides of the pond, offers no entry (*lemma*) for the term; indeed, “star party” doesn’t even appear in quotations illustrating the lexical practice for other words (OED). Nor are there entries for “star party” in either the most recent edition of the *Collins Dictionary of Astronomy* (Daintith & Gould 2006—aimed at advanced amateurs, and those embarking on first degrees), or the *Oxford Dictionary of Astronomy* (Ridpath 2012—intellectually downmarket in comparison to the *Collins*).

A simple, serviceable, and serious definition could be “a star party is an occasion for mainly recreational observing involving more than one person.” Or, in Biercian pastiche, “a star party is the peculiar practice of congregating under the stars with intent to waylay passersby with celestial enticements.” If one wished to construct a typology of star parties, various organizing principles could be employed. Categories could be established according to location (urban/semi-rural/rural), quality of the sky (Bortle class), number of attendees, annual duration (a single night/a week), closed or open invitation (intrinsic/extrinsic star party), types of astronomers (visual observers and astrosketchers/mixed visual observers and astrophotographers), types of object observed (any object observable/or with the emphasis placed on an eclipse/comet/

meteor shower/the deep sky/a single class of DSO/planets/a single planet/an occultation/variable stars/a class of variables/satellites and probes, etc.), style of observing (pure recreation/education and training/useful data acquisition), or sponsor (an association, educational or cultural institution/a commercial vendor). Add demographic factors and one might embark on a meaningful analysis of this aspect of the culture of astronomy. Intriguing though it may be, the sociology of star parties will not be pursued here; rather, the earliest traces of “star parties” within the RASC are sought.

The term “star party” is probably of North American origin. Its occurrence is scarce in British astronomical literature before the mid to late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> The earliest printed citations uncovered in the course of the present investigation date from 1939–1940. Brief articles in *The Sky* (a constituent of what would become *Sky & Telescope*), and *Popular Astronomy*<sup>3</sup> (the outstanding North American amateur magazine of the first half of the 20th century), report on what would now be called urban star parties, held in parks in downtown Cleveland, and, in imitation, in Evanston, Illinois (Fisher 1939; Russell 1940a; 1940 b; 1941). The occasions were advertised to the populace at large in the media, the telescopes and expertise were mostly provided by amateur astronomers, the locations were accessible to urbanites, and the objects chosen were those that might appeal at first blush to non-astronomers. There are signs in the reporting that indicate the organizers thought they were engaged in a novel activity: “star party” appears in quotation marks, signalling that the use is unusual (Russell 1940 a; 1940b; 1941); the organizers are said to have “conceived the idea of putting on a ‘Star Party’ for the public,” a report echoing “the tremendous response to the series of summer star parties amply demonstrated to the originators of the idea, that there is a wide-spread interest in astronomy among lay peoples” (Russell 1940 b, 566; Fisher 1939); and the Evanston imitator, impressed by Cleveland’s effort, was “determined to put on a ‘Star Party’ that would sweep the town...as this stunt had never before been attempted in Evanston,” and it is reported by one of the Cleveland initiators “with a hope that it will stimulate interest...to such an extent that other people will take up the idea in other cities” (Russell 1941, 55-56).

The use of the term, then, appears to be just under eight decades old. The practice in some form is demonstrably older than the term.

### Observing together under the stars

What was the nature of star parties, before the term “star party” was coined? Are their characteristics identical to those of our day, or are there differences?

Before the Cleveland and Evanston star parties of 1939–1940, occasions for planned, recreational group observing not tied to dramatic celestial events seem to have been “intrinsic,” chiefly reserved for a closed, invited group, such as family, friends, or



Figure 1 — One of the earliest photographs of an “RASC” “star party,” ca. 1900–1901. This was an intrinsic star party, only open to members, held on the property of D.J. Howell, Lambton Mills, Ontario. Reproduced courtesy of the RASC Archives.

learned Society members, rather than the public. The earliest RASC (i.e. Toronto Astronomical Society) images of “star parties” from ca. 1900–1901 show such “intrinsic” gatherings (Figure 1; [www.rasc.ca/early-star-party](http://www.rasc.ca/early-star-party); [www.rasc.ca/early-star-party-2](http://www.rasc.ca/early-star-party-2); [www.rasc.ca/early-star-party-3](http://www.rasc.ca/early-star-party-3); Howell 1931, 235). These were part of the tradition of Georgian and Victorian convivial, and frequently non-trivial, group observing, such as the evenings when William Herschel, “Astronomer to his Majesty,” would conduct observing parties for his patron, his family, and guests, or when Dr. Lee, Captain Smyth, and friends observed at Hartwell House, or when William Lassell viewed the heavens with other Liverpoolian amateurs (Herschel 1912, xxxv; Hoskin 2011, 71–72; Smyth 1851, 293; Chapman 1996, XVII, 344–346).

Dramatic celestial events could cause star parties, either of the planned sort (by intrinsic, or extrinsic invitation), or of the unplanned, and seemingly spontaneous sort; people just showed up where the action was—around the astronomers. At the last of the 19th-century transits of Venus, on 1882 December 6, both the Minister and Deputy Minister of Marine and Fisheries witnessed the event at the Nepean Point Observatory in Ottawa, along with “quite a number of persons” (Broughton & Rosenfeld—one could characterize this instance as having both an intrinsic and an extrinsic list of participants). Solar eclipses, and great naked-eye comets, could have the same effect, the latter well illustrated by Jan Luyken’s engraving of the Great Comet of 1681 (C/1680 V1, also

known as Kirch’s Comet; Figure 2). Such grand celestial shows could equally command the involvement of grand crowds, or more intimate groups (e.g. the Wordsworths’ “comet party” of 1814; Gaull 2015, 609).

Several types of pre-1939–1940 star party seem at first to have an economic feature not found today. The lectures in natural philosophy, which were part of the popular intellectual landscape of the 18th century, sometimes offered group observing sessions (e.g. Carpenter 2011, 30–31). Not unrelated, but certainly socially downscale and intellectually less ambitious, were the occasions when itinerant astronomers offered views of celestial “scenery” through their telescopes in public places in Europe and North America, for a monetary consideration. This sort of street hawking is immortalized in Wordsworth’s “Star Gazers,” and was an outreach activity perpetrated by the first president of the Toronto Astronomical Club (i.e. the RASC), Daniel Knode Winder, when he returned to live in Detroit (Wordsworth 1807, 87–89; Broughton 2008, 241). The practice does exist today in its partly lineal descendants, the star-gazing inn, hotel, and guest house (Treadwell 2017).

Most early examples of group observing for education and public outreach (EPO) conducted by the RASC and its members were not of a mercenary nature, and it is to these we now turn.

## “Star party” activity in the early RASC

How far back can traces of EPO activity, recognizable in large part as belonging to star-party practices, be found in the records of the Society?

At the eighth meeting of the Society on 1890 June 3:

*“An animated discussion arose with respect to the desirability of having, in popular parlance, “A Night with Saturn,” such of the public as might be interested to be invited. Ultimately, several of the members expressed their willingness to place their telescopes at the disposal of any persons desirous of seeing Saturn and other celestial objects;” TAPST 1891, 8.*

Clearly not all members at the time thought that it was either a good use of the Society’s resources to engage in “star-party” style EPO, or that it was appropriate. They may have wanted to keep the Society’s group observing intrinsic—if anyone wanted to observe with the group, or use its instruments, then they ought to apply for membership. This attitude was not foreign to a main trend of early “star parties” in amateur practice (see above). It could also reflect the desire to engage in serious astronomical observing, the sort that gathered data and advanced science, rather than a type of observing seen as frivolous, i.e. mere stargazing.

The case for serious observing over EPO was memorably stated by RASC honorary member and *Observer’s Handbook* contributor W.F. Denning, FRAS, in his *Telescopic Work for Starlight Evenings*, an influential work dating from this period. The passage is worth quoting:

*“Every man whose astronomical predilections are known; and who has a telescope of any size, is pestered with applications from friends and others who wish to view some of the wonders of the heavens. Of course it is the duty of all of us to encourage a laudable interest in the science, especially when evinced by neighbours or acquaintances; but the utility of an observer constituting himself a showman, and sacrificing many valuable hours which might be spent in useful observations, may be seriously questioned... Is it therefore desirable to satisfy the idle curiosity of people who have no deep-seated*

*regard for astronomy, and will certainly never exhibit their professed interest in a substantial manner? Assuredly not. The time of our observers is altogether too valuable to be employed in this fashion. Yet it is an undisputed fact that some self-denying amateurs are unwearied in their efforts to accommodate their friends in the respect alluded to. My own impression is that, except in special cases, the observer will best consult the interests of astronomy, as well as his own convenience and pleasure, by declining the character of showman;” Denning 1891, 74–75.*

Denning was an important amateur observer, and his opinion ought not to be dismissed as that of a pre-modern ogre (on Denning, see Beech 1998). Not all astronomers, amateur or professional, were, or are cut out for EPO. Denning’s time probably was best turned toward research. The trend now among most amateur organizations in the English-speaking world is to devote more attention and resources toward EPO, than toward skilled and disciplined data collection (including initiation and training in the latter). There is merit in pursuing both activities, of course. A healthy astronomical culture, indeed, is one that encourages both.

What was the result of that discussion among the members at the meeting on 1890 June 3 as to whether they should hold what we would now recognize as a public (extrinsic) “star party”? The account of the meeting in the manuscript minute book of the Society is much less detailed than the printed version(!), and offers even less detail on the tenor of the discussion, and none as to its outcome: “A suggestion was made by the vice-president as to an open meeting which could be held in the Normal School Grounds;” A&PST 1890, 30. This assumes, of course, that a “star party” is what is referred to by “an open meeting...on the Normal School Grounds.”<sup>4</sup>

The printed minutes for the year have nothing further to say on the matter (TAPST 1891), but in this case, the manuscript minute book is a little more informative. At the meeting of 1890 June 17: “The proposal to hold an open meeting in the Normal School Grounds or a more suitable place was dropped for the present;” A&PST 1890, 33. It seems that, for whatever reason, the proposal for the Society to hold its first public (extrinsic) “star party” was allowed to lapse in the year in which it was made!

Solid evidence of the Society making it possible for others to look through telescopes survives from four years later. A transit of Mercury was predicted for November 10, and:

*“Arrangements had been made to send telescopes to some of the public schools of the city, that the pupils might have an opportunity to observe the phenomenon. Mr. G.H. Meldrum and Mr. A. Elvins had placed 3-inch refractors at Wellesley School, and under the management of Miss A.A. Gray, very satisfactory observations had been made of the planet on the disc. Messrs. Michael Bros. had placed one of their 3-inch*

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Daar zullen ook schrikkelijcke dingen, en groote tekenen van den hemel geschieden. Lukas XXI: 11.  
En daar zullen tekenen zyn in de Zonne, en de Maane, en de Sterren, enz. Vers 25.

Hez

Figure 2 — Great Comet of 1680 (C/1680 V1), from Jan Luyken, *Beschouwinge der wereld*, 1725. Some celestial events are so impressive they can call forth spontaneous, extrinsic star parties, involving every and anyone. Reproduced courtesy of the *Specula astronomica minima*.

telescopes by Vion Frères, of Paris, at the York Street School<sup>5</sup>; two others of these refractors were successfully used, one by Dr. A.D. Watson, and one by Mr. C.T. Gilbert, who had taken charge of the arrangements at the Jesse Ketchum School. Messrs. Michael Bros. had announced their willingness to place their telescopes at the service of the School Board on any special occasions. A Gregorian reflector had been sent to the Ryerson School by Dr. Watson, and also a small refractor;” TAPST 1895, 103.

Fortunately this initiative was not left to wither; the following year, at a Society meeting of 1895 May 28, it was recorded that:

“Miss A.A. Gray reported having spent an evening at the telescope with the pupils of Wellesley School, who were much interested in observations of Jupiter and Saturn. With the assistance of another member, she had arranged to give the senior classes of the public schools as many opportunities as possible to engage in practical telescopic work. The general

interest taken and the order that prevailed during the observations had been very encouraging. Several members repeated their desire to assist Miss Gray in this work, which was directly in line with the Society’s objects;” TAPST 1896, 46.

Would that it were as apparently easy to get volunteers and instruments into schools now as it was then! It is notable that this sort of EPO was described in 1895 as being “directly in line with the Society’s objects.” That is broadly true of the RASC’s EPO objectives today.

School observing parties are certainly a variety of star party, but they are not identical to the extrinsic star parties, to which any member of the public is invited.

At a Society meeting of 1898 May 31, it appears that the next step to realizing open-invitation (extrinsic) star parties is initiated, with civic support:

“The President read a brief account of an interview had with a committee of the City Council since the previous meeting and in reference to a money grant to the Society. The sum of \$100 had been voted, it having been asked for the purpose of providing opportunities for the general public to view celestial objects with the telescope;” TAPST 1899, 26.

This may have borne fruit, as noted at the 12th meeting of the Society, 1899 June 27:

“...this was an open meeting held in the Toronto Observatory, at the invitation of the Director... The meeting then adjourned and a pleasant hour was spent in observation with the large telescope of the observatory, and with smaller instruments brought by members and placed on the lawn;” TAPST 1899, 37-38.

By 1900, “star parties” not too dissimilar from current practice, and attitudes of enthusiasm for such events, mark the Society’s activities. At the 16th meeting of 1900 September 5:

“A series of reports of successful out-of-door meetings for telescopic work were received... the President and other members had willingly set up telescopes for the evening on public and private lawns in various parts of the city in order that the public might be enabled to observe celestial phenomena and had themselves attended and had presided at their instruments or had given practical instruction in Constellation study. Some of these meetings had been held under the auspices of churches and of public and private schools, and one of them on the grounds of the Harbord Collegiate Institute at the instance of the Froebel Society; another on the grounds of the Normal School when the teachers attending the school were present, and a third on the grounds of St. Andrew’s Boys’ College. These meetings had been attended by large and appreciative gatherings, and the Society had been thanked for what it had done. The President

added that during a holiday in Muskoka he had placed a telescope on the lawn every clear evening, and had welcomed any one who chose to use it. Sometimes as many as fifty guests and others were present. The Muskoka air was admirably adapted for observation. During August, Venus was a beautiful daylight object being easily visible to the naked-eye in bright sunshine. In the telescope she was, of course, still more attractive. To many people, ability to see a star in the daytime was a pleasing novelty;” *TTAS 1901*, 29.

The star-party activity that seems an integral part of the modern RASC’s EPO was developed during the 1890s, and was largely established by 1900. We have been doing this for nearly 120 years. We had, in fact, employed star parties as a tool of outreach four decades before the term “star party” was coined. The RASC was probably not unique in this, although it would be interesting to identify any differences between the experience of the RASC and comparable organizations. Are there discernible “dialects” in star parties across the RASC, that is, regional differences, and if so, what is their history? ✨

## Acknowledgements

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### Endnotes

- Gillespie 2016, 153—not a reference to star parties, of course.
- A rare occurrence is in Lynch, C. (1964). The Preston and District Astronomical Society. In *1965 Yearbook of Astronomy* (p. 198). (Ed.) P. Moore. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode. Howard-Duff 1987 writes as if it were a rare occurrence in England.
- Popular Astronomy* ran from 1893–1951, and arguably remains the high mark that all subsequent periodicals for the amateur market fail to reach.
- An entry from later that year suggests that an “open meeting” might not involve any public observing at all. At the 14th meeting of the Society in 1891 September 8, two members: “advised the holding of a public meeting, with an exhibition of lantern slides, illustrating astronomical subjects. A committee was appointed to consider the proposition.” TAPST 1892, 28.
- These were the commercial opticians Solomon and Henry Michael, 57 King St. East; Might 1894, 1108