

Albert Jansen

1940 – 2004

Dutch-born Albert Jansen fell in love with the stars at the age of nine. After finishing high school he obtained an MSc degree in astronomy at Leiden University. For a number of years he managed the planetarium in The Hague and for the latter part of his career taught physics and computer programming at technikons in Amersfoort and Utrecht. During his working career, he regularly published quality research articles, mostly in Dutch astronomical magazines and lately also in *MNASSA*.

He always wanted to work in South Africa and after retirement, Albert and his wife, Ellie first came out for a reconnaissance trip and shortly after, emigrated in 1995, settling in the charming Karoo town of Prince Albert, population 6000.

After a lifetime of doing astronomy from the harsh conditions of European cities where “stars only appear from the smog at about 20 degree elevation”, he was overwhelmed by the excellent conditions, only 30 km away from the historical ESO testing site at Seekoegat.

To share his passion for astronomy, at the same time securing an income, he struck a deal with Mr. Niehaus from the farm Spreeufontein, 35km NNW from Prince Albert. Aimed at the serious amateur, he established the well equipped Spreeufontein Observatory and guest house (*MNASSA*, 1995, 54, 112–113).

While living in comfortable rooms, receiving three meals a day, guests had full use of a huge array of equipment ranging from binoculars, a solar telescope, a 10-inch Meade LX200 “GoTo” telescope to a giant 16-inch light bucket. Being a keen astrophotographer, his visitors had access to excellent photographic equipment, most noticeably a 65 mm f/0.75 Rayxar astro-camera and 180 mm f/2.8 Sonnar by Carl Zeiss Jena.

He gladly offered his services and assistance to visitors, particularly those unfamiliar with the equipment or in need of guidance around the night sky, which he knew like the back of his hand, even the Southern constellations which were relatively new to him! His main target group was overseas visitors, particularly from Europe, but he also offered star-gazing opportunities to the general public. Due to the distance from town and having to travel on a dirt road at night, public nights out at Spreeufontein were not too practical.

For a number of years, the Spreeufontein Observatory attracted around 40 visitors a year and Albert noticed that only a handful of them were knowledgeable amateurs, his principal target group. After six years, the low visitor volume hardly supplied Albert with a sustainable income and in 2002 he was forced to sacrifice quality for quantity and change his main target group to the general public. He built

“In 1994 werd hij door het weer en de sterrenkunde naar Zuid Afrika gelokt. Hij wist dat de ‘echte pronkstukken’ van de sterrenhemel alleen vanaf het zuidelijk halfrond te zien zijn. En hij had schoon genoeg van de Nederlandse winters. Hij besloot zijn baan op te zeggen en zei tegen ons: *Ik ga naar Zuid Afrika, en ik kom niet meer terug*. Met de Sterrewag Spreeufontijn en later Dorpssterrewag Prins Albert bewees hij dat zakendoen en toegewijde sterrenkunde weldegelijk hand in hand kunnen gaan.”

— Alford Jansen

a 6 x 6 metre roll-off-roof observatory in his backyard in town and moved all his equipment there (MNASSA, 2002, 61, 153–154).

Although he still offered the whole observatory to be hired by serious amateurs, he perfected a 1½ to 2 hour program, aimed at the public during which he took them on an extensive tour of the night sky, starting with a naked eye view of the constellations, followed by video astronomy (live or pre-recorded, depending on the availability of suitable objects), finishing off with unforgettable views through the eyepiece of the big 16-inch Meade.

This change of course soon paid off – within the first six months the Prince Albert Town Observatory gave more people a first-hand view of the night sky than what Spreefontein attracted in seven years! After ten months, Albert had more visitors on average per month, than he ever had at Spreefontein per year.

Towards the middle of 2003, Albert started work on a long-cherished project. He prepared a presentation, made an appointment with Struik publishers in Cape Town and presented his idea of a unique night sky guide to them. This book, first of its kind for the Southern Hemisphere, would present eight principal views from horizon to zenith for each month down to magnitude 6.5. Each month's set of sky maps is to be accompanied by a description of what you can see and what to look out for, aimed at learning the sky.

Struik agreed to publish his book and Albert immediately set to work, first by writing special software to produce the basic star plots to his exact requirements. Leaving no room for error, he then painstakingly, by hand on all 96 star maps, added the star and constellation

names to ensure a sensible layout with minimal cluttering. *Star Maps for Southern Africa* (ISBN 1770070052) finally saw the light in June 2004 when Albert had the pleasure of paging through the first copy.

In April 2004 Albert went into hospital in George for a gall bladder operation. While still in hospital, he suffered a massive heart attack and doctors battled for almost an hour to resuscitate him. He fell into a coma and, after coming out of it, could not even remember his own children who came out from Holland to see him.

In the next few weeks, he recovered to his old self, enough to even witness the transit of Venus on 8 June and he had the pleasure of seeing his book in print. On Sunday, 13 June 2004, while in Mossel Bay, he suffered a second heart attack which finally took his life.

On Albert's request, he was put to rest on Monday, 21 June, 2004 with a sober and modest cremation ceremony in George, attended by close family and friends.

Astronomical activities before the move to South Africa

- 1940 Born 6th February
- 1965 MSc in Leiden
- 1965 Managed The Hague Planetarium (until 1972)
- 1971 Co-writer & co-host of first astronomy course for Dutch television
- 1972 Co-founder of People's Observatory in Rijswijk
- 1972 Technikon teacher (until 1995)
- 1982 Published "Iets over het heelal" (*Something about the Universe*), a children's introduction to astronomy
- 1986 Designed 10m sundial in park in Amersfoort
- 1987 Co-founder of People's Observatory in Amersfoort
- 1995 Moved to South Africa

ANON