

## OBITUARY

## JOHN CAISTER BENNETT (1914-1990)

*José A. da S. Campos*

South African astronomy became poorer and indeed that of international amateur astronomy, with the loss of Jack Bennett who passed away on the morning of 30th of May 1990 in Pretoria, at the age of 76 years old.

John Caister Bennett was born on April 6th, 1914 in Estcourt Natal; his mother was British and his father was from Longford, Tasmania.

Jack became interested in Astronomy when as a teenager, his mother used to point out to him the Southern Cross and the brightest stars and planets, in the evenings after church service, on their way back home.

A long standing member of ASSA, Jack became its President during 1968-69 and in 1970 he was presented with the Gill Medal and made Honorary Member on October 1989. He was also an Honorary Member of the Pretoria Centre, having served as its Chairman for several terms. The University of Witwatersrand in 1986 conferred on him the Honorary Degree of Master of Science and last December, at the recommendation of Rob McNaught, Siding Springs Obs., the I.A.U. named asteroid VD 4093 after Jack Bennett.

His instruments were a 3-inch refractor, 10x60 binoculars plus a fine Zeiss 7x35 binoculars and an 8-inch Celestron telescope that he purchased during the late seventies, however, Jack had a preference for "low power" observing, his favourite instrument was a 5-inch refractor, (Apogee telescope) x21 power giving a field of view of a deg. and a quarter, mounted on an altazimuth mounting and it was with this instrument that he discovered a 9th mag. supernova (1968L) in Messier 83 (NGC 5236) in Hydra, on the night of July 16th 1968, becoming the first person ever to visually discover a supernova since the invention of the telescope. It was also with this same instrument that on December 28, 1969 he discovered his first comet of 8.5 mag. in Tucana, after 333 hours of searching; comet Bennett 1970 II became a fine naked-eye object seen and admired and remembered by many amateur and professional astronomers all over the world; his second comet discovery was made on the early morning of November 13 1974 - comet Bennett 1974 XV of mag. 9 - after another 482 hours of comet-searching from the back-yard of his home at 90 Malan Street in Pretoria.

During his searches for comets, Jack compiled a list of southern-hemisphere objects that appeared cometlike in small telescopes using low power, - "... shades of Messier ...." - as he once told me; this list was published in MNASSA, Vol. 28, August 1969, followed by a Supplementary List that appeared in Vol. 33, August 1974 - a bonus for any comet-hunter!

Since he took up comet searching in 1967, seeing conditions deteriorated due to increasing artificial light pollution and severely limited his observations - I recall him saying that on two occasions, possible new comets were lost due to poor sky visibility not enabling him to make positive confirmations and on the following sweeping sessions they were subsequently lost. Jack had a keen, general interest in Astronomy but his favourite subject was comets, with meteors as a close second; in 1968 Jack took over from the late S.C. Venter, as Director of the ASSA Comet & Meteor



**JACK BENNETT**

Section, a position that he held until July 1985 when his health declined due to arthritis.

On October 16, 1976, Jack attended an AAVSO meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was presented with their 'Nova Award' in respect of his being the first AAVSO member to discover a supernova - an honour that he was able to receive in person at a dinner. Following a suggestion from AAVSO, Jack organized a Nova Search for interested observers in Southern Africa, thus, serving as Director of that Section during 1975-87. For several years, Jack was associated with the I.A.U. Commission 20 (comets).

During the last three years of his life, his health deteriorated further and sadly he had to give up observing altogether; he presented his famous 5" Apogee rich-field telescope to UNISA, hoping that somebody keen on Astronomy would make good use of it, sold his home and moved to "Mothwa Haven", Booysen Street, Eloffsdal.

During his active days, Jack maintained correspondence with many professional and amateur astronomers from Southern Africa and abroad, a friendly "rivalry" was established between Jack Bennett and William Bradfield - the two most popular comet-hunters in the Southern Hemisphere, - resulting in a frequent exchange of correspondence on comets.

For most of his life, Jack worked for a Government Department in Pretoria until his retirement years ago. He never married and leaves his

brother Gordon Bennett and his sister Nan, her husband Mr Smith and a nephew who live in Johannesburg. Jack belonged to the Methodist Church Choir in Pretoria, which he greatly enjoyed. He was buried at Sandfontein Cemetery, Pretoria. At his funeral, ASSA and its Council was represented by Messrs. Danie Overbeek, Chris Papadopoulos, Prof. Walter Wargau (Chairman, Pretoria Centre) and Michael Poole, (Pretoria Centre).

Four days before Jack passed away, I phoned him and we spoke about comets Austin and the recent discovery made by amateur astronomer David Levy of Arizona, Jack was extremely interested to hear the news; as I understand, I might have been the last person from the astronomical community to have spoken to Jack and I am pleased that we spoke about his ever favourite subject - comets.

Woodhaven, Durban

#### JACK BENNETT - An Appreciation

Jack Bennett was as accomplished an amateur astronomer as one could meet - yet also one of the most modest and unassuming. Although best known for his discovery of comet 1969i, which went on to become one of the greatest of the twentieth century, he was never aggressively competitive about his comet hunting, generally being quite content to make accidental discoveries of comets that were already known and being magnanimous enough to encourage other amateur astronomers in this sport. Following a discussion on some of these cases I concluded a letter to him in January 1968 with the sentence "I hope it will not be long before we indeed have a 'Comet Bennett'". Although almost two years elapsed before this rather dramatically came to pass, he did also make history within six months with the first visual discovery by an amateur of a supernova in another galaxy. The galaxy was Messier 83, and on picking it up in the course of his comet hunting he was astute enough to notice that the novel presence of a bright point in the vicinity of the nucleus made the galaxy look more like a comet than usual. It was on account of this supernova that I finally got a chance to meet him - when he was finally awarded the AAVSO medal for visual nova/supernova discoveries in 1976.

Even when he did happen on comet 1969i, what seemed most to impress him was that he found it while using the ephemerides I had prepared for searching for members of the Kreutz sungrazing group. The other Comet Bennett, 1974h, also happened to be near the Kreutz track, although this time he was not using the ephemerides. It clearly puzzled him to have this comet, an easy object for his Moonwatch Apogee telescope but not obviously moving, all for himself. Although this comet was slightly brighter on the following two mornings, it then faded rapidly, all the while becoming larger and more and more diffuse. This was a classic and well documented case of a comet failure, and the circumstance tended to support Jack's conclusion that the object must just have started to flare when he discovered it. It also tended to support his feeling that other diffuse objects he had detected but could not subsequently confirm, in March 1965 and February 1966, may have been comets that were just ending similar outbursts when first seen.

Brian Marsden