The NEAF Solar Star Party

A History of NEAF and the NSSP

By Barlow Bob

NEAF was inspired when Allan Green and Al Nagler, both of the Suffern, New York-based Rockland Astronomy Club (RAC), attended an astronomy-product expo in Connecticut organized by Bob Rinaldi of New England Astro, a Tele Vue dealer. The expo was held at a Connecticut hotel for a year or two before 1990 and the experience gave Allan the idea of hosting a similar event at Suffern's Rockland Community College (RCC). Although Al guessed then that few would travel to Rockland for such an event, Allan would eventually prove him wrong.

In 1991, the RAC sponsored its first amateur astronomy product trade show, dubbed a name that would stick, the Northeast Astronomy Forum (now more popularly known simply as "NEAF"). It was a modest event, featuring Tele Vue products and those of a few other vendors. A group of dedicated RAC members headed by Allan Green, NEAF's first Chairman, and Don Urban launched this event at RCC where the RAC held its club meetings. To better attract amateur astronomers from the northeast area, Al Nagler introduced Tele Vue's annual "Scratch and Dent Sale." The initial goal was to attract as many as 200 amateur astronomers to attend NEAF, and more than that attended the inaugural show.

These first NEAF vendors displayed their products in the RCC's atrium area, between its auditorium and cafeteria, while the large RCC auditorium provided the perfect venue for NEAF speakers. The cafeteria area provided the food service.

NEAF was originally intended to provide a forum where northeast amateur astronomers could meet and exchange information. Free tables were provided where any local amateur astronomy clubs could promote their activities and swap tables were established where used astronomy equipment could be traded. These activities helped attract many local amateur astronomers.

I asked Al Nagler if I could demonstrate his new Tele Vue Solaris dedicated solar telescope with a DayStar H-alpha solar filter that year in the courtyard area next to the atrium entrance and with his usual generosity, Uncle Al provided the Solaris, a TV mount, Air Chair and several TV eyepieces. The Solaris telescope created breathtakingly-sharp images of the Sun in the red H-alpha wavelength.

Being a dedicated one-star solar stargeezer, I delighted in demonstrating the Solaris telescope from sunrise to sunset, but even I failed to anticipate the long lines of NEAF attendees that formed next to this lone solar telescope and that have continued to grow throughout the span of 20 NEAF events. I also failed to anticipate that this informal sidewalk solar display would, in 2004, be formalized as the annual NEAF Solar Star Party.

When Allan Green moved to the dark skies of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Don Urban became the second NEAF Chair-

NEAF Chairman pauses for a solar view during NSSP 2006.

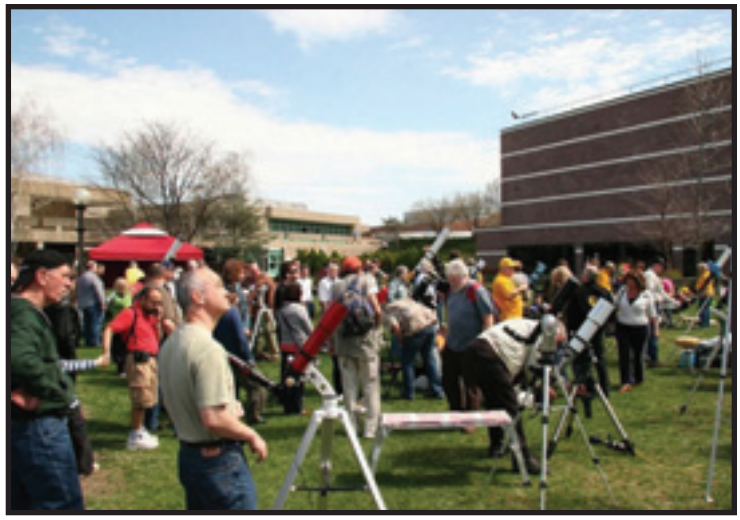
Barlow Bob (left) and Al Nager at NEAF 2005.

man and the event became even more popular under Don's steady direction and organization.

NEAF was moved to the nearby Suffern Holiday Inn and I set up my solar telescope (a TV Genesis fitted with a Solaris adapter kit and 0.7-angstrom DayStar H-alpha filter) outside in the hotel parking lot next to the NEAF entrance and continued my sidewalk solar-astronomy educational outreach demonstrations. The hotel's large catering area was divided into three rooms with vendors in the first, swap tables in the second, and amateur astronomy clubs in the third. Another large catering area was dedicated to speakers. As the number of NEAF vendors and attendees continued to increase from year to year, a large catering tent was set up in the hotel parking lot to accommodate them and the next year an even larger catering tent was employed. The annual Tele Vue "Scratch and Dent Sale" became such a popular feature that it too was moved to an outside tent to accommodate the huge lines that waited patiently for TV bargains.

Now, Barlow Bob is not stupid. I set

Barlow Bob provides first views through Tele Vue "Scratch and Dent Sale" bargains.



Crowds of NEAF attendees enjoying NSSP 2005.

up my new Tele Vue solar scope in the parking lot across from the long line of attendees leading to the TV sale tent and placed a large sign on the front of my scope advertising, "Complimentary test drive of your NEAF purchase on the Sun," and during these early years many NEAF attendees got their first views through their new TV eyepieces in my solar telescope. Better yet, I got free test drives of a wide variety of great eyepieces.

NEAF continued at Holiday Inn for several years until RAC needed a convention facility with a much larger area to accommodate the ever increasing annual crowds of vendors and attendees. A larger auditorium with better media facilities was also needed to more properly present the fine speakers that NEAF was attracting. The event was therefore returned to Rockland Community College and the exhibitor area moved into the extremely large RCC field house – a venue large enough to handle future growth of the increasingly popular event.

By this point, amateur solar astronomers Greg Piepol, Alan Daroff, Vince Cianfichi, and Mark Rosengarten had joined the still-informal solar presentations. Greg Piepol shared views through his large-aperture Astro-Physics refractor with a Solar Spectrum narrow-bandwidth H-alpha solar filter and Vince Cianfichi demonstrated sketching the sun. Mark Rosengarten also shared views of sunspots through a telescope equipped with a white-light filter and Bill Dean demonstrated a variety of Coronado's dedicated H-alpha solar scopes. The folks at Questar even demonstrated that company's unique solar spectroscope.

When the preternaturally-energetic Alan Traino became NEAF Chairman, the event began expanding at a similarly frenetic pace, even attracting numerous international vendors. Soon, the cooperating Northeast Astro Imaging Conference (NEAIC) was added to the venue to better promote astro-imaging products and related speakers. The NEAIC is now held in conjunction with NEAF on the Thursday and Friday before NEAF weekend.

In 2004, the RAC decided to include our previously-informal solar event as an official NEAF activity. The now-formal NEAF Solar Star Party (NSSP) was moved to a new site inside of the RCC courtyard, where it will remain to host attendees of

NEAF 2011.

At the first official NSSP, Greg Piepol, Alan Daroff, Vince Cianfichi, Paul Hyndman, and I were joined by a small group of dedicated amateur solar astronomers, plus the Coronado NEAF solar exhibitor. The NSSP has continued to increase in size and is now what many consider the world's largest solar star party.

While NSSP volunteers receive free entrance to NEAF and other perks, their most coveted compensation is in the form of the bright-yellow official NSSP sportswear, consisting of a golf shirt, sweatshirt, and hat, which uniform has become the high-school-letterman-jacket equivalent of amateur solar astronomy. Each year, a number of attendees ask if they can buy the yellow NSSP sportswear and we humbly explain that the NSSP uniform can only be earned, not purchased.

NSSP has become a remarkable Pro-Am solar outreach event that demonstrates equipment used by icons of amateur solar astronomy as well as the latest state-of-the-art solar observing and imaging systems exhibited at NEAF. NSSP amateur staffers have traveled to the annual event from 15 U.S. states and eight foreign countries and have been joined by NEAF exhibitors from eight U.S. states and five foreign countries. There is simply no better place than NEAF and NSSP for hands-on testing of the best equipment available to amateur solar astronomy.

Weather for daily NSSP solar viewing has usually been good and when NEAF was expanded to a two-day event, the odds of significant hours of clear skies improved. But when someone complains about the weather conditions at NEAF, I tell them to speak to Alan Traino, its current Chairman. I only organize NSSP; Mr. Traino is responsible for providing clear skies for our daily solar observing.

So, on the rare occasions when weather conditions do not permit solar observing, Alan provides the NSSP staff with an exhibitor booth in the RCC field house where they display their solar telescopes and present a solar educational program which can be far more dynamic than you might think. For example, our display might demonstrate bright emission spectra lines of the sodium and mercury lights in the ceiling of the field house as displayed through a Shelyak Instruments Lhires Lite spectroscope. Meanwhile, weather permitting, attendees can observe and contrast the dark absorption lines of the sun using the same equipment. NSSP staffers explain how scientists using spectroscopy to analyze the emission spectra-line fingerprints of various elements in a laboratory, discovered that dark absorption lines in a star correspond to these bright emission lines.

Alan Daroff is the most senior member of our NSSP Staff, with decades of amateur solar astronomy experience. He shares his considerable knowledge with NEAF attendees and, using a low-resolution prism spectroscope, demonstrates how an H-alpha etalon works. I also present a similar etalon demonstration using a Lhires Lite high-resolution grating spectroscope.

Other examples of NSSP solar astronomy educational activities have included those provided by Larry Rand, a local teacher who utilizes his unique "Pipehenge" to demonstrate movements of the Sun through the seasons. Larry sets up the Pipehenge next to the NEAF Kid's Corner where children can sit in its navigator's seat at the center of several curved PVC pipes, representing the center of the Earth. Larry uses this product to explain how the Sun travels in the sky through the year in a movement known as Analemma. Please visit the pipehenge.com website to learn about this amazing product.

Similarly, Marc Stowbridge has shared his "Walking the Analemma" demonstration at NSSP. He places a Meade ETX on the top of a tall PVC pipe mount. Marc attaches a green laser so that it points toward the rear of the telescope and programs the scope to follow the path that the Sun travels across the sky over the course of a full year, but in short, one-month steps. When the scope stops at each monthly step, the laser forms a bright, green dot on the ground and a child places a small, yellow disc on the successive spot. When the telescope has completed twelve movements, the twelve resulting yellow discs have formed the distinctive figure-eight-shaped pattern of the solar analemma. When NSSP is closed due to inclement weather, he presents this fascinating exercise inside the RCC field house instead.

The Kid's Corner is a popular NEAF activity with engaging astronomy-related projects. Its staff also brings groups of children outside to enjoy NSSP where the kid-friendly staff help children observe the Sun through the remarkable solar telescopes gathered there. Of course, we also stress the importance of safe solar observing. Most of these kids (like most adults of our general population) have never observed the Sun. Perhaps a Kid's Corner attendee who observes the Sun for the first time at NSSP will someday be a future member of the NSSP staff.

Each year I create and distribute the annual Barlow Bob's Solar Star Chart at NSSP. It's a simple chart and the 2011 version predicts the Sun's position at RA: 1h, 37m, DEC 10 degrees, 06 seconds, at magnitude -26.8 and spectrum G2V. No, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to find the Sun in the sky, but if you are a rocket scientist, just plug those coordinates into your go-to telescope's computer. Be sure to put a solar filter on the front of your scope before entering that go-to command. And feel free to create your own version of Barlow Bob's Solar Star Chart to share with fellow amateur solar astronomers at your own solar star party. You'll find solar coordinates at aa.usno.navy.mil.

NSSP staffers have received many positive compliments over the year, but perhaps the ultimate came from the NEAF exhibitors at large the year Alan Traino instructed that we end NSSP early so the exhibitors would have NEAF attendees' full attention at the closing hours of that event. Not bad for what started out 20 years ago as a one-telescope solar star party. ATT