

Reprinted with permission from the Canadian Astronomical Society

## FORTY YEARS WITH AN ASTRONOMY COLUMN

(Behind the Scenes View)

From the time that Dr. Peter Millman was able to arrange for my husband Dr. Frank Hogg to take over his weekly newspaper column "With the Stars" in the Toronto Star that column became embedded in my household for forty years. In the January, 1981 issue of *David Dunlap Doings* I have given an account of my departure from the column on January 10 this year. Some other details will be provided here.

In the early days the column was allowed about 600 words and the columnist was expected to supply the drawings. Frank had some skill as a draughtsman so this did not bother him much. The illustrations were usually diagrams, with an occasional picture. Frank wrote the columns in longhand and I typed them, doing some editing as I went along. (In fact, I did an occasional column on my own when Frank was under pressure). During World War II the column disappeared for a while with the shortage of newsprint, when the Toronto Star shrank to only a few pages.

Frank's last column, on the high altitude of the December full moon, appeared December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1950, only two days before his sudden death on January 1, 1951. (His heart had been damaged by the rheumatic fever in childhood). My astronomical friends immediately seized on the idea that the Toronto Star should ask me to take over the writing of the column. Members of the Toronto Centre of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada sent a barrage of letters to The Star with this suggestion. The column for January 6 was written by Fred Troyer, who was on the Star staff and is a well known member of the Toronto Centre.

My writing of the column began with that of January 13, 1951. For ten years I had been close enough to the column so that writing it came naturally to me. The drawings were harder. I have no skills along that line and I wince now when I look back at my efforts as recorded in some of my forty years of scrapbooks of the weekly column. Eventually The Star provided a skilled draughtsman. I prepared a crude sketch for him and he produced a marvelously clear and accurate end-product. In recent years though, the space allowed me for diagrams or photographs grew less and less.

The copy for the column was usually sent by mail from Richmond Hill to the Toronto Star, first at 80 King Street West, Toronto and in recent years at One Yonge Street. In the early days the editor asked to have it one or two days before publication, that is on Thursday or Friday of the week it appeared, always on Saturday. We mailed it by Wednesday. Even during the year I spent in Washington D.C. as Program Director for Astronomy for National Science Foundation, 1955-1956, I mailed it to Toronto on Tuesday. (This year I have received on Feb. 20 a letter bearing our proper postal code and postmarked Washington, Feb. 10). At Christmas season or if I was late in preparation, someone had to take the column to The Star. I think my reliability in getting the copy to the editor on time was one of the factors which helped the column to last so long. Another was the whole hearted support of the members of the R.A.S.C. who have formed a stable, valuable nucleus of readers.

In the early years the column appeared anywhere in the paper and was somewhat at the mercy of last minute news. Eventually, along with other weekly columns, it was gathered on to the Leisure Pages. Along with this, the editor's deadline grew earlier and the column gradually shrank to about 400 words. The editor requested that the copy be in his hands by Friday of the preceding week, and I mailed it from Richmond Hill on the Tuesday or Wednesday before that. A long lead time like this is serious when you are trying to convey the latest information on transitory events such as comets. Also handicapping my attempts at prompt information for the public was the excessive delay in postal service in recent years. This meant that occasionally some of my sources like Science News or Sky and Telescope were delivered to me six or seven weeks after THEY had gone to press.

The topic for each column was entirely my choice except that by agreement with the editor once a month I described the sky for the following month. (Only once did an editor suggest a topic to me). Usually the editors made very few changes in my copy. Many columns went through with no changes of any kind, not even punctuation. For the monthly sky column, for many years The Star obtained from Science Service its monthly sky maps. However with the retirement of James Stokley some years ago Science Service discontinued making the maps. Then we switched to the bi-monthly maps prepared for the Observer's Handbook R.A.S.C., by John Perkins under the auspices of Dr. John Percy.

In the topics I always tried to bring in as much Canadian astronomy and as many names of Canadian astronomers, professional and amateur, as I could in my limited space. If the column does not survive my departure, this is the feature that will be the biggest loss. These columns pertaining to Canada were the ones which gave me the greatest satisfaction to write. A few examples are: the CASCA-RASC meeting in Halifax last June (July 12, 1980), the IAU in Montreal (various dates, August 1979), Asteroid Toronto (April 7, 1979), Broughton's forecast for Halley's comet (April 21, 1979), Canadian meteorites (July 16, 1977), Grinding of 144-inch disk at Victoria (February 15, 1975), Dedication of Petrie Building, York University (November 8, 1969). There are dozens of such items pertaining to Canadian astronomy. The column was not a book review column, but when a specially pertinent book appeared, as Malcolm Thomson's "The Beginning of the Long Dash", I did use the space for a commentary on it (July 22, 1978).

Part of the time in the early days, the column carried a sizable heading, a sketch of an observatory dome and the planet Saturn, and had a double headline. In later years this was reduced to a rather small "The Stars" and a headline of a few words. The headline of the column was always completely out of our hands and was constructed by someone on The Star staff. Mainly the headlines were appropriate, but an occasional one caused me anguish when I picked up the paper. At times I found it hard to believe that the person who wrote the headline had actually read the column. My satisfaction on writing a column on Rolf Meier's first and very important comet discovery (June 3, 1978) was substantially diminished by the headline "New planet discovered by planning and work".

Back in 1963 I decided that my life had to be simplified and that the column was the thing I could give up most easily. So with the January 5 column I wrote a farewell to my readers. From this I received a flood of touching letters. The Star did not replace me, and after a gap of one week I agreed to resume the column on January 19, 1963. In my thirty years of writing the column this was the only time I failed to send The Star copy for it when they expected me to do so. During these years there were about three dozen weeks when the column did not appear, mainly because of periods when space was rotated amongst the feature columns. On some occasions the column was lost in the mails or on the editors' desks. Over 1500 of my columns have appeared.

On my final departure from the column this year I have not received as many letters as I did in 1963 and I ponder the possible reasons. Of course the correspondence has never been as heavy as columnists on more earthy subjects receive. Most of the letters contained ordinary, sensible questions. A few were humorous; some were frustrating. Occasionally a reader who insisted that he or she read my column each week asked for information (bright planet in the dawn sky?) recently given in the column.

For writing this column I was never on the actual staff of the Toronto Star. I was one of a group of feature writers known as “freelance”. The Toronto Star and I never had a contract with each other. Either party could have quit on a week’s notice. The financial reward for the column was very modest.

The presence of astronomy in big newspapers has changed enormously in recent decades. When either Frank or I began with the column there was rarely any astronomical news in the papers. “With the Stars” or the later title “The Stars” was all the astronomy the paper carried. That is all changed with the Space Age. Astronomical news is on the wire services weekly or daily from places like Jet Propulsion Laboratory. A weekly astronomy column now faces this kind of competition. And newspapers now have science writers on their staff.

In the last several years I have found the weekly deadline an increasing burden. Obviously I had to give up the column some time, and I did not want to dwindle away as some long-term columnists have done. To quit at the end of an even thirty years, at age 75, had a strong appeal for me. So I submitted my intentions to my editor, Stratton Holland, on September 11, 1980 to take effect in early January, 1981. This allowed the newspaper four months to appoint a successor. This they have not yet done, though they have had a number of good applicants.

My last column appeared January 10 alongside a comment from the editor, with my picture. At the end of this last column I had written the customary, but now particularly appropriate “30”, indicating the typesetter that this is the end of the copy, and the editor wrote a note requesting that in this case the “30” be left on. We were both disappointed when habit proved too strong for the typesetter and it was left out. So let’s put it on here.

Helen Hogg