

Why It's All Chuck's Fault A Report From Astrofest, 2007

Friday dawned as a dark, drizzly and humid day. The rain hadn't started in Kankakee, IL yet (60% chance), so I had decided to leave home early and hopefully get my campsite set up before any storms did set in.

First, I stopped at Q-Mart for ice. I mashed the bag on the ground for a bit, since it was a solid block. Shaking the bag into my cooler showed me I took 1-20 lb. iceberg and turned it into about 5 smaller icebergs. Not having a hammer in my van to break up the ice made me dig around to see what I could use to reduce these icebergs into useable chunks. I use small hand weights to hold down the screen door part of my tent. I picked one up and proceeded to beat on these icebergs. The result: icebergs 5, me 0.

I drove in and out of rain showers until the state line. I think the rain is afraid of Illinois construction, as I drove out of the rain, and drove into toll way construction from the state line to past Gurnee Mills.

I got to Vana's Farm just after the noon registration began. A gusty, humid and very sunny day greeted me as I parked my van and went to register. Two elderly ladies were trying to assemble nametags, while the wind kept blowing the tags off the table. As my last name confused them (no surprise, again) I dug through the pile and pulled my tag out.

Wandering back to my van, I saw a few more people had arrived. First job on my task list: set up the tent. Things went very well, until it was time to stand it up. I personally think the wind was taunting me the whole time. I would get one side standing up, walk to the other side and WHOOSH! the wind would gust and the side I just stood up would fall over. Moving a bit quicker than the wind allowed me to win and the tent was up. Ok, now the rain fly for the top of the tent. I would flip it up and start to hook it on, whoosh! the wind would blow and flop, the rain fly was all back on the side I was hooking up. G-r-r-r, ok, I tied one side down, dashed around to the other side to find out I tied it down too tight and I couldn't get the hooks done. Retied the one side down, get the fly over, only to realize it's crooked. Start again. Murphy's Laws were alive and well during this task.

It was interesting to see the different tents, campers and scopes that people were hauling out of their vehicles. I met Jeff Benuzzi as he came over to help me finish my campsite setup. He was saving space for his friends, Dave and Chuck, who were arriving later on.

Sunset brought out very hungry mosquitoes, along with Dave and Chuck. By the time they were parked, it was dark. Chuck then calls out, "I just bought a new tent!" Of course everyone starts laughing. Jeff comments that most people put up a tent during the daytime to make sure they know how to assemble it, and make sure all the parts are there. Well, think of some of the best jokes you know, and you'll know how to picture this scene: Jeff and Chuck are trying to assemble the tent while Dave and I are holding up red flashlights. After some scrabbling around to find out what goes where, the tent is up. Chuck then holds up a rod and asks, "Where does this go?"

Of course, as everyone is starting to buckle down to some observing, the clouds creep in. Jeff explains that every time Chuck touches a telescope, the clouds appear. We all jokingly tell Chuck to get away from the telescopes. What's that in the South sky? Lightning! Jeff says he's seen this before and the storm will stay to the South. I wait for the clouds to leave. They don't. The lightning gets closer. I notice that others have packed up their scopes. Flash! The lightning is by the tree line at the southern part of the property. I pack up, and the storm leaves. Figures. Well, I join Jeff and his merry band for the evening. I brought along my portable fan, which was nice to have, as the breeze had died off, the night was warm and the skeeters were still chomping away.

As the night progressed, Chuck kept using his scope, and "his friends" (the clouds) kept hanging around. During the cloudy times, we would sit and talk about numerous topics. One of particular hilarity was "Chuck's microwave." Chuck does his cooking using a gas torch. He had brought it along, so he could cook up some hot dogs.

Chuck's "friends" left for a short time, which allowed some observing to occur. I got to see the entire Veil Nebula through an Oxygen III filter. I had never heard of the filter, but now plan to add it to my eyepiece case. Each month Jeff publishes a listing of binocular observing objects. After viewing the "mini-dipper", which was on the binocular list for this month, the group got into a lively debate on another object on the list, NGC457. We call it the ET Cluster, but Chuck knew it as the Airplane Cluster. I don't know about you, but I don't know of too many airplanes that have eyes!

After getting a just a couple of hours of sleep, it's a really rude awakening to have a rooster crowing at sunrise! In Jeff's camp, I heard the guys talking about cooking up some hot dogs for breakfast. Chuck and Dave were nice enough to demonstrate their cooking process so I could take some pictures. Dave gave the hotdog a nice charcoal coloring, and then chowed down. The pictures are posted at:

http://web.mac.com/orionsas/iWeb/Astrofest_2007/Vendors.html

Saturday was sunny and warm, but clouds moved in at mid-morning. Dave came by to tell me that Chuck had looked through a PST (Personal Solar Telescope), so his "friends" were back for another visit. Randy and Carol arrived at 11:00. During the afternoon, Randy went to see some of the featured speakers, while Carol and I strolled through the vendor and swap area. I found the Crawford-style focuser replacement for my dob., and was very happy about that! 20/20 Telescopes had a nice display of Naglers, and boy it was so tempting to add one to my collection! Maybe next time... Astrogazers had a portable observing dome on display. It's able to be assembled by one person, the dome turns and has a shutter on it, and the observing area has two shelves inside. It's a nice idea for those who cannot put up a permanent structure. I'm debating about putting it on my Christmas list, but I think I'll be waiting for awhile for it to arrive.

Unfortunately, Chuck's "friends" stuck around for the rest of the day. Several heavy rain showers moved through during the late afternoon. Carol and I were under our Quik Shades, and we found out they are not 100% waterproof. We were doing the chair shuffle quite a few times in order to stay dry. Chuck's "friends" never left, so thanks to a Wi-Fi connection provided by Astrogizmos, Randy downloaded a JPL broadcast which we watched.

So, thanks to Chuck's "friends", I didn't get in the observing I wanted to do (it's all Chuck's fault!). We plan to try the Prairie Skies Star Party next year, as this Astrofest was rather a disappointment. Jeff, Dave and Chuck are fun guys, and I look forward to seeing them at Prairie Skies. Jeff will be letting me know when some of the other Illinois star parties are. Hopefully more SAS members will give a star party a try. It's a wonderful way to meet fellow amateur astronomers, trade stories and observations, and see some very unique cooking styles!

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