

Discussion

J. Percy: *In textbooks and other general astronomy books, there are several advantages to using photographs taken by amateurs:*

- i) They are often of very high quality.*
- ii) They are often of “everyday” objects that are discussed in school textbooks.*
- iii) Amateurs are usually pleased to contribute their work for publication.*
- iv) Readers can “identify” with photographs taken by people like themselves.*

TAKE THE “A” TRAIN¹ TO THE STARS

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Astronomers, in addition to their scholarly and academic functions, have the mission to bring enlightenment to the people. In the City of New York, astronomers fulfill this mission through the Amateur Astronomers Association. Over the decades, the Association, or AAA, evolved a multi-faceted scheme of public enlightenment in astronomy. Under this scheme, astronomy in New York City has become a free-standing cultural amenity on a par with streetfairs, artshows, plays, and parades.

Once a month during the school year, the Association presents a formal public lecture on astronomy. These are convened in the American Museum of Natural History, the ancestral birthplace of the AAA. Occasionally, lectures are featured at a large university in the City for time and place variety. At these lectures, a professional astronomer explains some contemporary topic on a first-year college level, illustrated by slides and viewgraphs. The lectures — and all public activities of the AAA — are free of any charge. Area high schools and colleges employ the AAA lectures as an extra-curricular activity for their students.

In the summer, the AAA stages public stargazing in Carl Schurz Park, along the East River in Manhattan. Though located in the dense Upper East Side, Carl Schurz Park offers clear views of about two-thirds of the sky with adequate shielding from nearby lights. These sessions, convened monthly in clear weather, feature the celestial sights of the season: the moon, planets, clusters and nebulae, and double stars. Telescopes and charts are provided by the AAA.

The Amateur Astronomers Association operates the astronomy program at Gateway National Recreation Area under contract with the U.S. National Park Ser-

¹*Ed. Note:* The “A” train is one of the New York subway routes that serves Harlem; it was made especially famous by Duke Ellington’s jazz piece “Take the “A” Train.” The authors can provide detailed information about the “A” train for any readers who have a special interest in this topic.

vice. The parklands and preserves of Gateway stretch along the southern frontier of New York and offer clean dark skies for the urban dweller. The programs include popular-level slideshows, equipment demonstrations, skywatching tutorials, and clear-weather star-viewing. Staff for the Gateway activities is drawn from the AAA's Brooklyn and Staten Island Chapters.

National Astronomy Day is a theme day celebrated in April or May each year. In New York, National Astronomy Day is hosted by a museum, park, or school while the AAA provides the astronomy program. In conjunction with the host facility, this program includes slidetalks, equipment and project exhibits, panels and seminars, fleamarkets, and viewing of sunspots by day and the stars by night. Sometimes movies, videos, and planetarium shows round out the day's activities.

The AAA maintains a panel of experienced speakers available for other clubs, museums, schools, and social and civic groups. Speakers may be AAA members or patron astronomers. The panel can supply a single person to give a simple slidetalk or it can cater to an all-day astronomy fair with a corps of astronomers. Speakers-panel services are customized to suit the client. Fees for speakers-panel service are quite attractive to even the smallest client.

The Association serves the newsmedia by explaining and interpreting astronomy events like comets, novae, and eclipses. Newsmedia obtain quick authoritative answers to their questions and they can engage the AAA for press interviews or radio/TV appearances. The press, both national and local, routinely carry notices of AAA public activities. The Association's interpretation mission extends also to consultations for outside authors and exhibitors.

Astronomers who serve with the Amateur Astronomers Association directly fulfill one major goal of their profession — to bring enjoyment and edification in astronomy to the people. If you have this goal, too, do consider membership in the Amateur Astronomers Association. For membership details — or for exploring other ways to practice public service astronomy through the AAA — contact us.

STRATEGIES FOR PRESENTING ASTRONOMY TO THE PUBLIC

James S. Sweitzer

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Imagine an American trying to explain a triple play to someone who understands English poorly and who has never seen a baseball diamond, much less a game. Yet this is the sort of challenge astronomy educators face every day both in the classroom and in more informal settings.

In a college classroom, the professor has some time to teach students the language of science and astronomy. As the students gain proficiency, they can then