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Keith Brown's photograph of the brilliant Orion nebula shows what colorful treasures the eye may encounter at his Billings observatory, inset.

STARGAZER

By KIM LARSEN
Of The Gazette Staff

When Keith Brown goes home at night he enters a fantastic world that is limited only by the bounds of imagination and broadens the intellect.

He visits deep space, with stops at the planets, explores stars, the Orion nebula, and the Andromeda galaxy, 2.3 million light years away.

Keith Brown is not an astronaut, but he has the next best thing. He has a powerful telescope nestled in the brown-brick inside the only known observatory in Billings — on top of Brown's house.

People often take a quick second look when they pass Brown's home at 2826 Rimrock Road.

Some are puzzled by the white-domed structure perched on the roof. Others immediately recognize it as an observatory, a structure Mount Rushmore, Kitt Peak and Lowell Observatories in California and Arizona.

Both the knowledgeable and the curious frequently are curious enough to go to the door and ask Brown's about his hobby. Neighbors drop by at night to peer through the telescope into the heavens.

Kids are especially interested in Brown's observatory and often are invited into the roof for a look at other worlds.

Brown, president of Wyo-Ben Inc., a Billings mining and electronics company with offices at 1280 N. 19th St., has been "playing around with astronomy for years."

He began as somewhat backyard, saying he is just an amateur and that he's "not into it deeply" or knowledgeable about astronomy. But, like a kid with a model train, he quickly warmed to his subject and delightedly detailed his experiences watching the sky at night.

Brown started his hobby during an astronomy class at Eastern Montana College in Billings, where he met Max Bray, a fellowstar who had made photographic lenses for one of the early American space vehicles.

Bray had also started to make small telescopes. Brown bought a 6-inch Maksutov scope from Bray.

Over the next few years, Brown often took his telescope to his cabinet home on the Hillcrest and spent hours at night looking at the wonders of space (and he became too cold at time).

Setting up the telescope in the observatory got to be too much of a chore.

So Brown decided on a permanent arrangement at home. In 1979 he bought his observatory from Observatory Domes, a Mississippi firm.

Brown had a concrete foundation built on the flat roof of his home for the observatory to place. He cut a hole in a bedroom ceiling and installed a ladder leading to a trapdoor over the hole.

The small Maksutov telescope was replaced by a 14-inch Celestron with a camera mounted on it.

To use the scope, Brown climbs the ladder and enters the observatory, which stands about 8 feet high and has room for one adult and a small child. The telescope sticks up about 6½ feet in diameter.

Two doors slide open at middle of the observatory to allow a 180-degree view from the horizon. The dome can be turned manually so the scope can be aimed in any direction.

The permanent installation is aligned with the Earth's polar axis so only pictures do not have to be made part by part.

Brown said the telescope is driven by an electric clock so that it turns in the opposite direction of Earth's rotation, but at the same speed. This enables the scope to "track with the stars."

Because the Earth turns only 15 degrees an hour, the telescope can turn "quite a way" through the observatory's opening before the dome itself has to be moved, Brown said.

To take a picture of a star, the telescope is aimed at the object, Brown said. It takes this long to get an image on film because there is so little light when photographing a deep-space object, he explained.

The dome is moisture proof, but sometimes cold when the doors are open.

Winter is not the best time for viewing, Brown said there have not been too many clear nights this winter. Even on clear nights, the cold keeps people inside the atmosphere that is not clearing, he said.

Brown likes having the observatory at home. He can go to it immediately after dinner and not have to waste time setting up equipment like he had to in the mountains.

But there are some disadvantages having it at home," Brown said.

His home sits in north Billings, near the Rimrocks, but south of Poly Drive.

Homes to the north, east and west "are reasonably good," Brown said, but to the south, lights from the brand business of the glow from the city's lights.

Asked to describe his favorite pictures taken through the telescope, Brown said a shot of the Orion nebula and some of the Andromeda galaxy were good.

He tosses away most of every 10 pictures because he is not satisfied.

"The process of learning to photograph space is pretty lengthy," Brown explained.

(More on Stargazer, Page 4D)

Montana's clear winter nights can mean cold temperatures in the unheated observatory.

Brown's bedroom trapdoor leads to heavenly vistas.

It's a rooftop landmark.

Keith Brown: Stargazer

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