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Next to Bryan High 1803 Greenfield Plaza
No. 1 Pizza Inn of College Station
413 Texas Ave.

Student hopes to detect meteors



Bob Johnson with meteor radiation analyzer.

TAMU graduate student Bob Johnson is trying to capture meteors on magnetic tape.

Meteors, known popularly as "shooting stars," should be plentiful during the shower.

The Perseid meteor shower will begin this weekend. It reached its peak Tuesday night and continued this morning. At its maximum, the shower usually produces 50 meteors an hour. The Perseids tend to be bright and leave "trains."

Johnson's interest hinges on research for his master's thesis at TAMU. Employing NASA-designed electronic equipment, he hopes to obtain data for a systematic study of meteors, their chemical composition, velocity and mass.

The meteor radiation analyzer (MRA) is being used under the direction of Dr. Ronald Schorn, Dr. George Kattawar and Dr. Edward Fry of TAMU's Physics Department. The MRA was loaned to the department on a long-term basis by the Johnson Spacecraft Center. The MRA detects meteors

through nine photometers which are devices for measuring light intensity. They are packaged on an equatorial-type telescope mounting.

Detected light of a meteor trail is converted to an electrical signal. Associated equipment including a logic unit, digitizer, magnetic tape recorder and power pack, treats and stores the signal. Taped data can then be reduced and analyzed by computer.

However, the project has had several difficulties.

First, the best meteor rates are found between midnight and start of morning twilight.

Finding "dark" also presented problems. The MRS can't be exposed to street and parking lot lights, or any extraneous illumination. It also requires electrical power and secure facilities for storage of the bulky electronic components.

Johnson is using a remote corner of the TAMU Research and Extension Center at Bryan, but only for six months. The combination of few

productive meteor showers and time limit could hamper the work.

"The system operates automatically once it is in operation," said Johnson, 1973 TAMU graduate from Plano. "Appearance of a meteor in the field triggers the recorder, and the data goes on tape automatically."

The motor-driven mounting keeps the detector unit pointed at a particular part of the sky. However, it is difficult to select a region in which meteors are most likely to appear. The apparatus has a 23-degree field of view from the photomultiplier tubes, each about two inches in diameter.

On a recent night, Johnson counted 32 meteors. None went onto tape, however.

The tubes are so sensitive to the slightest amount of light that flashlights and cigarette lighters are banned while it is running. Any light operates the recorder. Until minor equipment changes are made, such non-meteor light sources use up Johnson's special tape.

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Bryant aids research at bayou site

Dr. Vaughn Bryant, TAMU anthropologist and botanist, is assisting research at one of the newest archaeological sites in Louisiana, the Bayou Jasmin Project near New Orleans.

Bryant is working with colleagues from Louisiana State University to analyze pollen taken from the dig.

Bryant describes his role as determining prehistoric environmental changes and indications of plant domestication. In addition, he is looking at fossil plant seeds to study what kinds of foods people living 3,000 years ago gathered and ate.

"My work also involves analyses of preserved wood to determine what kinds were used for the manufacture of houses, bows, arrows and boats. Further, I am examining coprolites for indications of diet, methods of food preparation and even health as reflected by the presence of possible parasites," he said.

The dig has created enthusiasm among Bryant's LSU colleagues. "In my 20 years of the field," explains LSU curator of archaeology Bob Newman, "this is one of the most tremendous sites I have ever seen."

The site was first noticed in 1957, but lack of money and staff prevented research. When work began a couple of years ago on the junction of two interstate highways, dredgings thrown up on the bank showed an unusual number of artifacts from different periods.

Bryant explains that the Louisiana researchers are having to use some unusual techniques since the site is on the bayou and only two feet above sea level.

Although Bryant will be analyzing pollen and coprolites, he said some of the finds have included alligator tooth jewelry, a bone-tool tip, ceramics and a clay ball.

Be careful with fire: There are babes in the woods.



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