

Recollections: Parkes 60th

Jay Ekers



In 1964 I came newly married to Parkes. John Bolton, Ron's PhD supervisor, believed in astronomers being close to their telescope so we shifted to Parkes when Ron had finished his first-year courses at ANU. After three weeks in the town, we rented a little old farmhouse, Merryvale, a few miles out of Alectown. The floors sloped in random directions; occasional weeds grew up through the gaps between the boards in the passage. The back yard had a grape vine and a gold mine. The telephone was on a party line, the number of rings indicating the intended callee, with all calls going through a small exchange – probably one of the few rural exchanges that handled lots of international calls.



As part of Ron's PhD project, he was entitled to have his lunches at the telescope providing the cook knew before 10:00 am that day. Ron is not a morning person and his telephone bill to the cook was higher than our minimal £2 pound a month house rental. But the upside was that he met the many international scientists that visited the telescope, colleagues of John Bolton. An opportunity Ron would not otherwise have had so early in his career, an opportunity that others in Sydney and Canberra did not have.



Occasionally the normal view from the road of the telescope was just a red dust blur. We had arrived in the middle of a 5-year drought, and we had to have water carted to our Merryvale tank for drinking, dishwashing, and occasional beer making. Eventually we were showering and doing our laundry at the visitors' quarters.



Before marriage I had been a physicist working in the radio therapy department at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Parkes at that time only had a small cottage hospital so I was happy to take up John Bolton's offer of a job at the telescope, reducing the data from the ongoing 0° to $+20^\circ$ area of the Parkes 75cm survey. This was pre-computer - there were mounting piles of chart records and I drew gaussians by hand on each scan to find likely candidates for the follow up observations at 20 and 11 cm.



I was soon co-opted as an observer. After instruction from Dennis Gill, I received my licence to drive the telescope and joined the survey group in midnight to morning observations - fuelled by the quarter's cook who supplied us with a basket of goodies each night. The nights that John Bolton was there we also tasted Lettie Bolton's special observing cake. In those pre-computer days, the telescope was driven manually. At the desk in the control room, on the left, is the transparent dome that indicated the pointing position of the telescope and the master equatorial - a hemispherical coordinate converter from alt az to equatorial. It enabled the operator to drive the telescope at maximum speed, only slowing it down when nearing the required position.



Confirmed radio sources needed to be identified.. From an optical star catalogue, I would choose several stars near the radio position. The list was sent to the Sydney office and in return I received a paper plot of the positions, scaled to match the large photographic copies of the 48-inch Palomar Sky Survey; an error box indicated the radio position. On a sheet of transparent plastic laid on the plot, I used a razor blade to mark a cross over each position. This I could then overlay on the relevant photograph to check for any optical counterpart to the radio source.



I would drive the short distance home after observing because at that time there was a rule that no woman could stay in the visitors' quarters. But when Margaret Clarke, an English astronomer, came to CSIRO it was obvious that it would be most inconvenient if she had to travel back and forth to Parkes when she was observing with the telescope. To clarify the situation an official memo from headquarters was circulated stating that in future, professional women would be the only women allowed to stay in the telescope quarters. It

was from our Head of Division, Welshman Taffy Bowen, who was obviously not aware that in the local vernacular, 'professional women' meant 'sex workers'!



In my spare time I visited Effie, wife of the site engineer Peter Crossthwaite, and Mrs Day, wife of the site manager George Day, who lived in houses on site.

Alectown had a population of thousands in the goldrush days but by the time we arrived, there were only a couple of houses, a War Memorial Hall where dances were occasionally held, the telephone exchange and a petrol bowser where potato crisps and eggs were also sold. For the rest of our food shopping, we had to go to Parkes.

Many nights I drove in to the RSL to play squash. Once I played the pokies there, winning £5 which I happily pocketed.

John Bolton was a very considerate and thoughtful boss. In 1966 I was pregnant and when day-long morning sickness threatened to end my employment, he provided a shovel and pointed to a pile of dirt just outside our little wooden office. So I stayed. Months later when the ABC arrived to make the documentary "The Astronomers of Parkes" he loaned me his large desk so that the future Ekers Jr was hidden from view.



Thank you for reading,

Jay