

Clyde Tombaugh – Burdett - 2

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Along Kansas Highway 156 about fifty miles west of Great Bend is the rural community of Burdett. Next to the water tower is a roadside park with a historical marker devoted to a local boy who became the discoverer of the planet Pluto. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about Clyde Tombaugh, the local farmboy whose interest in astronomy would lead to his discovery of another planet. Don Cloutman is one of the citizens of Burdett who is seeking to continue to honor Tombaugh's legacy.

Don grew up southwest of Burdett in another rural community, the town of Minneola, population 717 people. Now, that's rural.

He studied zoology at Fort Hays State where he met his wife who is from Burdett. After serving in the Army, he went to graduate school at Arkansas, became a fisheries biologist at Duke Power Company in North Carolina, and earned a Ph.D. at Mississippi State. Dr. Cloutman became a professor of biology at Bemidji State University before he and his wife retired to Burdett.

They are helping Burdett continue to honor the legacy of noted astronomer Clyde Tombaugh. The Kansas Historical Society website, Kansapedia, provides some background.

Prior to 1781, scientists believed that there were six planets in our solar system. In March of that year, an English astronomer named Sir William Herschel became the first person in recorded history to discover a planet when he located the planet Uranus. This was a remarkable accomplishment. However, Uranus did not seem to conform to the laws of Newtonian physics. Its route through the night sky defied predictability, and no one could explain this erratic behavior.

In 1824, the work of a German astronomer and mathematician suggested that the variability was caused by the gravitational pull of another planet beyond Uranus. In 1846, an observatory in Berlin found such a planet: Neptune.

When additional variability was found, scientists assumed that there must be yet another planet beyond Neptune. However, it was thought to be too distant, too dim, and probably impossible to find.

Astronomers continued the quest, however, at such places as the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona. To assist in this search, the director of the Lowell Observatory hired a young amateur astronomer from Kansas named Clyde Tombaugh. In 1930, Tombaugh found the ninth planet.

Clyde Tombaugh went on to a long and distinguished career in astronomy and academia. Besides discovering Pluto, he discovered six star clusters, a cloud of galaxies, one comet and about 775 asteroids.

Tombaugh retired from New Mexico State University as a professor of astronomy. In 1982, the citizens of Burdett honored him with a roadside historic marker describing his achievements. Dr. Tombaugh died on January 17, 1997.

In subsequent years as technology improved, scientists were able to detect increasing numbers of small interplanetary objects such as Pluto. The International Astronomical Union issued an official definition of the term planet in 2006. Pluto was

determined to be a dwarf planet and the tenth largest body orbiting the sun. It is located in the Kuiper Belt.

If Pluto is a dwarf planet, perhaps Dr. Tombaugh's accomplishments are all the more impressive. In any event, Don Cloutman and the other citizens of Burdett continue to honor his achievements and have some fun along the way.

When the miniature golf course in the city park recently needed improvement, it was renovated with a planetary theme. Each of the nine holes was named for a different planet. The course was inaugurated with a community miniature golf tournament. With tongue in cheek, the winner was offered not just a belt buckle, but a Kuiper Belt buckle.

For more information on the community, see www.burdettks.org.

It's time to leave Burdett, the boyhood home of an historic astronomer. We commend Don Cloutman and the other citizens of Burdett for making a difference by keeping alive Clyde Tombaugh's historic achievements. The accomplishments of this young farmboy were out of this world.

And there's more. In the 2000s, Pluto would become the target of a major outer space mission. The man who led this mission also came from rural Kansas. We'll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.