The LAAS History Detective
Episode 4

Lewis Chilton

Laying the Groundwork for the LAAS - Amateur Astronomers Past – Part 1

(Unless otherwise noted, much of the written material and two images presented in this installment came from an article written by Dr. Mars F. Baumgardt for the March 1940 *Griffith Observer* magazine, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 26-38, and is used with permission.)

In this episode, let's step back even further in time to pay our respects to some early Los Angeles amateur astronomers, many of whom were the movers and shakers of their era and did much to popularize the science of astronomy and contribute to the growth and development of the city, the region and the state.

William H. Knight

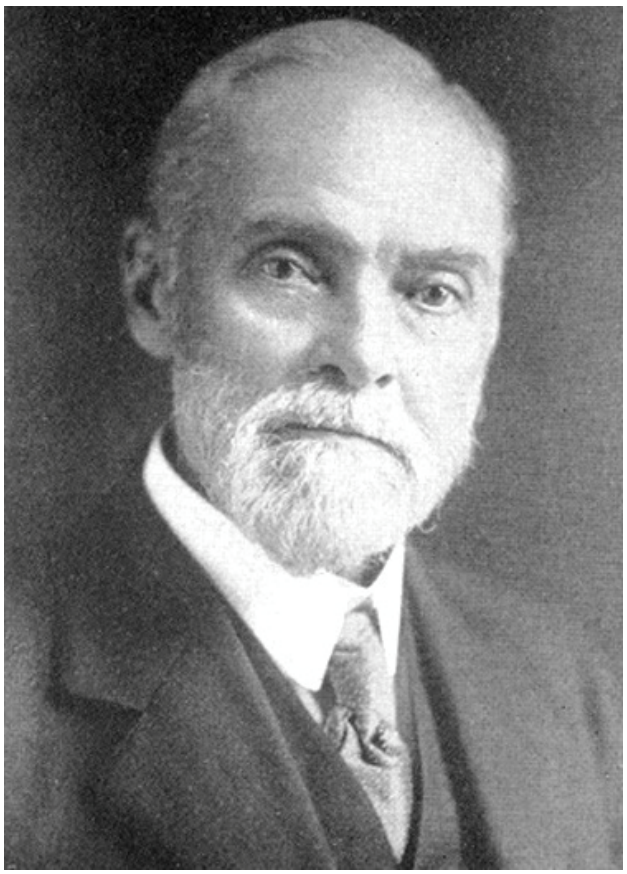
A 19th century amateur astronomer and science writer, William Henry Knight (1835-1925), was born in Chautauqua County, New York. As a young man, he crossed the continent on horseback, entered California by way of Lake Bigler (now known as Lake Tahoe), and settled in San Francisco where he was active for many years.

Two months after the onset of the Civil War he enlisted in the New York 40th Infantry Regiment. In 1862, he was wounded and taken prisoner at the Second Battle of Bull Run. After his repatriation and honorable discharge, he returned to San Francisco.

Knight was prominent in California's early history and was one of the founders of the Bancroft Library. He compiled Bancroft's Handbook of the Pacific States, Bancroft's Map of the Pacific States; was manager of Bancroft's publishing department in San Francisco from 1864 to 1869; was a partner in Bancroft, Knight & Company, publishers of music from 1870 to 1879; a buyer for the Emerson & Fisher Carriage Company, Cincinnati, Ohio, from 1879 to 1891; an auditor for Thaddeus S.C. Lowe's Mt. Lowe Railway Company in Pasadena from 1893 to 1896; and was associated with the renaming of Lake Bigler to Lake Tahoe.

Knight was a writer and lecturer of astronomical and other scientific subjects, a prolific contributor to leading newspapers, magazines and science journals, including the *Scientific American* and *Popular Astronomy*, and an editorial writer for the *Los Angeles Times*. His vast outpouring of astronomical articles was the chief reason thousands of readers became interested in the night sky.

California voter registration records reflect that Knight had relocated from San Francisco to Los Angeles by 1892 where he became a friend and confidant of Griffith J. Griffith and Thaddeus S.C. Lowe, among others, and served as president of the Southern California Academy of Sciences from 1894 to 1897 and from 1899 to 1902; secretary of the Los Angeles Merchants' and Manufacturers' Association from 1896 to 1897; secretary of the Forest and Water Society of Southern California from 1898 to 1903; secretary of the Los Angeles County Highway Commission from 1901 to 1903; and a member or honorary member of many other clubs and organizations in Los Angeles and elsewhere.



William H. Knight, undated. (Source: *Griffith Observer* magazine, March 1940, Vol. 4, No. 3, used with permission.)

We should be grateful to William Henry Knight for persuading San Francisco businessman James Lick to finance the 36-inch refracting telescope and observatory atop Mt. Hamilton, California (the world's largest when completed in 1888), instead of the world's largest pyramid that he had envisioned for San Francisco.

Although Knight is not known to have owned a telescope, he was known to use the instruments of his friends. In the opinion of Mars Baumgardt, he bore a striking resemblance to the great Italian astronomer Galileo.

Bernard R. Baumgardt, F.R.A.S.

Bernard R. Baumgardt, undated. (Source: *Griffith Observer* magazine, March 1940, Vol. 4, No. 3, used with permission.)

English-born, Swedish educated, Bernard Richard Baumgardt (1862-1935) spent part of his youth as a sailor before the mast. Standing watches far out at sea under the starry heavens and with training received in celestial navigation, he developed a love of astronomy that would last a lifetime.

Baumgardt's last voyage took him to Seattle, Washington in 1882. From there he went to San Francisco where he met and married his wife in 1885. Their first son Mars was born in Portland, Oregon in 1890 and by 1892 the family had established itself in Los Angeles, where Baumgardt's profession as a printer expanded to include publishing and public speaking. His interest in the natural sciences brought him in contact with the Southern California Academy of Sciences. He became an active member, especially in the Astronomical Section, and served as Academy president. He was also a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the University Club, where he continued to hone his public speaking skills.

In 1893, Baumgardt acquired a 6-inch Alvan Clark equatorial refractor. His home was located on W. 22nd Street near Union Avenue, which at the time was well out toward the country. Those were the days before the automobile and other modern inventions had changed the American way of life. Now and then a distant streetcar could be heard after dark, or the barking of a dog or a crowing rooster. By eight o'clock in the evening the family transportation had been fed and bedded down. Footfalls of neighbors a block away could be heard crunching on gravel paths, but it was the sound of crickets and the distant croaking of frogs from the *Sanja Madre* that provided the nightly "background music."

The few streetlights that existed in those days provided meager illumination and with little interference from traffic, Baumgardt often set up his telescope in the middle of the darkened, unpaved street. Seldom did a bicycle or buggy pass by. Most of the homes in the neighborhood were in the cottage style, but vacant lots predominated. The Milky Way was a glorious spectacle as it arched overhead and stars could be seen down to the horizon in almost every direction. The only obstructions were windmills and their water tanks and a tall tree here and there.

It was under such ideal conditions that Baumgardt used his telescope. The word eventually spread and in time it was a frequent sight to find a large gathering of children from the Orphans' Home, students from the high school, or groups from local churches and clubs gather in the street to look through his telescope and learn about the wonders of the heavens.

Baumgardt began taking his telescope to other communities to lecture about the stars. William H. Knight sometimes acted as his booking agent. Before automobiles or good roads, getting around Southern California usually meant a rail trip. Depending on the destination, the instrument, after being packed into three wooden cases, was shipped in a baggage car of the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe or the Los Angeles, San Pedro and Salt Lake Railroad.

Baumgardt illustrated his astronomy lectures with colored lantern slides and a gas-burning stereopticon and afterward invited his audience outdoors to look through the telescope. Most of his audiences had never looked through one. His lectures increased in popularity and he began bringing his older son Mars to operate the stereopticon and the telescope.

The elder Baumgardt traveled throughout the United States and Europe. In Great Britain, he was made a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society for his work in popularizing astronomy. The appellation 'professor' was bestowed upon him, but amongst his intimates he was simply Benny Baumgardt. With frequent long distance travel, his 6-inch Clark saw less use and would eventually find a new owner.

Gustav J.H. Koch

After arriving from Denmark in 1883, Gustav John Henry Koch (1861-1950), a carpenter turned building contractor, developed a reputation for building some of the finest homes in Los Angeles. He became an active amateur astronomer and member of the Astronomical Section of the Southern California Academy of Sciences. He was skillful in the use of the telescope and purchased Bernard Baumgardt's 6-inch Clark refractor, which Koch continued to make accessible to anyone who cared to have a look at the heavens through it.

Abbott Kinney

The man who was responsible for the development of Venice and Ocean Park, California was Abbott Kinney (1850-1920). He was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey and at the age of sixteen went to Europe where he studied in Heidelberg, Paris and Zurich, becoming fluent in six languages. He discovered Venice, Italy during a walking tour of that country.

Returning to the United States in 1869, he joined the Maryland National Guard and in 1873 joined a U.S. Geological Survey team to map the Sioux Indian reservations in the Dakota Territory. He traveled on to Salt Lake City and Oregon before rejoined the survey team in Yosemite Valley.

After arriving in San Francisco in January 1880, Kinney intended to travel east by train but was delayed by snow. So, being asthmatic, he made an impromptu side trip to a Southern California health resort, the Sierra Madre Villa Hotel. Arriving without a reservation, he was forced to sleep

on a billiard table but awoke the following morning without any symptoms of asthma. This positive experience led him to purchase 550 acres of nearby land, which he called Kinneola.

Kinney was appointed to a three-year position as chairman of the California Board of Forestry. He created an agency to protect the forests of the San Gabriel Mountains, where ranchers typically set fires to clear land for livestock grazing, which often led to flooding in the valleys below after heavy seasonal rains.

On his own property, he developed land management techniques for raising livestock alongside cultivated forests. Aided by friend and naturalist, John Muir, Kinney established the San Gabriel Timberland Reserve in 1892, forerunner of the Angeles National Forest.

In 1886, Kinney built a summer home for his wife in Santa Monica and the following year formed the Santa Monica Improvement Company. He purchased 247 acres of land on the bluffs north of Santa Monica Canyon to be developed as Santa Monica Heights, but economic conditions forced him to abandon the project. He shifted his attention to the coastal area south of Santa Monica.

In 1891, Kinney and a partner bought a controlling interest in Pacific Ocean Casino and a tract of land along the Santa Monica beach. Kinney built a pier, golf course, horseracing track, boardwalk and other resort amenities. He convinced the Santa Fe Railroad to extend its Inglewood line north to his resort.

In 1898, Kinney's business partner died. His half-interest was sold by his widow to a business consortium, and by a flip of a coin, Kinney acquired the marshy southern half of the property, which he used to build his "Venice of America."

The Venice of America recreation area opened in Ocean Park on the Fourth of July, 1905 but was unprofitable because the majority of area residents and visitors did not share Kinney's vision of a Chautauqua-esque movement of fine art and high culture. He acquiesced to the tastes of the beach-going crowd and the summer holiday revelers and in 1906 built an amusement zone that became known as the "Coney Island of the Pacific." Pacific Electric streetcars brought in the crowds from Downtown Los Angeles and nearby Santa Monica.

Visitors were dazzled by the system of canals that had been dug to drain the marshes for Kinney's new residential area. The canals were complete with gondolas and gondoliers imported from Venice, Italy. There was a block-long arcaded business street with Venetian architecture, a hot saltwater plunge and a 1200-foot long amusement pier with auditorium, ship restaurant and dance hall. A miniature steam railroad ran on a 2½-mile track, which operated until 1924. Kinney and some of the nearby residents were aghast at some of the low-class shows that began to appear, but they were profitable and considered to be the best collection of amusement attractions on the Pacific Coast. In 1911, after Kinney had become influential in city politics, he had the name Ocean Park changed to Venice and was permitted to build a 60-foot breakwater to protect his facilities from storm tides. The city of Los Angeles annexed Venice in 1926.

Abbott Kinney in an undated photograph.

Kinney was interested in astronomy and owned a fine 4-inch Bardou refractor, which he used to entertain guests at his oceanfront home by scanning the mountains and ships at sea by day and the heavens at night.

Although most of his work has been demolished, some of his buildings and Venetian-style arches remain, along with his breakwater and a few of the canals.

Personal note: I have pleasant memories of the Venice-Ocean Park area where I lived for a couple of years during the Korean War. I remember going to the beach with my family, the Aragon Ballroom on Lick Pier (where Spade Cooley and, later, Lawrence Welk entertained) and the cement boardwalk with its electric trams. Old-timers sat and kibitzed on benches lining the beach side of the boardwalk and a crowded array of novelty shops, small food stands and standup deli counters lined the opposite side. In 1958, Pacific Ocean Park opened on the site. Some of my old friends and I have happy memories of POP before it closed in 1967 – L.C.

(Note: most of the information used in this biographical sketch about Abbott Kinney was obtained from Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia.)

Next time: Laying the Groundwork for the LAAS - Amateur Astronomers Past – Part 2