

Cheap Observer's Report Special Shows and Exhibitions

By Alex McConahay

With RTMC coming this May, it is time to pass along some Cheap Observer hints on wheeling and dealing at a star party.

A couple of months ago, in the Cheap Observer report, I talked about Astromart, Cloudy Nights, Ebay, and a few other internet sources for buying equipment. Next month, I am going to talk about buying new and nearly new stuff from the big stores, locally and on the internet. In honor of RTMC Astronomy, one of the granddaddies of vendor/swap meet/exhibitions, this month will be about the third big way to buy astro-goodies.

This third path to equipment junkie heaven is by way of the swap meets, star parties, and shows in various formats and locales around the country.

Three in our area are RTMC Astronomy Expo (May 13-17, rtmcastronomyexpo.org), the Pacific Astronomy and Telescope Show (September 18-19, telescopeshow.com), and Oceanside Photo and Telescope's Southern California Astronomy Exhibition (Early July, dates not announced). Around the country, the biggest is probably New York's North East Astron-

omy Forum (where I will be headed as soon as I finish writing this and sending it off to Dan for the Prime Focus).

Each offers something different, and no two are exactly alike. But, common features are displays of new equipment, vendor sales of new and used, and a swap meet.

Let's start off in Vendor Alley. This is the area at RTMC's Camp Oakes where manufacturers, stores, vendors, clubs, and others set up awnings, circus tents, and tables display to display their offerings.

In the frenzy of the vendor alley, lots of wheeling and dealing goes on. It is easier to ask for a better price, and squirm and negotiate in this atmosphere than while standing at the counter in a quiet brick and mortar store or in a one-to-one conversation over the phone!

The denizens of Vendor Alley come for a variety of reasons. TeleVue, for instance, sells nothing. Their handsome, debonair West Coast Representative and his lovely lady are content to just let people look through their wonderful products and then wander across the dusty field to any one of a number of vendors selling the stuff. Some clubs are there to raise money by selling member stuff on consignment at a discount (see Eric Elliott and Jeff Huhs for the RAS

Vendor Field at RTMC Astronomy Expo. With several dozen large vendors, and a thousand or more attendees, RTMC AE is heaven for equipment junkies. Plenty of deals to be had.



version of this!). Still others see this as part of their big sales effort of the year and are willing to make big deals. They spend thousands on their displays and staffing their facility.

The various merchants trying to move their product have come up with quite a few special deals. "At the Show Only" bargains often feature:

- Five and Ten percent Discounts
- "We pay the sales tax"
- Package deals
- Introductory offers
- And my favorite/least liked (depending on who is asking) "So what are they asking over at the _____tent?!?!?!?"

In other words, the three to five dozen vendor tents are quite active.

It is relatively easy to check things out, walk from tent to tent, and see the prices. Pick something up, ask how much it costs, and put it back down. It is not like the streets of Tijuana or the bazaars of Cairo. But it is acceptable to wander around and make offers, especially if you offer to buy several items at the same time, ask them to skip the sales tax, mention that you saw it at the last tent, etc.

Feel free to bargain, but the brutality of the "list price" remains. You are not going to save tons of money buying list-priced new stuff at this type of show. You might get ten per cent off on some items. (Of course ten percent is a lot of money on some big-ticket items.) But, you usually get immediate delivery, and save shipping, and you can try it out that night. (And yes, sometimes you can order at "show prices" for later delivery).

•One note about timing your purchases at these shows. NEAF was famous for a huge line in the first hour of opening at the Tele-Vue booth where Al Nagler unloaded this year's



Returning September 18, 19 2010, the third annual Pacific Astronomy and Telescope Show will bring vendors from all over the world to Pasadena's and Southern California's amateur Astronomers.

blems for a steeply discounted price. At the Texas Star party, which lasts seven days, the vendors come and go, and it can be hard to predict which days and times they will be there. In the olden days of RTMC, there was a massive "Feeding Frenzy" when the vendors were allowed to open at noon on Friday. Vendor Alley remained active through Saturday, and then on Sunday morning, desertion had set in. Ahh, the olden days. With RTMC AE changing to a

Vendor's Area at the Texas Star Party, with 13 vendors spread through three rooms, was much smaller than the RTMC/AE version, but the concepts and activity were the same.



Stellafane, the most traditional of the large astro-gatherings around the country, allows no commercial vending (or advertizing or even mentioning!) but it does have a swap meet. Except for the greener trees, it operates the same (on a smaller scale) than RTMC-AE's.

five day format this year, it is hard to say what your timing should be. But that will not stop the cognoscenti from launching fast and furious speculation:

- Buy early while the merchants are desperate to get things rolling.
- Buy early when the blemes and seconds are still available.
- Wait till the last minute when they are desperate to clear the stuff out.
- Get a good idea of what is up for sale before plunking your money down.
- Don't wait, or the good stuff will be gone.
- Don't be too eager. Let the vendor think you can wait and you'll get a better price.

Hey, it's a game. Enjoy it.

And if that is true for vendor Alley, it is even more critical at "Swap Meet" time. At RTMC Astronomy Expo Saturday at 8:30 the program says the swap meet starts. You would be two hours late if you waited till then. Right outside the mess hall, fifty



or sixty amateurs spread their stuff along the sidewalk, hoping to catch the eyes of the thousand people walking back and forth, picking things up, putting them down, telling stories about how they used to own one of them, explaining why that is a silly price, or just throwing the money at the seller before he changes his mind to ask for more. It goes on for a few hours like that, and lots of money changes hands, and people haul stuff away. Lots of fun.

The RTMC-AE Swap Meet features lots of astro-equipment, from Amateur Telescope Making supplies, to fully assembled and functioning telescopes. You will also find all the accessories,

SWAP MEET AT WINTER STAR PARTY: Wherever amateur astronomers gather, stuff shows up for sale. Here is Friday afternoon's Swap Meet at the Winter Star Party, a very much smaller affair than RTMC AE.



cameras (both film, and digital) meteorites, counterweights, old film cans, books, magazines, oscilloscopes, binoculars—Let’s just say enough to keep any astronomer (or most geeks) occupied for quite a while.

Some things to know before you go:

- What you are willing to spend. (Think about your limits before you go.)
- The general going price for things you might be looking for. (It is hard to bargain unless you know what else people are paying for the thing you are buying.)
- Just what comes with whatever you are buying. (If a critical piece is broken or missing, will you be able to replace it? If not, how does that affect the value?)
- Most importantly—This piece of equipment is being sold by somebody. Why? What makes you think you have a use for it? Paperweights are never bargains.



Before we leave the “Shows, Exhibits, and Swap Meet” topic, we should make a few other notes:

- Bring Cash. Many people at the show will accept checks, and a few of the regular merchants can handle credit cards. However, the presumption is that things are on a cash basis.
- Be ready to take it home. Yes, you can make deals with some people to buy really heavy things or large pieces, and have it picked up later. But generally if you are planning on taking home a sixteen inch Dob, bring your SUV.
- Sales are generally final. The regular merchants will accommodate as well as they can, but don’t expect recourse against a swap market deal.
- Warranty coverage will vary. Of course if you buy new from the booth of a regular vendor, you will get full coverage, but there are exceptions for blem, seconds, and swap meet stuff. So, if this is of concern to you, please have that conversation with the seller before you lay down your dollars.

So, have fun at RTMC, PATS, and all that! See you there.

Paperweights are never a bargain!!!

I was wandering the swap meet at Stellafane (in Springfield, Vermont), and noticed a set of aluminum sand castings. They were similar to a set I had gotten from a man who was cleaning out a garage after his father, a long ago amateur telescope maker, had passed away.

Another fellow walked up. “Interesting,” he said to the would-be-seller. “Where did you get these?” The seller replied: “At RTMC a few years ago. I was going to make a mount.....” and as he went on, I noticed the price tag for \$25 was in my very own handwriting. It was still wrapped in black electrician’s tape as I had remembered wrapping them years ago . Here I was, 2500 miles away, five years after a long ago RTMC swap meet, and my old paperweights were still alive, changing hands. (But not yet part of a mount!)