

Obituary

J. C. BENNETT (1914–1990)

With the passing away of Jack Bennett on 1990 May 30, South Africa lost one of its most renowned amateur astronomers.

Best known for the discovery of his first comet, 1969i, which became a fine naked-eye object, he also had the distinction, in 1968, of being the first amateur to discover visually a supernova in another galaxy (M83). The discovery of a second comet, 1974h, followed.

John Caister Bennett was born on 1914 April 6 in Estcourt, Natal. He attended school in Ficksburg and, after matriculating, joined the civil service, spending a short period in the Forestry Department at Elgin before transferring to the Transvaal Provincial Administration in Pretoria.

Bennett became interested in astronomy during evening walks after church with his mother and her stories of Halley's comet were undoubtedly the stimulus for his deep love of these objects. A long-standing member of the Astronomical Society of Southern Africa, he was Director of its Comet and Meteor Section from 1968 to 1985 and of its Nova Search Section from 1975 to 1987 and also served as the Society's President in 1968–69. His list of southern objects published as an addendum to his Presidential Address and a later supplementary list form a valuable 'southern Messier' catalogue for comet hunters.

In later years, worsening arthritis limited Bennett's observing activities but his interest remained and just four days before he died he had a long conversation on comets with another South African comet hunter, José Campos.

He received several honours including the Gill Medal (1970) and honorary membership (1989) of the ASSA, an AAVSO Nova Award (1976) and an honorary MSc degree from the University of the Witwatersrand (1986), while in 1989 the asteroid VD 4093 was named after him. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1974.

After his death, the Pretoria Centre of the ASSA decided to institute an annual Jack Bennett Award for contributions to astronomy and to the Centre.

Bennett never married and is survived by his brother Gordon and sister Nan.

JONATHAN SPENCER JONES