

A little rain falls on star-gazer's parade

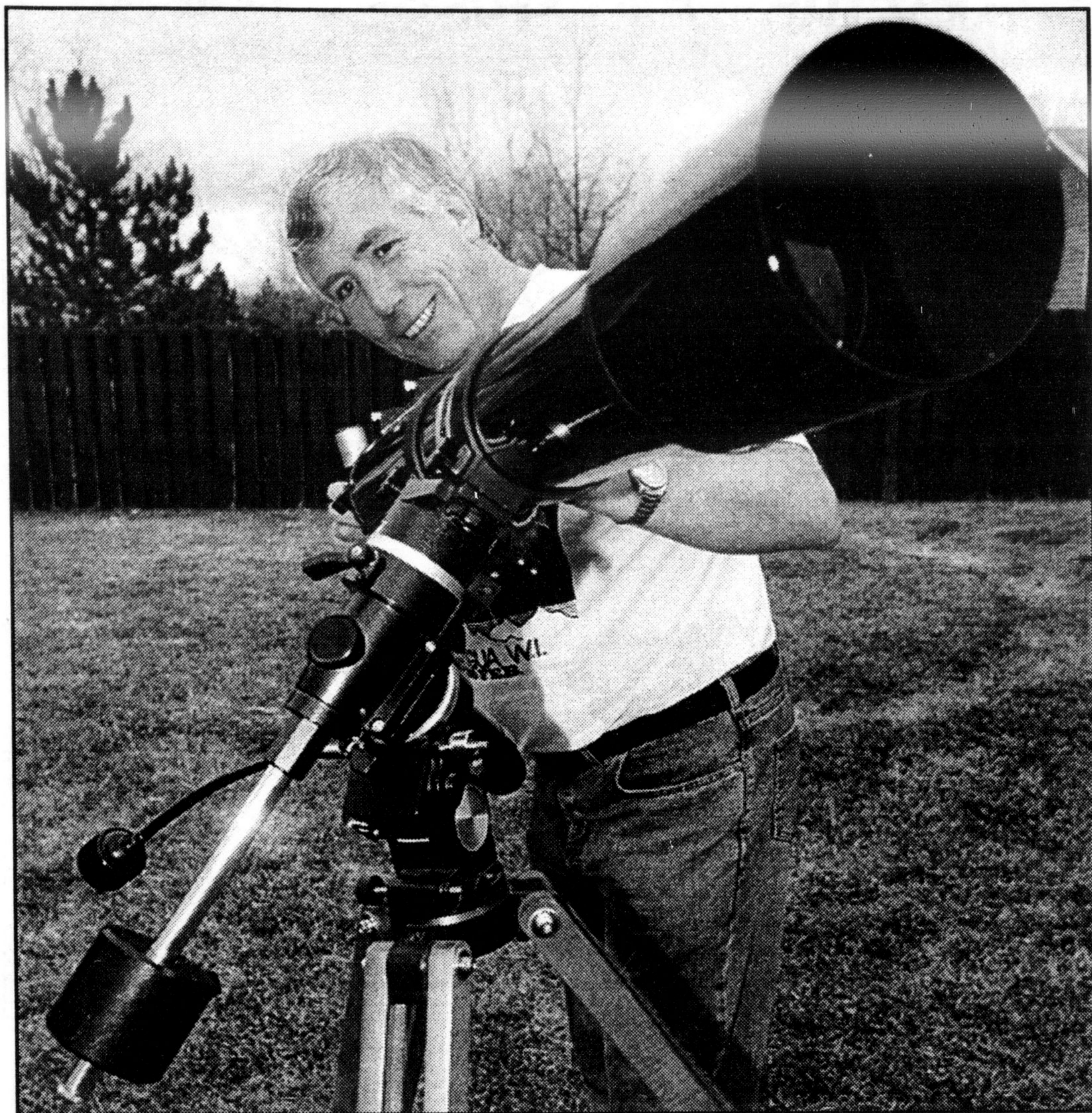


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Amateur astronomer Leslie Webb sets up to view the sky from his Milton backyard. More often, he travels to a Hamilton observatory or carts his gear up Highway 25 past Acton to get a better look.

By IRENE GENTLE
Special to The Champion

Milton amateur astronomer Leslie Webb knows first hand how the best laid plans can go awry.

Mr. Webb decided that in 1998 he'd see his first total solar eclipse. For two-years he planned a trip to Antigua, where a dry climate should have been perfect for an unfettered view of the late February event.

"It rained," reported a bemused Mr. Webb. "Then there were patchy clouds. There were pockets of blue sky, so literally it was like Russian roulette."

That left the star buff with a decision. Should he stay put and hope for high winds to clear the sky, or grab a cab and race to the other side of the island in hopes of a clear blue yonder?

Mr. Webb stayed put. It looked like a good bet as clear skies held out for up to 90 per cent of the eclipse. Then the clouds came back.

"It turned out there was a pocket in the cloud on the other side of the island, so if I'd gone north instead of south I'd have won," said a let down Mr. Webb. "Even Ben Johnson couldn't have moved that fast. But that's the Murphy's Law of amateur astronomy."

It's also the nature of eclipses. With the shadow of a typical eclipse being only about 60 miles wide, that means there's a narrow range for the phenomenon to be seen.

Then there's the time factor: A total eclipse lasts only two minutes, meaning even Jacques Villeneuve couldn't have gotten Mr. Webb to the other side of the island in time.

Still, Mr. Webb was in Antigua, after all. He is not exactly shattered. In fact, he's still kind of awed.

"I've seen a partial eclipse before but it's

nothing the same." With the total eclipse, "You have about 10 minutes of this eerie light and then it goes dark. The birds get quiet because they think it's night time. The stars even come out. You could see Venus come out on the western horizon."

Plus, it's Antigua.

"I bought an atlas where it had written this eclipse would take place in the Siberia. I don't know how they made that kind of a mistake," said Mr. Webb.

"If that were the case my wife would have said 'See you when you get back, honey.' But this way you get a week in Antigua out of it."

If cloud cover is a natural annoyance to amateur stargazers, even more irritating is a man-made invasion of the skies. It's caused by city lights.

"What's changed dramatically since I started this hobby is the light pollution. Your own backyard isn't a great place to look anymore," said Mr. Webb, who travels to a Hamilton observatory or carts his gear up Highway 25 past Acton to get a better look.

Mr. Webb also warns against buying the wrong equipment.

"The amateur has better equipment than the professional had 40 years ago.

The problem is if you buy equipment at department stores you can't see anything with it," said Mr. Webb.

"And you don't have to buy a telescope, especially if you don't know how to use it. That's like buying a Maserati without knowing how to drive."

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