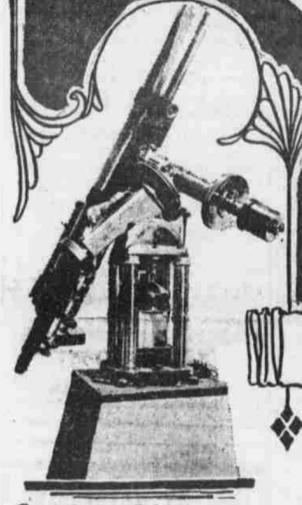




William F. Rigge, S. J.

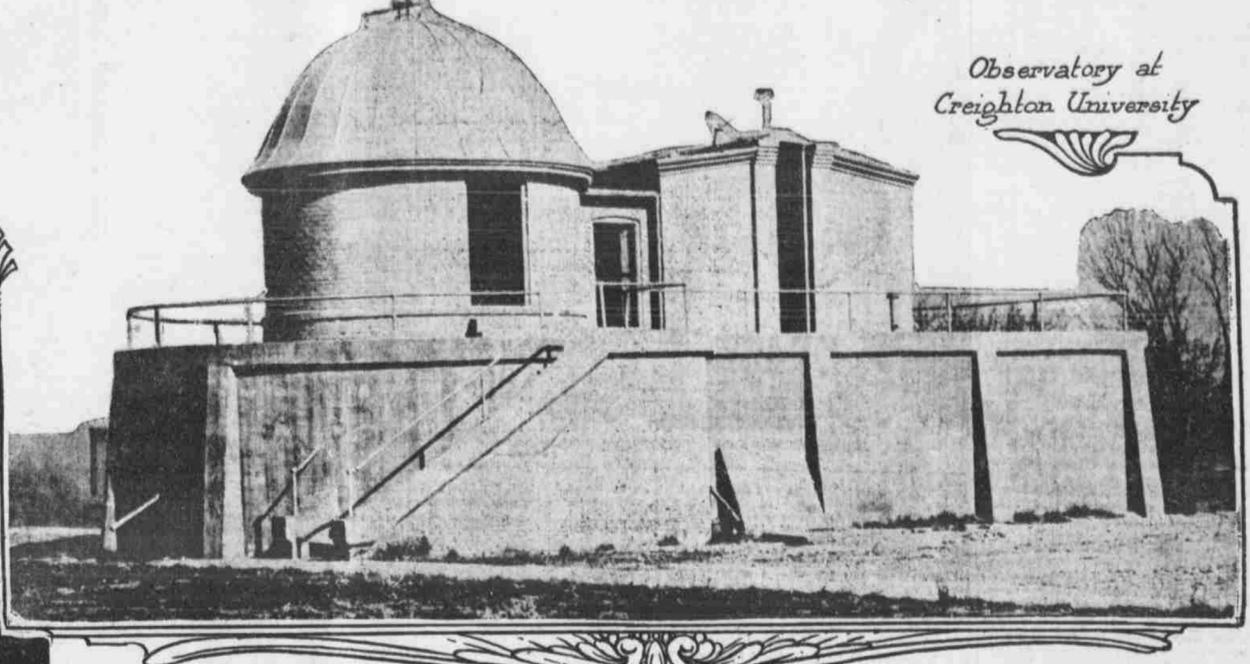


Creighton Telescope



# Omaha Man Who Lives Among the Stars

## Father Rigge—the Creighton University Astronomer—a Man of Many Parts



Observatory at Creighton University

*To him who, in the love of nature, holds Communion with her visible forms She speaks a various language.*

BRYANT

**N**O, THE poet did not have Father William F. Rigge in mind when he penned those lines. Creighton university, in which Father Rigge is professor of physics and astronomy, was unheard of until many years after Bryant wrote this opening sentence.

Yet if this had been written later and Bryant had been acquainted with Father William Rigge, it would be a simple matter to say where the poet got his inspiration for the thought.

For nature indeed speaks a various language to Father Rigge. Most of this is a silent language, spoken in vari colored light rays through a high power telescope.

For Father Rigge lives with his telescope among the stars.

Few perhaps are capable of appreciating as Father Rigge can appreciate the lines of Carlyle, "But I, I am alone with the stars."

To be alone with the stars, to Father Rigge, means to be amid a swarm of friends that smile, beckon, and speak a million languages all of which he understands. To be alone with the stars, to Father Rigge, means to be seated in the amphitheater of the firmament, it means to view the worlds, and flaming suns, as they leap, and plunge and play in the spanless mystery of space. It means to be far from the sordidness of things that belong only to the one little planet known as earth. It means to watch other green worlds gyrating through the depths of space, boasting their men and vegetation. It means to watch other worlds cycling by, barren as burnt brick, where men and vegetation have long since been choked. It means to be able to turn a powerful lens upon gigantic nebulae, majestically waiting into view, huge, fragmentary, gaseous, chaotic, where all the grandiose tragedy of life is yet unaged.

To be alone with the stars to Father Rigge means to see what the naked eye cannot see,—white-headed comets with ten-fold rifle-ball speed sweeping toward him. It means to watch them swerve at the sharp turns, crashing again into the unknown.

For while other men hoe potatoes and look for the stars only to determine whether rain clouds are gathering, Father Rigge looks at the stars because he loves them. He looks because there are things every moment to be seen far, far more wonderful than all the grand panorama that met his gaze at the circus as a lad of eight. For, far above his little observatory is being enacted the crushing of worlds. Chariots of the zodiac are

wrecked in the purple zenith. Cosmic pellets crash constantly through space—fragments of forgotten comets crushed by unrecorded collisions, spattering through the voids of infinity, through billows of nothingness.

Viewing these unknown wonders, Father William Rigge realizes the insignificance of human beings, and well might he exclaim, "I am but man in this churning insanity of elements."

For eighteen years Father William F. Rigge has been professor of astronomy at the Creighton university. For eighteen years he has viewed the heavens from his vantage point in the little observatory on the heights of the Creighton campus.

"Ah, there are gorgeous sights in the heavens," is his explanation when someone asks why he studies the heavens so much. "There are the various phases of the moon; there are the comets, and there are the various colored stars, and there are a thousand things to be seen nightly that are worth while."

Father Rigge deplores the fact that so few people take an interest in astronomy. "With all the wonders in the heavens," he says, "you would be surprised to know how many people of even above average intelligence, still know almost nothing about the heavens. People who come here to visit the observatory, are often completely lost

when they get in here, for they do not know what to say. They do not know how to ask a question about the work. They do not know what to ask. Nothing occurs to them in connection with astronomy."

But the little priest does not worry about the lack of popular interest in astronomy. Astronomy is his business, and whether he is followed by the popular mind or not, astronomy leads him into the infinite firmament he loves.

But, sad to relate, practical astronomy sometimes leads him into less poetic pursuits temporarily. How?

Oh, well for two weeks he had to chase spiders around the campus of the university. Many and of various species were the spiders he caught and carried to the laboratory, but none would do. The patience of Job was exhibited by the little priest as he chased spiders, bought spiders, traded for spiders, and if a priest can be ever said to steal, perhaps Father Rigge could be pardoned if he even went so far as to steal spiders.

But at last he was rewarded. At last he found a spider of the right species. At last he found a spider with a web both tough and extremely fine. He drew from this spider many yards of web which he carefully preserved.

The transit micrometer depends upon spiders' webs for its accuracy in measuring diameters of stars, and distance traversed by stars in the heavens. No other fibre known to man is so fine as the spider web, and so science has long employed spider webs stretched across the high power lenses in the transit micrometer.

Well, a student in one of the classes pushed a lens in too far and gave the spider web frame a shock and broke the fibres.

That was why Father Rigge had to chase spiders for a fortnight. It was to repair the transit micrometer. And he repaired it, thus saving a great many dollars of expense it would have required to have an expert come from the east to fix it.

Father Rigge does not thrive alone on the gorgeous colors in the heavens. He knows practical astronomy as well as "poetic" astronomy. He knows the mathematics of astronomy as he once knew the way to the circus grounds as a boy.

"I couldn't live without logarithms," he said, and smiled enthusiastically, when asked if the mathematical part of astronomy was not very difficult and tiresome.

Something of a joker is this little priest student. When Chief Hollow Horn Bear of the Sioux tribe visited Omaha a few years ago on his way to Washington, he was taken to the observatory to see the sights. The seven-foot telescope makes an excellent sun glass when the sun shines down through the various lenses. It will set fire to a piece of paper when the sun's rays are focused just right. Some of the visiting party let the focused light touch their hands and immediately jerked them away with a shriek. Father Rigge invited Hollow Horn Bear to hold out his hand to the focused light. The chief held his hand under the point of light, threw his head back, and stared blankly at the wall without flinching. He held his hand there for a minute and gave no sign of pain.

"And the joke was on us," said Father Rigge, "for Indian like, that fellow would let it burn a hole in his hand before he would cry out like a pale-face."

All the physical sciences are of intense interest to Father Rigge. He has equipped a wireless telegraph station on top of the Creighton university building, and it didn't cost him a cent. "I found some wire lying around and I strung it on top of the building. I did all the wiring myself, so there would be no expense. I did it all, I say, except right around the highest eaves, it was a little too dangerous for me. I had one of the janitors do it there."

Then, too, this little priest with a keen sense of humor, thought what a joke it would be if there could be found to be a lot of red tape about the

installation of a wireless telegraph apparatus. Oh, yes, he knew all the rules and regulations for installing the plant. But he had some time and he did not have all the equipment, so he just experimented to see whether all the details were really necessary.

To begin with he had no copper plate. The directions say to install such a plant, one must have an enormous copper plate of hundreds of square feet. That this must be buried in the ground; that it must rest on a bed of charcoal; that the copper plate must be covered with another bed of charcoal. He had neither. He had no appropriation to draw from to buy these things. So he just grounded his wire as he would ground a telephone wire. He disregarded the whole proposition of grounding in a great copper plate imbedded in charcoal.

"I'll just see," he said. "If I can't hear any messages that way, there will be time enough to change it when we have money to buy all this equipment."

Then, too, the regulations say the wires must be parallel. "Well, what will it do if they are not," said Father Rigge to himself. "I've just got a notion that if they are not parallel, and that if they run in various directions and in various planes, they will catch messages from the various directions the better." So his wires are strung in awkward directions over the roof of the building. "If they don't work, we'll change 'em sometime," he mused.

So with a cost of some 7 cents in all and a good deal of climbing, tacking, nailing and shin scraping, for the little priest, the wireless station, such as it was, was complete.

What happened? Why the first thing he knew the instruments began to tick, and he caught the official announcement of the time of day sent out by Washington daily. He set the clock accordingly. The telegraph company had been charging the university something like \$100 a year for flashing the time once or twice a day. The Rigge wireless was much cheaper. Father Rigge was just grabbing it out of the etheral waves as they passed over Nebraska bearing the message to the coast.

The little priest smiled.

Then the ticker began again, and the priest heard a steamship in the Gulf of Mexico calling for a pilot.

He smiled again. This time not because he was getting information for which the telegraph company had been charging good money, but merely because it assured him that his instruments were working so perfectly as to catch stray messages even from the Gulf of Mexico that were sent with the intention of traveling perhaps less than fifty miles.

Father Rigge likes a good time. He is not the silent, smileless, scientist, who wears a face soured by mathematics. When a caller looked for him at the university a few days ago, he found him in a circle of twenty convent girls on the fourth floor. It was a day off for the girls and they went to the university to be entertained by Father Rigge. The twenty laughing girls hand in hand formed a circle. Two of them held wires from an electric battery. Father Rigge was turning the crank. There were shrieks and shouts, much laughter, and the scientist kept busy finding new ways of manifesting the shock-power of electricity.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly see you today," said the scientist-priest. Come around at 10 o'clock in the morning. These girls of the convent have this afternoon off. It is the chance of their life, and I am entertaining them."

### Wanted--Better Behavior at Funerals

By ADA PATTERSON.

**R**ECENTLY I paid a little visit of condolence to a newly-made widow. She is a woman whose name you will know and reverence. Although she has the altitude of fame on this day, she was of the stature of a little child, for she pressed her head against my shoulder and wept as a babe that would not be comforted.

"The bitter thing is not that I miss him so," she said in her sob-muffled voice. "Though we were together for forty years, and it's like missing food and air and sunshine, all needful things, to know he's gone. And it isn't that so few friends came for a last look at his face or to comfort me. That's because he was a reserved man who made few friends, and they only superficial ones. But it was the way his family behaved."

"He had always loved his family. But when he went away there was only one near relative who came to bid him godspeed on his long journey. That one was his sister, and my heart swells to breaking when I tell you how she acted. She came straight to my room without ever asking where the poor boy was lying. Her maid was with her, and while she was talking to me she inter-

rupted herself every other sentence to say something quite irrelevant to the maid.

"You know, dear, how much I've always thought of you," she said, "but I can't stay long. I hope you understand that I can't stay long. I couldn't well leave home. Besides I'm staying with a friend," and she mentioned the noisiest, most garish hotel in town. "You know I don't often have a chance to stay in the city. So I'm going over there as soon as it's over." It was the burial of my husband and her brother.

"She went out on the lawn and looked over the old place and her laugh came to me now and then through the window. When she came back to my room she told me how my changes in the old house had improved it in some respects and taken from its beauty and comfort in others. Altogether she was in high spirits. I could see that a funeral was an event to her that is savored of a merry-making."

I have never met this apparently heartless sister. I know not what strange quirk of brain may have caused behavior so unseemly, but I do know that too many persons regard a funeral as a place and time of reunion.

"I had not seen Mary James for two years until I met her at Mrs. Alston's funeral. She is the same old Mary. Told me the funniest story I had

heard for a blue moon. I laughed until I ached."

I heard this choice bit of confidence on a street car.

An aged woman told me that in the short silence between the heart-straining sounds of the clogs falling upon her sister's coffin, across the open wound in the earth, so like the resounding void in her own heart, she heard a shrill voice proclaim:

"I haven't been to New York for three years. I'm just dying to go."

The carriage that took me from the train to my old home in which lay the comforter of my childhood, the counsellor of my youth, the strong rock of refuge in my life's high moon, my aunt who had been as a cherished mother took also a high-voiced woman, who talked all the way.

"It's been two years since I've seen her," went on the thin, nerve-tearing voice. The monologue continued until we had reached the door of the house to which silence had come, from which the light had gone out. And in the house I doubt not she counted noses to her shallow heart's content and registered minutely the costumes worn by everyone present.

I wish the society for the suppression of nuisances in every community would keep fools away from funerals.