

Feel Like Partying With The Stars?

By Phyllis Lombardi

Wouldn't you go? I mean, the invitation read "Annual Star Party." Well, it wasn't exactly an invitation. More of an announcement in a local paper but there was no charge and it began early - at dusk.

A star party. One of my all-time favorite stars is Gregory Peck. I knew he couldn't come to the party so maybe the star would be Harrison Indiana Jones Ford. That wouldn't be bad. Makes sense, too. He's young - only in his sixties - and he's got a new movie out. Mr. Indiana's been to the North Fork before so he wouldn't get lost. Once he made a movie in Greenport with Brad Pitt. Maybe Brad would come to the star party, too.

What to wear was no problem for me. I have everyday jeans from a Southold thrift shop and a pair of dressy jeans I bought from L.L. Bean when we camped in Maine in the 1990s. They still look good because I save them for events like star parties. And I just got a new T-shirt from Southold's Relay for Life so I was set. (Sometimes I see famous people all dressed up. Their pictures are in Dan's Papers. I bet they have lots of star parties on the South Fork.)

As I mentioned, the party began at dusk. That's a good time for me. I never went to a party that began after 8 p.m. except for one after a prom in an earlier century.

I drove alone to the Southold party. Even dusk is too late for my husband. The address was 1115 Main Bayview Road in Southold A nice area. But the invitation also said "weather permitting." I thought that was strange. After everything Mr. Indiana has faced, I didn't think he'd mind a little rain. Besides, he's got that big hat.

So it was I came to Southold's Custer Institute and Observatory, the party site. I got there at least an hour before dusk yet there were cars all over the place. And all the time I thought stars arrived fashionably late!

At the Custer Institute front door I heard some guys talking about Vega. Was this another Hollywood starlet I'd never heard of? I was about to inquire when I saw a telescope, then another, and another. Of course! This was a star party but not that kind of star. This was a party to celebrate the heavens. In the sweetest spot this side of heaven - the North Fork.

In a year in which the United States will not elect its first female president, let me introduce you to Donna McCormick, Custer's first female president (and the place has been around for more than 80 years). Donna told me the Southold property came to the Institute by way of May Custer Elmer, a niece of General George Armstrong Custer, and a Southold resident years ago.

Appropriately, I guess, I met Donna in the Custer kitchen. She and her assistant, Anna Verticchio of Greenport, were cleaning up after a sky-size barbeque. Burgers and hot dogs, chicken and salmon, all kinds of cake and big slices of watermelon.

I learned that Custer is one of three astronomy societies on Long Island. The others, Amateur Observers' Society of New York, and Astronomical Society of Long Island, are headquartered in Nassau County. But the price of gasoline did not keep members of the Nassau groups from coming to the North Fork for Custer's celestial celebration. "Everybody looks up in the sky," said Susan Rose, president of Amateur Observers. That's why the societies devote time and energy to educational programs and research. Custer, for example, holds an annual Astronomy Jamboree at Southold High School.

I climbed a staircase labeled "Stairway to the Stars" to the observatory's dome. According to Susan Rose, my "Wow" was what most folks said when they looked more closely at our North Fork skies through Custer telescopes.

Custer Institute is open every Saturday from dusk to midnight. Call 765-2626 and then go shout out your own "Wow." For while astronomy textbooks may tell of upper atmosphere phenomena, personal experience with a Custer telescope sets you off on that pathway to the heavens - where you could be swinging on a star.

