

# Halley's Comet draws faithful in droves

The Home News/Dick Costello

THE HOME NEWS

Sun. 1/19/86

OBITUARIES B7

The Home News/Dick Costello



The Croft family of cometgazers. From left: Roxanne, Christina, Gist and Mark, on telescope, amid a likeminded crowd in

Donaldson Park, Highland Park, during a cold night at the telescope last week. They managed to spot the celestial regular.

## By LENNY MELISURGO

Home News staff writer

**HIGHLAND PARK** — Darkness was falling. Donaldson Park was empty except for a lone jogger who slowly paced along the winding roads in the cold.

The sky was clear and starry, and an eerie silence filled the frigid air. Suddenly, headlight beams could be seen in the distance. They gradually approached a gravel parking lot next to a frozen pond.

When the beams were turned off, a bearded man stepped out of a tan-colored van, its engine still humming. The man was bundled up in a heavy winter jacket and ski pants. He carried a tripod and a large telescope, and walked several yards before assembling the equipment on a grassy field.

Then he looked up into the southwest sky, partially lighted by a bright quarter moon, and located Jupiter. He aimed his telescope just to the upper right of the planet and waited for the sky to further darken.

The bearded man, Highland Park resident Mark Croft, was doing something that had become a nighttime ritual for him during the past few weeks: He was searching for Halley's Comet.

## Here and gone

Thousands of others throughout Central New Jersey also were taking advantage of what may have been the last time this region will get a good view of the celestial celebrity until it comes around again in 2061.

For the remainder of this month, moonlight will interfere with its viewing. In early February, the comet will swing to the other side of the sun. And when it reappears, it

will hug the southern horizon, making it quite difficult to see from anywhere in the Northeast.

## Halley's partisans

Nevertheless, many local stargazers vow they will be getting up before dawn in March and April to give it a shot.

On Wednesday, Mark Croft arrived alone at Donaldson Park about an hour after sunset. At that time, it was cold — bitterly cold. The temperature was down to 15 or 20 degrees and a slight breeze pushed the wind-chill factor to zero.

But the icy weather didn't bother Croft, a physicist who teaches at Rutgers University.

"It's bearable," he said. "It freezes my toes thoroughly but it's with-standable, because you're satisfying other people."

The other people he referred to were his wife, Roxanne, and the Crofts' two children, Gist, 12, and Christina, 4. When they showed up at the park later that night, Croft was still searching the vast darkness for the comet.

The Croft family was joined by only a handful of other comet watchers Wednesday. But about 300 packed the park last Sunday night and dozens showed up Thursday.

The comet — which appeared as a tiny, fuzzy ball of light — was visible in the southwestern sky, beyond the treetops in the park. It could be seen a couple of fist-lengths to the left of the Douglass College chapel and the lighted steeple of the Sacred Heart Church in New Brunswick.

"I sort of felt compelled to see the comet — I had to," said Roxanne Croft, who had organized a bunch of

See **COMET**, Page B8

# COMET

Continued from Page B1

comet watches at the park during the past week. "This is about the worst of all its apparitions, but if you know what it is and you know where it's coming from, I think that's part of the excitement. It connects people across many generations and many centuries."

Gist Croft had a different reason for wanting to see the comet.

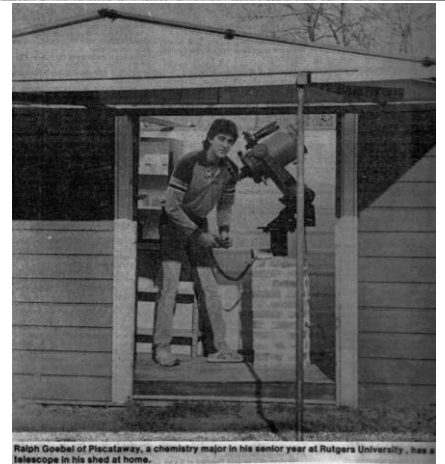
## Stars are the limit

"I'd like to see it when it comes back, because it's supposed to be a spectacular view," said the sixth-grader at Highland Park Middle School. "I'd like to say I saw it twice."

Gist, who wants to be an astrophysicist when he gets older, saw Halley's Comet on several different occasions last week and said it appeared to be "just a tiny bit bigger than a star, but fuzzier, like a cotton ball."

His younger sister described the comet as "a little tiny spot." She told her mother she hopes to see it again 76 years from now, when she is 80.

While hundreds of comet watchers were scanning the skies over Donaldson Park this week, other area residents were doing the same from their backyards.



Ralph Goebel of Piscataway, a chemistry major in his senior year at Rutgers University, has a telescope in his shed at home.

Ralph Goebel, a 21-year-old Piscataway resident, searched for the comet from his own private observatory — an aluminum shed behind his parents' house. The shed, which measures 8 feet by 10 feet, has been reconstructed to allow the roof to slide out on wheel bearings.

When the roof is pulled out, it rests upon two metal poles. Goebel is then able to bring out his \$1,200 telescope, rest it on a brick mounting pier inside the shed, and gaze out at the heavens.

Goebel, a senior chemistry major at Rutgers, loves astronomy so much that he plans to drive down to Florida during his spring break in March to get a better glimpse of Halley's Comet, which will be visible in the hours before dawn.

"I'm not going to the beach," he said. "I'll probably be sleeping during the day and staying up at night" looking for the comet.

South Plainfield resident Ron Gattie has been comet watching from the confines of what he refers to as his backyard "telefort" — a 32-square-foot viewing area surrounded by a 6-foot-high stockade fence.

In April, Gattie will be among a group of two dozen local stargazers making an expedition-vacation to Barbados, which is expected to be one of the best sites for viewing Halley's Comet.