

Local News

Colleagues recall star of Hawaii astronomy

by Peter Sur

Tribune-Herald Staff Writer

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Walter Steiger was a renaissance man, a genial polymath who is credited as a founder of modern astronomy in Hawaii.

Members of the astronomy community paused to remember the 87-year-old professor emeritus, who died Sunday afternoon in a traffic accident in Hilo. Memorial services are pending.

He was born in the small town of Proctor, Colo., the son of a botany professor, and grew up in Texas, Switzerland and Boston. His arrival in Hawaii was by fortunate accident.

Steiger was studying physics in 1943 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when he was told that if he enlisted in the Army Reserve, he wouldn't be drafted for World War II. Then the Army called up the reserves.

Steiger was sent to Kauai to guard Hawaii's interisland radio system.

"I had a wonderful time in Hawaii, and fell in love with it, and fell in love with the people, and I decided that I would spend the rest of my life here," Steiger told the Tribune-Herald in 2005. After being discharged, he completed his education, which included a master's degree in physics at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Cincinnati and returned to UH-Manoa, becoming the third faculty member of the UH physics department.

"I wanted to see what could be done in terms of research, and that's when my attention was called to the high mountains in Hawaii -- Haleakala, Mauna Kea, Mauna Loa and so on -- and surely there was some physics research that could be done on those mountains," Steiger had said.

"What interested me the most was the possibility of studying the sun, and for doing good solar studies you need a very clear atmosphere, and Haleakala turned out to be very good for that." He did a survey of conditions on the Maui mountain, finding it "extremely good in terms of the clarity of the sky."

"My goal was to build a solar observatory on Haleakala, but in the meantime I started one on Oahu on Makapuu Point," Steiger said. He built the observatory in 1957 for the International Geophysical Year, which actually lasted 18 months. It was the first observatory dedicated to serious study in Hawaii.

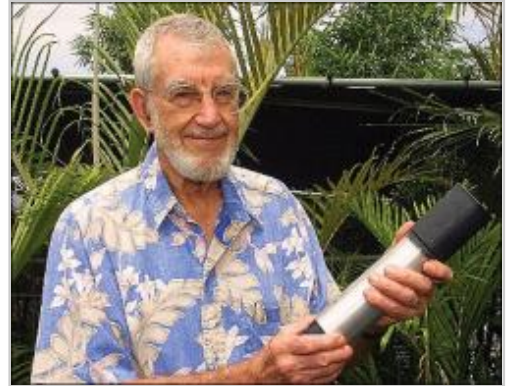
He then moved on to the just-finished solar observatory on Haleakala, studying a phenomenon called "airglow."

Word began circulating among astronomers about the mountain's clear skies, and that attracted the attention of another famous astronomer, Gerard Kuiper. Around 1963, Kuiper did a number of astronomical surveys on Haleakala, but he kept noticing another, even higher mountain poking above the clouds -- Mauna Kea.

Kuiper claimed credit for discovering Mauna Kea for astronomy, but he couldn't get the money to build a telescope. That responsibility fell to the three solar astronomers whom Steiger hired for the Haleakala observatory. One of them was John Jeffries, who led the UH Institute for Astronomy from its 1967 founding until 1983.

"Of course the rest of the story is history," Steiger said. He downplayed his role in bringing modern astronomy to Hawaii, saying that he was just "in the right place at the right time and helped get things started."

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In this 2003 file photo, Hawaii astronomer Walt Steiger stands outside his Kaumana home holding a telescope he and his students constructed. - Tribune-Herald File Photo

Steiger returned to full-time teaching at UH-Manoa throughout the 1970s, becoming chair of the Department of Physics and Astronomy.

"He was a wonderful guy. Everybody liked him," said Bill Heacox, an astronomy professor at the University of Hawaii at Hilo. Heacox was the chair of the UH-Manoa graduate student organization at the same time Steiger headed the department.

Steiger retired from teaching at the Manoa campus in 1980, and then kept on working.

In the 1980s he managed the Science Center -- the planetarium and telescope -- for the Bishop Museum in Honolulu in the 1980s and served on the UH Board of Regents for four years. He became site manager of the Caltech Submillimeter Observatory. From 1993 to 1997 he gave lectures in physics and astronomy in Hilo.

From mid-2003 to January 2004 he became the interim director of the future 'Imiloa Astronomy Center of Hawaii.

"The ('Imiloa) planetarium was one of his big things. He was very, very proud and excited for that planetarium," said Ka'iu Kimura, the center's current director. The two sometimes ate breakfast together, and last October 'Imiloa honored him in a special ceremony for his years of service.

Steiger never stopped working. In the last few years he did outreach for CSO, writing about the history of astronomy on Mauna Kea, drawing, delving into photography, updating the observatory website and helping wherever he could.

Family members remembered him as somewhat shy, and interested in, among other things, camping, fishing, hiking, singing, computer and auto repairs, construction and painting.

He would go into his office at CSO several times a week, said CSO technical operations manager Simon Radford.

"He was very active in a lot of things," Radford said, lauding his "buoyant personality." Steiger was "very enthusiastic to bring the science to the general public," he said.

"I help them when I can, and mostly I do my own thing here (at CSO)," Steiger said in 2005. "I'm not really doing any research now, more thinking of what I've done. Just having fun now, relaxing."

Steiger's eyesight was failing him, and he couldn't get a driver's license. Nor could he stay cooped up in his Hilo home, so he bought a mo-ped about a year ago. He had picked up medicine for his wife's arthritis and was riding the mo-ped home, driving up Kukuau Street, when he drove past the stop sign and into a vehicle.

His wife, Betty Steiger, recalled flirting with Walter Steiger via teletype when he was in the service. They both married other people, but remained friends. The two worked together at the Bishop Museum, and after both become available they fell in love and married in 1982.

Steiger is also survived by his son Keith Steiger and daughter Kathy Marciniak, stepchildren Dean Jones, Karen Jones and Kathy Walsh, 13 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

"He was always a caring person," Keith Steiger said. "And he didn't swear. Very smart."

Heacox, the UH-Hilo professor, said a group of people were already trying to round up support to name the new Science and Technology Building after Steiger. Family members supported the idea.

"Oh yeah, it would really please me," Betty Steiger said. "He really deserves it."

E-mail Peter Sur at psur@hawaiiitribune-herald.com.