



NMSU Library News Release

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Web Page Celebrates Discoverer of Planet

You can't blame the staff of the New Mexico State University Library for having stars in their eyes. The Library recently mounted a web page on planetary astronomer Clyde W. Tombaugh, who discovered the planet Pluto. The page, found at http://archives.nmsu.edu/exhibits/tombaugh_website/index.htm, includes an overview of the Clyde W. Tombaugh Papers, a biography, a bibliography, a listing of astronomy collections held by the Library and information on the processing of the papers. The page is a collaborative project of archivists Maura Kenny and Melissa Gottwald.



Clyde Tombaugh in 1928 with one of his homemade telescopes. Photo, NMSU Library Archives and Special Collections.



Clyde Tombaugh with the NMSU 24-inch planetary telescope in 1978. Photo, NMSU Library Archives and Special Collections.

Clyde W. Tombaugh is best known for his February 18, 1930, discovery of the elusive "Planet X," later to be named Pluto, at Lowell Observatory in Arizona. The majority of his career was spent in New Mexico, working first on the tracking telescopes at White Sands Proving Ground and later helping to establish the astronomy program at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, considered one of the nation's best. After his retirement in 1973, Dr. Tombaugh remained very active as a lecturer. Many senior Library staff members remember interacting with him on a regular basis as he came and went from his office in the astronomy department, located just across the street from the Library. Born in Illinois in 1906, the world-famous astronomer passed away on January 17, 1997, at the age of ninety.

The Clyde W. Tombaugh Papers were donated to the Library by his widow Patsy and their two children, Annette and Alden, in 2001. The papers consist of approximately 150 linear feet of material, including correspondence with prominent astronomers and space scientists such as Wernher von Braun and Carl Sagan. The papers also include educational records, administrative files, research files, writings, technical drawings, photographs, astronomical charts and printed matter. This spring, the Library is completing a three-year project to make Tombaugh's extensive personal and professional papers accessible for research.

Project archivist Melissa Gottwald presented a paper "The Clyde W. Tombaugh Papers and the Rio Grande Historical Collections: Preserving the History of Astronomy" at a January meeting of the American Astronomical Society in Atlanta, Georgia, and she repeated the presentation at a public program in Las Cruces on February 18. She discussed the preservation of the papers, as well as the astronomer's life and career, highlighting specific topics such as Pluto and Tombaugh's Mars research.

Processing of the papers was supported by grants from the American Institute of Physics and the New Mexico Historical Records Advisory Board and by private donations. The success of the project has been greatly enhanced by the cooperation of the Tombaugh family as well as the help of New Mexico astronomer Dr. Herb Beebe, who conducted an oral history project with family, friends and colleagues of Dr. Tombaugh. For more information, please contact Steve Hussman, the head of the Library's Archives and Special Collections Department, at (505) 646-4756.