

A Celestial Tour

Wisconsin Planetarium Takes Visitors Into The Stars

By ROGER SCHNEIDER
Associated Press

MONICO, Wis. — About the only thing more remarkable than the Kovac Planetarium is that on a Wisconsin tourism list of seven man-made wonders, it rated only an honorable mention.

Then again, when it's up against the likes of the Packers' Lambeau Field and Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin, maybe that's to be expected. That and the fact that the planetarium is plopped down in an isolated area of north-woods Wisconsin probably worked against it.

Frank Kovac Jr. is the 46-year-old amateur astronomer who built what he says is "the world's largest mechanical globe planetarium" on his 4-acre property near Monico, population fewer than 500. When he opened the planetarium in 2007 to his first customers, a woman and her son, it completed 10 years of work largely at night and on weekends that resulted from a lifelong passion inspired by his father in the family's hometown of Chicago.

He had no formal training in astronomy, opting for the Air Force after high school instead of college. He got the idea to build a planetarium in the early 1990s. It was an endeavor that was difficult to explain to the neighbors as the years dragged on, even as the project plowed ahead.

"They don't call it a planetarium. They call it a sanitarium," Kovac said. "Frank must be nuts saying it's going to look like this. Even one guy told his wife, 'That sounds really, really far-stretched that he can do that with glow paint.'"

All wackiness aside, what Kovac created is an hour-long celestial experience that is as entertaining as it is educational. His visitors include school and Scout groups from the area, but it also has attracted travelers of all ages from as far away as Texas and California.

Most planetariums show the movement of stars and other night-sky objects on a dome using expensive projectors. Kovac instead built a 2-ton, 22-foot-diameter mechanical globe, a project that he started in 1997. He did most of the work himself — minus the welding and motor building — during off-hours from his paper mill job, which also funded his project.

After "crazy," the word "meticulous" comes to mind.

He used luminous paint to apply about 5,200 stars inside the top of the globe, a process that took five months on a ladder and pretty much in the dark to replicate the night sky of the northern hemisphere at that location. The first star he painted was the North Star. Kovac's tour points out other prominent stars such as Polaris and Arcturus, constellations like the Big Dipper and Cassiopeia, and, of course, the Milky Way. The globe rotates to allow for the changing star positions with the seasons.

"Not that I'm an artist, just had to know where the dots went," said Kovac, who used a sky map to place his stars as accurately as possible. When something looked askew, he'd go outside on a clear night and look at the real thing to compare.

Planets require extra effort. He makes them with pins that he must move — from every few days to a month depending on the planet — to put them in their ever-changing positions as they revolve around the sun.

"For instance, here comes bright Jupiter in the east," Kovac explained. "By the time you get to 10 o'clock at night, that's where you'd see Jupiter, the largest planet in the solar system."

A soft music soundtrack sets the mood, or to simulate an outdoors sky-watching experience in the summer, there's a track of crickets chirping, Kovac supplements the

sky-watching with power-point photos to show size and distance comparisons of objects like our sun and other stars.

"Frank describes the solar system in such a way that kids can understand his language," said Linda Hendrickson of Antigo, which is about hour drive away. She is a just-retired elementary school teacher who has taken classes of second- and third-graders to shows several times. "They loved it."

Kovac admitted he had almost as many doubts along the way as his neighbors. Even his father, in whose memory the planetarium is named, questioned whether he could do it. The elder Kovac died in 1997 just as his son was getting started.

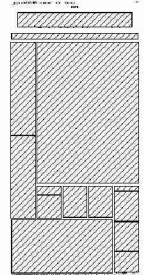
"To me it seemed like such a long endeavor because it's like a mountain climber reaches for the peak of the mountain, I'm reaching for the stars. I just many times felt that it was so much work building this thing, it seemed like it would never end. To finally get it to work and still I had no idea it would look this good."

Asked about the honorable mention in the state list, Kovac sounded like a guy who spent 10 years fulfilling a dream and now is happy spreading his love of astronomy to others.

"I'm not disappointed at all," he said. "The honorable mention is great. But maybe one day in the future if they re-categorize it, I'll be up in there."

IF YOU GO

KOVAC PLANETARIUM:
www.kovacplanetarium.com .
Located 4 miles east of Monico, Wis, on US Highway 8 at Mud Creek Road, which is roughly 320 miles north of Chicago, 230 miles north of Milwaukee and 210 miles east of the Twin Cities. Call ahead for show times and reservations: 715-487-4411.



Adults, \$12; children 5-12, \$8; seniors 62 and up, \$10, with discounts available for groups such as Scouts and schools.

WISCONSIN'S SEVEN WONDERS

The Kovac Planetarium earned an honorable mention in the Wisconsin Department of Tourism list of the state's seven man-made wonders. The seven are:

- Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame & Museum, Hayward: Take a walk through a replica of a musky that is four-and-a-half stories tall, a half city block long. Inside and on the grounds is

everything you need to know about fishing, from records to history.

- Lambeau Field, Green Bay: Since 1957, the home of the Green Bay Packers.

- Milwaukee Art Museum: Its steel wing-like structure known as the Burke Brise Soleil was designed by Santiago Calatrava.

- Noah's Ark Waterpark, Wisconsin Dells: One of the reasons the Dells is known as "The Waterpark Capital of the World:"

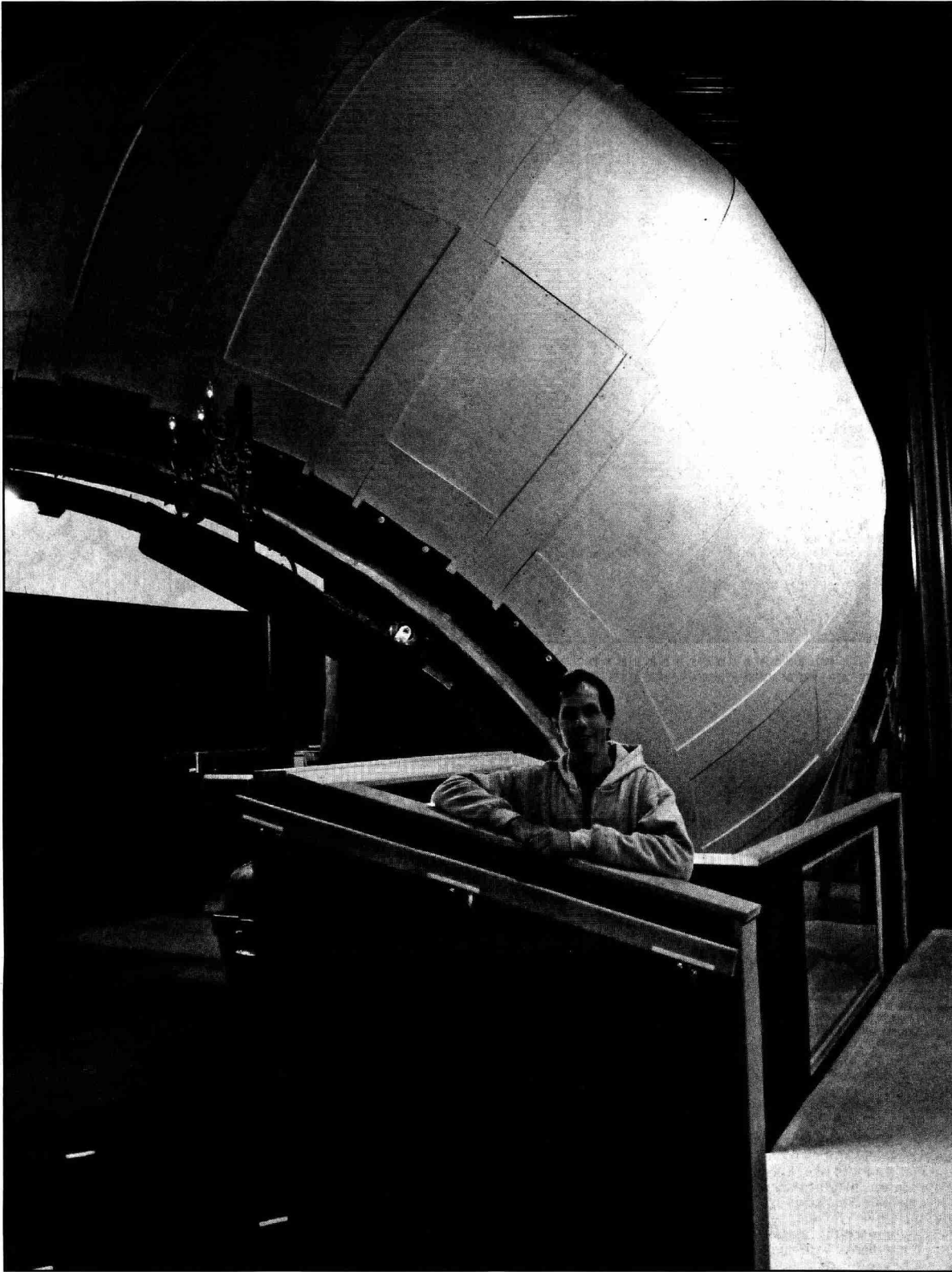
- Taliesin, Spring Green: 600-acre estate with five Frank Lloyd Wright-designed buildings in southwest Wisconsin.

- House on the Rock, Spring Green: Alex Jordan's passion for collecting led to him turning his home into what the tourism department calls "a repository for the myriad fanciful, whimsical and artful collections that spoke to him."

- Wisconsin Concrete Park, Phillips: an outdoor museum of 237 concrete sculptures and other objects created by folk artist Fred Smith in northern Wisconsin.



This Oct. 23, 2011 photo shows the sign for the Kovac Planetarium in Rhinelander, Wis., which includes an image of Frank Kovac Sr., left, and an image Frank Kovac Jr. shot of Comet Hale-Bopp Comet in 1997.



Frank Kovac Jr. stands outside the Kovac Planetarium in Rhinelander, Wisc. Kovac built the planetarium over a 10-year period, from 1997 to 2007, and named it in memory of his father who died in 1997.

AP photos