

# Moving to Galaxy Country



article and photos by Tom Clark

**W**riters always like to ask, "So, what would you change if you had to do it all over again?" whenever we have the chance to visit someone's home-made observatory.

It's not often when we get to find out exactly what the answer to that would really be.

In Issue #52 *Amateur Astronomy* ran an article on what has to be two of the best home-made telescopes in the country. When we visited John Novak's observatory in Brooksville, FL we were awestruck by what this

quite, non-assuming telescope maker had accomplished with very little fanfare. His magnificent observatory was quite unique - very different from anything else we had visited. The observatory building had two domes on it, and the scopes included not only a 24" f/8 Ritchie, but also a 36" f/4 Newtonian. Both scopes were on fork mounts and were used extensively for imaging.

John had built his astronomy dream near the small town of Brooksville, about 45 miles north of where he used to live in St. Petersburg, on Florida's west coast. The only prob-

lem was that in 10 short years the small town had grown way too much, and his 30 acres had become surrounded by new homes, and the inevitable light pollution was catching up to him.

John had rejoined the Chiefland club, spent a few hours observing with me on my 42", and the draw of dark skies was making observing from his own observatories under brightening skies much less interesting. Before long, John decided that since he was now mostly retired, it was time to move the family out to the country. He asked me to be on the lookout for

*Novak watching the crane drive the dome over to the new home. The 16' dome can be seen in two pieces in the background*



*The aluminum dome is so light that the crane could have lifted many of them at once.*





*Left: The 36" was lowered into this pit so there would be an elevated floor all around the scope. The scope is so large that even with the high floor, it can still image down to less than 20 degrees above the horizon.*

*Middle: The warm room with the base for the 22' dome*

*Bottom: The 36" made the 90 mile trip in one piece, without the optics in place of course*



any property coming up for sale in Chiefland for him. Meanwhile, he was sketching out plans for the new observatory, and deciding how to improve the old set up. His actual homemade aluminum domes would be making the move with him, and the old observatory was turned into a mother-in-law apartment.

The only thing left to do was to build two new bases for the 16' and 22' domes.

Within six months of talking about making the move, luck was with him. A 20 acre plot behind my property came up for sale, and within a couple of hours of my contacting John, a deal was struck and soon I would have a new neighbor, and the Chiefland Astronomy Village was about to gain two new domes.



The main differences between the old observatory and the new was that the 36" Newtonian was going to sit in a pit, with a raised floor all around it. The 25" was going to go into a higher building, and the scope itself would be elevated so it would sit higher above the ground and the attending atmospheric turbulence.

In the first observatory, the control room was on the right and the scopes on the left. In the new one, the control room was in the middle, with the scopes on either side.

The work was started in the spring, and the dome for the 36" was built first. I was happy to be able to help with the construction before we left Chiefland for the summer, as John

had worked wonders helping me rebuild my own dome. (see Building New Aluminum Dome Doors in issue #54.)

Just before our departure date the dome sections arrived on a trailer, and the larger one was reassembled first. Soon after, the 36" scope made the trip on the same trailer, and was ready to be re-installed into its new home.

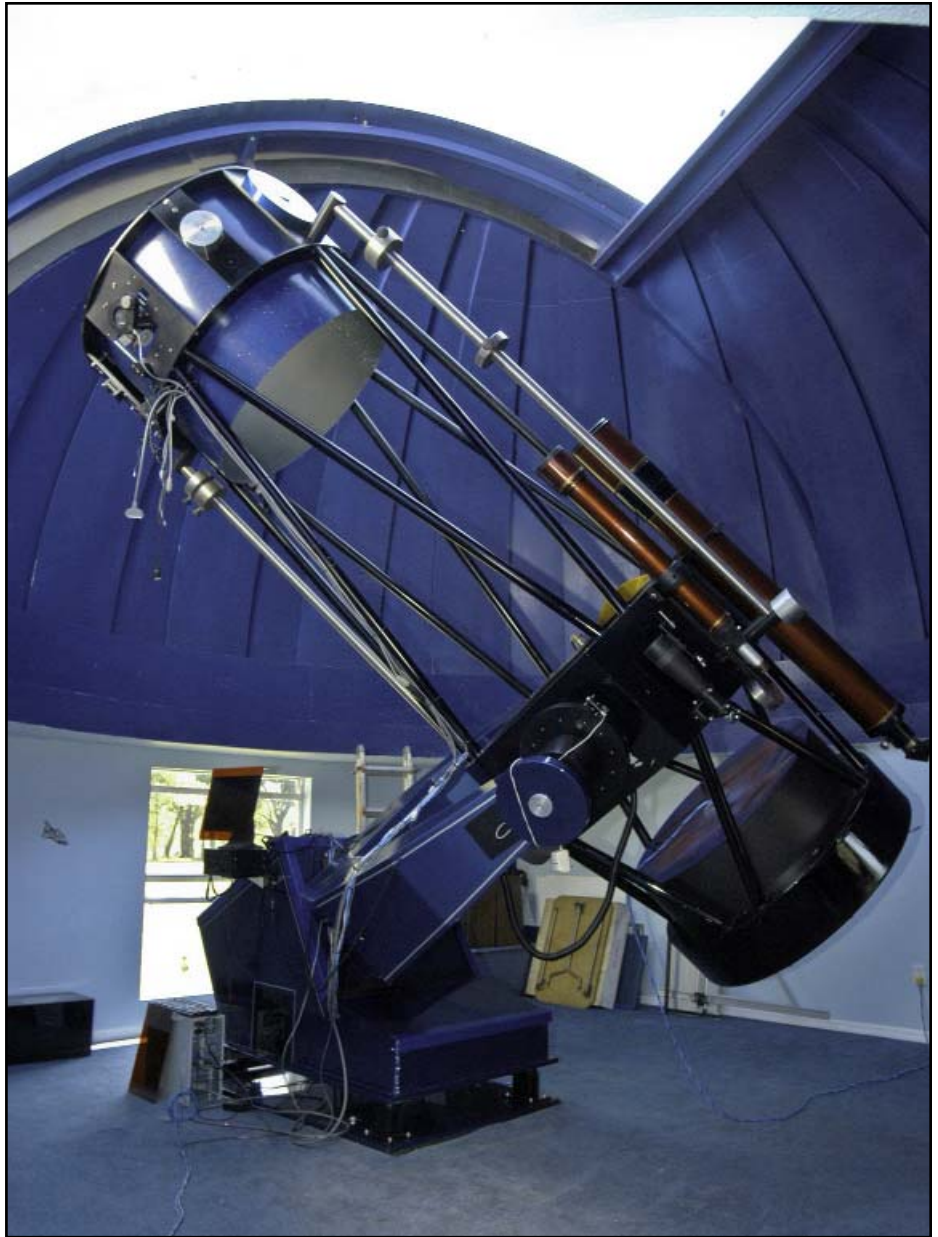
By the time I got back from the golf course one Monday morning, the 36" was already sitting in the new observatory, but I was in time to watch the crane pick up the 22' dome, drive across the field, and then lift it into place.

### What a sight!

By the time Jeannie and I returned home in the fall, the building was finished, the 22" set up, and John was grinning ear to ear when he showed me his first image from the his new dark sky location. M33 was like a poster taken by a professional observatory with a 100" scope.

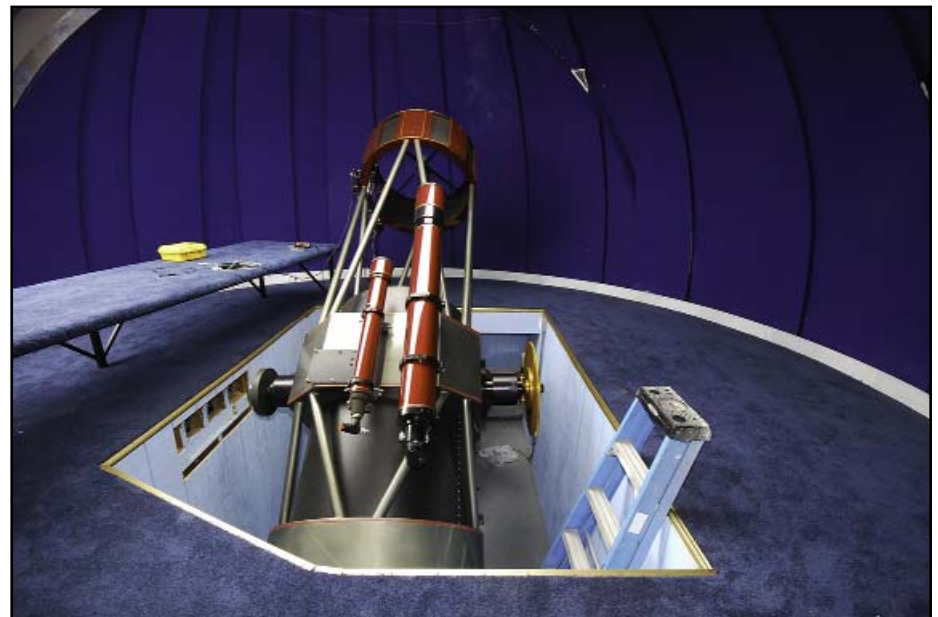
John says that he had quit trying to photograph galaxies from the Brooksville location as the light pollution made it hopeless. H-alpha filters made it possible to image nebulae, but not much else from the brightened skies.

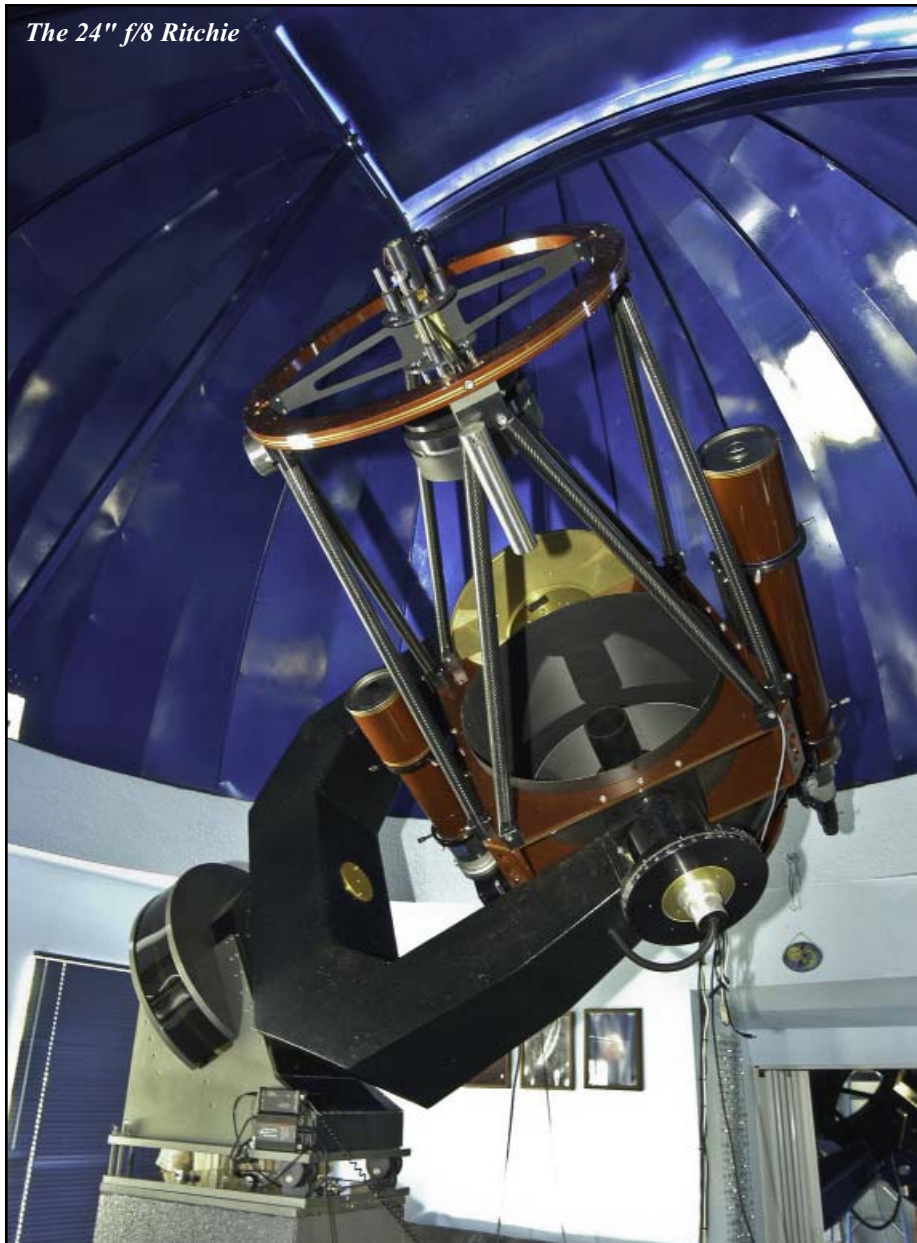
The move to dark skies had put new life into what is probably one of the finest private observatories in the country. John is definitely a great



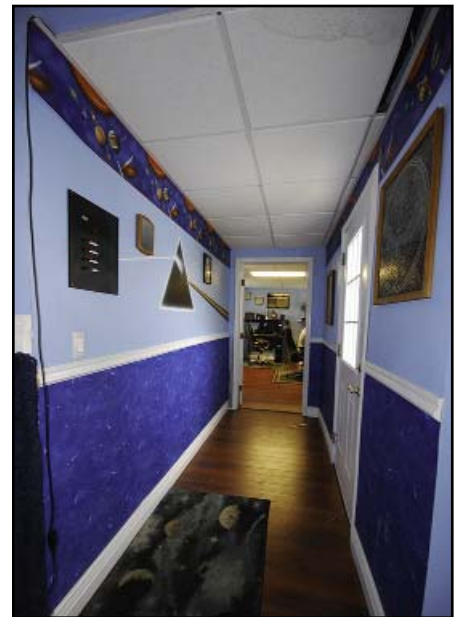
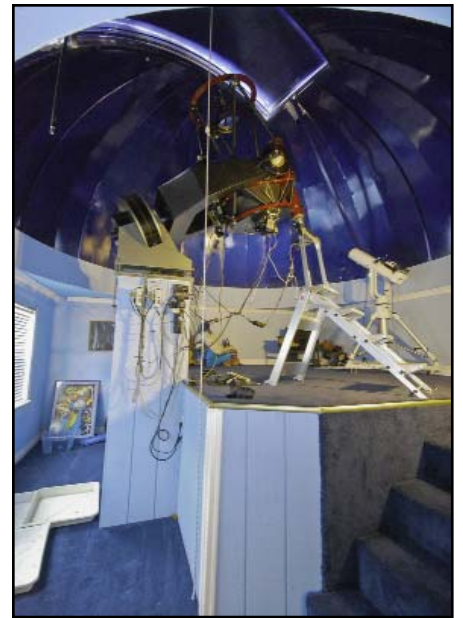
*This 36" f/4 is one of the nicest home-made scopes the author has ever seen. It weighs 7 tons! If you missed the article in #52, you should read it.*

*The bottom image shows the 36" installed in the new location with the raised deck. The declination axes on the 36" are seven feet above ground level, and even with the raised floor. The huge observing platform will soon be on wheels and easy to move for visual observing.*





*The 24" f/8 Ritchie*



*Top Left: Close up of the 24" Ritchie*

*Top Right: The 24" Ritchie now sits on a nine foot high concrete pier, and the floor is raised on the side so the cameras are easy to reach.*

*Right: The entrance hall in the observatory is decorated with astronomy motif wallpaper*

*Bottom: The 12 x 20' warm room has heat and air, microwave and fridge, and two control computers so both scopes can image simultaneously. That is the sign of a true astrophotography junkie*



*Top: The 16' dome for the 24" Ritchie uses a motorized vertical sliding shutter*

*Middle: The 22' dome has horizontal shutters that open with just a couple of pounds of pressure due to their ball bearing tracts. The opening is six feet wide. Both domes are rotated in sync with the scopes from the control room.*

*Bottom: John's main computer has four monitors, one for processing, one for scope control, one for music, and one for image display.*

new asset to the Chiefland Astronomy Village. Within a month or two after his arrival, he made friends with a neighbor who had a very annoying light, and was able to get it replaced with a fully shielded light that satisfies both the non-astronomer neighbor and the astronomy focused villagers. His 20 acres has turned from an eyesore overgrown property into the nicest property in the village. Every place needs new blood once in a while to reinvigorate it, and we welcome John Novak and family as wonderful new neighbors.

When you walk into the observatory, all shoes are left at the door. The domes are thickly carpeted, and wood flooring covers the hallway and warm room. The walls are painted sky blue, and the inside of the domes are dark blue. What a nice combination.

John observes every night when there is a clear sky, and some of his images



*John's image of M33 - shot through the big scope at the new home in glaaaxy country*

are getting very good. He has even progressed to the point where his processing has really improved. Most nights galaxies are the targets, as they had to be neglected for the years he imaged from the light polluted Brooksville site.

There is nothing like moving to a darker sky location to make the astronomy hobby more fun and rewarding. Having a world class observatory and instruments only make the hobby more fun.

**Tom Clark**






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