

Astronomy column for 7/2/00

## Leo Brenner and the Moon

When all else fails, owners of binoculars or telescopes can always observe the moon. Our celestial neighbor is available at least a few times every month, and its craters, mountains, valleys, and lava plains seem endless in their variety.

Every mark or splotch has its story, and none is stranger than the tale of a crater named after Leo Brenner. He was born in 1855 in Trieste, then in Austria, as Spiridion Gopcevic, son of a rich ship owner, who committed suicide when Spiridion was only six. He and his mother resettled in Vienna, but she died soon thereafter.

Little is known about his youth after his mother's death. He reappeared as an author of several minor novels and non-fiction works about politics and war. He married a wealthy wife and settled with her on the island of Lussin in the Adriatic Sea.

With his wife's money, he erected an ornate observatory with a seven-inch refracting telescope. For reasons that are now lost (but are highly suspicious), he immediately changed his name to Leo Brenner. The telescope was particularly suited to the observation of the moon and planets. Brenner's observations, which were widely published in the scientific journals of the time, gained the admiration of many astronomers.

Sadly, some began to doubt his work. Every time someone else made a discovery, he managed to make spectacular observations of it. Against all odds and the laws of physics; he calculated the rotational period of Venus (a Venus "day") at 23 hours, 57 minutes, and 36.2396 seconds. This was astounding when consider that Venus is covered with an unbroken layer of clouds. It has no visible surface features against which to measure the planet's rotation. Since Venus is close in size of the earth, it is likely that Brenner guessed Venus would have a similar rotation. However he didn't say it was a guess and purposely continued the deception by by inventing a grotesquely accurate figure. A Venusian day is actually 243 Earth days, but there was no way for Brenner -- or in fact anyone else at the time -- to know that.

After Percival Lowell of the United States discovered the famous (and, as it turned out, bogus) canals on Mars, Brenner drew detailed Mars maps crisscrossed with hundreds of canals, which he concluded were artificial waterways created by intelligent Martians.

Astronomers had recently discovered that the bright star Sirius in the constellation Canis Major had a faint companion star orbiting around it. Brenner published measurements of the companion's distance from Sirius, despite the fact that the companion was far beyond the reach of his telescope.

Brenner did not take criticisms of his finding well. His comments and letters in reply were so threatening and extreme that people began to suspect that Brenner was, well, crazy. Scientific journals soon refused to accept his articles, so Brenner began to publish his own journal and continued to publish it until 1909, long after anyone was reading it.

Abruptly, in 1909, he sold his observatory, and the person called Leo Brenner ceased to exist. As Spiridion Gopcevic, he traveled to the United States and then back to Austria. After that, even Spiridion Gopcevic disappears. What he did afterwards and even when he died remains a mystery.

Had Brenner faked his observations, or was he one of the sincere cranks who occasionally dot the history of astronomy? No one really knows. Brenner still had a few friends. Noted lunar mapper Philipp Fauth was one of them. To this very day, detailed moon maps show a small crater near the crater called Metius. It is a monument to one of the strangest characters ever to look through a telescope.