

I met Aline Carter at the Witte Museum somewhere in the mid-1950s. My mother was there at a meeting and I had been left to wander through the exhibits. As was often the case, I was peering at the shrunken heads (later deaccessioned because they were fakes). Without warning, powerful female voice boomed out in the silent, “Little boy, what are you doing?” I turned around to see a tall woman dressed in flowing white. I said, “I’m looking at these shrunken heads, Ma’am.” She pointed upward and said, “You should be looking at the stars!”

On the way home, my mother told me that I had been invited to the home of Aline Carter to look through her telescope. We arrived at about eight, and I was left to enter the imposing house by myself. It was rather tumbledown, as I recall. But Mrs. Carter seemed oblivious to its condition as she led me up one staircase after another until we were on the roof. And there was a wonderful thing indeed, a real observatory with a telescope!

She first showed me Saturn with its rings, shimmering there in the night sky. I was so amazed by it. This wasn’t a photo. It wasn’t a painting. I was looking at Saturn as it was right now. Believe me, my heart was pounding. I was amazed by its grace and beauty. Awed. Then she said, “What would you like to see?”

In those days, we boys were fascinated by Mars because of all the speculation that the flying saucers that were daily in the news might come from there. So I said immediately, “Mars.” She adjusted the telescope and there it was, a shimmering red smudge—with a white edge that she told me was a polar cap.

In that moment, I was filled with a great wonder that has not left me to this day. The mystery and grandeur of the universe has become part of my blood and soul, and it all started on that night so long ago, in that lovely little observatory with Ailene Carter watching over me as I beheld for the first time the true wonder in which we live.

—Whitley Strieber