

Elgin National Watch Company's Observatory 312 Watch

A 1908 U.S. Bureau of Standards disclosure, which stated that time controls in America were substandard, stimulated the Elgin National Watch Company to build an observatory to time its watches by the stars.

"The Elgin National Watch Company, to provide its own accurate time standards announced it would build an astronomical unit to cover this necessity, and the Observatory was the result. In May, 1909, Professor William W. Payne of Goodsell Observatory, at Carlton College, Northfield, Minnesota, was engaged to advise and assist in locating and equipping the Observatory. A permanent building was soon started according to designs made by and supervised by Mr. George Hunter, consulting superintendent, to comply with the requirements outlined by Professor Payne." (The Elgin Observatory Story, R.S. Neidigh)

The hill on which the Observatory sits was chosen because its gravel base reduced vibrations of the earth. The Observatory was opened in February, 1910, and Professor Payne, a nationally-recognized astronomer, was appointed its director. Underground cables were laid between the Observatory and the Watch Factory's Rating Room in order to accurately regulate and time the watches being manufactured at the factory.

Elgin Observatory sent impulses daily to Chicago to open the 1933 Century of Progress World Fair's gates. At the Fair, the Elgin National Watch Company's exhibit contained a replica of the Elgin Observatory. The greatest single event on the fairgrounds was the turning on of all the outdoor lighting and the nightly ceremony of Arcturus in which the Elgin Observatory was the key player during the duration of the Fair (1933-34).

In 1959, the watch company presented the Observatory to the Elgin Public Schools for use by young science students.

The planetarium was built in 1963 and opened in school year 1963-64. The 25th anniversary of the planetarium was celebrated in 1988-89. Over the years, 600,000 students have visited the Observatory, participating in the elementary science program and Junior Astronomers, a program in the gifted curriculum. As an expansion of the services, staff included kindergarteners this year.

Community groups, parent-teacher groups, Scouts, and others schedule time at the facility for their members and also attend special programs and the traditional holiday presentation. The community's appreciation of the site and the expansion of service supports the adage, "The sky's the limit."

