

In a year and a half, Starfront Observatories in Rockwood, Texas, has grown from zero telescopes to more than 550. Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times



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By Kenneth Chang

Kenneth Chang stayed up late during an August visit to Starfront Observatories' 11 sheds in Rockwood, Texas.

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During the day, this patch of land in sparsely populated Central Texas is not remarkable. Eleven buildings, nearly identical, look like bland, oversize backyard sheds. Several large R.V.s are parked nearby.

Not long ago, cows grazed here.

But as the sun sets on a clear day, the buildings groan and creak as the roof of each shed rolls back, like the sliding lid on a wooden box.

Revealed within the sheds are hundreds of telescopes, which intermittently twitch and pirouette, a robot army awakening. Their owners are nowhere to be seen.

This is Starfront Observatories. If you want to explore the universe but do not want to go outside, this might be the place for you. In an age of digital cameras and state-of-the-art internet, amateur astronomy can now be a remote-controlled hobby, and a far more sophisticated one.

Today's telescopes provide much more than a magnified view of the night sky. For many practitioners, the name of the game is astrophotography — taking exquisite, long-exposure photographs of objects too dim to be seen with the naked eye.

“It's the most efficient way for astronomy to be done,” said Dustin Gibson, one of the company's founders.

The romantic notion of an astronomer trekking to the top of a distant mountain to observe the universe through the eyepiece of a telescope has been fading for decades. Now, many professionals set up observation campaigns from their own offices, sometimes half a world away. The next morning, they go to work and look at the new images and data awaiting them on their computers.

That trend has reached amateurs, too, with remote observatories popping up in Utah, New Mexico, Chile and elsewhere. But those largely cater to the most obsessed hobbyists, who seek the clearest, darkest skies for big, expensive, high-end equipment.



From left: Josh Kim, Bray Falls and Dustin Gibson, three of Starfront Observatories' four co-founders, who met in the worlds of start-ups and astrophotography. Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

Mr. Gibson and the other three founders of the company — Bray Falls, Nathan Hanks and Josh Kim — wanted to build something within reach of more people. Since it opened for business a little over a year ago, Starfront has grown quickly and now houses more than 550 telescopes. That is, by far, the most of any such facility in the world, the company says.

The telescopes include tiny ones that look like security cameras as well as a behemoth with a two-foot-wide mirror that belongs to Mr. Gibson.

“Our mission is to make space exploration, and space in general, more accessible to everyone,” Mr. Kim said.

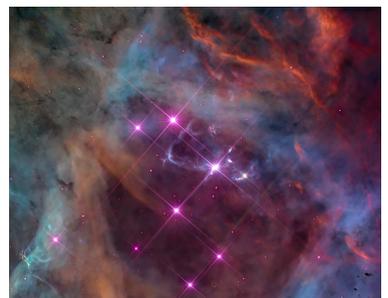
In the future, the founders imagine schools and universities setting up or renting time on telescopes at Starfront, allowing students to explore the universe.

“It becomes places in their mind, instead of just things in a textbook,” Mr. Gibson said.

The heavens have long attracted enthusiastic amateur sky gazers, who have often been the first to spot comets, exploding stars and other cosmological finds.



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The first and last images, taken by Mr. Gibson, show two star-forming regions in the Milky Way: the Orion Nebula and the Rosette Nebula. The second, taken by Mr. Falls, shows, at top, a planetary nebula — an expanding shell of gas ejected by a dying star. The third image, also by Mr. Falls, captures the sinewy remnants of a supernova explosion. Starfront Observatories

But it is not a cheap hobby — a good telescope can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars — nor an easy one. Most people live in urban and suburban areas where the night skies, flooded by artificial lighting, never get very dark. Clouds can also get in the way, and in places up north, standing outside in winter can be uncomfortably cold.

“It’s very challenging if your experience has to be dependent on taking the system out somewhere and waiting for clear skies and hoping for your best,” Mr. Gibson said.

Many a beginner quickly gives up, the telescope languishing in a closet.

The founders of Starfront say there is a better way: ship the telescope to Texas, along with a digital camera and a computer. At Starfront, a technician will install the device onto a steel mount in one of the sheds.

It is like renting a parking spot for your telescope, albeit one with a high-speed data connection. The cost starts at \$99 a month for the smallest telescope.

The telescopes can track the same part of the sky over many nights. Over that time, digital camera sensors can gather enough photons to reveal objects that are otherwise invisible. Amateurs typically use telescopes with a wide field of view and thus spot things missed by giant professional observatories, which focus on a speck of the night sky.



Texas was not an obvious place for a remote telescope farm, but the Rockwood area had internet access and other features that made it attractive. Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

“This is a nebula I discovered in Virgo,” Mr. Falls said, pointing to a colorful image of a remnant of a supernova explosion in the constellation Virgo that rivaled the nearby moon in size.

Mr. Falls, an accomplished photographer of the night sky, said the image took about 180 hours of exposure time.

“Most of the stuff I look at is bigger than the moon in this sky, but it’s just so faint that people don’t really photograph them at all,” Mr. Falls said.

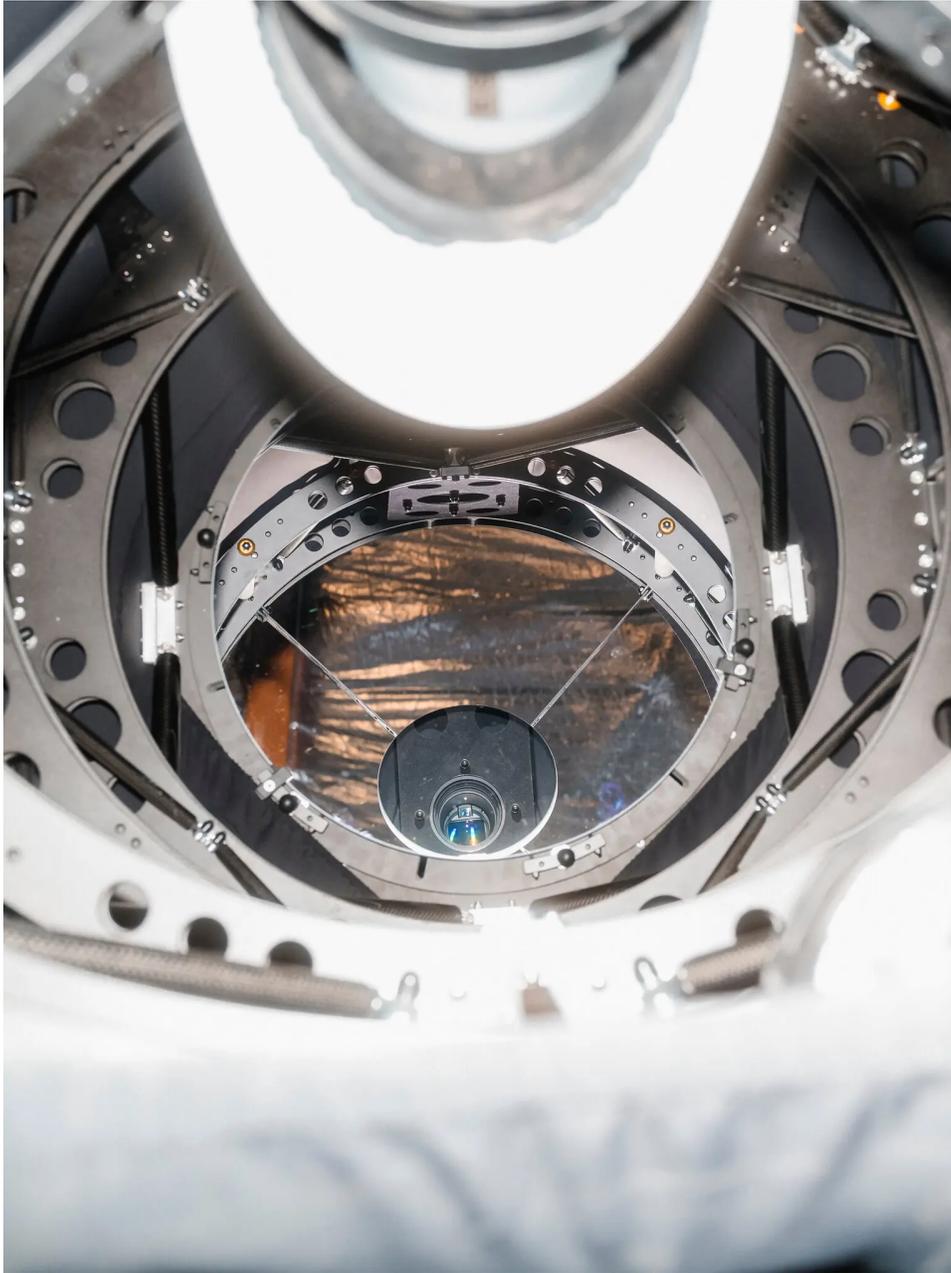
The four founders of Starfront had crossed paths through various earlier business ventures and a shared interest in astronomy. Mr. Gibson, Mr. Hanks and Mr. Kim had all worked at a start-up, OurSky, which provides a software development platform for space data applications. Mr. Falls and Mr. Gibson have known each other for years through the astrophotography community.

A couple of years ago, they started looking for a site. There were some obvious requirements.

It had to be dark: Class 1, the darkest on the Bortle scale, named after John Bortle, the amateur astronomer who created it. (Times Square in Manhattan is a 9, the brightest and least desirable for looking at the cosmos.)

The weather also had to be clear on most nights.

Texas was not an obvious choice. Deserts or mountaintops in places like New Mexico and California can be darker and clearer. But 15 acres of land next to a dirt road near the minuscule community of Rockwood offered other benefits like fiber-optic cables that provided fast, reliable internet.



Telescopes at Starfront include tiny ones that look like security cameras as well as Mr. Gibson's behemoth with a two-foot-wide mirror. Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

Rockwood is also not completely in the middle of nowhere. Austin and Fort Worth are within a three-hour drive.

They bought the land in April last year. As they started construction on the first of the sheds to house the telescopes, a rare torrential downpour made the Rockwood location seem like a terrible decision.

“They had what they said was the worst rain in like 20 years, the day we arrived,” Mr. Gibson recalled. “It was a nightmare scenario. And all the water created bug issues.”

The rain ended. The floodwater drained away. They built the first two sheds.

On YouTube, Mr. Falls posted videos explaining the concept of Starfront. That caught the attention of people like Jonathan Semeyn, who lives in Kansas, close to downtown Kansas City. “The conditions that I have for astrophotography are not great,” he said. “I have a really small backyard with a limited view of the sky.”



The Starfront founders are looking to expand and host more telescopes, both in Texas and in the Southern Hemisphere. Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

Mr. Semeyn said he logged into his telescope every night when the skies were clear over Texas. In the second half of last year, he had more than 800 hours of imaging time on his telescope at Starfront. For a telescope he has at home, he said, he had gotten maybe 100 hours so far this year. “It’s no comparison,” he said.

Starfront has collaborated with its customers to adapt telescopes for remote observations. Carlos Garcia had bought a Seestar S50, a small telescope controlled by a smartphone app.

He said he enjoyed using it, but “I found myself being frustrated that here in Miami, where I live, I could only take it out, maybe, if I was lucky, two nights a week.”

He started contacting remote observatories. “The overwhelming reaction was ‘You’re kidding, right? That’s a \$500 telescope. That’s never going to work,’” Mr. Garcia said. And the lowest rate he found was \$800 a month.

When he learned about Starfront, he signed up for the cheapest option, then \$149 a month, and shipped the telescope to Texas.

Mr. Garcia made a video explaining how he set up and controlled his Seestar using a Mac. These small telescopes are now a sizable part of Starfront’s business. In the newer sheds, a row of Seestars can be installed on a steel beam at the front of the building, providing an even cheaper mounting option at \$99 a month.

Starfront recently purchased an adjoining 20-acre plot, providing room for many more sheds and telescopes. It is exploring the possibility of a second site in the Southern Hemisphere.

As people sent their telescopes to Starfront, the founders had trouble keeping up with customer support.

“We were drowning,” Mr. Kim recalled.

So they set up a community on Discord, the instant messaging platform, so that customers could help one another. Anyone can join, not just people with telescopes at Starfront. That has turned into a vibrant group of people helping with technical issues and collaborating to combine data from several telescopes to produce better images.

“You’ve got 2,000 astronomy lovers in one place all talking about the same thing,” Mr. Gibson said.

“And they’re hilarious,” Mr. Kim added.



Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

Kenneth Chang, a science reporter at The Times, covers NASA and the solar system, and research closer to Earth.

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