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ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH AN ASTRONOMICAL OBSERVATORY IN THE UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES IN THE LAST 100 YEARS

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RESUMEN

Desde finales del siglo XIX, la ULA se ha propuesto crear un observatorio astronómico para incrementar el nivel educativo de los estudiantes y establecer las bases para realizar investigación sistemática en astronomía. A lo largo del siglo XX se han realizado varios intentos por alcanzar un viejo sueño institucional. Sin embargo, las dificultades que enfrentaron cada uno de los propulsores, en sus respectivos períodos históricos, lo han retrasado. Se presenta un análisis de las características de cada uno de los proyectos localizados en los diversos archivos institucionales, los profesores que los promovieron y algunas características de cada uno de ellos.

ABSTRACT

Since the late 19th century, the ULA have set themselves the goal of creating an astronomical observatory to increase the educational level of students and establish the foundations to develop systematic research in Astronomy. Throughout the 20th century several attempts have been made to reach an old dream of the institution. However, the difficulties faced by each of the proponents, in their respective historical periods, have delayed it. A brief analysis of the characteristics of each of the six projects found in the various institutional files, the teachers that promoted them, and some of the characteristics of each, is presented.

Key Words: history and philosophy of astronomy

1. GENERAL

At the Universidad de Los Andes (ULA), located in the city of Mérida (Venezuela), Dr. Caracciolo Parra Olmedo, during his term as President of the university (1887–1900) proposed the creation of a Meteorological and Astronomical Observatory as part of a process to modernize the university (Chalbaud 1965). One of the first actions taken was to ask several Astronomical Observatories (Paris, Greenwich, Bremen, Berlin, Washington, Cambridge, Sydney) for free copies of the yearbook and the works they have done on them (Chalbaud 1975). The resources for the acquisition of instruments, including the installation of a telescope and its dome, began being gathered from a public fundraising and contributions from the Regional Legislature since May 17, 1889 (Chalbaud 1975). At the beginning the results were negative, regardless Rector Parra Olmedo went on receiving private donations: books, Cosmological and Astronomical maps, an indoor observatory, and even, an Optical Telescope with its respective tripod and lens. The project sought to install the observatory in the Tower of the former chapel of the university. Although public and private resources allowed performing the purchase of the telescope and the dome from the Fouldfrères y Cie in France, they never arrived to Mérida; on April 28, 1894 the Huge Earthquake of Los Andes took place and destroyed some cities at the Andean zone, as well as the tower where the observatory would be installed and forcing Rector Parra Olmedo to redefine the project and reorient the resources to rebuild a sizable part of the former building of the ULA. A second attempt was held from 1961 by Dr. Pedro Rincón Gutiérrez, Rector of ULA (1959–72), who upon knowing the intentions of the Board of Directors of the Observatorio Cagigal in Caracas (Hubschmann, 1988) of installing their telescopes in the area of The Andes (Chalbaud 1990), requested before the University Council the institutional support necessary for the National Government to install said on ULA land, for which the creation of a School for Basic Sciences was being planned. The first contacts were given with the authorization to start the campaign for meteorological measurements with aims to locating the most adequate site (ULA-CU 1961). From 1961 to 1975, university authorities kept an open channel of direct communication, first with the Cagigal Observatory, and then with the authorities of the Foundation of the Centro de Investigaciones de Astronomía (CIDA), whom administrate the National Observatory of Llano Hato. From 1975 until current times the inter-institutional relations are channeled through a representative of

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the ULA in the Board of Directors of CIDA. Professor Emidio Prata –priest, physicist and Ph.D. at the University of Firenze (Italy), member of the Department for Physics and Mathematics in the Faculty of Engineering set forth the third and fourth attempts to build an observatory in the ULA in December 1961 (ULA-FI 1961). The proposal focused on the construction of an Astronomical Observatory at the top of Pico Espejo (4,765 meters, 15,583 feet), to perform heliophysics observations, taking advantage of the facilities of the Mérida Cable Car (ULA-AH 1962). The project was framed under the policy called Expansion Plan of ULA which intended to enlarge the student capacity, the constructions, and research improvement. Basically, the intention was to install one of the telescopes that Cagigal Observatory kept stored awaiting a definite location. In this phase, Prof. Prata affirmed that he had the collaboration of the American astronomer Donald Menzel, who visited the ULA twice (March/01–02/1960 and April/02–03/1964) (ULA-AH, 1960). In the next phase the proposal underwent a modification, the project was set forth in terms of a large institution, "Simón Bolívar Geospace Observatory", divided into several research centres: Centre for Space Communications via Satellites, Artificial Satellite Tracking Centre, Station for the Study of Cosmic Radiation, Zodiac Astrophysical Observatory, Geophysical Observatory, Centre for Study of Terrestrial Electricity and a Centre of Observations on Terrestrial Magnetism (ULA-FI 1960). The fifth attempt came from the engineers. Professor Angel Ernesto Hernández B., proposed in May 1971 the creation of an Astronomical Booth in the building of the Faculty of Engineering (ULA-FI 1971). The station would allow performing the practical lessons, necessary for students of the subject of Geodesic and Astronomy, part of the curriculum of Civil Engineering, in addition to providing service to the Photogrammetry Institute. Prof. Hernández proposed as objectives the determination of precise geographic coordinates of the second order; the participation in activities of astronomic observation, and the initiation of relations with the Astrophysical Observatory to be installed in Mérida.

The sixth attempt was formulated in 1990. A group of teachers, members of the Grupo de Astrofísica, headed by Dr. Ignacio Ferrín, planned the construction of an Astronomical Observatory in the Páramo of Piedras Blancas (4,305 meters, 14,124 feet). The Council for Technological, Humanistic and Scientific Development (CDCHT in Spanish) made an evaluation of the proposal within a policy favoring research and the formation of Research Groups. The justifications harbored were directed to the construction of an observatory of the ULA's own, and independent of the National Observatory. This observatory will be destined to the systematic observation of Comets and the performance of photometric measurements. This proposal privileged the characteristics of "seeing" but the back up necessary to demonstrate it was not included (ULA-CDCHT 1990). Yet, ULA, through CDCHT, provided resources necessaries to move forward the design of the building (ULA-CDCHT 1993).

2. CONCLUSION

The University of Los Andes, over the course of more than a century has been unable to build and operate an Astronomical Observatory of its own. Not taking into consideration dimensions, all the projects submitted proposed small instruments. An essential characteristic is that the majority of the people in charge of the projects were oblivious to the existence of previous proposals. The reasons why any of the projects were not made are due to natural phenomena (earthquakes), the lack of financial resources, the loss of interest, resignation or retirement of the creator, change of the technological paradigm, etc. However, the will to continue trying has been a constant and recurring element. An exhaustive evaluation of the historical sources could yield new projects that were lost in historical periods and have not been studied yet.

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