

Austin American-Statesman

PUBLISHED SINCE 1871

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1991

Harlan Smith dies, headed observatory

Retired UT astronomer saluted for vision

By Siva Vaidhyanathan
American-Statesman Staff

Harlan Smith never made it into space. He never saw his "Eye of Texas" telescope built. He never saw human beings explore Mars or colonize the moon.

But the astronomer is more renowned for his concrete accomplishments than for the big dreams never realized, his friends and colleagues say.

Smith, the former director of the McDonald Observatory and chairman

of the University of Texas astronomy department, died Thursday night after a long struggle with kidney cancer. He was 67.

"Harlan Smith was a hero of education and astronomy, but he was much more than that," said former Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby in a re-



Smith

lease from his office. "He was inspirational in every aspect of his life."

Smith died at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Seton Medical Center, where he had been hospitalized since Oct. 11, said hospital spokesperson M.A. Bengtson.

Frank Bash, current head of the McDonald Observatory, said Smith's greatest contributions to the field of astronomy have yet to be realized.

Bash says Smith's vision of goals such as using the moon as a base for an observatory and setting foot on Mars will be recognized some day for its brilliance.

But more immediately, Smith is highly regarded for ensuring that the public — those who ultimately pay the bills for the research and space flight — understand and value astronomy, Bash said.

"He could talk about almost every aspect of science in a way that those fortunate enough to hear him could understand — because

See Harlan, Back page

Harlan Smith, former head of UT's observatory, dies

Continued from B1

he understood," Hobby said.

"He always thought it was an important mission of any astronomer to explain to the public what we did," Bash said. Because of this concern, Smith helped create *StarDate*, a two-minute syndicated radio show heard by about 10 million people in the United States and Canada.

Bash, 55, whose 2-year-old job as interim director was made permanent in July, paid his predecessor a compliment that would make

any Texan blush. "Following Harlan is like following (former Dallas Cowboys Coach) Tom Landry," Bash said at the time of his appointment.

The world-famous observatory sits atop Mount Locke in the Davis Mountains of West Texas, and houses a 107-inch reflector telescope, an 82-inch reflector and several smaller telescopes.

When Smith came to UT in 1963, the U.S. space program and the UT astronomy program were both in their infancies. The Mc-

Donald Observatory, owned by UT since the 1930s, had been operated by University of Chicago researchers.

"The university decided (in the early 1960s) that it would establish an astronomy department and run the observatory," Bash said. "Harlan did both."

Smith's notion of manifest destiny, the same notion that inspired his drive for space exploration, drove him from the hallowed halls of Yale University to the academic wilderness of the UT astronomy

department, Bash said.

The Wheeling, W.Va., native received his Ph.D. in astronomy from Harvard University in 1955.

Smith is survived by his wife, Joan, and four children. His awards include the NASA Distinguished Public Service Medal. His interests included wind surfing and beekeeping. "Harlan has always thought differently from all of us," Bash said.

"We are all greater because he was here, and lesser because he has gone," Hobby said.