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Real 'star' to

enter Heritage Gallery

By Robert Smith

Journal Staff

WHEATON — Move over, Red Grange.

You, too, Reverend Graham and Colonel McCormick.

There's a new inductee in the DuPage Heritage Gallery — a Wheaton native named Grote Reber — and we need a little extra room. After all, his accomplishments are only as big as all space.

You see, gentlemen, Reber is the man who developed the first radio telescope back in 1937 and opened the door for future inquiries into things like black holes, quasars and the Big Bang theory. The telescope, affixed to a "dish" 31 feet in diameter, was built in the Reber's backyard at a cost of \$1,300. It took him four months, June through September, to complete the construction.

"HE SAW at that time what no one else in the world had ever seen," says Jerry Bradshaw, who serves as president of both the DuPage Heritage Board and Gary-Wheaton Bank.

Adds Dr. Eric Carlson, senior astronomer at Chicago's Adler Planetarium, "He opened up the invisible world of radio waves from space at a time when no one seriously thought they existed."

Reber never topped that early accomplishment — which is a little like saying Einstein didn't do much after discovering the theory of relativity — but his love of scientific inquiry hasn't wavered. He con-

tinues to probe and examine the world around him, working on projects ranging from development of an electric car to improving production of peas.

But despite all that, Reber's name hardly is a household word outside the scientific community.

EVEN THE directors of the Heritage Gallery, who will honor him with a dinner on Oct. 19, admit they were largely unaware of Reber's accomplishments until five years ago when a BBC television crew came to town to film a documentary on his life.

But that lack of notoriety probably shouldn't be surprising, given the esoteric nature of his work and Reber's penchant for operating as something of a lone wolf.

Even as a young man building a radio telescope in his Wheaton backyard, Reber kept to himself. To others, who didn't comprehend the meaning of the giant disk, he was something of a mystery man.

David Roberts, now a Heritage Gallery director, remembers walking past Reber's house near Memorial Park and wondering about the disk and the elusive man who built it.

"Here was this hermit type of man living right in the heart of downtown Wheaton," Roberts recalls. "The easiest thing in the world was to think that he was weird, but the fact of the matter was that he was far ahead of the

(Continued on page 2)

Grote Reber, 'a real hero'

(Continued from page 1)

rest of us."

EVEN TODAY, the 73-year-old Reber has chosen to set himself apart.

He lives in Tasmania, an island south of Australia, where he is 20 miles from the nearest telephone. To contact him by phone, one first must write a letter telling him when to expect the call.

While that may discourage pesky magazine salesmen from calling during dinner, it also helps isolate Reber from a society that perhaps never fully recognized or appreciated his accomplishments.

A member of one of Wheaton's earliest families, Reber's interest in radio probably can be traced to his days as a student at Wheaton Central High School, when he built his own shortwave and began conversing with other communication buffs around the world.

WHILE REBER was still a school boy, an AT&T physicist named Karl Guthe Jansky was as-

signed to study atmospheric conditions that caused problems with ship-to-shore communications.

Prevailing theory suggested the problems were caused by the sun, but Jansky discovered that they actually emanated from the constant bombardment of earth by ex-

traterrestrial electrical disturbances. His findings were published in the early 1930s.

The timing couldn't have been better for Reber, who found the findings almost mirrored the re-

(Continued on page 16)

16 The Daily Journal, Sunday, September 15, 1985

Grote Reber, 'a real hero'

(Continued from page 2)

sults of his own backyard experiments beginning in 1938.

Working without institutional support, Reber continued Jansky's experiments where the AT&T scientist had left off.

THE RESULT was construction of the first radio telescope designed specifically to observe the astronomical origin of radio waves. Although he didn't know it at the time, Reber had provided future scientists with the key to unlock the first door en route to uncovering the secret of black holes and other atmospheric wonders.

Black holes are regions or objects in space in which the gravitational pull is so great that even light cannot escape. Some scientists have speculated they are caused by the collapse of a star.

Whether their discovery will ever produce practical applications on earth remains to be seen, but the concept continues to stir imagina-

tions of both scientists and laymen — not to mention Sci-Fi authors.

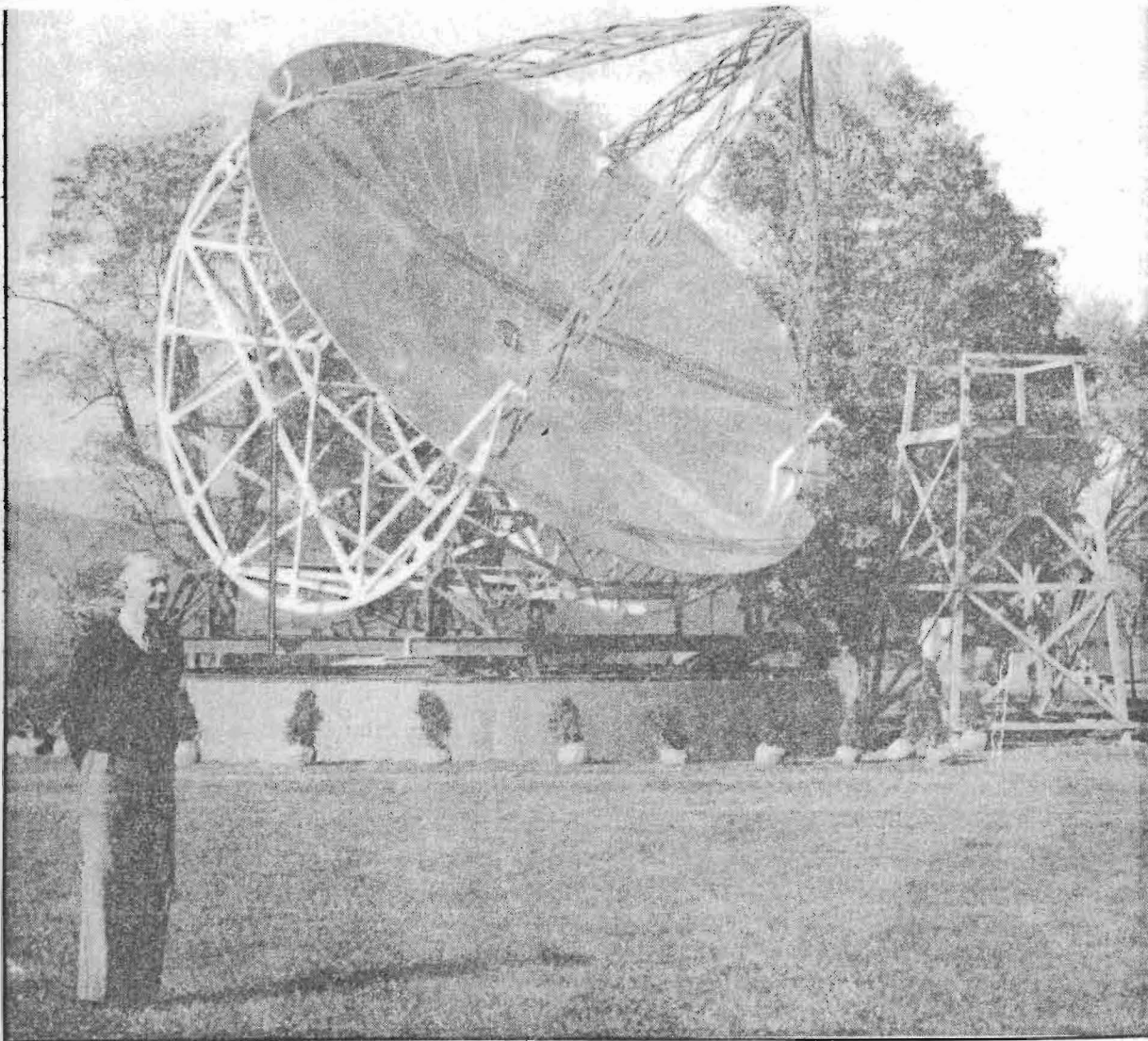
"It's an exotic oddity about the universe," says astronomer Eric Carlson. "It has no practical application at this time, but people are fascinated by something powerful enough to swallow its own light. It's like a giant whirlpool, but you can't see the center."

SO IT'S somewhat ironic that when Reber unveiled his initial radio wave theories, optical astronomers tried to discredit his findings.

But he never wavered, and it is that spirit of perseverance that led to his selection for induction into the DuPage Heritage Gallery.

"Those who achieve have the ability to persevere and those are the people we want to honor," says President Jerry Bradshaw.

"When you're talking about Grote Reber, you're really talking about a hero," he says. "Grote is someone who can show young people that if they work hard enough, they can become great."



Wheaton native Grote Reber

Reber's gallery induction Oct. 19

Journal Staff

WHEATON — The DuPage Heritage Gallery opened in 1974 to honor county residents who have made significant long-term contributions to their country and their world.

Located in the three-story DuPage County Center atrium, 421 N. County Farm Road, the gallery uses photographs, memorabilia and touch sound buttons to tell the story of influential county residents.

Operated by a volunteer board, the gallery is designed to inform and inspire county residents — especially youngsters.

WHEN WHEATON native Grote Reber is inducted Oct. 19, he will join other notables that include:

- Harold "Red" Grange, the Wheaton Ice Man, whose football career helped bring that sport into national prominence in the 1920s.

- Judge Elbert H. Gary, who founded U.S. Steel and helped shape the steel industry.

- John W. Gates, who founded Texaco Oil Co.

- Col. Robert McCormick, who published The Chicago Tribune.

- The Rev. Billy Graham, the internationally known evangelist.

- Everett G. Mitchell, an early Chicago radio pioneer.

- Kenneth Taylor, who translated the living Bible.

An exhibit honoring Taylor's accomplishments is scheduled to be unveiled at 5:30 p.m. Oct. 19 — immediately before Reber's induction ceremonies.

TICKETS FOR the dinner honoring Reber are \$35 and can be obtained, along with further information, by calling Nola at the Gary-Wheaton Bank, 665-2600.