

# The Greening of a Telescope

The Delaware Country Club near Columbus, Ohio, could have a unique hazard on the second half of its golf course—Ohio State's radio telescope. Instead, much to the chagrin of the university, the telescope may be torn down. "We have a window on the universe and they want to turn it into a golf green," laments John Kraus, the facility's director.

But the real villain in the affair in the eyes of many at Ohio State is not the country club but the university's neighboring seat of higher learning, Ohio Wesleyan University. Ohio Wesleyan owns the land on which the telescope resides and is in the process of selling it to the country club. According to Kraus and others at Ohio State, the first Ohio State officials knew of the sale was early in January. "We were presented with a fait accompli," says Terry Roark, Ohio State's assistant provost.

Who told what to whom, and when, is in dispute, however. Ohio Wesleyan officials say they gave Ohio State plenty of notice that they were considering selling the land. "At no time did Ohio State offer any money at all to buy the land or anything like that," claims Ohio Wesleyan spokesman Eric Gnezda. Asked whether the land was ever offered to Ohio State, however, Gnezda admitted that it was not. The future of the telescope is "now up to the new owners of the land," Gnezda says.

Ohio State officials have had one meeting with representatives of the country club and another is planned. According to Larry Thompson, an assistant to Ohio State president Edward Jennings, they were informed that the club wants the land now occupied by the telescope to expand its current 9-hole golf course to 18 holes. The country club, says Kraus, is "not interested in establishing anything but who is going to pay the cost of dismantling the telescope."

The telescope, together with a buffer zone around it, occupies about 24 acres. Since the country club is buying a total of about 260 acres, couldn't the telescope be spared? "Absolutely not," says Richard Farr, the club's president. "The thing is right in the middle of the entire area."

Farr says he was told that Ohio State was no longer interested in operating the telescope. "It is not doing anything," he claims. Roark denies any such thing. Although support for the instrument has declined, "If we had our way, the observatory would stay open and operating," he says.

The fourth largest radio telescope in the United States, the instrument was built in the 1950's with a \$2 million grant from the National Science Foundation. Its chief mission was to conduct a complete sky search for radio sources, a task completed several years ago. It is now supported with a small grant of about \$20,000 a year from

the National Aeronautics and Space Administration through its Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) program, and Ohio State itself provides some operating funds.

Although the instrument is getting on in years, Kraus says it has just gone through a 2-year upgrading program, including the installation of an \$80,000 computer donated by Digital Equipment Corporation.

The instrument was built on Ohio Wesleyan land to be next door to the 72-inch Perkins optical telescope, an instrument built in the 1920's and since moved to the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona. (Some smaller optical telescopes remain at the Perkins Observatory, however, and the land they occupy is not part of the sale.)

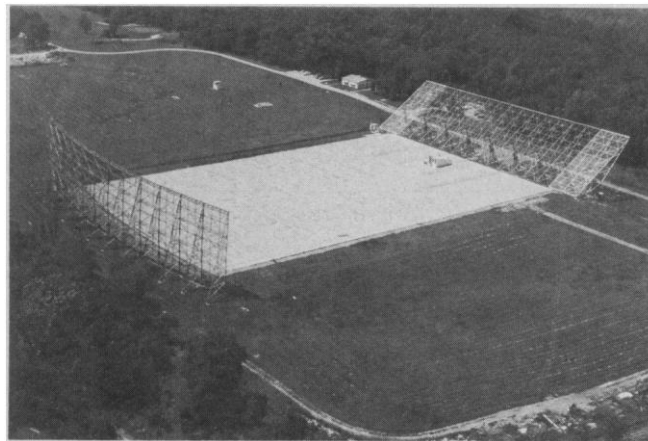
Originally envisioned as an instrument that would be available to both universities, the radio telescope has been used almost exclusively by Ohio State researchers, which is not surprising since Ohio Wesleyan is an undergraduate institution. It is managed by a joint committee of the two universities, and Ohio Wesleyan effectively leases the land to Ohio State for no rent on a year-to-year basis.

According to Gnezda, Ohio State was informed early last year that Ohio

Wesleyan was contemplating selling a large tract of land, including the 24 acres occupied by the telescope, to the Delaware Country Club. Kraus says, however, that these plans were never brought up in the joint management committee, and he understood in any case that the telescope would be excluded from any land sale.

Part of the breakdown in communication between the two institutions may have arisen because of a change in the presidency at Ohio State last summer, but something clearly went awry last fall. According to Roark, Ohio Wesleyan's president, Thomas Wenzlau, wrote to Jennings in October, informing him that land around the telescope was likely to be sold and suggesting that somebody from Ohio State be named to act as liaison between the universities. Jennings appointed Roark, who promptly informed Wenzlau's secretary. Nevertheless, Roark says he heard nothing until early January, when he called Wenzlau and was told that the land, including that occupied by the telescope, had been sold. Ohio Wesleyan then served notice that the lease would expire on 31 August.

What happens next is unclear. Farr says that it is up to Ohio State to dismantle the telescope and remove it from the site. He says, however, that he has told the university that it could be reprieved for another year or so, provided construction around the site goes ahead. But that may be impossible because of electrical interference from construction equipment.—COLIN NORMAN



**Ohio's radio telescope: threatened by a golf course**

Tom Root Air Photo