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## Rolf G. Meier (1953–2016)

By: [David H. Levy](#) | June 29, 2016

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*Amateur astronomy has lost a dedicated observer and successful visual comet hunter.*

Rolf Meier was born in Germany but relocated to Ottawa in the late 1950s. As a teenager, he read about the great effort that the American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh went through to discover Pluto. Hooked on the night sky, Rolf joined the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada's Ottawa Centre, one of Canada's most active and noted astronomy clubs, and he became an frequent observer.

In 1975, Kathy Hall, another active member there, suggested that some enthusiasts who enjoy spending long hours looking at the sky might enjoy searching for comets. The idea certainly caught Rolf's attention. Although he'd begun a casual search of the evening sky, in those early years his professional interest revolved around engineering. He went to Carleton University, from which he earned a degree in electronics two years later in 1977.

By then Rolf's interest in astronomy had become even more serious. Using the large 16-inch reflector at the Ottawa Centre's [Indian River Observatory](#), he prided himself on using a telescope several times larger than what most other searchers use. "I never wanted to push myself," he said. "I'd just look when it was convenient. I'm not in it for the discomfort," he added with his famous dry wit.

On the evening of April 26, 1978, after searching for only 50 hours, he discovered his first comet — and the first one ever found from Canada. Comet Meier, initially designated 1978f and later C/1978 H1, is one of the largest comets ever found by anyone.

Despite a [perihelion distance of just 1.14 astronomical units](#), it never got bright enough to be viewed without a telescope. Still, it hung about for more than a year at the edge of visibility.

Most comets are relatively small balls of icy mud, traveling around the Sun in long, looping paths that often pass through the inner solar system only once. When a comet nears the Sun, however, its ices sublimate, turning to ionized gas, and then the comet gets bright enough to be followed. To see a comet is rare, to find one rarer still. And to catch one from the frequently cloudy sky over Canada, after only 50 hours of looking, is unheard of — and that is what Rolf did.



Best known for his four visual comet discoveries, Rolf Meier was also passionate about planetary photography.  
*Linda Meier*

One comet find, people say, is an accident. Rolf knew this, and so he quickly resumed his search. Only 18 months later, after only 29 more hours of searching, he found his second comet — and then a third one less than a year after that.

Meanwhile, he'd found a partner in Linda McCrae, another active amateur in the Ottawa club. Before their wedding in 1984, Linda gave Rolf an oil painting. But in return she asked him to give her another new comet. Two months after tying the knot, Rolf obliged. They were observing together with friends. "My Linda!" Rolf would call loudly across the observing field. "My Rolfi!" Linda would respond. But then, urgently, came a second call: "Linda! I think I've got one." By the time their son Matthew was born the next year, Rolf had [four comets to his credit](#), and has been one of Canada's most highly respected citizens ever since.



Discovered on April 26, 1978, while still 3 astronomical units (about 300 million miles) from the Sun, Comet Meier (C/1978 H1) was intrinsically very bright and remained observable for a year.  
*Rolf Meier*

Rolf continued his journey in astronomy by night and kept working as an engineer by day. As Ottawa Centre past president Gary Boyle recalls, Rolf would often share his planetary photography (another passion) at the club's monthly meetings, and the Meiers would host an annual cookout and occasional meteor watches at their home.

One day this past spring, he went to work as usual. But a few hours later he telephoned Linda with a terrible headache; he could hardly move. She drove him to a hospital, where he was diagnosed with a stage IV brain tumor. He died peacefully on June 26th at age 63.

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### About David H. Levy

With 34 books and 22 independent or shared comet discoveries to his credit, David Levy is one of the world's best-known amateur astronomers.

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## 2 thoughts on "Rolf G. Meier (1953–2016)"



Fred-Espenak

June 30, 2016 at 3:16 am

Rolf was a new friend and neighbor here in Arizona Sky Village. We are all shocked and saddened by his sudden and untimely death. We will miss him.



tomwys

July 1, 2016 at 4:57 pm

Thank you David, for your compelling look back at Rolf Meier's achievements! Advances in Amateur Astronomy can be compared to thousands of dedicated "Sky-People" extracting knowledge by pulling on a chain linked to the stars. Rolf, with mighty tugs, pulled harder than most.

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