EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

The science fantasy writer Edgar Rice Burroughs was born on September 1st in 1875. When Burroughs was just two years old, the planet earth passed Mars at a distance of 35 million miles, which gave astronomers a chance to view the red planet up close. In America, the Director of the U.S. Naval Observatory, Asaph Hall, used a 26 inch refracting telescope to discover the two small moons of Mars, while in Italy, the astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli made sketches of what he called “canali,” that he saw on the Martian surface. The Italian word, “canali,” means, “channel,” which Schiaparelli thought were natural features on Mars. But in America, the word got mistranslated to, “canals,” which are artificial. From that time on, a regular Mars mania swept the world, and in 1912, Burroughs’ novel, “Under the Moons of Mars,” launched his career. Besides the John Carter of Mars and other off-world adventures, Burroughs is best known for his Tarzan stories.

VIKING 2 LAUNCH

September 9th marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of the launch of Viking 2. Its destination was the planet Mars, which it reached about 11 months later, in the summer of ’76. Viking 2 was sent off a couple of weeks after its sister craft, Viking 1, which got to the red planet a month before Viking 2. Each spacecraft had two components: a lander that would set down on the Martian surface, and an orbiter that would circle Mars, relay signals from the landers, and take more images from space. The Viking 2 orbiter got some pretty good pictures of the polar ice caps of Mars, as well as the 8-mile-wide moon Deimos, and the lander settled onto Utopia Planitia, the Utopian plains in the mid-northern latitudes of the planet, with one of the lander legs perched on a rock that kinda got in the way. The Viking 2 orbiter worked well for a couple of years, and the lander lasted for four years before its batteries ran down.

FRANKLIN’S HURRICANE

In colonial America, Benjamin Franklin was hoping to observe a lunar eclipse one evening. Anticipation soon turned to dismay however, as an hour before the eclipse was to begin, clouds and rain blew in from the northeast, and treated Philadelphia to a most violent thunderstorm. He was all the more surprised therefore, when his brother in Boston told him that they had also had a storm, but it happened after the eclipse, which he got to see. But the storm had come from the direction of Boston. How did it hit Philadelphia first? Franklin reasoned that this must have been some special kind of storm. He gathered together weather reports and found that the storm had moved up the Atlantic seaboard, moving counter to the local surface winds. And so Benjamin Franklin was the first person to discover the cyclonic nature of a hurricane, and thus turned an astronomical defeat into a meteorological windfall!

MOON AND PLANETS IN THE WEST AT SUNSET

This evening, you may be able to find the new crescent moon, low near the western horizon, just above the setting sun. After sunset you will notice a very bright star above it. That star is really the planet Venus. As darkness sets in, you may find two more stars to the right of Venus. The one immediately to the right of Venus is actually the planet Mars; the star below Mars is a real star, called Spica, which marks the constellation Virgo the Maiden. Now there is a third planet fairly close to these other two, and even closer to the moon. Go back down to the moon again and look slightly up and to its right. That yellow star you see there is actually the ringed planet Saturn. By 8 o’clock tonight the moon will be setting, and Saturn will follow right along after it. Venus and Mars and Spica will be up a little longer, but thanks to the earth’s rotation, they too will set a little after 9 PM.
Did you know that here in America, there was no September 10th in the year 1752? There wasn’t an 11th either, or a 12th or 13th, nor a 3rd through the 9th! It happened when the Gregorian calendar replaced the Julian calendar. The Julian calendar, established by Julius Caesar seventeen hundred years earlier, was inaccurate; it was behind by ten days when Pope Gregory introduced the Gregorian calendar to Catholic countries in 1582. But England and its Protestant colonies ignored the papal edict, and continued using the old Julian calendar, until 1752, when, in order to fix the calendar, eleven days had to be chopped out. Riots broke out in London, because landlords charged their renters a full month’s rent, even though the month was only 19 days long. “Give us back our eleven days!” the mobs shouted. But in America, Ben Franklin counseled his readers not to “regret the loss of so much time,” but to give thanks that one might “lie down in Peace on the second of the month and not… awake till the morning of the 14th.”