

NTSU reflecting on observatory

By TOM SIEGFRIED

Break an ordinary mirror and you're in for seven years of bad luck.

But break this one and you'll have bad luck for a lot longer — or however long it takes you to scrape up the \$50,000 you'll need to replace it.

The mirror is 41 inches in diameter, a foot thick and weighs half a ton. Someday it will be a part of the telescope at North Texas State University's "People's Observatory."

THAT IS, it will be if NTSU can scrape up the \$350,000 or so it needs to build the observatory.

"We're starting from ground zero," says Dr. Thomas Harrison of the NTSU physics department. "Our greatest potential for funding is from the people themselves."

Harrison hopes that people and business firms will help in the project by donating money and materials. So far, one local contractor has offered to supervise construction.

"This facility will be a unique offering," says Harrison. "Normally a telescope of this size is used exclusively for research." But the NTSU observatory will be for educational purposes, he explains.

STUDENTS and teachers at all levels — elementary, secondary and college, will be welcome to use the telescope.

"We'll schedule things to accommodate as many people as we can," Harrison says. "We're going to show people what astronomy is all about."

Students and faculty at NTSU — and other universities — will be allowed to do some research at the observatory. But there will be no major-scale research. "We don't want it tied up with long-term projects," Harrison points out.

The half-ton mirror actually is the property of Pan American University, but the astronomy program there has been phased out.

SO NTSU reached an agreement to take possession of the large mirror and a few smaller, secondary mirrors, from Pan American.

The large mirror, valued at \$50,000, recently arrived from Arizona, where it was in storage with an optical engineer.

The mirror, Harrison notes, had been in storage for 10 years. "That's just regrettable," he says.

The regret, he explains, is that such excellent optical material has not been put to use. It'll take a lot of donations and state funds to get the mirror out of storage and into a telescope, however.

In addition to using the planned observatory for educational purposes, Harrison also foresees its use for community programs, enabling area residents to get close-up views of the stars.

Hence the label "People's Observatory" for the project.