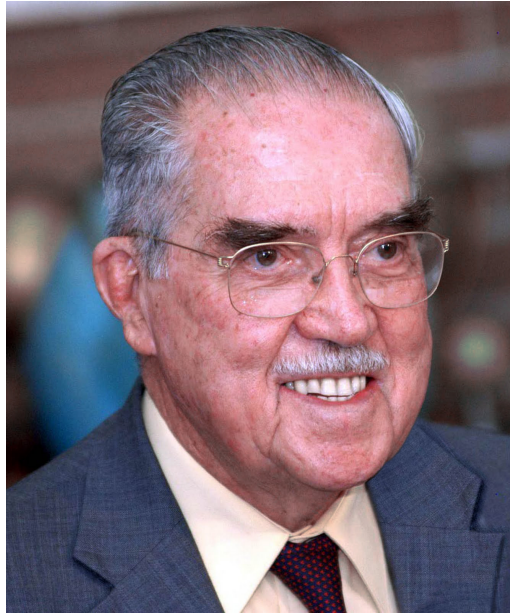


## OBITUARY



### **José Antonio Ruiz de la Herrán Villagómez 1925–2022**

On September 5, 2022, Engineer José de la Herrán passed away at the age of 96. He was a multifaceted character who stood out as an engineer, popularizer, collector, athlete, politician and musician. We astronomers met de la Herrán in his capacity as designer and coordinator of the construction of the telescope with a 2.1-meter-diameter mirror that was installed at the UNAM National Astronomical Observatory in San Pedro Mártir, Baja California. In 1980 we went with de la Herrán and a group of technicians and astronomers, including myself, to start using that telescope. When we arrived at the telescope, de la Herrán, as if nothing was happening, climbed over its structure, reaching the upper part. I was very surprised at his ability, but later I learned that among his many hobbies, de la Herrán liked to climb trees and had a surprising nimbleness for a man over fifty years of age. In the following decades, the 2.1-meter telescope became the workhorse of Mexican astronomy.

That same year he told me that he believed his work on the 2.1-meter telescope was finished, and that he would like to focus on outreach. At his request, he was transferred from the Institute of Astronomy to the University Center for Science Communication, both departments of UNAM. At the Center he would play an important role in the design and construction of many of the exhibits in the “Universum” Science Museum. Since 2007, the planetarium of this museum bears his name.

His work as a popularizer was remarkable. He was an advisor to the “El Túnel de la Ciencia” project that we can still visit in the La Raza Metro station in Mexico City. He gave hundreds of lectures. In 1979, together with Christine Allen and Arcadio Poveda, he founded the “Discovering the Universe” section in the Science and Development magazine, published by CONACyT. Additionally, he published several books that reached a wide audience. His latest book, “I am a technologist”, is autobiographical and based on interviews by Juan Tonda, who also provided an informative prologue.

The life of Engineer José de la Herrán was full of interesting events and incidents, propitiated by his adventurous spirit. His father was also an engineer and worked for radio station XEW, The Voice of Latin America from Mexico. He frequently accompanied his father to the XEW facilities and, while he was doing his work, José sniffed around the studios and facilities. One day he saw Agustín Lara playing a piece on the piano in his very special way. Whenever he could, a fascinated José would spy on Lara and gradually learned to play the piano in his style.

But at the same time he maintained his interest in the technical aspects of communications. He was linked to the construction of XEQ-FM (the first FM radio station in Mexico) and the studios of XEW Television Channel 2. He was also linked to the planning of the cable television system in Mexico City.

On many occasions, his curiosity allowed him to be in the right place at the right time. In 1969, he learned that the Apollo 11 mission was going to attempt to land humans on the Moon. Somehow he managed to make it to Cape Kennedy a few hours before the launch, and the event organizers placed him in a temporary grandstand built for journalists from around the world. From that vantage point he watched the pillar of fire and heard the roar of the mighty Saturn V rocket that would successfully carry Armstrong and Aldrin to the lunar surface.

Many of the things I mention here are illustrated with film material in an interesting UNAM documentary that you can find on YouTube under the title “José de la Herrán, Technologist.”

He was a member of the Consultative Council of Sciences of the Presidency of the Republic, and of the Astronomical Society of Mexico, among many institutions. Likewise, he received many awards, including the National Award for Sciences and Arts in the area of Technology and Design in 1983, and the National University Award in the area of Artistic Creation and Extension of Culture in 2005.

He enjoyed life very much. I remember once traveling to a small town in Michoacán where there was a highly recommended restaurant. Upon entering the restaurant I found José sitting at a table with his sister Esther, already enjoying the culinary specialties of the place.

José had transformed his house into a mixture of workshop, museum, laboratory and library. In his travels throughout Mexico he had collected devices such as telescopes, clocks, radios, motors and film cameras that he repaired and used in his demonstrations. He donated several of these artifacts to the “Universum” Science Museum.

He also thought that we scientists and technologists really liked to criticize politicians, but that we would not accept a political position. So, from 1991 to 1994, he became a candidate and was elected as a Representative for the I Federal Electoral District of Mexico City. From that position he promoted science, technology and outreach.

We learned with sadness of his passing. A few months before, Dr. Arcadio Poveda, promoter and collaborator of de la Herrán in the San Pedro Mártir 2.1-meter telescope project, had passed away.

Mexico needs many Josés de la Herrán and Arcadios Poveda.

Luis Felipe Rodríguez