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# Victor Blanco, Stargazer, Dies at 92

By DENNIS OVERBYE

Victor Blanco, a Puerto Rican astronomer who helped build a major outpost for American science, the Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory in Chile, and shepherded it through 14 years of revolution, counterrevolution and economic turmoil, died on March 8. He was 92 and lived in Vero Beach, Fla.

His death, near Vero Beach, was confirmed by his stepdaughter, Elizabeth Vitell.

Astronomers said Dr. Blanco would be remembered for his scientific, political and managerial skills as the observatory's director in opening up the Southern sky as a new frontier of cosmic research.

When American astronomers worried that the election of a Marxist government under [Salvador Allende](#) in 1970 might threaten plans to build what would be the largest telescope in the Southern Hemisphere at the time — 158 inches in diameter — it was Dr. Blanco who was dispatched to explain to President Allende what the Americans were doing on his mountaintop.

And when President Allende was overthrown by a military junta and replaced by General [Augusto Pinochet](#) three years later amid death squads and disappearances, strikes and food shortages, Dr. Blanco was dispatched to General Pinochet, who decided that he wanted to visit the observatory and asked for a list of Chilean staff members and their political affiliations. Dr. Blanco demurred, saying that that would be an inappropriate intrusion into Chilean politics.

“General Pinochet visited Cerro Tololo anyway,” Dr. Blanco wrote in a summary of his life in *The Annual Review of Astronomy and Astrophysics* in 2001, “and we kept those Chilean staff members we knew to have been pro-Allende away.”

Through all the tumult, the observatory stayed open. The Southern sky offers many of the most exciting sights in the universe, like the center of our own Milky Way galaxy and its attendant star clouds and clusters. But historically most astronomers lived in the North and had little access to those Southern wonders.

By the late 1950s and early '60s, astronomers had their eyes on the dark dry mountains of Chile. Cerro Tololo, founded in 1961 in northern Chile, was a collaboration of the [National Science Foundation](#), a consortium of colleges called Associated Universities for Research in Astronomy and the University of Chile.

No small part of Dr. Blanco's job was to keep these disparate elements working together while getting roads and buildings built. “Victor had a very delicate sense of diplomacy and customs,” said Robert Kirshner, an astronomer from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, who said that Dr. Blanco and his wife Betty, also an astronomer, kept a list of all the marriages they had helped arrange.

Dr. Blanco's other major accomplishment was building the 158-inch (4-meter) telescope, a twin of one already built and installed at the Kitt Peak National Observatory in Arizona, also run by the National Science Foundation. It was completed in 1975, with Dr. Blanco helping to align and test the telescope. South American astronomy took off.

The Cerro Tololo investment paid off in 1987 when a star erupted in a bright supernova explosion in the Large Magellanic Cloud, practically right overhead. Astronomers flocked to Chile, obtaining a trove of data that is still being mined for clues to the violent death of at least one star.

A decade later, the observatory played a key role in the discovery that the expansion of the universe seems to be accelerating under the influence of a mysterious [dark energy](#), a discovery that has shaken physics and astronomy.

Victor Manuel Blanco was born March 10, 1918, in Guayama, P.R., one of nine children of a policeman, Felipe Blanco, and a housewife, Adelfa Pagan de Blanco. As a boy in San Juan with astronomical dreams, he raised pigs that he named after asteroids and built a backyard telescope. He nevertheless entered a local college intending to study medicine, until an acquaintance of a [University of Chicago](#) graduate student reawakened his love of the stars.

He transferred to the University of Chicago, but before he could finish he was drafted into the Army in World War II and spent six years repairing and tuning radar detectors and studying atmospheric effects on radar waves. Granted college credit for his wartime work, he returned briefly to Chicago and then entered the [University of California, Berkeley](#). He received a Ph.D. in 1949.

After six years at what is now Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Dr. Blanco joined the Naval Observatory as the director of a program to measure star positions. He left after two years, in 1967, to become the second director of Cerro Tololo.

Dr. Blanco stepped down in 1981 after 14 years, but remained at Cerro Tololo to continue research.

His marriage, to Cicely Woods during the war, ended in divorce. He is survived by a his son from that marriage, Daniel; his second wife, Betty; two stepchildren, David Mintz and Ms. Vitell, from his second marriage; and three grandchildren. Although the 4-meter telescope at Cerro Tololo is no longer the largest in the Southern Hemisphere, it is still at the forefront of research. Equipped with a special digital "dark energy camera" built at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Illinois, the telescope will embark this year on a survey of some 300 million galaxies in an effort to discern the effect of dark energy on the evolution of the universe.

In a mountaintop ceremony in 1995, the telescope was named the Victor M. Blanco telescope.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: March 18, 2011**

*An obituary on Thursday about the astronomer Victor Blanco misstated his first wife's maiden name. She was Cicely Woods, not Brooks.*