Clyde Tombaugh (1906–1997) was born and raised in Illinois, but while in high school his family moved to a farm near Burdett, Kansas. After graduation, though he had no formal training, Tombaugh began making telescopes and within a short time became skilled at grinding the necessary lenses. He remembered in an interview with the Aggie Panorama of New Mexico State University, where he would eventually teach astronomy, that early on he purchased a copy of Scientific American’s Amateur Telescope Making for two dollars. From it he learned that the best optics were made under constant temperatures, and he convinced his father to let him dig a cellar on the Burdett farm, to be used for storing dairy and sheltering from tornadoes in the summer and as Tombaugh’s workshop year round. He dug the pit—eight feet wide, seven feet deep, and twenty-four feet long—himself, and by the summer of 1928 he had constructed the nine-inch reflecting telescope pictured here.

Later that fall Tombaugh sent drawings of Mars and Jupiter to the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, an enterprise devoted to the search for a “Planet X” that its founder, Bostonian Percival Lowell, had predicted and searched for up to his death in 1916. The observatory was impressed by the young Kansan’s drawings, and hired him on a trial basis. While there Tombaugh manned the observatory’s blink comparator to study images of the sky taken several nights apart. By flipping from image to image, astronomers could identify moving stellar objects, including planets, and Tombaugh did just that in the images below from January 23 and 29, 1930. In observing the movement of the body marked with the arrows in each image, he discovered the planet that would come to be called Pluto. After his discovery, Tombaugh went on to receive bachelor’s and master’s degrees in astronomy from the University of Kansas and to embark on a long teaching career. In 2006 some of his ashes were placed aboard the New Horizons space probe to Pluto.
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