WALTER Steiger, a University of Hawaii physics professor, was the driving force behind early island-based astronomy in Hawaii.

He set up Hawaii’s first observatory at Makapuu Point in the 1957 International Geophysical Year, and established the Mees Solar Observatory at Haleakala, Maui.

Visionary then, Steiger’s 1950s efforts were “low-tech” compared to today’s dozen-plus observatories on Mauna Kea. One highlight of his career was photographing the 1991 total solar eclipse from Mauna Kea, where he was site manager at the Caltech Submillimeter Observatory.

In the mid-1950s, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration funded Steiger’s air glow and zodiacal light studies as satellite communications research. In 1957, the successful launch of Sputnik that demonstrated advancing Soviet rocketry also fueled Steiger’s career. His NASA-related space observations found him chief of a volunteer Moonwatch team that lasted until 1959 — about the time the Smithsonian Institution needed a satellite tracking station. Backed by funds from the late C.E. Kenneth Mees, amateur astronomer and former Eastman Kodak Co. executive, Steiger persuaded the university to seek state land at Haleakala for a scientific reserve.

He also recognized Mauna Kea’s pristine conditions but chose Haleakala, which had a road and commercial power, for the solar facility.

Although he never dreamed astronomy would gain a huge scientific presence in Hawaii, Steiger said in a 1991 interview he was not all that surprised.

“It was a lot of fun,” he said. “But the most fun I had was at Makapuu Point. It was something brand new, and so few people were around doing anything.”

Steiger left the UH faculty to direct the Bishop Museum science center and planetarium from 1981 to 1986. A UH regent from 1982 to 1986, he stepped down to briefly return to teaching, then moved to the Caltech observatory at Mauna Kea in 1987.

Steiger, 76, still lives on the Big Island.