



By Steve Leavitt

Reaching
out there
— way,
way out
there

Educational outreach is one of the service activities emphasized in the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research. On occasion, this activity is conducted by our faculty and graduate students, but usually it involves staff, particularly one Rex Adams. This outreach includes visits to schools or service and social groups, but more likely these groups get a pep talk about dendrochronology and a tour of West Stadium, and now also the recently acquired space in the basement of the Math Annex building (also known as “Tree-Ring West” or “the root cellar”).

In a typical year, this outreach involves from 2,000 to 3,000 people, largely students from grade school to graduate school, but also retirees and visitors, some from outside Tucson and even outside the United States. With such large numbers, it is therefore not uncommon to unwittingly stumble out of an

office into the midst of a large flock of tree-ring tourists, which is sort of like inadvertently being caught in the festive chaos of a fleamarket disaster preparedness drill.

To what are these visitors actually exposed on the tours and what do they take away with them? I think perhaps the most revealing way to answer these questions is to look at the letters and notes sent by students who visited the Lab. No matter what grade level of the tour, there seems to be two obligatory elements to these letters, including (1) “Thank you for giving us a tour of the lab,” or “Thank you for showing us how to find out how old a tree is,” and (2) “I had a fun time,” or “I really had a great time at Tree-Ring Lab.”

I find this monotonous chorus of positive response to be suspicious, and dare I say that I “smell something rotten in Denmark,” very similar to the overwhelming stench of the walrus-blubber rendering plant adjoining the fleamarket deli. To investigate, I could take the tour but I would probably get the “nosy faculty” sanitized version with everyone on their best behavior and doing things by the book.

Fortunately, the actual goings-on in these tours can be gleaned from some of the more candid undertones in these letters. And when we take this closer look, it is not a pretty sight.

■ One student especially liked the “twisting into the tree.” Obviously this was a tour guide showing the kids what he called

“a hip, fancy dance move” without paying attention to where he was going.

■ Another enjoyed the “illustration of tree-ringing.” I think that illustration is outside the Director’s office next to the picture of the dogs playing poker.

■ I detect a particularly flagrant violation of LTRR protocol in the words of a student who wrote, “You said a lot of big words.” This can only mean an unauthorized visit to the secret storage room where we keep all of the really big dendrochronological words reserved for writing emergencies.

■ Another student found it “cool that trees don’t die if they catch on fire.” The guide must have used petrified wood in demonstrating this maxim, although come to think of it, now and again at the sound of sirens, I see some of these tour guides fleeing the premises.

Finally, one student commented, “It was also cool that you can get the inside of the tree so smooth with sandpapering it.” I am the least certain of this one, but it might be a reference to the vinyl wood-grain paneling on the inside of a staff member’s 1976 Dodge Aspen.

When this humble commentator thinks “high-quality educational tour experience,” fleamarket flapjack museum is the first thing that springs to mind. In light of the comments above, however, it is time to ask the tough question: Are we really making any serious effort to attain this ideal? ●