BEHIND THE WOODSHED

An irreverent microanatomical view of life at the LTRR

By Steve Leavitt

Skeletons In Our Closets

Although we know who we are, the worldwide dendrochronology community knows who we are, and a surprising number of civilians everywhere seem to know about the "Arizona Tree-Ring Laboratory," we commonly encounter people unaware of us, sometimes even people from Tucson or among the University of Arizona community.

When I meet someone who asks about my UA departmental affiliation, I say "the Tree-Ring Lab" while trying to annunciate slowly and particularly clearly, to avoid conveying the idea of a "three-ring" something or other. After I get the seemingly obligatory puzzled look, similar to that of the bewildered gaze of the attendant at a fleamarket Ask-an-Expert booth, I commonly follow it up with a "you know … growth rings of trees." A range of responses follows, typically related to their effort to deduce my "real" department such as forestry, or perhaps biology.

At this point I usually put on my educator's hat, and with the swagger and puffery of the headmaster at a fleamarket canine obedience school, I explain we are indeed our own independent department (for now). In fact, we are one of a dozen or so departments, co-equal in some respects, within the College of Science. The impromptu discourse ends with a review of all of the applications of tree rings, from archaeology to climatology, hydrology, ecology, and beyond.

Unfortunately, every now and again one of these clever novice inquisitors stumbles on to one of the more sinister aspects of what we do. They start to put tree and tree together, and come to a macabre realization, even more frightening than the back-hair clumps on the floor of a fleamarket hair removal booth – namely, our supreme role in killing the world's trees.

There are 2 million specimens estimated to be in our storage collections. Most are cores, but if 1% are disks from trees, that would be 20,000 slaughtered trees. We cannot take credit for killing all of them. Some of the disks are from archaeological wood cut long ago by paleo-peoples in the Southwest and elsewhere, cross-sections archived from the timber industry, slices of logs from geological deposits, and in the case of fire ecology, re-sampled stumps of trees that were cut for lumber decades ago.

Assuming that half of the disks were actually living trees euphemistically "harvested" by us, the number would be horrific even to a hardened old hand like me, who normally doesn't faint for more than 20 minutes at the sight of hypodermic needles. Naturally, you don't have to look far in the Tree-Ring Lab to find the tools of this carnage, the omnipresent axes and chainsaws. We could certainly be characterized as the ultimate anti-"tree-huggers."

Those 10,000 trees cut over 100 years compute to about 100 per year! Look out Georgia-Pacific, and look out Weyerhaeuser – we might have cut enough board feet to stock a fleamarket crate boutique, or enough pulpwood to build all the cardboard furniture in a fleamarket antique emporium!

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