

Fall n' Stars 2006

by Mark Coady

Fall n' Stars, which is a star party hosted by the Belleville and Kingston Centers of the RASC, was held September 22nd to 24th. For the first time the PAA was part of the organizing committee. I represented the PAA and had the task of arranging for the speakers, to manage the silent auctions for astronomy books and magazines, and to keep PAA members informed of the event. Over the past few months we secured books being discarded by our own library, Buckhorn Observatory, and the boxes of Sky and Telescope and Astronomy magazines that had been donated to the PAA, over the past couple of years. I also secured fellow PAA members, John Crossen and Peter McMahon, to be our speakers.

The star party is held in the Boy Scout Camping Area of Colonel Roscoe Vanderwater Conservation Area, which is on the Moira River by Thomasburg, Ontario (just off of HWY 37 some 20 km north of Belleville). It is a completely rustic environment with no electricity or plumbing. Participants either camp or vie for limited bunk beds in a sheltered building called "The Longhouse". This building has kitchen facilities, with propane appliances, and the building has propane lanterns on the wall – which illuminate the building sufficiently yet don't seem to affect your night vision much. The main part of the building has the tables and chairs used for our Saturday banquet, presentations, and other events. It is heated by woodstoves. Toilet facilities are a short walk away in clean and pleasant outhouses – this may put you off but remember that this is a Boy Scout camp – and the facilities are much cleaner than many I have noticed in provincial parks.

The weather for the weekend was quite poor as there was cloud and rain with only a brief, mushy, opening on Saturday evening for about an hour and a half – somewhat like the PAA BBQ. No observing was done. But that didn't mean the event was a washout – in fact, it was far from that.

Friday evening most of us gathered in the Longhouse. After a while of general talk and getting to know some others, Kevin Kell, of Kingston RASC and our audio/video technician, put on a funny video called "Hoodwinked" – an animated send up of the "Little Red Riding Hood" fairytale.

Saturday morning we gathered under a small pavilion where swap/buy/sell tables were set up. Following this, we held an impromptu "show and tell" about some aspects of astronomy. Arlyne Gillespie, of Kingston RASC and the event's chair, showed off an IDA approved wall lantern she had just picked up from Home Depot. Mark Leeming and Greg Lisk, both of Belleville RASC, respectively showed off an 8 inch Orion Intelliscope and a very nice meteorite collection.

Saturday afternoon saw our two speakers making their presentations. Our own Mark Coady stood in for the ailing John Crossen and put on an interesting, and well

received, presentation on how to go about fighting light pollution. Peter McMahon put on a light hearted, and also well received, presentation on how actual stars, planets, and other heavenly bodies, appear in sci-fi.

Then there was the catered banquet. For \$18 you got your choice of Roast Beef, Turkey with Dressing (or both), three types of salad, corn, carrots, two types of gravy, rolls with butter, coffee, tea, and selected desserts. And seconds, thirds, whatever, were free!!! The food for the banquet was one of the best I have ever had the honour of tasting.

After the banquet there was the door prize draw. I won a certificate entitling me to a copy of “Earth Centered Universe Pro Edition” which I will be mailing in shortly. Kim Hay, of Kingston RASC, took the one year family membership in the PAA. Our own John Cameron, who had come for only a couple of hours as a day participant, won the draw for a hand made observing chair donated by master carpenter, Joseph Shields, of the Belleville RASC – which I promptly delivered on my way home on Sunday.

Then there was the silent auction. All magazines and most of the books were sold. All of these fundraisers help keep the cost down.

Following the auction, David Cotterell, of Belleville RASC, conducted an Astronomy Trivia Challenge. This is something he has done at Starfest for many years. For this time it consisted of three teams of five members. The team, that I was on- which we named “Stellarly Challenged”, won the challenge by a very narrow score.

Then we assembled around a campfire for a few hours of laughs and singing old folk songs. It made me think back to my days as a Boy Scout – although the lyrics in the songs we were singing were somehow cleaner than what we sang way back when.

After complimentary coffee and juice on Sunday morning, came the time to tear down and clean up the park. Although it was sad parting, I know I will be back again next year. Despite the fact that the park is a little small for full sky observing, it is intimate. This is a small star party where everyone seems to make new friends, quite easily.

And, for \$50 I paid – which included my weekend registration, Saturday banquet, and the best designed star party t shirt I have ever seen, it was more than a bargain, it was an outright steal.