

Wide-eyed about night sky

UA astronomy camp excites 20 students from across nation

By **GABRIELA C. RICO**

Citizen Staff Writer

KITT PEAK — Twenty students from across the nation are “shooting for the stars” this week at the inaugural astronomy camp held by the University of Arizona Alumni Association.

This camp, the first of its kind in Arizona, is being held in a fitting place, because Tucson is regarded as the “astronomy capital of the world,” said Joan L.

Morrill, assistant director of UA’s alumni office.

Coordinators of the camp are Morrill, Ray White, an astronomy professor who is associate director of UA’s Steward Observatory; and Larry Dunlap, Flandrau Planetarium education director. White and Dunlap serve as supervisors when the students go on their field trips.



White

The students, between the ages of 11 and 15, traveled from as far away as Minnesota and New Jersey for the camp. They are spending the week observing different aspects of astronomy.

In the evenings, they go to Flandrau Planetarium to study the constellations and learn how to adjust a telescope to find the stars on their own.

On Tuesday, the students were given a tour of Kitt Peak, home of the Robert R. McMath solar telescope, the world’s largest.

The students were shown how the telescope tracks the sun throughout the day by using an 81-inch mirror that takes the sun’s beam hundreds of feet into the earth and reflects it into optical equipment that feeds it to instruments at the observatory’s base.

They also were given the opportunity to look directly at the sun with the use of the solar patrol telescope, a smaller solar telescope that uses filters to make the sun look like a large red ball.

With the use of this telescope, the sun’s surface appears splotchy and the outer edges appear to be in constant motion.

The 12-meter radio telescope was cause for concern for one of the students, 11-year-old Kim VanRavenswaay of Rio Rico.



VanRavenswaay



Babcock



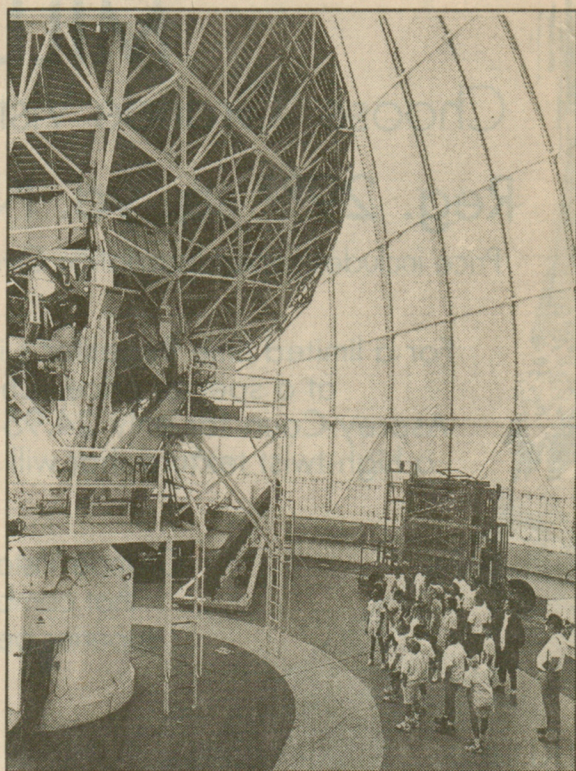
Henry

While one of the telescope operators was rotating the 50-foot telescope, a small bolt fell onto the floor.

VanRavenswaay came up to White with a very concerned look on her face. She held out the bolt and said, “Ray, this just fell out of the telescope.”

“She had this ‘Tell me it will be OK’ look on her face,” White said and he burst into laughter.

Everything turned out fine. To the little girl’s relief, the telescope did not fall apart.



CLARENCE TABB JR./Tucson Citizen

Astronomy camp participants get a look at a 12-meter radio telescope at Kitt Peak.

The students will be on Mount Lemmon from 3 p.m. today to midnight tonight, to observe the night sky with Steward Observatory’s 40-inch telescope and with other, smaller telescopes.

The students will be given a lecture on searching for comets and will photograph constellations.

On Tuesday, the students, most of whom never had been to Kitt Peak before, were attentive and noticeably amazed by the magnitude of the telescopes. All seemed enthusiastic about an astronomy career, with the exception of one student who expressed the fear of “never being able to go to a party because you have to work at night.”

Nicole Babcock, 12, of Tucson, said that before she came to Kitt Peak, she was interested in astronomy because of the science involved, but did not think it was all that fun. “It seems like a lot of fun, now that I have been here,” Babcock said.

Todd Henry, one of the graduate students helping with the camp, said that probably the most important thing the students would learn is that astronomers hardly ever actually look through telescopes anymore. Astronomers use a computer screen to give them an image of the night sky, Henry said. He added that “these kids will see more telescopes this week than most people ever will see in their lives.”

The camp will last until Saturday, when all 20 students will graduate in a Flandrau Planetarium ceremony at which they will be given certificates for their achievements.