

The LAAS History Detective

by Lewis Chilton



Many years ago, when I was an active participant in our club's affairs, I made a fascinating discovery while surveying my new domain in the deepest, darkest recesses of Griffith Observatory. That's where the LAAS optical shops were located from approximately 1947 to 1974.



The LAAS optical shops in 1954 - the grinding room. The shop director was Frank Grow, the older gentleman at left rear. Do you recognize anyone? (Source: LAAS Archives)

In 1969, I was asked to take over the Friday night telescope making class from Dave Balogh, who had accepted a college teaching position up north. Dave had been the Friday night shop director for the past couple of years and I had been one of his Friday night regulars. Dave had a hunch that I'd make a good replacement and offered me the job. I reluctantly accepted believing that I would surely prove him wrong. To this day, I'm still not sure if his faith in me was justified, but you could ask two of my former students: LAAS President-Emeritus Dave Sovereign and professional telescope mount maker Scott Losmandy.

But back to that fascinating discovery in the basement of Griffith Observatory on my first night as shop director. Wooden shelves built into the far wall of the grinding room held telescope making supplies and old cardboard boxes of LAAS records. When I entered the grinding room, a 50-gallon trash can sat in the middle of the floor brimming with paper trash. (I later learned that the club librarian had unilaterally decided to do a little house cleaning to make room for the library collection.)

Curious about what the trash can held, the first piece of paper I picked up was a handwritten letter from Russell W. Porter to the club secretary, Frank Mergenthaler, declining his offer to attend a club meeting to see the first motion pictures of Jupiter. The letter was dated January 17, 1929.

History was my worst subject in high school, but discovering 43 years of LAAS history in a trash can gave it a whole new relevance. Ever since, I've considered myself to be the club's history detective and a strong advocate for the preservation of its records.

Next time: Some forgotten stories and facts from the Archives