

EXPERTS MAKE A TIMELY STOP AT CLARK COLLEGE

Sundial aficionados visit the school's 12-foot-high instrument



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By **HOWARD BUCK**
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It was a happy group of visitors that climbed off the tour bus and strode across the Clark College campus.

About 4 o'clock Friday, a heavy overcast finally gave way. And the flock soon had what it wanted: Bright sunlight.

Pretty important when you're a collection of serious sundial fanciers.

About 40 members of the North American Sundial Society (total membership: about 300) convened to dissect all facets of the solar-based timepieces all weekend at the society's annual conference in Portland.

Included was a day tour of

six fine examples in the metro area — capped by a pair of period sundials at historic Fort Vancouver and Clark's newly refurbished model, mounted outside Anna Pechanec Hall on the main campus quad.

"Perhaps the 'day star' will bless us," suggested Dick Shamrell, animated Clark physics teacher who greeted the assemblage, as the sun slipped behind lingering clouds.

He told the history of Clark's 12-foot-high instrument, constructed by welding students in 1984 to commemorate the school's 50th anniversary. Sleek anodized aluminum supplied by Vancouver's Alcoa facility forms two swooping arcs that can precisely measure the dance of time and space.

"Linking the celestial with our

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CLAUDIA J. HOWELL for The Columbian
Dick Shamrell, Clark College physics teacher, shows off the recently recalibrated large campus sundial Friday to members of the North American Sundial Society.

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humble existence," Shamrell intoned, in full lecture mode.

All well and good. Then the sun flared. Cameras rose. And the mostly male, 60-to-70ish crowd (a handful of women)

quickly swarmed the sculpture.

"Clear out, so I can take a picture for the register," commanded one gent, his ball cap reading "Analemma Society, Great Falls, Va."

"Take it! Take it, quick!" as the sundial's shadow deepened.

"Dudley, move!"

"Can we touch it, now?"

Shamrell deftly stepped aside. "It's been climbed on before. I'll

"It's lovely. Beautifully conceived, very nicely constructed."

Tony Moss

On the Clark College sundial

shut my eyes, if you climb on it," he said.

None actually did. But they caressed smooth curves, tested

solid beams and rods and the pedestal, admired its pleasing form.

"It is sorta birdy, isn't it?"

"Or, a cobra."

"It's lovely. Beautifully conceived, very nicely constructed," said Tony Moss, of Northumberland, Great Britain. He pronounced it the best of Friday's tour, which included stops at Reed College and Marylhurst University sundials.

"It looks as if it grew there, which is the ultimate accolade," Moss said.

This was a heady, discerning bunch, folks who know plenty about sundials, whether ancient, ornamental or cutting-edge. And about the timeless science and math that have made them useful to mankind over the millennia.

"It's a very interesting group," said John Schilke, of Lake Oswego, Ore., former NASS vice president who acted as Portland host during the 15th annual gathering.

"These are people who are machinists, mathematicians, artists, scientists," he explained. Among the visitors were natives of Japan, Italy and the U.K.

Sundials involve "mainly exercises in trigonometrics," Schilke said. And yet their universal appeal blurs cultural lines, he said. "We all have our elephant: We'll be talking about anything, and suddenly we'll be talking about sundials."

Sure, it might seem odd to host a sundial convention in UV-ray-deprived Portland. (August, at least, offers favorable odds.) But Vancouver, B.C., held the event in 2006. And Mr. Moss would recognize a sodden climate.

Lake Oswego expert Schilke did concede some irony.

"It's just weird, to have a hobby like this in the Pacific Northwest," Schilke said, eyes twinkling. Gesturing at Clark's timepiece, he said, "When the sun comes out and you have something like this, it's nice."

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Art Krenzel of Battle Ground, left, in blue shirt, describes the function of the gnomon, which improves the sundial's accuracy. Listening are NASS members Tony Moss, center, and Gino Schavone. Krenzel suggested the upgrade to help mark Clark's 75th anniversary.

Clark upgrade improves accuracy

For Dick Shamrell and astronomy teachers, the Clark sundial provides a critical prompt when they walk students out for a look.

A sliding time bar permits him to correct for daylight time. But, previously, he would provoke students by noting the shadow still was incorrect, often as not, by a few minutes.

"What's wrong?" he would ask.

The bright ones would reply: The thin rod didn't account for the earth's noncircular, elliptical orbit of the sun. Marked over a full year, the sun's midday point actu-

ally registers as an elongated figure eight, or analemma. Students had to fudge all sundial shadows slightly to compensate for that wobble.

No longer. To cap Clark's 75th birthday celebration this year, a recent upgrade adds a bulbous wrap to the rod's midsection — an analemmic gnomon — that provides a correct measure.

Viewers need only know which shadow edge (east or west) to read, depending on the month. An explanatory plaque is due soon, Shamrell said.

— Howard Buck