

FOREWORD

As editors of *RADIOCARBON*, we believe that the 14th International Radiocarbon Conference (14C14) was a benchmark event in the history of radiocarbon dating. For the first time, the journal, the editors and the conference all happened in the same place, at the beautiful Westward Look Resort in the heart of the Sonoran Desert, Tucson, Arizona.

Aside from enjoying the spectacular setting, 250 attendees, representing 33 countries, immersed themselves in a week-long “crash course” in every aspect of ^{14}C dating currently practiced all over the world. The Table of Contents attests to the wide variety of topics covered. In addition to the main program, special-interest groups met to discuss future plans, and four workshops were held: Liquid Scintillation Counting; Prospects for Temporal Extension of the Radiocarbon Calibration; Paleoenvironments of the Eastern Mediterranean; and Paleoastrophysics and Natural Variations of Cosmogenic Isotopes. The Proceedings of the latter session were published in the previous issue of *RADIOCARBON* (Volume 34, No. 2).

Much of the success of the conference derived from political changes that have been redefining the maps of Europe. Never before were so many scientists from the former Soviet Union, in particular, and Eastern Europe, in general, able to attend a radiocarbon conference. The historical significance of the time will remain with us, especially since subsequent developments over the past year have directly affected our colleagues in the former Yugoslavia, where, in 1988, we also shared memorable experiences.

On another historical note, Meyer Rubin paid tribute to retired members of the radiocarbon community, in his typically brilliant yet flamboyant style. Although we cannot reproduce the spontaneous quality of the moment (at the conference barbecue), we acknowledge here the recently retired (or almost retired) scientists who have devoted their careers to the field of radiocarbon dating. Please inform us if we have overlooked anyone. Some of the following continue to participate in active research, and merely have changed, rather than curtailed, their activities:

Paul E. Damon	Gordon W. Pearson
George W. Farwell	Henry A. Polach
Harry Gove	H. W. Scharpenseel
K. O. Münnich	Adela Sliepčević
Reidar Nydal	Henrik Tauber
Hans Oeschger	Willy Wölfli
Ingrid U. Olsson	

To recapture some of the flavor of the evening, we reprint on the next pages a stellar piece by Meyer Rubin.

The next Radiocarbon Conference is scheduled for 14–18 August 1994. Contact Mrs. M. Smith, Department of Statistics, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QW Scotland, for more information.

Renee Kra
Austin Long

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF . . . OR, MY THIRTY-YEAR WAR WITH THE BACKGROUND

MEYER RUBIN

U.S. Geological Survey, National Center 971, Reston, Virginia 22092 USA

I've had this feeling for more than 30 years now that I was pushing with all my might and ingenuity against a large, amorphous blob called "the background". Those of you who have run a radiocarbon lab and have had this continuing battle to keep the background down, know the fight I'm talking about. Just when you think you have it licked, with stable electronics, tried and true chemicals, foolproof lab techniques, and trusted lab assistants, this enigmatic, unpredictable constant variable (or variable constant) will bust loose and rise to mountainous heights, laughing scornfully at all efforts to tame and conquer it.

I have heard that Bill Libby had the power to stare the background down, and Hans Suess, my mentor, was in league with a certain unnamed power, but I had no such supernatural abilities and relied mostly on luck. Well, I finally thought I had it licked. Backgrounds and moderns had been stable (within statistics, of course) for the past month, the lab was functioning smoothly, and I was happily driving in, thinking that today I'd be able to work on that manuscript. It wasn't going to be like last month, when the building maintenance crew shut off the electricity suddenly without warning, as they are wont to do from time to time, crashing my computer programs, blowing my pre-amps, and ruining a lot of archival data in the storage. They have been repeatedly scolded about that, so I was confident that it wouldn't happen again.

Alas, I was greeted at the door by our new lab assistant, who informed me that she forgot to order liquid nitrogen for today, she needed some bottles for gas storage, and oh yes, she forgot to turn off the voltage again when she was pumping off the counters, and "Did that mean she burned out the center wire again?"

It took Herculean effort on my part to hold my temper, for after all, she was the wife of one of my co-workers. I accepted the prospect of a week's work on the counters with a minimal display of grief and anger, lasting barely an hour. Seems I'm constantly training new lab workers; "Use the N Apeizon for this stopcock, the H is used elsewhere; no, it's acid into water, not the reverse; no, don't use that, it's our oxalic acid standard." Later that day, she was to get even with me for my loss of decorum when she turned the high voltage on while I was working inside the shield, zapping me with 5,550 volts and causing what is left of my hair to stand on end. "Oh, I thought you were finished with Counter II."

Just before lunch, my college student part-time helper (where would labs be without slave labor?) asked if I would "like more practice in glass blowing", his coy way of telling me that the stopcock in his hand was serving a better purpose on the vacuum line before being wrenched off by his nimble fingers (he's a heavyweight wrestler). And, oh yes, that irreplaceable Antarctic sample that he was pretreating – well, the sieve broke and before he could get off the phone (he has numerous girlfriends), "the whole thing washed right down the drain. It just got away from me. Is there any more of that stuff from the ice hole?" Remembering how my scolding had affected him before (when he broke his scuba wrist watch that had a luminous dial, spreading radioactivity in the lab), and subconsciously recalling his 30 and 0 win-loss record in his weight class, I chastised him with the disappointment in my eyes, a devastating weapon. Naturally, there wasn't any hydrogen gas left for the torch. That was used up for balloon-blowing in last week's party. Someone is always having a birthday, baby, wedding, promotion, vacation, *etc.*

The building maintenance crew didn't shut off the electricity while I was out to lunch, I'm happy to say. It was the water. So it was to a fine mercury haze in the air that I returned. The mercury diffusion pumps, lacking cooling water, had overheated, breaking the bulb, pouring the mercury over the heaters and vaporizing about a liter.

After spending the afternoon cleaning up the mess and testing the mercury concentration to the satisfaction of the safety officer, I was driving home thinking, well, maybe I'd get to that manuscript next week.

My understanding wife waited until I had gulped down my third martini before asking me "Did you have a nice day at the office?"

"About average", I replied.

