

Summer/Fall 2025

History of the River Bend Astronomy Club: Part 2-RBAC is Born!

By Gary Kronk

(Part 1 in Winter/Spring 2025 Edition)



Courtney Curtis of Edwardsville, Ill., winner of the grand prize — a telescope donated by Hardin Optical Company — pictured with Mark Brown, Astronomy Day coordinator (left), and Gary Kronk, president of RBAC.

From *Current Astronomy* May 2004

An informal public event was held on April 7, 2000, which was Astronomy Day. The four friends met at St. Jacob Park and set up their telescopes to observe the Sun. Although they did not advertise this event, the park is popular for people to just walk around the perimeter on a paved path on nice days.

It was a nice day and ten people stopped by to talk and look through the telescopes.

The Astronomy Day event was an inspiration and the lunch discussions concerning a new club became more serious during the remainder of 2000. They decided to call the club the River Bend Astronomy Club. Eric, who is a graphic artist in public affairs designed the RBAC logo. They applied for their Astronomical League membership and the club became official in July 2001, just three months after their 2001 Astronomy Day event. Gary had moved to St. Jacob by then, which was a darker location for observing, and they began meeting there once a month to observe. This would continue to be the club's meeting place for the next decade.

Although there were many gatherings during the next few months, the first "formal" meeting of RBAC came on September 28, 2002. It was considered formal because it was the first meeting to have an agenda.

RBAC's first big Astronomy Day event came in 2003. They met at the Children's Museum in Edwardsville. It was special in many ways, as this event had the highest attendance, the most media coverage, the most prizes and giveaways, and the most new members than any previous club event. In addition, several members got to

witness a small tornado that appeared out of a wall of rain near the Edwardsville water tower.

October 29, 2003: starting around 2 a.m. the northern sky began brightening, around the time that a mid-latitude aurora was predicted. Club members Mark Brown and Jamie Goggin had already met in St. Jacob Park in preparation. Shortly thereafter, Gary arrived. During the next 45 minutes, the three club members began photographing what would be the most spectacular auroral event in the St. Louis area in years. What's more, aurorae made a reappearance the evening of October 29 and the evening of October 30. More photos were taken. Eric was informed about what had happened. Since he was in public affairs at Washington University, he took their best photos and contacted newspapers throughout the area. Their photos were published in nearly every newspaper in the metro-east, with Gary's appearing in the both the Missouri and Illinois editions of the Post-Dispatch.

By the end of 2003, RBAC had grown to 26 members. Several times during late 2004, 20 or more club members would show up at meetings with their telescopes and set them up in Gary's backyard.

When Good Things Must Come to an End



RBAC Members gathered around telescopes inside Lookin' Up Optics in Vandalia, IL, July 2023 (Photo by Alan Scheidler)

When "Lookin' Up Optics" opened in 2018, the world of amateur astronomers in the Midwest was changed forever. Randy had a dream that he would open a shop for others who shared his love of astronomy he has had since he was 14 years old. He wanted to share his enthusiasm by helping others get started with equipment to pursue their love of astronomy.

Randy, along with his wife Boni, opened his shop with 35 demonstration telescopes. At that time, he had no idea he would be attracting customers from as far away as Ohio, Iowa, and Kentucky. Not surprisingly, he had numerous customers and friends from Missouri and Illinois since he was a member of several clubs in the bi-state region.

By having his shop advertised on websites belonging to numerous vendors, he reached many individuals who had no idea that a Midwest telescope vendor even existed. Vendors he advertised with, and carried merchandise for, included Celestron, Explore Scientific, Starfield, and Skywatcher.

In a recent interview, Randy remarked, "I have met so many interesting people and we stay in touch by email, photos and texts." Randy is pleased that he has been able to reach so many astronomy enthusiasts. He explained that he loves helping customers with a beginner telescope and watching them learn. He told customers: "Call me with questions!", and they do!" Randy and Boni have been generous to the community as well, donating a telescope to the Girl Scout Astronomy Club in Effingham. He also volunteers his time and expertise to the local U of I Extension office, providing astronomy instruction to the local 4-H group.

When asked if he was tempted to buy any new merchandise he brought in, Randy admitted he had to get the

Skywatcher's Espirit, the Celestron Edge HD 9.25 in as well as a Super APO triple lens and other miscellaneous eyepieces.

Randy's impact on the River Bend Astronomy Club has been enormous! Membership has grown from Randy referring customers in the area to our club. Current club members gained the courage to acquire more robust equipment since they know they can trust Randy to help them learn the ropes. The astrophotography skills in our membership have grown exponentially. The "show and tell" sessions we have at the Christmas Dinner and Star-B-Que are breathtaking!

When asked if he had any parting words, Randy said it was a great experience, it is a wonderful hobby and he is grateful that everyone was helpful along the way. He says he "learned a lot from customers since everyone does things differently." He especially learned a lot about astrophotography. Most of all, Randy has had a lot of fun. "It's all about the friends you make along the way!"

The River's Edge Sky Puppies Program:

This class has settled out into having 4 students, all highly motivated and very engaged in the course. We have 2 older students who need to accelerate their observations and projects to earn their award prior to the rest of the group. We even have a student from Waterloo!

Youth Astronomer Program:

This year has been a challenging year for observing with many cloudy skies and then heavy wildfire smoke in the late summer. Our three Young Astronomers are still making progress with the small patches of clear skies we've had. They have between 14 and 21 of the 25 items needed to receive

their Silver-level award. We hope they complete that level before spring 2026 rolls in.

Around town

Why We Do What We Do

In 2004 Terry, our 2 young children, and I attended our first RBAC meeting. It was in Gary Kronk's backyard in St. Jacob. As we walked through the telescope field I heard snippets of conversations, conversations that contained words and phrases that over the years I used with friends and family and received blank stares in return. I realized then I had found my people. Fast forward to November 2025. Terry and I are hosting our newest Sky Puppy kids at our home outside Highland. I get into a conversation with 10-year-old Zackary about stellar classes and the HR diagram (and he KNOWS this stuff). I hear his father say to his mother, "He found someone who speaks his language.". This is what outreach is all about, finding kindred spirits in this vast and amazing universe.

First Quarter Moon Days

The schedule for 2026 is listed in this edition. We hope members take advantage of reaching our regulars as well as the passers-by who are thrilled to get an opportunity to look through our telescopes. Many times, we hear them say, "This is the first time I have looked through a telescope! Thank you!"

Library Telescope Program: We are currently working with the Trenton Library to apply for the Horkheimer award which is a library telescope for the winning club in our region.

Chautauqua Event comes with Bonus Historical Tour and Lunch!

Jeff and Terry Menz attended the daytime event at Chautauqua

neighborhood in Grafton on July 7th. After Jeff gave an informational talk about the Sun, we were given a tour of the “village” via golf cart. Cars are seldom used in this primarily residential neighborhood of narrow roads. Most people walk, bicycle, or rely on golf carts to get around. After giving us the historical background of neighborhoods like this one, we learned the community is now primarily a summer home to most of the residents who enjoy recreation, entertainment, and enlightening talks during the summer months. Our hostess then invited us for a delicious lunch at the Lodge at Pere Marquette. For more information about Chautauqua, go to their website:

<https://www.newpiasachautauqua.org/about-us>.

By the Way

Club News

Elections: A bylaws change has been made to set the term of office to 3 years instead of the current 1 year, with re-election of officers staggered to provide for greater continuity between elections.

Dashboard

RBAC Dashboard 2025

Year	Outreach Events	Event Hours	Venues	Number of Towns	Visitors	Member Hours
2018	20	56.75	16	10	2037	274
2019	14	38	12	11	1051	193
2020*	4	6	4	4	116	32
2021	13	39.5	9	5	655	201.5
2022	33	71	31	19	1268	364
2023	40	110.75	29	18	3463	528.25
2024	60	117	39	24	3059	509.5
2025	35	79.25	28	21	1369	304

Communities reached in 2025:

O’Fallon (2), Centralia, Highland (2), Trenton (2), Edwardsville (4), Valmeyer, Mascoutah, Carlyle Lake, Roxana, Alton, Lebanon, Belleville, Chautauqua, Troy, Altamont, Waterloo, Glen Carbon, Godfrey (2), Holiday Shores, Grafton, Hamel.

Only held 6 of 13 scheduled First Quarter Moon Day events due to weather.

Outreach Photos

ASTROCON in Bryce Canyon, UT, June 25-28



The NCRAL group of attendees at ASTROCOM at the Bryce LookOver. (Photo sent in by Randy Harrison)

Chautauqua Speaker Series, Grafton, July 7



Jeff Menz explaining the dynamics of our Sun. (Photo by Terry Menz)

First Quarter Moon Night, July 7, Northtown, Highland



Jeff Menz sharing view of the Moon with a young visitor. (Photo by Terry Menz)



Dave Kirsch lining up telescope to look at the moon. (Photo by Terry Menz)

Schoen Park, Glen Carbon, Sept. 1



Visitors to Schoen Park in Glen Carbon (Photo by Terry Menz)



Jim Reagan shares telescope view visitor. (Photo by Terry Menz)

Dobsonfest, Stacey Park, Olivette, Sept 13



Dennis Latinette with his gear. (Photo by Dennis Latinette)



Traditional cake to honor John Dobson's birthday. (Photo by Dennis Latinette)



Dennis Latinette and Randy Harrison ready to view the Sun. (Photo by Dennis Latinette)

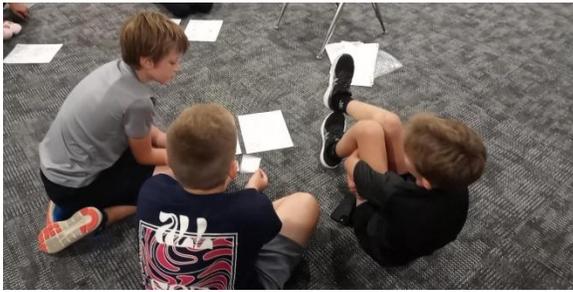


Someone brought out the big gun! (Photo by Dennis Latinette)

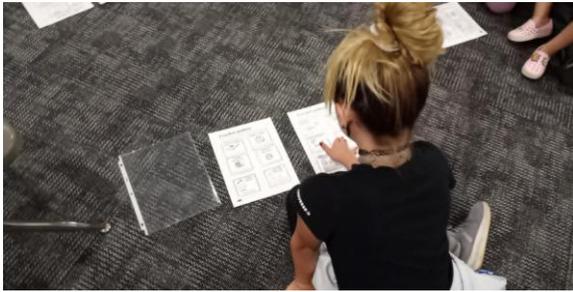
Family Stargazing, Holiday Shores, Sept 27



A family works together on the game Crash Landing. (Photo by Terry Menz)



Biggest success was getting these boys off their phones and into the game! (Photo by Terry Menz)



The whiz kid of the day who insisted on working alone and did a great job! (Photo by Terry Menz)

International Observe the Moon Night, Highland, Sept 29



Dennis with his equipment ready for visitors. (Photo by Dennis Latinette)



Dennis captured this shot of the Moon (Photo by Dennis Latinette)

Godfrey Nature Center, Oct 4



Dan keeping cool in the shade. (Photo by Terry Menz)



Terry with Hidden Message activity (Photo by Jeff Menz)

Girl Scouts, Hamel Community Center, Nov. 12



What a glorious clear sky! (Photo by Mo Johnson)



Older brothers of Girl Scouts also get a view! (Photo by Mo Johnson)



Jeff Menz explains what this scout is seeing through the telescope. (Photo by Mo Johnson)



Aurora we experienced on November 11. Taken with iPhone. (Photo by Randy Harrison)

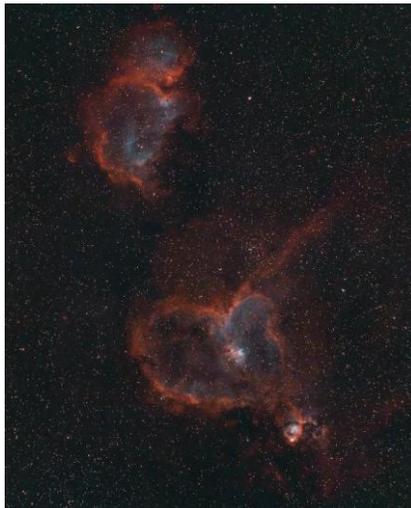


Oreo Cookie Moon Phases is always a fun activity! (Photo by Mo Johnson)



Aurora, Nov 11, Belleville, IL. Photo clipped from Go-Pro footage. (Photo by Gary Kronk)

Gallery



This is IC 1805 and IC 1848 The heart and soul nebula. Taken with Samyang 135 mm camera lens and ASI 294MC pro camera. A Synergy and an IDAS Filter on a GTI mount. Total integration 10 hours 55 minutes (Photo by Randy Harrison)



Aurora, Nov 11, Alhambra, IL. Taken with cell phone. (Photo by Jim Reagan)



Aurora, Nov 11, Alhambra, IL. Taken with cell phone. (Photo by Jim Reagan)



Sunspots, 12-5-25. Sky Watcher 61 mm EVO LUX telescope on a GTI mount Using a Herschel Wege and a 183MC pro camera. (Photo by Randy Harrison.)

New Members:

Kennedi Walls: July 2025

Outreach Awards:

Matt Caminiti: Basic, March

Dennis Latinette: Stellar, October

Upcoming Events

- RBAC Meeting, Jan 10, 7-9 PM
- Scouts at Hamel Community Center, Jan 21, 6:30 – 9:30 PM
- Pere Marquette State Park Star Party, Saturday, Jan 24, 7- 10 PM
- First Quarter Moon Day, Mon. Jan. 26, 7-9 PM
- RBAC Meeting, Feb 14, 7-9 PM
- First Quarter Moon Day, Mon. Feb. 23, 7-9 PM



First Quarter Moon Days

Join the River Bend Astronomy Club for our monthly telescope viewing. Enjoy close views of the craters on our Moon and other night sky objects. Amateur astronomers will have a variety of telescopes, and welcome questions about astronomy!

Where? Glik's Northtown parking lot near the stoplight south of Mazzio's in Highland.

When? (All dates are Mondays.)

1/26/26	7-9 PM	7/20/26	7-10 PM
2/23/26	7-9 PM	8/17/26	7-10 PM
3/23/26	7-9 PM	9/21/26	7-10 PM
4/27/26	7-10 PM	10/19/26	7-9 PM
5/25/26	7-10 PM	11/16/26	7-9 PM
6/22/26	7-10 PM	12/14/26	7-9 PM

What if? Cancelled when cloudy or weather prohibits.

