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Childhood friends finding the time

A Tustin astronomer gets pulled into a real-life, Indiana Jones adventure when his long lost pal asks him to figure out the riddle of a hidden Peruvian temple, called the Temple of the Fox.

By TOM BERG

The Orange County Register

TUSTIN – Vacation. You know, snap a few pictures, buy a few T-shirts, sample a little Peruvian alpaca.

But somewhere between the lost Incan city of Machu Picchu and mountaintop observatories of Cerro Tololo, Chile, retiree Larry Adkins opened a mysterious e-mail from an old childhood pal.

And suddenly, Adkins, 66, of Tustin was solving a 4,000-year-old riddle, wrapped around pyramids, a buried temple, mummies and a dark cloud constellation known as The Fox.

The temple just may be the Western Hemisphere's equivalent of Stonehenge, an ancient calendrical device intended to mark the seasons by pinpointing the summer solstice sunrise



ALIGNMENT: Tustin resident Larry Adkins peers through his reflector telescope. Adkins determined that a Peruvian temple his friend found was positioned right for marking the summer solstice.

EUGENE GARCIA, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Graphic



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and the winter solstice sunset.

If Adkins and his friend's discovery stands up to academic scrutiny, "It would be the oldest known solstice marker in the hemisphere and one of the oldest in the world," says Dave Dearborn, co-editor of *Archeoastronomy* journal.



Today Adkins will face that scrutiny when he and his old friend, archaeologist Bob Benfer, present their case to the Society for American Archaeology in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

National Geographic magazine is watching. And Smithsonian magazine. And Nature magazine, too.

All Adkins really hoped to do in South America was shoot a few pictures that *Sky & Telescope* magazine might publish. Now he's deep inside the Temple of the Fox.

LONG LOST FRIENDS

This was all an accident, Adkins says of his involvement in the case. If so, it was an accident waiting to happen.

He and Bob Benfer met in a Texas grade school about 50 years ago. They raised chickens and read science fiction together. Rode bikes to nearby caves. Even tried to start a seventh-grade science club.

Geeks? Sure, but *smart* geeks. *Future-Ph.D.* geeks.

Already, Benfer had begun looking down while Adkins was looking up. Benfer, the future archaeologist, thought nothing of dropping 200 feet down on a rope into the Devil's Sinkhole. Adkins, the future astronomy teacher, was happier peering up at the sky through a homemade telescope for which he even ground his own mirror.

After graduate school, they lost touch for 25 years - until e-mail reunited them as middle-age men with families. When Adkins planned an astronomy trip to South America in July 2004, he wrote his old friend who had uncovered an ancient temple atop a buried pyramid near Lima, Peru.

They agreed to meet.

Benfer was supposed to be done for the season when Adkins arrived, but things got delayed. So he invited his astronomical friend out to the Chillon Valley site. It didn't look like much.

"If I had stumbled across it, I wouldn't have known what it was," Adkins says of the mostly buried temple.

He forgot about it until he reached the mountain village of Vicuña, Chile.

Benfer e-mailed him, saying he'd just found a hand-hewn rock on a hillside that measured 114 degrees from due north. Did that mean anything?

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"I don't know," Adkins typed back. "But I'll make some calculations and see."

THE FOX

Benfer doesn't really want to talk about this because he knows it's a diversion - but he can't help himself.

"Weird thing," says the University of Missouri anthropology professor. "I don't know if it's good to publish, but ."

The day they started excavating the Temple of the Fox - where they unearthed two, 4,000-year-old fox murals and a sacrificial human mummy - a real fox arrived in the hills. And watched. And watched.

"He stayed till we finished excavating, and then it left," Benfer says. "That was a weird coincidence."

Weird because he thinks another kind of fox has watched over this temple for more than 4,000 years: a celestial fox.

Peruvian nights reveal a far different sky from our own. One where the Milky Way streaks across the heavens in a white path. Intergalactic dust creates dark shapes inside, called dark star constellations. Andean sky watchers named these after animals: the Llama, the Turtle, the Snake and the Fox.

This is where Adkins' astronomical calculations fit in. First, he found that the summer solstice sun in Lima rises at exactly 114 degrees. Directly over the modified rock.

Then he found that in 2,200 B.C., the summer's first sun would be announced by a celestial visitor watching from just above - a dark star constellation painted in Incan murals. The Fox.

CIVILIZATION

So who cares where the solstice sun rises? And why?

Some 5,200 years ago, you could've asked those building one of the oldest known solstice markers - the megalithic passage tomb at Newgrange, Ireland. A few hundred years later, you could've asked those setting the first stones at Stonehenge. And later still, those erecting the Egyptian pyramids.

In 2,200 B.C., you could've asked those aligning the Temple of the Fox to observe sunrise on the first day of summer and sunset on the first day of winter. Why?

The short answer is this: Civilization.

Knowing the movement of the sun is critical to knowing the seasons, which is critical to planting, which is critical to civilization. Agriculture allows a society to store food, so not everyone has to hunt and gather. It allows a society to support teachers, priests, artisans, doctors and large armies for protection and domination.

In Peru's Chillon Valley, it allowed society to know when to plant cotton in the flood plain and when to stop. And it did so not just a little earlier than anywhere in the Western

Hemisphere, but *lot* earlier.

"I'd say, if he's got something, it's 2,000 years before anything else we're talking about," says Colgate University anthropologist Anthony Aveni, author of more than 24 books on ancient astronomy.

How big a deal is that?

Says David Brunzell, University of La Verne archaeology teacher: "Oh, cover of National Geographic - that big."

All of which is heady stuff for a retired engineer from Tustin now teaching a little astronomy at Cerritos College.

"It feels like Indiana Jones, although not nearly as dangerous," Adkins says. "If you were writing a novel, people would be looking for buried treasure. But there's very little of that. Even the ceramic pots are not of much interest to the local pot hunters because they fall apart."

Maybe. If you're used to looking up. But his old friend says he *has* found a buried treasure - a curious frowning statue found in a second temple on site.

"I got in touch with other archaeologists, and none claim there's anything even close," Benfer says. "Not for a thousand years. If you're interested in the history of art, this is it. This is the beginning of sculpture in the New World."

And possibly the beginning of civilization here. All it took to discover was two friends, one always looking down and one always looking up.

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