Grading Down In The Valley

2003 Tie Grading Seminar Held At Koppers' Roanoke Facility

Along the banks of the quiet Roanoke River in Salem, Va., students gathered recently to participate in the Railway Tie Association's Annual Crosstie Grading Seminar for 2003. Koppers Inc.'s operation there produces ties primarily for Norfolk-Southern Corporation. Mark Franck and all the staff at this pristine example of a modern wood preserving facility are to be thanked and commended for the wonderful job done in preparing for this event. The students and instructors recognize and appreciate all the hard work and time invested to make this a truly exceptional educational experience.

Speaking of the students, the class once again had an international flavor. Attendees from Canada, Mexico and the United States, representing tie treaters, railroads, suppliers and industrial users, were treated to a half-day introductory session on engineering and two full days of classroom and field experiences. This photo essay tells the story.

Day 1 Over the past two years, the tie grading seminar has started with a half-day, condensed video version of the TieLife engineering seminar that is designed to enhance the learning experience by explaining why specifications have developed over the years the way they have. Then, bright and early, students tackle the first full day of instruction with a brief course on wood species identification.

Attendees are asked to review small wood block samples that are part of a take-home kit to identify softwoods vs. hardwoods and then begin delineating the individual species from these broad groups.

One of the reasons for doing this is to expose students to all of the approved species that can be used for ties. Another is to let them determine for themselves that all tie species are not necessarily equal in the way they do their job.

Everyone takes the work very seriously.

During the instruction, lectures are given on tie defects, and students get to see large tie blocks to acclimate themselves to identifying the full-sized ties they will grade during the afternoon session.

Day one in the field, students are encouraged to work together to identify species and test themselves on the defects they need to understand.

Since this is a preview of the real tests to come on day two, the sessions are intense.

This year, a bit more focus was placed on the treatability of various species. For example, students were allowed to see the differences between the species after they were treated. Of course, Red Oak (RO) and Black Gum (BG) are two species that accept treatment well and are easy to spot.

Day 2 brought more classroom instruction and the first of two practical tests.

Then it was back to the plant to do more work on full-sized ties—this time for the students' final grade.

Speaking of grading, is this tie acceptable? No? Then what is the defect? This is what the tie grader has to know before he graduates.

Can you tell what species this is? Everyone is taught tell-tale signs to help them identify the species.

After about 90 minutes the test is over, and instructor Jimmy Watt goes over the correct answers with the group. The winner gets a $100 U.S. Savings Bond.

This year's winner of both the classroom test and the field test was Joey Rhodes of Koppers. It was a close race, though, as the scores from this year's group were the tightest in years. Joey only won by one point.

Following the testing, the instruction is not over until a complete tour of the treating plant is accomplished. Koppers' extra-clean facility Boultonizes most of its production…

…thus the condensation tanks on each of the cylinders are eight feet in diameter by 140 feet long.

Koppers has also been awarded a water quality control award from the State of Virginia. Here, Dave Basham explains the recovery and water treatment process.

The plant's inside is just as impressive...from the computerized controls of the treating control room to the new, state-of-the art boiler operations.

Koppers also has two framing mills where specialized track and bridge components are made.

And, of course, Koppers also produce a significant quantity of switch ties for their customers, as this large switch tie yard would suggest.

Although the weather was a little wet on the last day, the students and instructors found a way to pose for a final group picture.

New Visual Guide To Tie Specifications

Nothing can replace the real thing when it comes to tie grading; you have to do it in person and with good instruction to really learn the in's and out's and catch all the subtleties. However, for those who have yet to make it to a Tie Grading Seminar, some help is on the way. RTA has produced a Visual Guide to Tie Specifications that was used for the first time at this year's seminar. This computer-based training tool is now available and gives a general overview in pictures of what the text of the specifications means. Contact the RTA office at (770) 460-5553 to learn more about how you can receive a copy of this important new training tool.

Tie Grading Seminar 2003 Attendees, Instructors & Staff

Students included Johnny Hodges and Robert Fox of Acme Wood Preserving; William Dere of Canadian National; Chuck Ward of Coastal Lumber Co.; Tony Allenczy, Chad Baisden, Mark Franck, Patrick Gladwin, Tony Lovern, Joey Rhodes, Mark Sykes and Dana Young of Koppers Inc.; John Camerota of New York Department of Transportation; Audie Truitt, RailWorks Wood Products Inc.; Frank Crisp of Southern Company Services; Alfonso Chavez of SFP; and Amanda Stimart of Webster Industries. Staff and instructors included Jim Gauntt of the Railway Tie Association; Gary Ambrose of Koppers Inc.; Marshall Allen of Metrolink; Mike Barnes of Mississippi State University; Terry Conners of University of Kentucky; Jeff Morrell of Oregon State University; and Jim Watt of The Crosstie Connection.