



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Penn and Teller beat about the bush

by John Blanton

The NTS program for June featured that delightfully skeptical pair of magicians, Penn and Teller, not live unfortunately. We replayed a copy of their latest DVD titled *bull something or the other*. *Bull* is from P&T's current show on HBO of the same name, the subject of which is a bunch of stuff P&T consider to be **bull something or the other**. If you don't get HBO on your Stromberg Carlson black and white, you can still catch the show by ordering the video from Amazon.¹

In the video P&T have a lot of fun with stuff which is obviously a bunch of **bull something or the other**. They cover a range of topics, from creationism to bottled water, all the time mentioning off hand that it's all a bunch of **bull something or the other**. In fact, that's about the main problem we have with the video. Watching a few episodes from the show the observant view may get the idea P&T find disagreement with some of the issues they touch on. However, they never get right down and tell us, in straight terms, what they think. Oh, well. It's my feeling that an ounce of innuendo is worth a ton of name calling.

Take, for example, their treatment of creationism.

Penn Jillett, the more talkative of the two, attempts to explain life's origins using the time-tested theory of evolution. All the while, Teller (no last name given) stands by patiently, fondling a large copy of a holy book.

Finally, it comes Teller's turn to explain the anti-evolution side—the case for creationism. Anticipation builds as the audience wonders what great oratory Teller will employ to put down the evolutionists' heresy. As Penn looks on expectantly, Teller gives the only reply possible—the only answer to evolution. He swats Penn across the face with the holy book.

Now, that's **bull something or the other**, Penn explains, as though an explanation is needed.

EVENTS CALENDAR

Saturday, July 10, 2004
at 2 p.m.

The North Texas Skeptics Paranormal Challenge

Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas
(corner of Live Oak Street and
Liberty Street)

Free and open to the public

The North Texas Skeptics will
host an audience participation
discussion of its \$10,000
paranormal challenge.

John Blanton will tell how
challengers can win the \$10,000
prize that is offered to whoever
can present proof of the
“paranormal.” People wanting to
vie for the prize are encouraged
to attend and present their
claims. Mr. Blanton will also
relate stories of recent attempts
to claim the prize.

The \$10,000 prize is
underwritten by five area

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North Texas Skeptics

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 501 (c) (3) scientific and educational organization. All
 members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend
 NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or
 reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings
 on topics of current interest or social events.

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Another fun topic is bottled water. Penn reminds us that status-minded souls, plus some skeptics, besides, pay big bucks for plain, ordinary water wrapped up in fancy bottles.

To illustrate what we are getting for our moola, the pair arranged to serve up their own special brands of water at an upscale Manhattan restaurant. To dice things up a bit, they packaged their special blends in different kinds of bottles to give customers the feeling they were getting a rare treat. Of course, all bottles were filled out back in the restaurant from a water hose hooked up to that exotic source, the New York City water works.

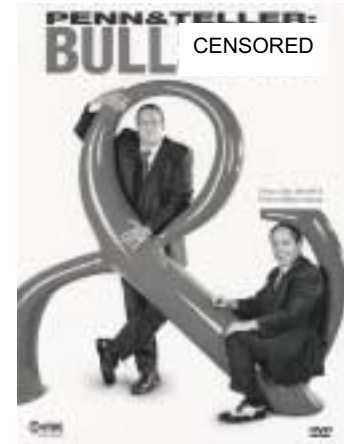
We in the audience had a lot of fun at the customers' expense as we watched them sample and compare, applying laudatory phrases to this and that bottle of tap water. In the end, the customers enjoyed the joke, as well, especially, I am sure, when they found out they would not have to pay the prices quoted for the wonder water.

Summing it up, Penn reminded us this is all **bull something or the other**. However, he would never come right out and give us his honest opinion. He said you can call stuff **bull something or the other**, but when you start using the f-word (*fraud*—this is not the U.S. Senate, after all) you will have lawyers all over you.

Here's a complete list of topics from the DVD set:

Talking to the Dead
 Alternative Medicine
 Alien Abductions
 End of the World
 Second Hand Smoke/Baby **bull something or the other**
Sex, Sex, Sex [My wife wouldn't let me watch this one.]
 Feng Shui/Bottled Water
 Creationism
 Self-Helpless
 ESP
 Eat This
 Ouija Boards/Near Death Experiences
 Environmental Hysteria

The video would be R-rated if shown in the theaters, due to the use of some peculiar English language figures of speech.



Danny Barnett graciously lent the set to us for our viewing enjoyment, but we only had time for about three episodes. Hopefully we can do this again in the future.



References

- 1 To order Penn and Teller's *bull something or the other* DVD, use this link:
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00019PDNY/thenorthtexaske>.

What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the *What's New* column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Political science: Republicans insist they love science, too.

Republicans rushed to defend their science credentials, following the endorsement of John Kerry by 48 Nobel laureates on Monday. "Only John Kerry would declare the country to be in scientific decline on a day when the country's first privately funded space trip is successfully completed," a Bush spokesman snorted. Kerry meanwhile vowed to lift the Bush restrictions on stem-cell research and "listen to the advice of scientists." In February, more than 60 prominent scientists, including 20 Nobel laureates, had charged the administration with politically manipulating the science advisory process (WN 20 Feb 04).

Coronation: Reverend Sun Myung Moon crowned in U.S. Capital.

The *NY Times* and *Wash Post* have just now discovered the bizarre March 23 crowning of Korean-born news mogul, Unification Church founder and self-declared Messiah, as members of Congress looked on. This is big. We don't get many Messiahs in Washington. The appropriate action, we believe, is to rename the Reagan Memorial Moon (WN 11 Jun 04). It will henceforth be known as "the Moon."

Missile defense: Senate rejects call for independent testing.

The Senate Armed Services Committee voted this week to proceed with President Bush's proposed missile defense system, which is scheduled to be deployed in October. Amendments that would subject the system to independent testing before deployment were proposed by Jack Reed (D-R.I.) and Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), and were voted down. This is perfectly reasonable, since a non-working missile defense system should be sufficient to deter a nonexistent missile threat from Iran or North Korea. Chairman John Warner (R-Va.) proposed that the Pentagon test its own system, rather than risk faithless skepticism of an independent agency. However, inability of the system to shoot down incoming missiles is irrelevant, since John Kerry is the real target.

Misconduct: Schoen loses doctoral degree for falsifying data.

The University of Konstanz has revoked the doctoral degree of J. Hendrik Schoen, a former physicist for Bell Labs who was fired two years ago (WN 27 Sep 02) for falsifying data. The school cited its legal right to revoke his degree on the grounds that he behaved in an "undignified" manner. Schoen was busted in 2002 after other scientists discovered almost identical data in two completely unrelated papers of his.

DARPA: a moment of silence to reflect on our fallen programs.

Last week marked the demise of the Isomer Energy Release Program, (WN 04 Jun 04) but this was only the most recent DARPA program to be too strange even for the Pentagon, like Total Information Awareness (WN 20 Dec 02). Then there was the Policy Analysis Market, a plan to base intelligence estimates on betting in a futures market (maybe that's where the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq came from), and the LifeLog comprehensive personal database .

Hafnium: Congress kills the "isomer energy release program."

In spite of the Pentagon's fascination with imaginary weapons, the Senate Armed Services Committee listened to the scientists and recommended a \$4 million reduction in the program. That puts it at zero. The House Armed Services Committee agreed: "The committee questions the utility of this research under any circumstances and is particularly skeptical of research into nuclear isomer production before triggering is shown to be possible." WN recommends they also cancel DARPA's subscription to *Popular Mechanics* (WN 16 Apr 04).

Intercessory prayer: maybe our prayers have been answered.

Three years ago, Columbia U. researchers reported in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* that in-vitro fertilization is twice as likely to result in pregnancy if the women are prayed for by a group of total strangers, even though the women are unaware of being prayed for. Recognizing that such a finding would threaten the very foundations of science, WN called on WN readers to “pray this study is wrong” (WN 05 Oct 01). This week we learned that our prayers seem to have been answered. No one, of course, ever replicated the study. But meanwhile, one of the coauthors has been exposed as a con-man. Daniel Wirth, J.D. (not MD), is known in alternative-medicine circles for his studies of Non-contact Therapeutic Touch on wound healing. Touch therapy, you may recall, was thoroughly debunked in a *Journal of the American Medical Association* paper by a 9-year old scientist, Emily Rosa (WN 03 Apr 98). On 18 May 04, Wirth reportedly pled guilty to fraud charges in Federal Court for his role in bilking troubled Adelphia Communications out of \$2M. The senior author on the prayer paper, Rogerio Lobo, Chairman of the Columbia Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, now says he provided only “editorial assistance.” Bruce Flamm, Clinical Professor of Obstetrics at UC Irvine, who relates this incredible tale of academic chicanery in *Skeptik* magazine, says the third author, Kwang Cha, has left Columbia and isn’t talking.

Placebo effect: use of alternative remedies continues to grow.

A new government survey of adult Americans found that 36 percent of us use some kind of “complementary or alternative” therapy. The number jumps to 62 percent when prayer is included. I find it surprising that the percentages are not higher; you make the list if you take vitamins, or meditate, or get a massage, or go on some fad diet. Echinacea turns out to be the most popular herbal supplement, although studies stubbornly refuse to uncover any benefit. Wisdom has it that Echinacea wards off colds, but when adults taking Echinacea three times a day inhaled a strain of common cold virus, ninety percent came down with a cold.

Homeopathy: can you do placebo-controlled studies of placebos?&s

Four years ago, a guest on “Superquark,” an Italian television science program, observed that relying on homeopathy could be dangerous for someone who actually has a serious illness. The Italian Association of Medical Homeopathy sued the host of the program. But last month, according to *Nature*, the court in Catania ruled that the opinions of the guest were “justified” and “could not be considered offensive or defamatory.”

Homeopathy: Demonstrators in Belgium resort to mass suicide.

A Special Report in the current issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* looks into the ultimate protest by a group of skeptics. They objected to a decision by the major health insurance companies in Belgium to begin covering the costs of homeopathy in response to popular demand. Depressed by the willingness of the insurance companies to encourage quackery, the 23 skeptics resigned themselves to committing mass suicide by drinking a cocktail of lethal poisons including arsenic, snake venom and deadly nightshade. To the horror of the homeopaths, they even increased the potency in true homeopathic fashion by preparing a 30C solution of the cocktail. That means the cocktail was diluted one part per hundred and shaken, which was then repeated sequentially, 30 times. All newspapers and TV stations were invited to watch the death agonies of the 23 deranged suicides, who included a number of prominent citizens and professors of medicine, “and a few normal people armed only with common sense.” The media coverage was excellent, but the suicide attempt was a failure.

Missile defense: deployment plan ignores technical realities.

Yesterday, a group of scientists, including Congressman Rush Holt (D-NJ), released a new Union of Concerned Scientists study that characterizes administration claims for the missile defense system being deployed as “irresponsible exaggerations.” They called on the Bush administration to halt deployment, and urged Congress to require operationally realistic testing first. The director of the Missile Defense Agency, General Kadish, explained two weeks ago that the current plan is to deploy and then test (WN 30 Apr 04). I asked my friend in the agency, General Persiflage, how the plan is working (WN 19 Dec 03). “Great,” he exclaimed, “initially we were told to deploy by the end of 2004; that left no time for testing. But now that we’ve stopped testing, we find it easy to stay on schedule. We’ll never go back to testing.”

Open-access journals: does anyone care who pays the bills?

“*Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (eCAM) is a new international journal that seeks to encourage rigorous research in this new, yet ancient world of complementary and alternative medicine...particularly traditional Asian healing systems.” So begins an Oxford University Press announcement <http://www.oup.co.uk/jnls/list/ecam/>. All eCAM papers are available online at no cost and without subscription. Unlike other open-access journals there are no author submission fees. Who pays, skeptics might ask? The “generous support of Ishikawa Natural Medicinal Products Research Center, co-owner of the journal with OUP.” Yes, it’s the ancient-wisdom scam. You are asked to believe that before it was known that blood circulates or germs cause disease there were

these miraculous cures. If you can live with a little superstition, you can save a couple of bucks on page charges. They may be on to something big here. Other industries might be equally generous. Perhaps the *Journal of Gambling Studies*, which deals with gambling addiction, could cut a deal with the slot-machine industry. And perhaps *Join Together Online*, which opposes gun violence, could team up with the National Rifle Association. On the other hand, maybe not.

Missile defense: GAO report says tests have been unrealistic.

We started to use interviews with our usual fictitious experts from the Missile Defense Agency, Puff Panegyric and General Persiflage, to tell this story. But we could not invent dialogue that measured up to quotes in the *Washington Post* from General Kadish, Missile Defense Agency director. Explaining why tests don't affect plans to deploy: "You can't operationally test the system, until you put it in place." We have extensive computer modeling based on test results, he says. But How do we know the models are valid? "Because they accurately predict the test results." Maybe there's a better way. Why not test the system against the ISS? If it works, we immediately free up some of the \$11B promised when ISS and the shuttles are retired.

Dietary supplements: *Consumer Reports* lists the "dirty dozen."

A cover story in the May issue of *Consumer Reports* identifies 12 supplements that should be banned, increasing pressure to amend or repeal the obscene 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act (WN 02 Jan 04).

Paul Gresser contributed to What's New.

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

My Ship Has Sailed

On **Sunday, July 18, at 7 p.m.**, longtime NTS member Laura Ainsworth's musical comedy show lampooning anti-aging quackery, "**My Ship Has Sailed: How to be a Late-Bloomer in a World Obsessed with Extreme Youth,**" will be filmed for a DCTV/Comcast cable TV special. It's at Django on the Parkway, just off the Tollway at Beltline in Addison. She'd really love to have a loud, supportive audience for this one, so come on out!. They will be filming crowd reaction shots, so if you'd like be on TV, too, here's your chance. Public seating is limited, so please make reservations quickly at 214-370-9917. For more info, visit www.lauraainsworth.com

Web news

The World Wide Web is a great source of skeptical news. Here are some clippings:

Report: No link between autism, vaccines

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-05-21.htm#autism>

<http://www.cnn.com/2004/HEALTH/05/18/vaccines.autism.ap/index.html>

WASHINGTON (AP) — There is no evidence that a controversial mercury-based vaccine preservative causes autism, concludes an eagerly anticipated scientific review that says it's time to lay vaccine suspicions to rest and find the real culprit.

Five studies involving thousands of children since 2001 have found "no association between autism and vaccines containing the preservative thimerosal," according to the Institute of Medicine. Some parents of children with autism have sought to place the blame on vaccination.

The preservative contains mercury and high doses of mercury can produce neurological damage. However, this kind of damage is not associated with autism.

"Don't misunderstand: The committee members are fully aware that this is a very horrible and devastating condition," said Dr. Marie McCormick, a Harvard professor of maternal and child health who led the IOM probe. "It's important to get to the root of what's happening."

Thimerosal, which has been in use since the 1930s, is no longer used for childhood vaccines.

Vaccine critics didn't immediately comment on the report.

New entry for SKEPTIC Bibliography

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-05-21.htm#bibliography>

<http://www.csicop.org/bib/664>

The Case For A Creator: A Journalist Investigates Scientific Evidence that Points Toward God

Lee Strobel

<http://www.zondervan.com/Books/Detail.asp?ISBN=0310241448>

2004, Zondervan; 352p.

creationism: defense, religion: defense

A defense of “intelligent design” creationism at a layman’s level. Strobel, allegedly an investigative journalist, goes around interviewing leading ID proponents to create the impression that evolution is scientifically dead. There are no surprises in the resulting book, but its level of dishonesty is disturbing. Everything takes place within the hermetically sealed world of conservative Christianity; Strobel doesn’t bother to check with any of the benighted evolutionists he thinks are being left behind by the advancement of ID-science why they still think evolution is fine. It’s worth looking at for anyone in a position of arguing against ID publicly, because Strobel’s simpleminded and tunnel-visioned approach is likely to be common.

Visit the full bibliography at <http://www.csicop.org/bibliography/>

Please consider submitting an entry yourself.

Taner Edis, SKEPTIC bibliographer

Police eye robbery in killing of scientist

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-05-21.htm#fusion>

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2004/05/17/police_eye_robbery_in_killing_of_scientist/

Eugene Mallove is more recently famous for his support of “cold fusion.” Now police suspect robbery as a factor in his murder in Norwich, Massachusetts.

Several items were taken from him, including his Dodge Caravan, which was found hours later in an employee parking lot at the nearby Foxwoods Resort Casino, police said.

Mallove worked in Concord, N.H., as editor-in-chief and publisher of *Infinite Energy* magazine and president of the New Energy Foundation, both of which explore alternative forms of energy not generally recognized by mainstream scientists.

Fans of cold fusion remember him as a strong advocate of their cause.

"One measure of the type of man he is is that we've had thousands and thousands of e-mails and phone calls already. It's fresh news, but it's all over the world already," said Christy Frazier, managing editor of the magazine, when reached by phone yesterday.

Scientific American Exposes “Attachment Therapy” to Wide Audience

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-05-16.htm#sa>

The estimated million-plus readers of Scientific American will be introduced to “Attachment Therapy” with the June 2004 issue of the magazine, in general release this week.

SA Columnist Michael Shermer has written “Death by Theory” (page 48), a concise and chilling account of the death of 10-year-old Candace Newmaker at the hands of Connell Watkins and Julie Ponder in April 2000. The point of Dr Shermer’s column is that Candace was killed by pseudoscience that should be banned “before it tortures and kills children again.”

Dr. Shermer’s column will no doubt give a large shot in the arm to the visibility — and urgency — of the anti-Attachment Therapy movement. Please bring Dr. Shermer’s column to the attention of anyone who is “on the fence” about this issue.

The article quotes from *Attachment Therapy on Trial* (Praeger 2003), a book that analyzes the Watkins/Ponder trial and Attachment Therapy in general.

Meanwhile, Jean Mercer, Ph.D., of Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, goes into this same topic in depth for the current issue of *Scientific Review of Mental Health Practices* with “Violent Therapies: The Rationale behind a Potentially Harmful Child Psychotherapy” (see <http://www.srmhp.org/0201-violent-therapies.html>).

AT NEWS sends the latest news to activists and allied organizations about the many abusive, pseudoscientific, and violent practices inflicted on children by the fringe psychotherapy known as Attachment Therapy, aka “holding therapy” and “therapeutic parenting.” Attachment Therapists claim to work with our nation’s most vulnerable of children, e.g. minority children, children in foster care, and adoptees. AT NEWS is the publication of *Advocates for Children in Therapy*. For more information on Attachment Therapy and a film clip demonstrating AT, go to the Utah activists’ site at <http://www.kidscomefirst.info> and ACT’s website: <http://www.childrenintherapy.org>.

Contact: Linda Rosa, RN

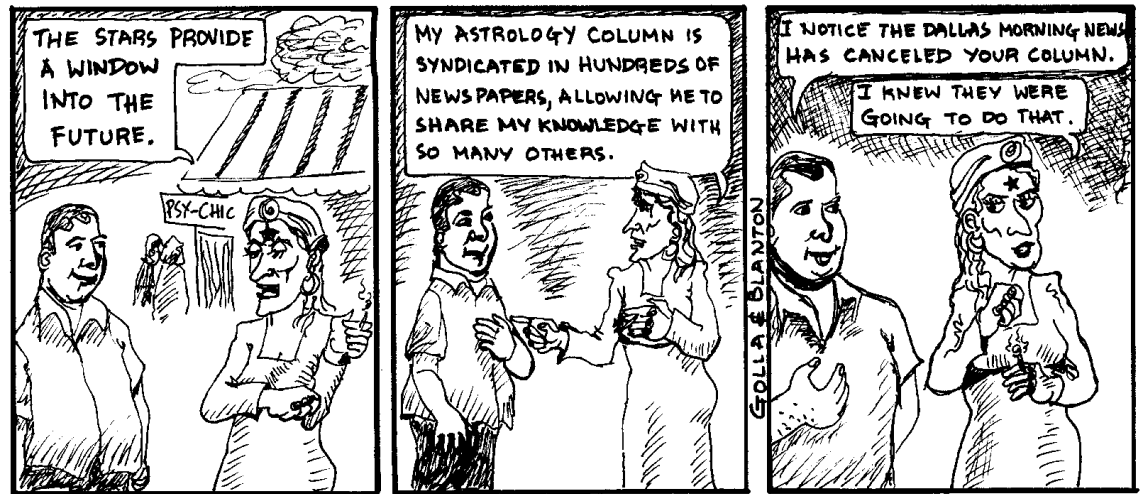
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and John Blanton.
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Kudos For Shanks, Forrest, Gross

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-05-16#kudos>

Niall Shanks's *God, the Devil, and Darwin: A Critique of Intelligent Design Theory* and Barbara Forrest and Paul R. Gross's *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design* both received favorable reviews in *Science* (2004 May 7; 304: 825-6). All three authors are members of NCSE, and Forrest just joined NCSE's board of directors. In his review of these two books along with the "intelligent design" anthology *Darwinism, Design, and Public Education*, Steve Olson noted that "studying intelligent design hypotheses can be frustrating because they seem so obviously inspired by nonscientific considerations. When rebutted, intelligent design theories tend to ignore the objections, claim that all will be revealed in the future, or rework their arguments to draw the same conclusions in a slightly different way." Olson said that Shanks "deftly skewers the scientific pretensions of intelligent design creationists" and praised Forrest and Gross for thoroughly describing and meticulously documenting their motivations and strategies, warning

Future meeting dates

Unless otherwise indicated, all our meetings will be held at—

Center for Nonprofit Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas
(corner of Live Oak Street and Liberty Street)

August 14, 2004
Tom Siegfried - Strange Matters

September 11, 2004

October 9, 2004

November 13, 2004

December 11, 2004 (Party)

January 8, 2005
Board meeting only

February 12, 2005

March 12, 2005

April 9, 2005

May 15, 2005

June 11, 2005

Events Calendar continued from page 1

skeptics and will be paid to the first person who can present scientifically valid proof of psychic abilities, astrology, extraterrestrial visitors and more. The protocol for filing a claim for the prize is described on the NTS Web site at —<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/challeng.htm>.

This meeting is free and open to the public.

Saturday, July 24, at 7 p.m.

NTS Social Dinner and Board Meeting

Hedary's Lebanese Oven and Grill
7915 Belt Line Road
Dallas, TX 75240
972-233-1080
<http://guidelive.com/profile/102890>

Let us know if you are coming.
Phone 214-335-9248
E-mail skeptic@ntskeptics.org

North Texas Skeptics
P.O. Box 111794
Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794

FIRST CLASS

Address Correction Requested

Application for Membership

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Home Phone _____ Work Phone _____
Occupation _____
Special expertise and/or interests _____

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership agreement:

Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible and scientific point of view, and while I do not endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscientific claims, I believe that such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational enquiry demands.

Signature _____ Date _____

Indicate your choice:

Member: A voting member and newsletter recipient. Family privileges included. Annual dues \$35.00

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