



The North Texas

Skeptic

Volume 19

January 2005

Number 1

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Wrap up

by John Blanton

It's not as though we're not serious about this stuff. All of 2004 we served up a skeptic's smorgasbord—appetizer, soup du jour, main course, and dessert. And what a feast it was.

Creationism, of course. In 1925 who would have believed that 79 years later the ghost of Matthew Harrison Brady would stalk the land much as his real-life counterpart, William Jennings Bryan, did that year when he prominently defended creationism in the trial of John Scopes. In the stage play *Inherit The Wind* and the movie of the same name "Brady" was patterned after Bryan—pompous, self-righteous, tragically behind the times. Maybe not anymore.

Today we have a new breed of creationist in the form of Phillip Johnson, William Dembski, Michael Behe, Jonathan Wells, and the like. And we have public schools reaching out to them, yearning to teach creationism, something even Bryan opposed.

If creationism was our big story last year, you can hardly blame us. It's back. It's big. It's been marked down for quick sale. Stand by for more in 2005.

Alternative medicine? Really hot, as well. We noted the downfall of high-profile studies in reputable medical institutions that initially claimed success with intercessory prayer. Let us pray there are no encores.

John Edward caught our attention, as well. Having lost his bid for the vice presidency...no, wait. That was John Edwards. John Edward is the one who speaks to the dead. Maybe that was John Edwards. Anyhow, we learned that a class act like this just won't die.

And, there was *The Big Lie*. The big news was not that Thierry Meyssan's conspiracy book about the 9/11 attacks was a big seller. It was that so many bought into it. Oops. Maybe that's not news, after all.

And, that was not all. We spiced up the year end with a special treat.

EVENTS CALENDAR

NTS Board of Directors meeting and election of officers

2 p.m. Saturday, 8 January, 2005

Center for Community Cooperation, 2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas (corner of Live Oak Street and Liberty Street)

The NTS will elect Board members for the new year. Traditionally, the newly-elected Board members will then appoint the offices of President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer immediately after the Board election. The Board may also fill various other positions, such as Web Master and Activities Director.

Continued on page 7

North Texas Skeptics

Officers

President ····· Daniel Barnett
 Vice President ····· John Brandt
 Secretary ····· Mike Selby
 Treasurer ····· Mark Meyer

Staff

Newsletter Editor ····· Keith Blanton
 Webmaster ····· John Blanton
 Meetings and Social Director ····· Mike Selby

Board of Directors

Greg Aicklen, Laura Ainsworth, Daniel Barnett,
 Virginia Barnett, John Blanton, John Brandt, Prasad
 Golla, Elizabeth Hittson, Jack Hittson, Mike Selby and
 Curtis Sevens

Directors Emeritus Tony Dousette, Ron Hastings,
 Mark Meyer, John Thomas, Joe Voelkerling, and Mel
 Zemek

Scientific and Technical Advisors:

Joe Barnhart, Professor of Philosophy
 David E. Dunn, Ph.D., Geologist
 Raymond A. Eve, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, UT
 Arlington
 Timothy N. Gorski, M.D., Physician
 Ronnie J. Hastings, Ph.D., Science Teacher
 Anthony P. Picchioni, Ph.D., Licensed Professional
 Counselor
 James Rusk, Director, Russell Planetarium
 Lakshman S. Tamil, Ph.D., Engineer
 John Thomas, Attorney

The North Texas Skeptics is a tax-exempt
 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.

Our newsletter, *The North Texas Skeptic*, is
 published monthly by The North Texas Skeptics, P.O.
 Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794.

Permission to reprint: Articles in *The North Texas
 Skeptic* may be reprinted without further permission,
 provided that *The Skeptic* is credited as the source, the
 mailing address above is listed, and a copy of the
 publication containing the reprint is sent to the Editor.
 Opinions expressed in *The Skeptic* are those of the
 individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the
 views of The North Texas Skeptics. Contents and logo
 © 2005 by North Texas Skeptics.

For the December meet-
 ing we invited Rechey
 Davidson and Harold Sargent
 to present their personal inter-
 pretation of reality.

Mr. Davidson, you will
 recall, is a map dowser. He
 finds lost objects by laying
 out a map of the search re-
 gion and then applying his
 dowsing rod. Back in Sep-
 tember he applied his tech-
 nique for us in a
 loosely-controlled evaluation.
 That did not achieve the
 hoped-for result, so we have
 decided to do more testing.



In December Mr.
 Davidson joined us at the
 NTS year-end party and dem-
 onstrated his technique. He
 likes to use a bent wire, as
 from a coat hanger. See the photo. He holds the upright end of the wire
 in his fist, but not too tightly. When properly balanced, the long end of
 the wire will swing around and point to the area of interest. He showed
 us how this works by moving his hand around the room while the wire
 swung about, always pointing to the same location.

At the December meeting Rechey Davidson
 demonstrates map dowsing using a bent wire.

Photo by John Blanton

One of the Skeptics hid a piece of jewelry—Mr. Davidson uses his
 technique to finds lots of lost jewelry—and asked him to find it. OK, not
 so good that time, either. The technique apparently needs further refin-
 ing.

Harold Sargent, we learned through e-mails, is the official alien's
 representative to SETI. SETI is the Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelli-
 gence program. Mr. Sargent's body produces radio signals in response
 to communications from aliens, if I understand him correctly.

At a separate meeting he demonstrated this to me with the use of a
 sensitive radio probe. The probe was assembled on a small circuit board,
 which he placed in his mouth—it wasn't sensitive enough to pick up the
 signal from outside his body. True enough, a few moments after placing
 the probe in his mouth it begin to emit a chirping sound in response to a
 received signal. He showed me this was no trick by allowing me to hold
 the probe while he walked across the room and activated his cell phone.
 The probe chirped reliably whenever he keyed the phone. It also
 chirped, I noticed, when my finger accidentally, or deliberately, touched
 a small button on the side of the probe. My assumption is that whenever
 Mr. Sargent placed the probe in his mouth his tongue didn't accidentally
 touch the button.



The alien's representative to SETI. Harold Sargent's body provides the radio connection.

Photo by John Blanton

For the time being we can't reveal all the details of Mr. Sargent's activities. His plan for the day after the NTS meeting was to head out of town for an arranged meeting involving some highly sensitive tests of his ability. He has asked us to keep the details secret, and we respect his wishes. We have obscured his face in the photo, because he does not want the FBI to be able to identify him. We think this is wise, as well.

Finally, late last year I received an urgent e-mail. It said, briefly:

I notice that you've posted an article that appears on my site entitled:

"Arnold Schwarzenegger Delivers Enthusiastic Statement Of Support For Chiropractic"

I don't have any idea why you would put such an article on your web site as it was an actual news item posted from the American Chiropractic Assn[.] Governor Schwarzenegger has been a long time advocate of chiropractic. Any idea posted to the contrary is false.

Please remove it immediately.

I think what the writer meant to say was "Quit posting stuff that appears to lend credibility to chiropractic."

Well, we can't do that. Can't quit, that is. That's the business we are in. We post all sorts of crank stuff, knowing all the while our readers will see it for what it is. By now, Skeptics,

you should not need little notices tacked onto the front of a bunch of B.S. that say "Caution: B.S. ahead." If you do, then we are not doing our jobs. Come see us.

Anyhow, Happy New Year to all of you. Above all, stand by for more of the same in 2005. Remember what a famous person once said: "The most abundant substance in the Universe is hydrogen. Number two is stupidity."

Note: I never can seem to get my quotes right, so I did some digging. I found lots of references. Here are two:

Jon Crowcroft said "Scientists claim that hydrogen is the most abundant substance in the Universe – they are wrong – Human Stupidity is far more abundant."

<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/users/jac22/talks/wolfson-internet.pdf>

Frank Zappa said "The most abundant substance in the universe is human stupidity."

<http://www.iidb.org/vbb/showthread.php?t=63716> □

Mind steak

by John Blanton

Jump the rails. Head for the hills. There's a whole different world out there and it's just a click away. The higher channels on your TV set are prepared to surpass your lowest expectations.

That's where I found MindStake.¹

MindStake is the revolutionary new system developed by renowned hypnotherapist Dr. Terry B. Massey that increases your winnings by 25% or more, guaranteed regardless of your favorite game.

Buy the CD, sit back, and relax and listen. Then be prepared to take on the top casinos in the world. Be prepared to take on the laws of probability.

From poker to blackjack, roulette to craps, Mindstake gives you a mental edge over the casinos, and puts you in a state of relaxation to make better money management and betting decisions—it even works on slots!

Until now you have probably been thinking the reason you lose at the casinos is because they design the games to give themselves the edge. You probably didn't realize all this time you've been losing because you've been approaching the tables with the wrong mindset.

MindStake is prepared, for a small sum, to relieve you of this crippling debility and to ensure that when you lose it's not going to be because of anything you do wrong, unless, maybe, it's deciding to gamble at a casino in the first place.

Maybe a little perspective on casino gambling is due. Historically, there have been ways to give yourself an advantage at some casino games.

For example, analysis of the game of 21 (blackjack) in the 1950s revealed a weakness in the house advantage. Basically it was this: In blackjack the house's main advantage is they win in case of a tie. They have a disadvantage in that the dealer must play according to a strict formula.

He has no options. When holding 16 or less, the dealer must take another card, and the dealer must stand (not take another card) when holding 17 or more. On the other hand, the player has the ability to *double down*, *split pairs*, and *ensure* a bet.

Without elaborating further, the rest of the story is that in 1962 MIT professor Edward O. Thorpe published his book *Beat the Dealer*, in which he detailed his analysis of the game and his subsequent success at the Nevada casinos. Thorpe's method involved a technique known as "card counting," and it's just what the name implies.

The player mentally keeps a running count of which cards have been played and places increased bets when the remaining cards in the deck give him an advantage. You probably saw Dustin Hoffman doing this in the movie *Rain Man*.

Some games, like poker, involve player skill, so training and concentration can help you out here. Particularly pay attention to some sound advice I have received: Never play poker with a guy named Slim.

But what about games involving pure chance, such as craps and roulette? If ever there was a safe bet for the house, it is roulette. The wheel has 18 black and 18 red numbers, plus slots labeled "0" and "00." In principle the ball should fall into any slot with equal probability. However, the player cannot bet "0" or "00," so the house gets an automatic advantage of 38 against the player's 36. If a player bets on red, for example, the house can win 20 different ways against the player's 18.

It goes much the same for all the other bets in roulette. Players can bet on an individual number, on odd versus even, and other combinations. I have watched players busily stacking chips in various patterns on the table time and again, apparently using a scheme of theirs that will maximize their chances of winning. Sometimes they win, and sometime they lose, but as the clock ticks by there is a steady trickle into the house's coffers.

The best mental preparation MindStake can offer at this point is the ability to accept that you have just paid several hundred dollars to watch a little ball drop into a slotted wheel.

Wait, there's more.

MindStake comes with an offer of \$50 in cash to gamble with plus free three-day, two-night stays at gambling resorts in Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Daytona, and New Orleans. The \$50 in cash is not hard to figure out. You're just getting a \$50 rebate on MindStake's \$129 price. Also, the free stay at a gambling resort is the kind of deal you can get most anywhere. If I were a casino operator, I would gladly welcome somebody who has just invested \$129 in a plan to beat the dealer.

But, how can MindStake promise to make you a winner at craps, roulette, and the like. Well, if you watch their infomercial on Channel 28 you will notice a small disclaimer: Don't get greedy. If you win, take the money and run. If you lose, don't keep throwing good money after bad. Some pretty sound advice.



References

1 <http://www.mindstake.com/>



Shame!

by John Blanton

On 16 December *The Dallas Morning News* published an editorial under the heading: “An Atheist’s Apostasy: Data won over professor; why shun it in class?”

They were, of course, referring to the recent declaration by atheist philosopher Antony Flew. Mr. Flew has said in part: “What I think the DNA material has done is show that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements together. ...The enormous complexity by which the results were achieved look to me like the work of intelligence.”¹

Well, that’s OK. Mr. Flew apparently has thought long and hard about this issue, and he is now uneasy about naturalistic explanations.

However the editorial goes on to say:

Mr. Flew may be dead wrong, but it’s refreshing to see that an academic of his stature is unafraid to let new facts change his mind. The philosopher told The Associated Press that if admirers are upset with his about-face, then “that’s too bad. My whole life has been guided by the principle of Plato’s Socrates: Follow the evidence, wherever it leads.”

If the scientific data are compelling enough to cause an atheist academic of Antony Flew’s reputation to recant much of his life’s work, why shouldn’t Texas schoolchildren be taught the controversy?²

That is what is interesting.

Antony Flew is “unafraid to let new facts change his mind.” We may wonder: What are these new facts? “If the scientific data are compelling enough ...” We may ask: What are the scientific data?

We may never learn.

The author of this editorial is Rod Dreher, and he is also the principal author of one *The News* ran on November 5, 2003. That piece was titled “The Evolution of Textbooks: Students shouldn’t be protected from dissent.” It concerned the controversy over Texas biology textbooks at the time, and it objected to excluding ideas from science teaching just because they have a religious basis. Mr. Dreher wrote, in part:

When dissenting scientists produce reliable data challenging prevailing orthodoxy on scientific terms, then respectful attention should be paid, no matter whom it pleases or discomfits. Students need reasonably complete and accurate information. They don’t need to be protected from dissenting scientific opinion.³

What seems to be missing from all this is some sort of idea of what passes for “facts,” “scientific data,” and “accurate information.” Also, what passes for “wisdom” at *The Dallas Morning News*?

It would seem to be a simple matter to discover Mr. Dreher’s thinking behind this, so I contacted him and put the question directly. In the e-mail I asked for whatever clarification he could provide:

Principally what I am interested in is the “reliable data.” Can you give us what you know about this? What convinced you there are “reliable data” challenging prevailing orthodoxies, and what are the details of those data, to the best of your knowledge. It’s OK if you don’t have the specifics. Just say so. Also, if you are just winging it, then it’s all right to tell me so. I just need something to pass on to my readers.

His response cleared up things a bit. He explained their editorial board received a briefing at the time of the biology textbook controversy last year from the Discovery Institute. I happen to know they also received a briefing from the Texas Freedom Network, so it was not all one-sided.

Anyhow, he said he was not comfortable with DI’s philosophy, and he is not an anti-Darwinist. Although he did not recall the exact details from the briefing, he thought they raised some legitimate questions “from the data.”

Well, that satisfies me on the matter. The editorial page is, after all, not the hard news section, so hard facts are really not the issue. And every newspaper must set its own standards.

Take this publication, for example. Whenever I write an opinion piece for *The North Texas Skeptic*, I research my facts, and I go back to the original sources to the extent possible. This doesn’t mean I always get it right. Right now there are pieces of my scalp hanging as souvenirs beside somebody’s sizzling typewriter. It’s one thing that keeps us honest. Let’s hope there’s a lot more of that going around. I will check the next issue of *The Dallas Morning News*. □

References

- 1 <http://www.thewonderoftheworld.com/newsrelease-flew.php>
- 2 *The Dallas Morning News*, 16 December 2004.
- 3 *The Dallas Morning News*, 5 November 2003.

What's new

By Robert Park

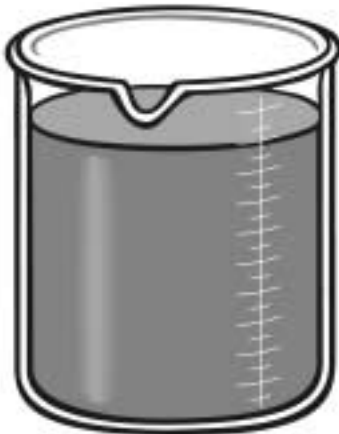
[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

SNAFLU: you read the *Wall Street Journal* for medical advice?

The Bush Administration announced Wednesday it intends to buy 1.2 million doses of flu vaccine from Germany. If you can't wait, the WSJ gave its list of options last week. FluMist was their top pick, but you gotta be under 50 to get it. I don't remember ever being under 50. After hand washing, WSJ lists Oscilloccinum. WSJ checked with a "research methodologist" at Sloan-Kettering. He said it probably doesn't prevent flu but may cut its duration by 6 hours. Six hours! They can tell that? WN bought a 6-dose carton, a three-day supply. Of what? Boiron, the maker, says it's from duck livers, but the homeopathic dilution is listed as 200C. That's gotta be a record. It's also impossible. Maybe they could help Balco with a homeopathic performance enhancer.

Colder-than-ever fusion: this book won't end the controversy.

Several cold-fusion proponents took the trouble this week to send WN the announcement of a new book, *The Rebirth of Cold*



Fusion: Real Science, Real Hope, Real Energy by Steven Krivit and Nadine Winocur. It was clearly timed to coincide with release of the DOE report. The book drew praise from Arthur C. Clarke, Brian Josephson, and Martin Fleischmann, among others. It's not in the bookstores here yet, but Amazon lists it. The authors are editors of *New Energy Times*, which calls itself "Your best source for cold fusion news and information." Krivit has a bachelor's degree in business

management, Winocur maintains a private psychotherapy practice. They've got the right qualifications.

Cold, cold fusion: so after 15 years, what has been learned?

We've learned that DOE should stop playing games with the Federal Advisory Committee Act while shrouding its review in secrecy (WN 17 Sep 04). Beyond that, we haven't learned much. The report released this week is an attempt to summarize individual comments from 18 unidentified reviewers. The conclusions at the end of the report were: 1) "significant progress has been made in sophistication of calorimeters," and 2) "conclusions reached by reviewers today are similar to those found in the 1989 review." That's it? After 15 years we've got better calorimeters? The 1989 review called for no more cold fusion research. Good advice. Proponents now prefer "low energy nuclear reactions," but "no more" is still good advice.

Prayer study: Columbia professor removes his name from paper.

We have been tracking the sordid story of the Columbia prayer study for three years (WN 05 Oct 01). It claimed that women for whom total strangers prayed were twice as likely to become pregnant from in-vitro fertilization as others; it was published in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*. At the time we were unaware of the background of the study, but knew it had to be wrong; the first assumption of science is that events result from natural causes. The lead author, Rugerio Lobo, who at the time was Chair of Obstetrics, now says he had no role in the study. The author who set up the study is doing five years for fraud in a separate case, and his partner hanged himself in jail. Another author left Columbia and isn't talking. The *Journal* has never acknowledged any responsibility, and after withdrawing the paper for "scrutiny," has put it back on the web. Nor has the *Journal* published letters critical of the study. Columbia has never acknowledged any responsibility. All of this has come out due to the persistence of Bruce Flamm, MD. The science community should flatly refuse all proposals or papers that invoke any supernatural explanation for physical phenomena.

Cold, cold fusion: and the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

Sunday's *Washington Post Magazine* had an article about a secret review of cold fusion (WN 17 Sep 04). A panel of scientists selected by DOE allegedly met with a small group of cold-fusion believers. No announcement, no reporters, no names of attendees. Panel members were instructed to comment individually to circumvent the Advisory Committee Act. If it was actually of any importance it would be truly outrageous.

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

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2005.
Free, non-commercial reuse permitted



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)

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

The North Texas Skeptics is a 501 (c) (3) corporation chartered in Texas. It is run by the people who show up for the January meeting. If you want to actively participate, come out to the meeting. Full members of the NTS will be allowed to vote in the board election and to serve in one of the appointed positions. If you cannot attend, please submit your proxy vote and even nominate yourself. Send proxies and nominations by postal mail or by e-mail (skeptic@ntskeptics.org). These have to be received by Saturday morning, 8 January.

No other activity is scheduled for this meeting, but there will be the usual refreshments and skeptical discussions.

NTS Social Dinner

Saturday, 22 January at
7 p.m.— Good Eats Grill
(214) 691-3287
6950 Greenville Ave
Dallas, TX 75206

Let us know if you are coming. Send e-mail to mseby@ntskeptics.org, or phone 214-335-9248. We sometimes cancel these events or even change the location at the last minute.

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of

such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues.

The Skeptical Inquirer is published bimonthly by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Subscriptions should be addressed to

SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226-0703. Or call toll-free 1-800-634-1610. Subscription prices: one year (six issues), \$35; two years, \$60; three years, \$84. You may also visit the CSICOP Web site at <http://www.csicop.org> for more information.

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

FIRST CLASS

Address Correction Requested

Application for Membership

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
E-Mail address _____
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

Newsletter recipient: No membership privileges. Annual subscription rate \$15.00

Receive a \$5 discount on either of the two newsletter subscription levels above by choosing to receive your newsletter by e-mail only.

Introduce a friend to *The North Texas Skeptic*: Let us send a **FREE** three-month gift subscription of *The Skeptic* to this individual (or institution).

Enclosed is a tax-deductible donation to The North Texas Skeptics in the amount of \$ _____.

Bill me: Please bill me for the choices I have made above.