



The North Texas

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Ginny

by John Blanton

I was sitting at a table in a nice sandwich restaurant in Dallas. Across from me were two of my favorite people. One was writer, magician and master skeptic James Randi. The other was Virginia (Ginny) Barnett. I took this photo.

We met Ginny Vaughn early on in the life of the North Texas Skeptics, and a truer friend of science and intellectual honesty you will hardly find. In 1995, while I was out of town spending your tax dollars, Ginny helped organize the resistance against the Plano School District's plan to introduce a creationist book into the curriculum.

Ginny came up with a badge for protestors to wear. The design showed a cute little panda bear with a line through the drawing. No pandas. Creationists on the Board were seeking to use the creationist text "Of Pandas and People" produced by a local religious organization, The Foundation for Thought and Ethics. We did not know at the time that ten years later the book was to feature so prominently in a landmark trial involving creationism in Pennsylvania. But on this night, when the creationists on the Board looked out at the hostile audience that came to hear their excuses, they saw a sea of badges with little (no) pandas. The creationists wilted in the glare of public scrutiny, and Ginny was my hero of the day.

Ginny served various functions for the NTS, including a year as our president. In 2000 she married Danny Barnett, and they had ten years together.

Ginny died in May of this year. I do not know the exact cause, but she had been in failing health for many years. Danny said she died in her sleep. We are all the worse off.



James Randi and Ginny Barnett at La Madeleine in 2002

Photo by John Blanton

EVENTS CALENDAR

June program

Saturday, 19 June at 2 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Free Energy

Did Stanley Meyer create a way to extract free energy from water? Was his death in 1998 part of a scheme by the oil companies to stifle competition?

Get real. Get the straight scoop at the June meeting.

NTS board meeting and social dinner

Saturday 26 June 2010,
at 7 p.m.

Vapiano International
5319 East Mockingbird Lane
Dallas, TX 75206

If you plan to attend, please call. We sometimes cancel or change these events.

214-335-9248

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L' Affaire Coppedge

by John Blanton

I will start with the standard disclaimer, which goes something like this: "I'm no lawyer, but..."

We have previously covered the Sternberg Affair and the Gonzalez Affair, both covered in director Nathan Frankowski's 2008 video *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*.

Richard Sternberg previously was editor of the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, and in this capacity he authorized publication of a paper advocating Intelligent Design. The paper was submitted by Stephen C. Meyer, a fellow of the Discovery Institute and director of its Center for Science and Culture (CSC). The CSC is the major organization advocating Intelligent Design in the United States.

Subsequently Sternberg was no longer the journal's editor, and his work at the Smithsonian Institution was hampered. He had to give up the keys to his office and was relocated to a less desirable work space at the Institution. Also, his access to the Institution's collections was restricted.

That's what we get from the Discovery Institute. The complete story is more interesting.¹

Guillermo Gonzalez was a rising star doing postdoctoral work in astronomy at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Washington. However, as an assistant professor of physics and astronomy at Iowa State University he was denied tenure, meaning his position had a limited shelf life.

The Discovery Institute would have us believe Gonzalez was "expelled" for his religious views (favoring Intelligent Design). Again, the complete story is more interesting.²

Now we come to the Coppedge Affair.

David Coppedge held a prestigious position ... I will just let the Discovery Institute tell it:³

He is a top-level computer specialist on the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's Cassini mission to Saturn whose supervisors demoted and humiliated him for raising scientific issues about intelligent design. Last week he sued in the Superior Court of the State of California, complaining of religious discrimination, harassment, and wrongful demotion. Sounds like a news story, doesn't it?

Intelligent design isn't religion, but Coppedge's supervisor, Gregory Chin, harangued him for "pushing religion" after Coppedge merely offered apparently interested colleagues DVDs of two documentaries on ID, *Privileged Planet* and *Unlocking the Mystery of Life*. Coppedge had every reason to think the films related to his work at JPL. Part of Caltech and operated under a contract with NASA, JPL has a longstanding program called Origins that seeks information on the origin of life on earth and hypothetically on other planets. Neither film includes religious statements or references. In fact, *Privileged Planet* explores cosmological issues illustrated by interviews with scientists at NASA and JPL. But since supervisor Chin called this "religion," and since religious speech is legally protected, Coppedge seeks redress for religious discrimination. If Chin had made no mention of religion but harassed and demoted Coppedge simply for raising doubts about Darwinian evolution, as *Unlocking the Mystery of Life* does, that would also violate free-speech protections.

The Becker Law Firm of Los Angeles is representing Coppedge in his suit against JPL and various named and unnamed employees of JPL. The complaint was filed on April 14 and includes the following claims:

- Religious discrimination and retaliation in violation of Government Code § 12940 et seq.
- Harassment in violation of government code § 12940 et seq.
- Wrongful demotion in violation of Government Code § 12940 et seq.
- Wrongful demotion in violation of public policy
- Declaratory relief
- Injunctive relief

A critical section of the complaint provides this information:⁴

7. Plaintiff, an information technology ("IT") specialist, was charged with violating his employer's anti-harassment and ethics policies by promoting his religious views while discussing with co-workers a scientific theory of life's origins known as Intelligent Design ("ID"). Plaintiff was told that his discussions with co-workers concerning ID and his distribution of the documentary films on DVD entitled "Unlocking the Mystery of Life" and "The Privileged Planet" amounted to "pushing religion" and were "unwelcome" and "disruptive." Although no

one had previously said these things to him, his supervisors informed him that "a lot of people had been overly nice to you just to move on when you presented the ideas."

8. Plaintiff was ordered not to discuss ID, religion or politics under threat of termination, and though he complied with the unfair order he was nevertheless stripped of his section team leadership position and reassigned to a job position with less responsibility and fewer privileges, embarrassing, degrading and humiliating him. To date, he remains constrained in his ability to express his views on ID, religion and politics and has been kept a prisoner of JPL's systemic ideological culture. He has been stigmatized in such a way that career advancement opportunities have been foreclosed to him, and he survives each working day under a cloud of suspicion and a threat of termination should he say anything with which someone might take offense.

What is not mentioned in all of this includes:

- David Coppedge is a creationist and is also the son of the famous creationist James Coppedge.
- David Coppedge is on the board of Illustra Media, the company that produces the *Privileged Planet* and *Unlocking the Mysteries of Life* videos.
- David Coppedge is listed as the person of contact and founder of Creation Safaris. From their Web site:⁵

Just as it is one thing to know about God and quite another to know God, it is one thing to know about the creation and another, thrilling thing to know the creation. If your Christian life has become stale armchair intellectualism and needs a boost, I have an excellent idea. Go on a Creation Safari!

- Also, I note the CSC claims Intelligent Design is not religiously motivated, but Coppedge is claiming religious discrimination.

Call me cynical if you wish, but it would appear that Frankowski brought out his *Expelled* two years too early. Of course there is always the opening for a sequel that would include L' Affaire Coppedge.

Enough fun at the expense of the creationists. I am not making any judgments regarding the legitimacy of Coppedge's complaint, however, a coarse legal analysis (see the disclaimer above) is helpful.

All we hear about the Coppedge Affair is from the creationists and their law firm. Obviously, the creationists are making the most of this.

JPL, as is customary in these cases, is not saying anything. On the legal stage, JPL is the big guy and Coppedge is the little guy. In this case JPL will be seen as having the superior position and the financial ability to crush their competition, so they must avoid every opportunity to appear to do so. If the case goes to trial, and the plaintiff can demonstrate that JPL used its financial clout to influence a jury pool, then that would work against JPL.

At the very least, this may have been a problem of JPL's own making. A big organization like JPL will also have a big human resources department with strict rules in place at the advice of expensive lawyers. These rules will describe in detail the due process to follow when there is friction between labor and management or between employees. Maybe a little too strict. Take this scenario:

Somebody feels Coppedge is being a little too pushy about his creationist videos and complains. From that point due process must be followed. There is no room for common sense. This train is headed for a wreck.

In a less organized shop a supervisor might be having a cup with Coppedge, and he could mention, casually, of course, "Dave, some of the guys may find these creationist videos of yours a bit creepy. Make sure people are cool with the topic before you get up on a soap box. By the way, that load balancing report was just what I needed."

Anyhow, that's why I develop computer code for a living rather than manage those who do.

The title of this article is no accident. The allusion is to the notorious Dreyfus Affair about 100 years ago. In this case a French Army officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was falsely accused and convicted of treason. The fact that he was a Jew made him particularly vulnerable. The whole affair blew up when the real facts became known, and L'Affaire Dreyfus stands today for any case of an innocent person subjected to wrongful persecution.

The creationists do not reference the Dreyfus Affair in their *Expelled* stories. That is my doing. They take instances of fellow creationists running up against public scorn and otherwise normal organizational mechanics and inflate these cases to the breaking point. They would welcome any confusion between these cases and the Dreyfus Affair. The facts do not support such comparison.

When the creationists say Sternberg had to give up his office keys, they do not mention he was given a security card to use instead. When they tell us that Gonzalez was denied tenure, they do not mention that his research productivity fell off considerably after he went to Iowa State, and his fellow researchers decided to reserve the limited tenure slot for someone who showed more promise.

Creationists don't do any scientific research related to Intelligent Design. What they *are* good at is propaganda, and whenever anything like the Coppedge affair comes up they go into overdrive to get the maximum mileage. At the North Texas Skeptics we go into overdrive to obtain the most amusement from these antics.



References

1. <http://www.expelledexposed.com/index.php/the-truth/sternberg>
2. <http://www.expelledexposed.com/index.php/the-truth/gonzalez>
3. http://www.evolutionnews.org/2010/04/what_happened_to_david_coppedg.html
4. http://ntskeptics.org/creationism/Coppedge/Complaint_with_stamp.pdf
5. <http://creationsafaris.com/whycsf.htm>

Paul Kurtz resigns

We received the following announcement that Paul Kurtz has resigned from the board of directors of the Center for Inquiry.

It was in 1976 that Kurtz, along with Martin Gardner, James Randi and notable others decided the world needed a voice to counter claims of the paranormal and other silly stuff. Along with the death of Martin Gardner in the same week, this marks a great loss from the ranks of the old leadership of the skeptical movement:

Amherst, N.Y. (May 18, 2010)—The Board of Directors of the Center for Inquiry, the world's leading and largest organization promoting humanism and skepticism, issued the following statement today: The board will accept Dr. Paul Kurtz's resignation as chairman emeritus and as a member of the board:

The board sincerely thanks Paul Kurtz for his decades of service to the Center for Inquiry and its affiliates. The board deeply respects Dr. Kurtz and his work and knows that this organization will always be associated with his efforts on its behalf. Dr. Kurtz founded and led our organization and helped it thrive. Much of CFI's success is due to Paul Kurtz's inspiration and leadership.

Our success is also due in no small part to the efforts of CFI's dedicated staff, its many skilled volunteers, and its generous financial supporters. CFI has never been a one-person operation.

At Paul Kurtz's behest, CFI began years ago to organize a leadership transition. Moreover, in recent years the board had concerns about Dr. Kurtz's day-to-day management of the organization. In June 2008, the board appointed Dr. Ronald A. Lindsay president and CEO; in June 2009, the board elected Richard Schroeder chairman, with Dr. Kurtz moving to chairman emeritus. During this two-year transition, CFI continued to hold a rigorous schedule of more than 110 national and international events, to develop its grassroots network, and to advocate effectively for humanism and skepticism.

As a result of this transition, CFI is well-prepared to move forward into the next phase of its institutional life, confident that the organization will remain at the forefront of secular humanism and skepticism.



MIOS revisited

by John Blanton

Oops!

In April I did a round up on MIOS, the Metroplex Institute of Origin Science. In this item I prematurely hinted I may have been dropped from their mailing.

Not so fast. I received this:

Dr. Jobe Martin presents on April 6, 2010:

“Where We Are in the Fight for the Biblical Truth of Creation”

Although great strides have been made for Creation teaching around the world, it is not encouraging to see the continued defiance of Biblical Truth, even in, if not especially in, the Church and Christian community. Hosea 4:6 states that we are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Psalm 78 tells us to pass on truth to our children. The truth of Genesis 1-11 is critical and crucial to impart to our children and yet we are not succeeding in great degree based on what we see in so many churches, Christian schools and colleges as we travel. We praise God for the inroads that have been made through so many Creation organizations and a rising awareness of this issue, but we also see the enemy blinding the eyes of not only the unbelieving, but the believing. We must continue to

contend for the faith and always be ready to make a defense, to give an account, of the hope that is within us (I Pet. 3:15). Dr. Martin will give some continuing statistics and quotes and information regarding how the battle continues to rage and our need to be faithful and diligent to the end as soldiers of Christ.

It's good to see they still have their sights on scientific evidence for creation.



Martin Gardner

Being semi-retired and enjoying some welcome free time, I am spending some wonderful moments reading books from my skeptical collection. A particular pleasure has always been *Science Good, Bad and Bogus* by Martin Gardner.

For years Martin wrote the Mathematical Recreations column for *Scientific American*, and it was here I came to a startling discovery. In one of his *Scientific American* articles Martin made the point that the closer we look at ESP and other psychic phenomena, the weaker becomes the evidence.

I had previously lent some credibility to various claims of the paranormal, so this was a revelation to me. I blush to recall the age at which my eyes became open. I am generally clueless about a lot of stuff, but one thing I have always been sure of is this: If you examine the evidence more closely, and it vanishes under your scrutiny, then there is something wrong with the evidence. A skeptic was reborn.

In 1976 Martin Gardner, along with Paul Kurtz, James Randi, Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, Philip J. Klass other notable skeptics founded the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). Eventually support appeared in the form of local and regional skeptical groups. One such was The North Texas Skeptics.

Martin Gardner also wrote *Fads & Fallacies in the Name of Science*. Eventually his output reached fifty titles. All are recommended.

Martin Gardner was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1914 and obtained a B.S. in philosophy from the University of Chicago. He died this May in Norman, Oklahoma.



John Blanton

What's new

by Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.bobpark.org>. Following are some clippings of interest. This month's issue seems to be mostly about cell phone radiation.]

Cell phones: five billion are in use around the world.

In spite of unsubstantiated reports that cell phone radiation increases the risk of brain cancer, sales soared in the first decade of the 3rd Millennium. Cell phones became a \$1 trillion business. There was no corresponding increase in brain cancer, but perhaps there is a long latency period. Cancer victims have no way of knowing what caused their cancer, but the media had made their cell phones the suspect. The clear scientific conclusion that cell phone radiation could not be the cause, <http://jncli.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/93/3/166>, went largely unreported. In short, microwave photons do not have enough energy to create a mutant strand of DNA. That can't happen until you get to the blue limit of the visible spectrum. In the interest of full disclosure, let me state that although I own a cell phone I don't normally carry it, and can't even remember my number. I find cell phones to be rude and intrusive. My wife insists I carry it when I travel so I can dial 911 in an emergency. That's OK.

COSMOS: the Cohort Study on Mobile Communications.

Yesterday, the cell-phone controversy was taken to a new and substantially lower level. The Cohort Study on Mobile Communications (COSMOS) was launched in the UK to determine whether microwave radiation from wireless devices can induce cancer. It will track 250,000 users for 30 years to catch any slow growing cancers. Note the built-in job protection. The study will look for neurological diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's as well. Participants aged 18-69 are being recruited in Britain, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark. In Britain, COSMOS is inviting 2.4 million cell phone users to take part, and hoping 100,000 or so will accept. If they do the study really well, it will confirm Albert Einsteins 1905 explanation of the photoelectric effect, for which he was awarded the 1921 Nobel Prize. Of course, the photoelectric effect is confirmed thousands of times annually by students in elementary physics lab courses. If it is done badly, this tedious and

expensive study could perpetuate the publics unfounded fear of radiation below the ultraviolet threshold. This must be stopped.

Cell phones: trust me, it's not cumulative.

I read another article this week in which a physician warns that the risk for each use is minimal, "but over the years repeated exposure could produce genetic damage leading to cancer." I've been trying for years to throw a rock across the Potomac River. So far, they don't go half way, but I'll keep trying in case its cumulative.

Apocrypha: Science Board hides American ignorance.

The National Science Board, established by Congress as a national science policy body, oversees NSF and provides independent science policy advice to the President and Congress. It issues a huge biennial report, Science and Engineering Indicators, which is a compendium of quantitative data on the science enterprise around the world. The results are disturbing. In their understanding of science, polls found, most Americans are falling behind, even though much of the progress was made by American scientists and engineers. Congress needs to hear these facts. Instead, poll questions dealing with the origin of the universe and evolution were simply excised from the report. The board member who took the lead in removing the text was John T. Bruer, a philosopher with close ties to the Vatican. I hope that Science will publish the apocryphal text so we may judge its relevance for ourselves.

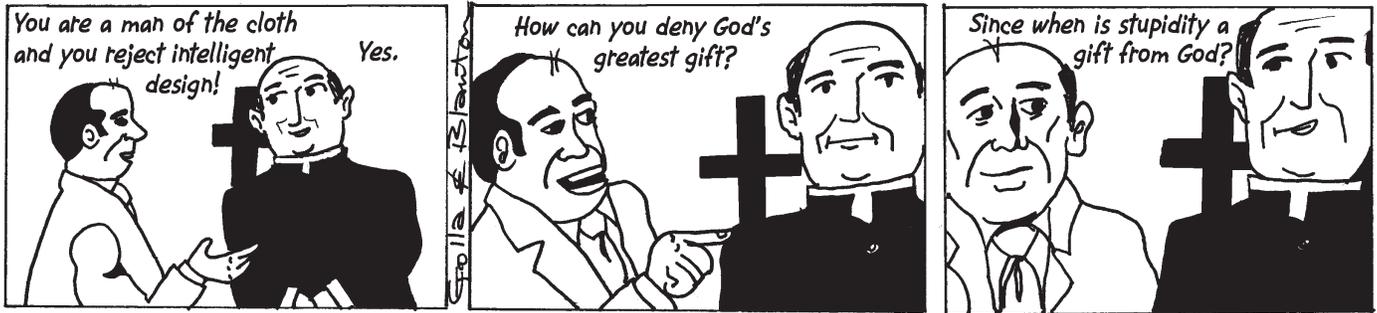
Cell phones: cancer in Maine is mainly in the brain.

The Maine House of Representatives has voted to reject a law that would require cell phone makers to affix labels warning consumers of possible brain cancer risk due to electromagnetic radiation. There is no credible evidence whatever of a link between cell phone radiation and cancer. It is not clear why some people are so anxious to believe there is.

Mars Rover: the oldest colonist on the red planet.

Opportunity arrived on Mars 25 Jan 04. In the 6 Earth-years since, Opportunity has never once complained about the cold nights, and it lives on sunshine. It has now operated on Mars longer than the 1976 Viking 1 lander, which ceased transmission in November of 1982. Meanwhile, Spirit, Opportunity's twin, is stuck in a sand trap. Not a lot happens on Mars for a stationary observer to report on, so Opportunity is trekking to a large crater. It should be there in a couple of years. Long before an astronaut could get there.

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Science: born on this day 2595 years ago.

Not everyone agreed with the designation May 28 as the birthday of science. It marks the day that Thales of Miletus is alleged to have predicted a solar eclipse. One reader thought the discovery of fire would be a better choice, but of course we don't know when that happened or who did it. Cause and effect on the other hand applies to all science. We can begin with any phenomenon and in principle trace its cause and the cause of its cause backward through time to the merger of all such tracks at the Big Bang, beyond which presumably no tracks remain. We are trying to re-create the last footprints with the LHC. We need a beginning that applies to all of science. Causality does that.

Gusher: environmental impact is elevated to a "catastrophe."

The President went on television yesterday to assure everyone that he's in charge. At this point no one is contesting him for the honor. After top kill failed, BP tried "junk shot", the last arrow in their quiver. Same result. BP then resumed "top kill." It looks better to be seen doing something, even if it doesn't work.

Hurricanes too? more bad news for the gulf coast.

In the Wall Street Journal this morning, Jennifer Levitz wrote, "The coming Atlantic hurricane season could be the busiest on record, with the possibility of the next six months bringing nearly as many hurricanes as in 2005, when Hurricane Katrina pummeled the Gulf Coast, federal forecasters said Thursday." Or maybe not; without some sort of probability assessment no information is conveyed.

Antimatter: now available on-demand.

Lots of anti-particles are seen in cosmic rays and in particle accelerators, but what about anti-atoms? A CERN collaboration named Athena announced this week that it has created perhaps 50,000 antihydrogen atoms, but it's pretty hard to build up an inventory. Antimatter is a staple in the science fiction world where it is often used to power spaceships. Its production in the laboratory is a major scientific milestone. Athena beat a CERN collaboration known as Atrap to the goal. Why there is so little antimatter in the universe remains a great mystery. Theory requires that matter be created as particle-antiparticle pairs. Scientists will be looking for any symmetry-breaking difference with ordinary hydrogen.

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

Future Meeting Dates

- 19 June (NTS program meeting)
- 26 June (NTS social dinner at Vapiano International)
- 17 July (NTS program meeting)
- 24 July (NTS social dinner)
- 21 August (NTS program meeting)
- 28 August (NTS social dinner)
- 18 September (NTS program meeting)
- 25 September (NTS social dinner)
- 16 October (NTS program meeting)
- 23 October (NTS social dinner)
- 13 November (NTS program meeting)
- 20 November (NTS social dinner)

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