



# *The North Texas*

# Skeptic

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## The ICR is coming to town

by John Blanton

**H**ow come we did not see this one coming? How clueless can you get?

It took a headline from *The New York Times*:<sup>1</sup>

HOUSTON — A Texas higher education panel has recommended allowing a Bible-based group called the Institute for Creation Research to offer on-line master's degrees in science education.

The action comes weeks after the Texas Education Agency's director of science, Christine Castillo Comer, lost her job after superiors accused her of displaying bias against creationism and failing to be "neutral" over the teaching of evolution.

That was news. The last we heard the ICR was out in

Santee, California. Did we miss something?

We have followed the doings of the ICR for over 20 years, and it's been a fun ride. If you want to see creationism in its purest form, here it is. You want to embrace the golden calf? Ankle, and thigh, and upper half? Here it is – I mean here it is.<sup>2</sup>



At the ICR in 1995. The facility in Santee, CA, was a wonderful tribute to a creationist view of science. So why am I smiling?

Photo by Barbara Neuser

Creationist Henry M. Morris, Ph.D., formed the ICR as an offshoot from the Creation Science Research Center in 1972. Their principal entity previously was the Museum of Creation and Earth History in Santee. The museum featured dioramas recreating the story of Genesis and especially the flood of Noah. An upper level school was in the same building, and here students of a creationist bent were expected to achieve college-level training in science that conformed to Biblical teachings.

The ability of the ICR school to offer college-level degrees was initially approved by

California, but subsequently there was a back and forth tussle that resulted in a lawsuit, in which the ICR prevailed and was awarded monetary damages. Ultimately the ICR was given a

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At the ICR in 1995. NTS treasurer Barbara Neuser points out a diorama depicting a Garden of Eden world.

Photo by John Blanton

religious exemption from California's post-secondary school requirements.<sup>3</sup>

Founder Henry Morris died in 2006, and in 2007 the decision was made to relocate to Dallas because of its more central location and because Dallas offered logistical and demographic benefits. Ironically, Dr. Morris was a native of Dallas.

The move to Texas has meant starting the accreditation process over, meeting stiffer resistance in Texas (surprise). So far, Texas education officials have denied the ICR recognition of its degree program by a slim vote margin. The tussle continues.

We were out to San Diego in 1995 and did not pass up the opportunity to visit this shrine to creationism. There we were treated to a free tour of the museum and its legendary depictions of creation science. It was worth the drive.

Recently my work has taken me back to the West Coast, and last year I stopped by for a return visit. The ICR had already vacated the old premises, and a woman in charge explained the wrought iron fencing being installed. The people who had acquired the facility, she told us, intended on doing some highly sensitive research. OK.

Back in Dallas I took a drive down to the newest ICR digs at the intersection of Luna Road and Royal Lane. Not so friendly a reception this time.

On the day I arrived the front door was locked, and my inquiry at the door brought forth a woman who seemed to be in charge.



The ICR in 2009

What a difference 14 years make. I have gotten older, but the ICR has stayed rock steady.

Photo by Barbara Neuser

The facility was not open to the public, she said. Yes, a museum is planned, and also yes, the remaining ICR team has made the move. John Morris, Ph.D., son of founder Henry Morris, heads up the Dallas office. Also on board is Henry Morris III, (also) son of the founder. He joined as Executive Vice President for Strategic Ministries. And, yes, I was informed, the notable authority on modern floods Steven A. Austin, Ph.D. Skeptics, it doesn't get much better than this.

Master debater for creationism, Duane Gish, Ph.D., is now Senior Vice-President Emeritus, which means he might be effectively retired.



Back in Dallas, I found the new ICR digs located conveniently on Royal Lane at Luna Road. As you can see, the new ICR is devoted to real science.

Photo by John Blanton

You don't have to rely solely on the NTS for information. The ICR has a great Web site and a free publication, *Acts and Facts*. When the museum is open we will be quick to bring you the news.<sup>4</sup>

Anyhow, I promise in the future to stay much better on top of things. If we work at it we might even get the Flat Earth Society to relocate, as well.



### References

- 1 *The New York Times*, 19 December 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/19/education/19texas.html>
- 2 With apologies to Alan Jay Lerner and André Previn
- 3 Wikipedia has the full story at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute\\_for\\_Creation\\_Research](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_for_Creation_Research)
- 4 The ICR Web site is at <http://www.icr.org/>.

## February program

by John Blanton

The February program was about pathological science. This is a rehash of something we did back in March 1990. Furthermore, there have been new developments since, not the least of which is the matter of cold fusion. Here is a summary:

In 1990 we touched on Nobel Chemist Irving Langmuir and his encounters with pathological science. Briefly, Langmuir provided these critical indicators of pathological science:

- ① The maximum effect that is observed is produced by a causative agent of barely detectable intensity, and the magnitude of the effect is substantially independent of the intensity of the cause.
- ② The effect is of a magnitude that remains close to the limit of detectability, or many measurements are necessary because of the very low statistical significance of the results.
- ③ There are claims of great accuracy.

- ④ Fantastic theories contrary to experience are suggested.
- ⑤ Criticisms are met by *ad hoc* excuses thought up on the spur of the moment.
- ⑥ The ratio of supporters to critics rises up to somewhere near 50% and then falls gradually to oblivion.

An example Langmuir gave was the Davis-Barnes effect.

Bergen Davis and Arthur Barnes were researchers at Columbia University, and they brought the story of their discovery to General Electric's research center in Schenectady, New York. Figure 1 describes the experiment.

A polonium alpha particle source on the left provided a supply of positively-charged particles, some of which traveled down the tube to the right in the order of 10,000 miles per second. An electron emitter in the center of the apparatus provided negatively-charged electrons, which were propelled to the right by means of an electric field.

By adjusting the voltage across the field it was possible to get the electrons moving at the same speed as the alpha particles, and the two would combine to produce neutrally-charged (or less positively charged) helium atoms. A magnetic field at the right end of the apparatus deflected charged particles. Uncharged particles struck the zinc sulfide screen at the end of the tube, producing a small flash of light that could be observed. Charged particles were deflected downward to strike the lower screen, where flashes could also be observed. The experimenters claimed great accuracy at adjusting the voltage and counting the flashes in a darkened room. They claimed to be able to accurately measure count rates (counts per minute) and to thus obtain very precise results.

Langmuir observed the experimental process and concluded the two scientists were unconsciously fudging their results. First of all, the experimenters seemed to unconsciously adjust

the count time to obtain the expected count rate. Also it seemed implausible the claims for accurately regulating the voltage could be met with the equipment being used. Langmuir blinded the process by hiding the voltage regulation process from the observers. Under these conditions the experimenters were never again able to obtain measurements (count rates) that corresponded with the applied voltage.

After Langmuir alerted the scientific community and after others failed to replicate the results the Davis-Barnes Effect died a quick death, but not before the researchers had published in a scientific journal.

Time passed. Sixty years later two researchers at the University of Utah claimed to have produced cold fusion of hydrogen using palladium rods. Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons knew that palladium has the ability to absorb hydrogen in great concentrations.

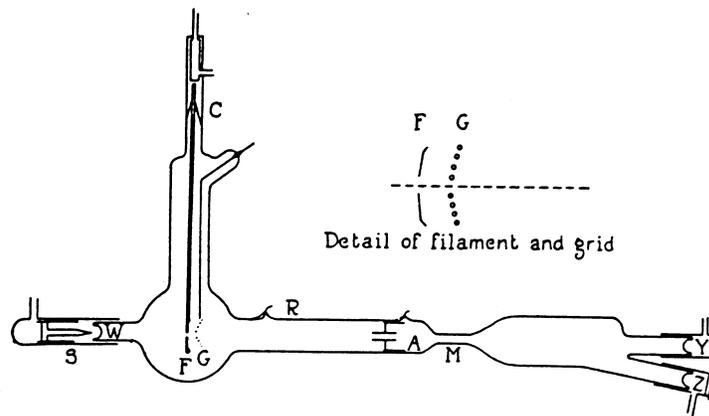
They figured that concentrating hydrogen in this manner would enhance the fusion of hydrogen nuclei, which ordinarily do not want to get close to each other because they are positively charged.

Their early experiments seemed to produce excess heat, more heat flowing out than could be accounted for by any chemical reactions involved and by any energy supplied to the experiment. They also observed neutrons and tritium, which would likely be products of hydrogen fusion.

The University administration jumped on these results and announced the discovery before any scientific paper had been published.

The economical implications and the value of potential patents were tremendous. Experimenters at Brigham Young University had been following the work of Fleischmann and Pons, and they, too, announced positive results.

The problem was that the results flew in the face of physical reality. For example, the amount of heat produced should have produced lethal doses of neutrons, but the experimenters were still alive. Also, other experimenters failed to replicate the claimed results.



**Figure 1. Sketch of the Barnes-Davis experimental apparatus.** Electrons and alpha particles traveled left to right and were counted by observing flashes on the zinc sulfide screens on the right end.

*Physics Today*, October 1989, p.39

While the Barnes-Davis effect died quickly and peacefully, cold fusion lives on in accordance with Langmuir's number six indicator of pathological science. An obvious reason for cold fusion's life after death experience is the economic lure. In the years following the first cold fusion announcement serious industrial concerns were still contributing millions of dollars to cold fusion research.

Langmuir's story also recapitulated the N-ray episode.

René Blondlot was a respected scientist at the University of Nancy in France. In a case similar to the experience with Davis and Barnes the supposed N-rays were detected by gazing at a calcium sulfide screen in near darkness to detect the barely visible effects of the rays.

Robert Wood was a visiting American physicist, and while he observed a demonstration of N-rays in Blondlot's laboratory he removed an essential aluminum prism from the apparatus. The researchers continued to observe amazingly accurate results without this essential part, and N-ray science collapsed rapidly after Wood published his observations in *Nature*.

Absence of a skeptical approach has been associated with all these examples of pathological science. Often in instances of pathological science researchers take ownership of the concept they are studying and only seek evidence that reinforces their expectations. In all cases more skeptical scientists have come forward to put real science back into the picture.



### Future Meeting Dates

- 20 March 2010 (NTS program meeting)
- 27 March 2010 (board meeting and social dinner)
- 17 April 2010 (NTS program meeting)
- 24 April 2010 (board meeting and social dinner)
- 15 May (NTS program meeting)
- 19 June (NTS program meeting)
- 17 July (NTS program meeting)
- 21 August (NTS program meeting)
- 18 September (NTS program meeting)
- 16 October (NTS program meeting)
- 13 November (NTS program meeting)

## 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.]

### **Naturally: alternative medicine is in the health reform bill.**

Sen. Tom Harkin, the Iowa Democrat also known as Senator Bee Pollen, could not let the Health Reform Bill go through without a provision mandating that insurers reimburse alternative medicine providers. It was Harkin, you will recall, who was responsible for creation of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), forcing Harold Varmus to resign as head of NIH. NCCAM hasn't found any cures, but it has done a credible job of using rigorous placebo-controlled double-blind studies to demonstrate that one herbal remedy after another is totally ineffective. Presumably the alternative medicine providers will be reimbursed for applying the placebo effect.

### **Warning! cell phones are found to emit bullshit.**

From San Francisco to Maine there is a campaign to require cancer warning labels on cell phones. Fact: cell phone radiation doesn't cause cancer. Cancer agents break chemical bonds, creating mutant strands of DNA. Microwave photons cannot break chemical bonds. This is not debatable. In 1989, Paul Brodeur, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, claimed in a series of sensational articles that electromagnetic fields from power lines cause childhood leukemia <http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN89/wn082589.html>. Brodeur, however, understood none of this and when virtually every scientist agreed that it was impossible, Brodeur took their unanimity as proof of a massive cover-up. Other anti-science know-nothings followed Brodeur's lead, shifting their attack to cell phone radiation. Cell phones have since spread to almost the entire population, but with no corresponding increase in brain cancer. Case closed.

### **Voodoo: violations of the laws of thermodynamics.**

Several times a year there are announcements of inventors obtaining free energy. Occasionally they succeed in patenting their idea. Unfortunately, even a patent will not make the idea work. Patent number 6,938,422 seems to be such a case. What is claimed seems to be that electric power can be generated using ambient energy extracted from the working fluid. If that's so

the second law of thermodynamics would not be a law would it? We'll keep working on it.

### **Warnings: Maine legislature agrees to take up cell-phone warning labels.**

State Rep. Andrea Boland (D) is pushing for the state to become the first to require cell phone makers to put warnings on packaging like those on cigarettes. The bill was filed in October but is on a fast track. It's considered emergency legislation because there are 900,000 cell phones in the state. Rep. Bolden's concern was based on a 2006 study in Sweden showing a correlation between brain tumors and heavy cell phone use. However, a Danish study that came out in December found that the rates of brain cancer in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden had remained stable from 1974 to 2003. Such studies are possible in Scandinavia where record-keeping is an obsession. If the effect is real, the frequency of brain cancers should have turned up sharply in 2000. An estimated 277 million people use cell phones in the US. I doubt if such a label would reduce that number significantly. Scientific truth becomes something to be negotiated.

### **Earthquack: Pat Robertson explains the Haiti disaster.**

With the death toll in Haiti now estimated at about 50,000, the evangelist broadcaster explained to "The 700 Club" what it all meant. In colonial times, he said, Haiti cut a deal with the devil to get rid of the French — and has been cursed ever since. According to a BBC news report White House spokesman Robert Gibbs characterized Robertson's remarks as "stupid." There was in fact a lot of "stupid" going around this week.

### **CIA: how many spies has the polygraph exposed?**

According to a CBS News account of the suicide bombing at a CIA base in Afghanistan, "The double agent was brought onto the base without first being given a polygraph test, one of the basic tools in establishing a spy's trustworthiness." Really? Aldrich Ames, the master Soviet spy who was a high-ranking CIA analyst, routinely passed polygraph exams, even as he passed information to the Soviets. Nor did the polygraph expose Larry Wu-Tai Chin a Chinese language translator working for the CIA who sold information to China, or Robert Hanssen of the FBI. In fact, not a single spy has been caught by a polygraph screening exam. In 2003 the National Academy of Science issued a report, "The Polygraph and Lie Detection," that found the majority of polygraph research to be unreliable, unscientific and biased. The high rate of false positives was considered unacceptable. I have argued, however, that the small number of true positives is the real problem. I propose replacing the polygraph with a coin toss. That would identify 50 percent of the double agents compared to zero with the polygraph. The unfor-

tunate increase in false positives constitutes collateral damage, which is inevitable in war.

### **Baby Gabriel: the reality of lie detection in popular culture.**

A prospective adoptive-couple have been named as "persons of interest" in the disappearance of an eight-month old baby in Arizona (Gabriel). The couple appeared on television early this week demanding a polygraph test to "determine absolutely whether we are telling the truth." The next day the polygraph examiners announced the result: "inconclusive." The public perception is that the polygraph is a scientific device that distinctively signals a lie. This is abetted by the media which rarely mentions the strong scientific objections to the polygraph. Devices claimed to be lie detectors are even used in television game shows (Fox of course). In fact, the polygraph looks for spikes in blood pressure, heart rate, respiration and perspiration. In other words, you can't tell a lie from the sex act.

### **Fraud: why not give this businessman a polygraph exam?**

We reported last fall that a British company, ATSC, sold Iraq security forces 1500 fraudulent bomb detectors for \$85 million <http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN09/wn110609.html>. The head of the company has now been arrested on suspicion of fraud. As WN pointed out, the device is simply a telescoping antenna mounted on a swivel held by pistol grip. A slight movement of the handle will cause the antenna to swivel to its lowest point. It works like a dousing rod pointing anywhere the operator wishes. Law enforcement officers love them because it gives them an excuse to search anyone who looks suspicious. A scientific device that no one understands serves as protection against the charge of profiling.

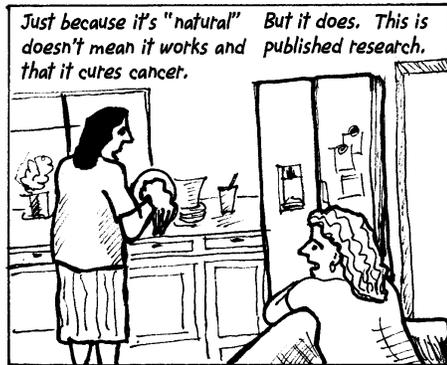
### **Cell phones: what's behind the continued cancer scare?**

The latest is a lengthy article in GQ demanding to know why America is not doing anything about the cell-phone hazard. At the top of the article is an eye-catching photograph of a pack of Marlboro's next to a cell phone. Well cell phones are a hazard, and rude and intrusive as well, but they don't cause cancer. They're a hazard because they distract people who are operating huge machines that can travel 100 mph. Go to <http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu>, click on "search", and type in "cell phone". You will get a list of 38 issues of What's New going back to 1993 <http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN93/wn012993.html> that deal with cellphones.

### **Electrosensitivity: Aluminum foil clothing is not fashionable.**

I don't imagine aluminum foil is very comfortable either, but there are people who wrap themselves in it before they venture

**Skeptic Ink** — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2010. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



out into the world of cell phones. Should society be more tolerant and provide EMF-free zones? Absolutely not! There's a bunch of things that really bother me, but I resolutely endure them, refusing even to claim that they are a health threat. It's my contribution to a peaceful world.

**Prayer: California Supreme Court rejects superstition.**

Bruce Flamm, obstetrician and skeptic, fought a millionaire fertility/prayer clinic operator through the California court system and won. The case involved the notorious "Columbia prayer study," in which it was claimed that prayer increased the success rate of fertility treatments. Flamm demanded the study be withdrawn. Qwang Cha, the millionaire clinic operator, lost at every level but kept appealing the judgment in the belief that Flamm must inevitably fold. Bruce Flamm doesn't fold. Last we [heard] the California Supreme Court refused to consider the Appeals Court decision against Cha.



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

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**EVENTS CALENDAR**

**March program**

Saturday, 20 March at 2 p.m.  
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

**The challenges of teaching skepticism in public school**

Jamye Johnston worked for years as a scientist before becoming a public school teacher to promote scientific thought in our younger generations. She will discuss the challenges facing teachers on a daily basis, specifically in the sciences and particularly with respect to the teaching of evolution.

**NTS board meeting and social dinner**

Saturday, 27 March at 7 p.m.

El Fenix Mexican Restaurant  
5280 Belt Line Rd  
Dallas, TX 75254

If you plan to attend, please call. We sometimes cancel or change these events. 214-335-9248

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