

The Ohio Valley Skeptics News
Encouraging Critical Thinking In All Walks Of Life
Vol. 1, No. 3
November, 1991

The Ohio Valley Skeptics is a new organization committed to encouraging critical thinking in all walks of life. OVS encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific viewpoint and the distribution of the results of such investigations to the public. You are cordially invited to become a charter member of OVS. Membership information is on the back page.

November Meeting: Nineteenth Century Paranormal Beliefs in Cincinnati

The Ohio Valley Skeptics November meeting at the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History was highlighted by OVS President Joe Gastright's presentation on "The First New Age: Paranormal Beliefs in Cincinnati, 1840-1880." Thumbing handily through an enormous pile of index cards packed with the results of wide-ranging research, Joe described in colorful detail Cincinnati's participation in pseudoscientific activities popular during the nineteenth century, including phrenology, mesmerizing, and sarcognomy (A pseudoscience based on the notion that body shape predicts character, just as phrenology is based on the idea that head shape predicts character.) He illustrated his lecture with diagrams and models describing exactly which parts of the head and body were thought to represent which personal characteristics--a well-developed left forearm in women was believed to indicate "combativeness," while a muscular right upper arm was taken to be a sure sign of "ambition." The confusion of science with pseudoscience and the unsubstantiated claims of individualistic mysticism unrestrained by traditional religious authority or scientific thinking were as common in nineteenth century Cincinnati as they are today.

The meeting was followed by an informal lunch and a great deal of lively conversation at a nearby restaurant. Special thanks go to Richard Davis and the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, who generously made the museum available for our meeting.

December Meeting: Richard McGrath on Near Death Experiences

On Saturday, December 14, at 10:00 AM, the OVS will meet at the Museum of Natural History (Driving instructions elsewhere in this issue.). Major issues to be discussed include finding a permanent meeting place and deciding whether to change the name of the organization. If you know of a centrally located meeting room with no charge, parking, and a nearby inexpensive restaurant, please find out whether it is available for meetings on the third Saturday of the month and bring the information to the meeting or call Joe Gastright, president, and give the information to him. Places to check out include public libraries, schools, and community buildings.

Several members have suggested that people who might otherwise join OVS will be put off by the word "skeptics" in the name of the organization, and that more people might join if the name were aimed more at critical thought or scientific thinking and less at debunking. Most skeptics' organizations growing out of CSICOP use "skeptics" or "skeptical" in their title, but a few use phrases like "critical thinking," "rational thought" or "scientific thinking." Please come and add your opinion to the discussion December 14.

Our speaker on December 14 will be the Rev. Richard McGrath, a faculty member at Thomas More College, where he teaches a course on death and dying. He will speak about near death experiences, including what a near death episode means to the person to whom it occurs.

Get Ready for the January Round Table on Satanism!

One of the most popular topics making the talk show rounds today is Satanism, an ill-defined phenomenon viewed as a major threat to society by the religious right and as an unsubstantiated claim by social scientists. Here are some sources which will help you inform yourself about this important issue. The Satanism Scare, edited by three sociologists, James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley, is a good collection of articles scholarly and popular examining the development and dimensions of Satanism as a social problem. It is available in paperback from Aldine de Bruyter, 200 Saw Mill River Road, Hawthorne New York 10532.

The Skeptical Inquirer has published a series of four articles: "Police Pursuit of Satanic Crime," Spring, 1990; "The Spread of Satanic Cult Rumors," Spring, 1990; "Police Pursuit of Satanic Crime II: The Satanic and Urban Legends," Summer, 1990; and "Satanic Cult 'Survivor' Stories," Spring 1991.

"Scholars Debunk Supposed Cult Rise: Fear Called Satanism's Biggest Threat," a report on the recent meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, appeared in the Cincinnati Enquirer, November 17, 1991, p. A-15. On September 14, 1991, in "Authorities Alerted to Signs of Satanism," the Enquirer reported on a seminar given by a Chicago police detective at Clermont College. The seminar was designed to help police and social workers identify crimes committed by "satanists."

Your local public library can provide you with more information. Check out the entries under "satanism" in the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature for recent articles.

Calendar

Change in regular meeting day: The day for the regular monthly meeting has been changed from the second Saturday of the month to the third Saturday of the month, beginning in January, 1992.

December 14, Saturday, 10:00 AM. Monthly Meeting. Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, 1720 Gilbert Ave. Business meeting followed by the Rev. Richard McGrath on "Near Death Experiences." Informal lunch nearby afterwards for anyone who wants to come.

January 18, Saturday, 10:00 AM. Monthly Meeting. Place to be announced. Round Table Discussion: "Satanism: What Is It? Why Is It So Feared?" Virginia Jergens, Moderator.

February 15, Saturday, 10:00 AM. Monthly Meeting. Place and moderator to be announced. Round Table Discussion: "Reinventing the Wheel, or Does Each and Every Weird Claim Deserve Debunking?"

March 21, Saturday, 10:00 AM. Monthly Meeting. Place to be announced. Bob Baker of the Kentucky Association of Science Teachers and Skeptics will report on "Ghost-Busting in Kentucky."

Officers

Elected to serve until an official first annual organizational meeting in April, 1992: President, Joseph Gastright, Treasurer, Richard Shepherd; Newsletter Editor, Virginia Jergens; Publicity Chair, Porter Henry; Media Resources Chair, Richard Boznian. Members of the Media Resources Committee are Chuck Rodway and Carl Bunde. Members of the By-Laws Committee are Dick Shepherd, Mary Pacinda, Chuck Rodway, and Holly Norton.

Share Your Stuff!

Bring your favorite skeptical clipping, cartoon, book, or whatever to the next meeting and share it with your fellow skeptics. The hit of the November meeting was Joe Gastright's collection of phrenologica, including full scale heads marked with the phrenologically correct locations of aspects of the personality. These handsome busts are available in the shop at the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County

See your by-line and words of wisdom right here in the newsletter! Send your book review, letter to the editor, article, cartoon or other contribution to the editor today.

Ohio Valley Skeptics is an independent, nonprofit, scientific and educational organization. We share the philosophy of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, an international organization which investigates paranormal events, sponsors workshops, and publishes Skeptical Inquirer, a journal of investigations of paranormal claims. OVS meets regularly on the second Saturday of each month and publishes The Ohio Valley Skeptics News. OVS plans to sponsor public lectures, assemble a panel of experts for news media to consult, and investigate local paranormal claims. Annual dues are \$10.00 for regular members, \$5.00 for full-time students, and include a subscription to The Ohio Valley Skeptics News.

The Ohio Valley Skeptics News V. H. Jergens, Ed.
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