

The SKEPTIC

The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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In this month's issue:

- [DSTOP reorganizes, changes name to North Texas Skeptics](#)
- [Police investigator to discuss crimes of Gypsy fortune-tellers](#)
- [Fieldtrip and picnic set for creationist "mantracks" site](#)
- [Activist, Ex-fundamentalist To Address Scandals, Conflicts in Religion](#)
- [Briefly](#)
- [Board of Directors Elected](#)

DSTOP reorganizes, changes name to North Texas Skeptics

The not-for-profit organization known as the North Texas Skeptics (NTS) was founded in 1983 as the Dallas Society to Oppose Pseudo-science (DSTOP). and in the spring of this year was renamed and reorganized to encourage critical examination of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscience claims, and to provide an alternative source of information to the news media and general public

NTS encourages public education in the methods of critical thinking and scientific investigation, endorses scientific inquiry as the best approach for obtaining knowledge, and investigates paranormal phenomena and pseudo-science claims. NTS is associated with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) with which it shares principal interests and goals. And the NTS organization is comprised of persons who reside, work, or maintain substantial interests in the North Texas area,

Goals and purposes

Copies of a new organizational charter, approved by majority vote, will be available at the next meeting and will explain in detail the goals and purposes of NTS. Briefly, NTS does endorse the principle that the scientific method is the most reliable approach for obtaining knowledge about the universe. The organization does not, however, endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudo-science claims, but believes such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational inquiry demands,

In the North Texas area, the organization will assist local schools and institutions of higher education in teaching the methods of scientific inquiry, and will alert educators and students to the dangers of uncritical acceptance of paranormal phenomena and pseudo-science claims.

Additionally, NTS will monitor local media. and whenever necessary, will remind members of the press that, when reporting on paranormal phenomena and pseudo-science claims. journalists are not exempt from their duty to present "both sides" and to provide fair and accurate coverage,

NTS will also facilitate the scientific testing of persons who are involved in pseudo-science activities or who claim to possess paranormal abilities, and will conduct research for and provide information to CSICOP concerning local paranormal claims. pseudo-science activities, and groups which share the objectives of NTS and CSICOP.

Membership categories

Membership in the NORTH TEXAS SKEPTICS is open to those persons in the North Texas area who share the concerns and objectives outlined above.

Members' views may represent a broad spectrum of beliefs concerning paranormal phenomena and pseudo-science. However, all members should hold in common the principle that truth can be established only through rational inquiry. while misinformation, irrational inquiry, and fraud serve only as deterrents to truth Membership is open to all persons, regardless of race, sex, ethnic group, age, or religion.

Following are the four membership categories: Patrons, Scientific and Technical Consultants, Fellows, and Associates.

Patrons are those individuals or organizations endorsing the goals and ideals of the NORTH TEXAS SKEPTICS while making significant contributions of services, resources, or funds to aid in investigations. special events. print production. and other organizational business. Patrons are nominated by the board of directors and approved by the Fellows and are given formal recognition for their trust and assistance. Patrons are non-voting. unless they are also Fellows of the organization.

Scientific and Technical Consultants are those persons appointed by the board of directors to assist in investigative and educational Activities. Typically, a Consultant will be a professional or an expert. experienced in investigating paranormal phenomena, unorthodox medical claims, or other pseudo-science activities, and who has demonstrated the ability to examine such claims fairly and critically. Usually such persons will have academic training in science, medicine, psychology, technology, or related subjects. Consultants receive no payment for their Services and are non-voting unless they are also Fellows of the organization. Consultants do not speak for NTS unless approved to do so by the board.

Fellows are the voting members of the organization, and they appoint, remove. and replace the board of directors, Patrons, Fellows and Associates. Fellows also place items on the ballot and request mail-in votes, set membership dues, and act on any other business not explicitly a duty of the board of directors. Only Fellows serve as board members or committee chairpersons. They receive the organization's newsletter and any mail-in ballots distributed by the organization. And Fellows may attend all activities at no cost or at reduced rates. Fellows may also serve as Scientific and Technical Consultants.

Associates are non-voting members who receive the organization's newsletter and announcements of activities. Associates may attend activities at no cost or at reduced rates, may attend Fellow's meetings as observers, may serve on committees, and may serve as Scientific or Technical Consultants.

To become a Patron, Consultant, Fellow, or Associate, please complete the membership questionnaire located elsewhere in this issue.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Police investigator to discuss crimes of Gypsy fortune-

tellers

No federal, state, or municipal laws exist to prohibit fortune-telling in this area, and law enforcement statistics indicate that the practice is widespread and replete with fraud. Police officials report that locally, unreported earnings for some fortune-tellers reach \$200,000 annually in monies token from customers during legal sessions and illegal schemes. And interestingly, police say almost all fortune-tellers who advertise in this area are Gypsies - members of a culture which officials say is growing in North Texas.

Descendants of ancient nomadic tribes from India and Pakistan, early Gypsies migrated west to Eurasia and Europe before coming to America. Today, it is estimated that more than 1.5 million Gypsies, deriving their major source of income from fortune-telling, now reside in the United States. While no overall Statistics are available for the North Texas area, law enforcement officials say the advertisements of fortune-tellers, coupled with group encampments outside of Dallas, reflect a rise in local Gypsy population, bringing with it on increase in fortune-telling fraud.

W.J. Hughes, an investigator with the Swindle and Fraud Unit of the Dallas Police Department, will address the culture, history, and crimes of Gypsy fortune-tellers at 3 p.m., Sunday, June 14 at Brookhaven College, 3039 Valley View Lane in Farmers Branch. (Enter the college near the flagpoles, and look for the NTS Sign with directions.) While pointing out that not all Gypsies are involved in illegal fortune-telling, Hughes will explain his department's concern about the criminal segment of the Gypsy population whose very existence, he says, is based on theft by deception, fraud, and swindle.

Hughes, a 20-year law enforcement veteran, Says his department becomes involved only when a crime has been committed, and admittedly, proof of such crime is hard to come by, it is not against the law, he says, to receive payment for the "service" of telling fortunes, and the law is broken only when a practitioner makes false Statements, asks the customer to give up property, or uses slight of hand.

Proving that such criminal actions have occurred, though, is always difficult and often impossible, since many customers are not aware of or cannot document the scheme. Others, says Hughes, are simply too embarrassed to admit that they were victims of such fraud.

Worse yet, says Hughes, many customers are actually pleased with the service they receive from fortune-tellers, and return regularly with increasing amounts of cash or goods. Often, these customers are lonely, despondent or emotionally disturbed, Hughes explains. and are easily duped into placing great faith in the "powers" of the fortune-teller who, after gaining the customer's trust asks for "proof of loyalty" in various forms of payment.

In his June presentation, Hughes will give detailed accounts of the crimes of local Gypsy fortune-tellers and will present a locally-produced slide show documenting those crimes and the often bizarre props and schemes used to perpetrate them.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Fieldtrip and picnic set for creationist "mantracks" site

In the lower Cretaceous limestone along the Paluxy River near Glen Rose, Texas. creationists lost decade reportedly found human footprints or "mantracks" alongside those of dinosaurs.

Most scientists and skeptics who viewed the tracks were surprised at how very little actually comprised the basis of claims made by the creationists, but because of those claims, children in fundamentalist Christian schools began and continue to be taught that human prints were actually found near those of dinosaurs; creationist-written books and films were produced, attesting to the same; and the Paluxy River "mantrack" claims became a major subject of the creationist museum of the Institute for Creation Research.

These and other claims have perpetuated, largely because prior to 1982 scientists generally ignored creationist "mantrack" claims which had been common since the early 1930s when carved replicas of human footprints were made and sold near Glen Rose.

But until the 1980s, the impact of these efforts seldom came to public attention outside the sectarian circles of the creationists themselves. Creationist "mantrack" claims were generally dismissed by the scientific community, especially by those investigators who had actually explored the banks of the Paluxy River and found that the so-called "mantracks" could be otherwise explained. But in 1982 when the Rev. Carl Baugh began calling public attention to newly exposed "human" prints, and when biology textbooks in public schools had greatly reduced coverage of evolution (justified in part by the discovery of "human" tracks in Cretaceous limestone), many scientists and skeptics could no longer ignore the "mantrack" claims.

One of those persons was Ron J. Hastings, Ph.D., chairman of the North Texas Skeptics, and director of computer services and instructor of physics and higher math at Waxahachie High School. Hastings conducted intensive investigations of the so-called "mantracks" and along with three other colleagues authored the special issue of "Creation/Evolution, Issue XV, The Paluxy River Footprint Mystery Solved," (C/E XV) (Cole, 1985), which focused on general "mantrack" claims by Rev. Baugh and his coworkers at the site on the Paluxy River. The foursome, which included Hastings, was collectively known as "Raiders of the Lost Tracks, and to his credit, Hastings is the only investigator involved in all major "mantracks" investigations since 1982.

In short, Hastings and his colleagues, including scientist Glen Kuban, in their scientific investigation of "mantracks" along the Paluxy River found no evidence of human tracks, and furthermore concluded that the tracks in question were..

- man-made carvings
- erosion features
- distorted dinosaur tracks
- misinterpreted trace fossils
- marks left by dinosaur toils
- elongated dinosaur footprints

The impact of the investigations by Hastings and other scientists was significant. While the creationist community did not completely nor consistently recant its past "mantracks" claims, statements were issued by authors of several "mantrack" books and films advising other creationists not to cite the Paluxy River footprints as evidence against evolution or represent the tracks as proven evidence of human existence during the deposition of the Cretaceous rock system.

Hastings concedes, however, that the hoped-for response from creationists - an unequivocal declaration of all "mantracks" sites as dinosaurian has not yet come because many creationists continue to draw conclusions based on the religious assumptions to which they are committed, rather than on scientific evidence.

Hastings will lead a field trip to the dinosaurian and "mantracks" Sites along the Paluxy River near Glen Rose on Sunday, July 19. Members of the North Texas Skeptics and their guests are invited to participate in the field trip which will include viewing of the tracks, a midday picnic, and an afternoon fossil hunt. Members will participate in the field trip at no charge, while non-members (family or guests) will be asked to donate \$2.50 per person toward handout materials. Hastings recommends that only children 10 years of age or older, who are capable of serious participation, attend.

The field trip schedule is as follows:

8:00 a.m.: Meet at the flagpole entrance at Brookhaven College, 3939 Valley View Lane in Farmers branch, to carpool or form a caravan

10:00 a.m. Arrive at Dinosaur Valley State Park in Glen Rose. \$2 per vehicle entrance fee. Investigate dinosaur tracks inside the park.

2:00 p m Picnic along the Paluxy River. Please bring your own food and drinks

1.00 p.m. Investigate "mantracks" site outside of but near the park.

3.00 p.m. Stop for refreshments in Glen Rose

3-30 p.m. Fossil hunt.

Because the field trip will be conducted in or near shallow water, wear appropriate clothing and bring a sturdy pair of wading shoes with non-slip soles. Additionally, the sun in mid-July is likely to be quite intense, and the use of sunscreen is recommended. To prevent dehydration, all participants are asked to bring ample supplies of water and soft drinks.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Activist, Ex-fundamentalist To Address Scandals, Conflicts in Religion

Anne McKinney was raised in an ultra-fundamentalist Catholic home by a violently abusive and alcoholic mother and an abusive father. When as a child she turned to church officials for help, she was told by religious leaders that her parents' discipline was an appropriate response to her own bad behavior.

Disillusioned with her church and suffering from low self-esteem, McKinney turned as a teenager to a more progressive, non-denominational church where she quickly became caught up in the Jesus-movement of the 1970s,

Finding no long-term solace there, she withdrew from organized religion altogether, and soon married a man who had recently left the Baptist Church. Although McKinney had not even known her husband when he renounced his faith, she was nevertheless blamed by his father (a deacon), his mother (owner of a Christian book store), his brothers (both ministers), and his sister (a Sunday School teacher).

Throughout her 20s, McKinney struggled not only with that blame, but with the loss of her own faith and the affirmation it had once brought her. Anger, resentment, and a feeling of failure continued to overshadow her happiness and success in an otherwise normal life, until finally, she learned of Fundamentalists Anonymous (FA), a non-profit support group for the religiously-injured who have left or who are leaving the fundamentalist faith.

Through counseling at FA, and through association with other ex-fundamentalists, McKinney not only found help for herself, but also learned that when people leave fundamentalist religions, an average of 10 years passes before they are able to reconcile the feelings of bitterness, anger, low self-esteem, a negative self-image, loneliness, isolation, depression, distrust of groups, inability to discuss church involvement, fear of divine retribution, occasional lapses into fundamentalist consciousness, sexual dysfunction, and fear of harassment, persecution, or coercion by other fundamentalists. Now 30, McKinney says it did, indeed, take her the projected 10 years to reconcile her fundamentalist past.

Less than three years after first seeking help, however, McKinney is now five-state regional coordinator for Fundamentalists Anonymous and an organizer of the Dallas chapter. A well-known political, religious, and reproduction rights activist, the Plano woman spends up to 25 hours a week monitoring the television broadcasts of PTL, Word of Faith, Church on the Rock, W V Grant, James Robison, Tim and Beverly LeHay, Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, TBN, and the 700 Club. She also monitored Peter Popoff until programming was cancelled in this area.

Additionally, McKinney is the organizer of last year's Labor Day march against Jerry Falwell and the Southland Corporation, and is in demand throughout the state as a speaker and comedian. A regular at the Comedy Corner in Dallas, McKinney is scheduled to appear on "Latentight with David Letterman" later this summer, where her act will

include political and religious humor, and she will sing "The DART Twist," a self-penned tribute to her recent battle with Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) over lack of restrooms in the system's transfer centers. (She won the battle; DART will install the toilet facilities, along with enclosed waiting rooms, benches, and water fountains. at a cost that McKinney estimates to be at \$2.5 million.)

McKinney will address the North Texas Skeptics at 3 p.m., Sunday, August 16, at Brookhaven College, 3939 Volley View Lane in Farmers Branch. (Enter the college near the flagpoles and look for the NTS sign with directions.) Mixing seriousness with humor, She will discuss the scandals, power struggles, and conflicts among top-ranking televangelists and local religious leaders, along with their effect on believers and non-believers alike. And McKinney will tell of the thousands of calls, many from the frightened, the suicidal, the elderly, and the poor which have been placed to FA in the wake of recent revelations about local and national religious leaders. She will also describe what she believes is forthcoming for fundamentalist religion in this area. and will outline ways in which NTS might respond to past and future developments in the fundamentalist community.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Briefly

Newsletter to Expand In Upcoming Months

The Summer 1987 issue of The Skeptic is a maiden publication and does little more than outline the reorganization of NTS and announce events scheduled for the summer. Beginning this fall, however, the newsletter will expand to include columns, investigative reports, an "in the news" listing, feature stories, reports of local paranormal and pseudo-science activities, and other important information.

Membership input into the newsletter is not only welcome, it is vital. Please mail story ideas and related information to newsletter editor Vicki Hinson-Smith at the NTS address listed elsewhere in this issue.

Bibliography Materials List is Needed for NTS

The North Texas Skeptics is compiling a bibliography of relevant books, magazines, articles, video tapes, and other published or private materials which relate to pseudo-science, paranormal phenomena, and skepticism.

Since it is beyond the Organization's means to purchase such a collection, NTS must rely on the personal collections of members and friends.

If members possess or are aware of materials in the above categories, please compile a list of the names, publishers, and descriptions of the materials and mail the list to resources chairman Mark W. Mateer at the NTS address listed elsewhere in this issue,

It is not the organization's intention to "raid" the personal libraries of its members, but merely to publish a bibliography for reference use by members, the press, and other interested persons.

Subject and Speaker List Being Compiled for Future

The subjects are endless: creation science, UFOlogy, telepathy, scientology, pyramid power, psychokinesis, precognition, faith healing, psychic archaeology, lost tribes, medical quackery, levitation, kirilion photography, astrology, hypnosis, ghosts, dowsing, divination, clairvoyance, biorythms, Atlantis, ancient astronauts, Bermuda Triangle, psychic surgery, palmistry, witchcraft, post-life regression . . . et cetera, ad nauseum.

Well-informed speakers on these subjects are harder to come by, however.

Suggestions for speakers for the coming year are now being accepted. Particularly helpful would be a list of members'

own contacts with scientists, educators, noted speakers, well-known skeptics, physicians, and other persons who could address the organization.

Please send the names of suggested speakers, along with contact information, to chair Ron J. Hastings, Ph.D., at the NTS address listed elsewhere in this issue. Also, feel free to include personal preferences regarding subjects or topics for future meetings.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Board of Directors Elected

The North Texas Skeptics recently appointed the following persons to its board of directors.

Chair: Ron J. Hastings, Ph. D.

Hastings is director of computer services and instructor of higher math and physics for an area high school. As chair, he will preside over all meetings of the board of directors, as well as meetings of the Fellow's membership. He will also review and sign all official correspondence and ensure that official resolutions and decisions of the organization are executed.

Co-chair: James P. Smith, Ph.D.

Smith is a consulting scientist and an instructor of chemistry and physics for an area college and university. As co-chair he will assist the chair, and in the absence of the chair, perform the duties thereof.

Treasurer: John Thomas, J.D.

Thomas is an attorney and an Oil and gas investor. He also serves as legal advisor for NTS. As treasurer, he will maintain financial records of all receipts and disbursements, prepare financial statements, and report to the board and membership on all financial matters.

Secretary: Mary Hunter

Hunter is an instructor of biology for an area high school. As secretary, she will record and maintain minutes of meetings and will also maintain membership rolls.

Liaison: Vicki Hinson-Smith

Hinson-Smith is a communications consultant and public relations professional. As liaison, she will edit and supervise the production and distribution of the organization's newsletters, reports, press releases, and other publications. She will also provide media relations for the organization.

[\[Back to top\]](#)
