



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Creationist text turned back

Large Dallas-area district puts *Pandas* on endangered species list

Citizens had hoped to make pseudoscience text extinct

By Mike Sullivan

Plano, Texas — Hundreds of angry residents, educators and local clergy members united at a school board meeting in this large suburban Dallas district to keep a textbook that promotes Creationism out of the public school science classes, at least temporarily. However, procedural motions made at the last minute may resurrect the controversial issue in the future, as the board did not act to formally reject the text. The book, *Of Pandas and People: The Central Question of Human Origins* (Second Edition) was proposed by a school board member who later tried to withdraw his proposal for funding after seeing the public firestorm the issue created.

Plano Independent School District (PISD) trustee Tom Wilds proposed in mid-January that district funds be used to buy review copies of the book for each of the system's biology teachers. The teachers would then be free to ask that copies of the book be purchased with district funds if they wished to use it in their classroom, thereby circumventing the established PISD textbook review process. Three other board members expressed support for the idea, setting up the prospect of an easy vote of approval by the seven-member board at the February 7 meeting.

Plano is one of the largest and most affluent school districts in Texas, known across the state and nationally for excellent academic standards. Plano is also home to tens of thousands of highly-educated citizens who are employed at several area universities and giant firms including EDS, Frito-Lay, JC Penney, Arco Oil, Cyrix, E-Systems, Texas Instruments and many others.

@SUBHEAD = Three weeks with *Pandas*

As reported in the January issue of *The Skeptic*, a front-page story on the *Pandas* controversy in the January 13 editions of *The Dallas Morning News* brought the issue to wide attention and kicked off three weeks of frenetic activity by local parents, educators, clergy and taxpayers. A local parent's group, organized last year under the name Keep Quality in Plano Schools (KQUIPS), began investigating the issue immediately after hearing of Wilds' proposal and quickly found

themselves out of their range, unfamiliar with the Creationism issue and the subtleties of the *Pandas* book. Assistance and contacts offered by The North Texas Skeptics proved crucial in getting the opposition effort organized in time, according to KQUIPS spokeswoman Evelyn Peelle.

The KQUIPS group was able to collect information on the history of the book and of the so-called "scientific creationism" movement; contact and receive written statements from leading scientific experts on the book; research the substantial case law regarding use of religiously-oriented materials in public schools science curricula; and mount a letter-writing, faxing and telephoning campaign directed at the board members. In the final week before the scheduled school board action, community outrage at the proposal and in the unorthodox acquisition proposal itself was clear.

The KQUIPS effort was also aided by the *pro bono* efforts of Dallas attorney Michael Linz. Working through the preceding weekend, Linz prepared a letter to the board on behalf of several parents and taxpayers and the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, Inc. The letter outlined the board's fiduciary responsibility to conduct a legal and academic review of all proposed texts, especially a text with a troubled history such as *Pandas*. Linz's letter also summarized the case law of *Edwards vs. Aguillard* and pointed out that the board would be subject to an expensive legal challenge if the *Pandas* text was approved. Linz's letter was hand-delivered to the board members the day of the meeting.

@SUBHEAD = Wilds' night

The KQUIPS group in Plano was armed with all this information, plus the availability of expert testimony at the board meeting of local scientists and educators who have battled Creationist texts in the past, including NTS Technical Advisor and Director Emeritus Ron Hastings, Ph.D. The stage was set for a very long night of citizen comments before the vote at the February 7 meeting.

Trustee Wilds must have had a change of heart about his interest in *Pandas* sometime over the weekend preceding the meeting, however. Although he had asked that the issue be placed on the agenda for the Tuesday night public meeting, he told the press in time for Tuesday morning newspaper editions that he was going to ask that the item be withdrawn from consideration. *The Dallas Morning News* and local broadcast outlets reported Wilds' comments, but that late-hour development did not seem to diminish the desire of local citizens to turn out in force for the meeting, just in case Wilds decided to change his mind again and call for a vote on the funding approval measure after all.

As the meeting convened on Tuesday night some 45 minutes late, well over 200 people packed the board room and the adjacent lobby. A large number of them were wearing a "No Pandas" badge, supplied to them by the KQUIPS group as they entered the building, as well as holding reprints of local and national news stories on the book and the Plano case in particular. In addition, copies of the established Plano textbook adoption procedures were on hand, as well as an abstract of the pertinent U.S. Supreme Court case, *Edwards vs. Aguillard*. *Edwards* is the landmark 1987 Louisiana case that ruled unconstitutional the idea of teaching Creationism in "equal time" to evolution theory in public school science classrooms.

After the opening prayer, led by board member Don Mills, and the Pledge of Allegiance, the first order of business was the approval of the printed agenda, which had been supplied to all present upon request. Listed first under the approval of agenda item was the option to have any item on the agenda deleted. Although Wilds had told the press earlier that he intended to remove the *Pandas* issue from the board's business, he remained silent and seemed somewhat distracted by the huge crowd as the board President asked that the agenda be approved as printed, and it was without objection. Wilds himself voted that the printed agenda be adopted, an action that would frustrate him just moments later.

Next, board member Mike Evans asked that the *Pandas* item be moved up in the order of business from Item "H" to the next item to be considered, in deference to the large number of citizens who turned out for that issue alone. That motion was passed without objection, and the board then moved to take up the *Pandas* debate.

Wilds started the shenanigans by saying that, as was widely reported in the press, he wished to remove the *Pandas* item from the agenda for the evening and reconsider it when more information was made available. Evans objected to the attempted dodge, noting that Wilds had been given the opportunity to remove an agenda item just minutes earlier and did not do so. Now that the agenda had been unanimously approved as printed, Evans questioned whether it was proper to pass over the *Pandas* issue.

The district's legal counsel was consulted and said that both the Board's rules and Robert's Rules of Order are silent on the question of whether a board member may remove an agenda item after it had been approved. Questions were also raised regarding whether doing so would, in effect, violate the Texas Open Meetings Act, in that the public was told that the item was to be considered. The meeting agenda had been printed the prior Thursday afternoon, in compliance with the 72-hour notice rule for public meeting agenda.

The counsel advised that the Board should address the matter in fairness to the hundreds of citizens present who wished to be heard. Despite Wilds' further attempts to have the board pass over the *Pandas* item, a motion was made, then amended, that the book not be considered by the board until it was either vetted by the board's established textbook review process *or requested by staff*. "Staff" means anyone employed by the district, so this motion would leave the door open to a school janitor bringing the whole matter back, again not in compliance with the long-standing and normal district textbook process.

The voice of the people

Citizens were then allowed to speak, but were limited to five minutes each and were restricted to speaking *only* to the issue of the motion before the board, and *not* to the larger issue of the appropriateness of *Pandas* in science curricula. This upset many of the citizens, as they had prepared and wanted the board to hear their views on the central question of *Pandas* and not on the much narrower motion just proposed.

Still, over 30 citizens rose to speak in turn, and all who addressed the board were unanimous in their opposition to the pseudoscience posited in *Pandas*. Five local clergy of various faiths addressed the board (and Wilds in particular), denouncing them for their deceitful actions in the whole process, their arrogance for thinking themselves competent to suggest what is proper science classroom material, and their incompetence that they did not know the well-established textbook approval procedures of their own district. A local Rabbi spoke very forcefully, calling the board members cowards for not facing the issue before the people and for their ignorance of the social, religious and cultural mixture of their students which would make the *Pandas* material objectionable to many not of the Christian faith, regardless of any purported scientific merits.

Other speakers included the chairman of the science department at Plano Senior High, who also berated the board for not following their own procedures; parent and Dallas attorney Jill Weinberg, who explained to the board why they should *never* bring *Pandas* back for consideration by briefing the board on *Edwards vs. Aguillard*; and professors from local universities denouncing the contention that *Pandas* is anything remotely like a science textbook.

For all of their claimed courage and purity of purpose, not a single pro-*Pandas* speaker rose to support the book. By the time all the citizens had made their remarks, albeit rather limited by the procedural motion, Wilds and fellow board member Don Mills looked as if they were trying to dissolve into the upholstery of their chairs. They had been publicly, clearly and unanimously upbraided and humiliated by their constituents. Evans looked like a hero for his efforts to make Wilds and the board face the *Pandas* issue then and there, although his motion was not carried.

After the citizens had been heard, Wilds then tried to back-pedal his way to respectability by making gratuitous statements supporting the book and his claim that he never intended that it be used in a classroom, all of which drew loud objections from the audience. Wilds was being allowed to speak to the merits of the book, something which the electorate had just been prohibited from doing during the public comment period just ended. Tempers were high as discussion closed and the board moved to a vote.

The vote was unanimous: *Pandas* would not be brought back before the board unless recommended by the district's formal textbook approval process or if requested by a staff member. That last leaves a door open that the residents wish they would have been able to shut and lock, and no one puts it past the Creationists to do exactly that in the future after things cool down. Moreover, the *Plano Star-Courier* quoted Wilds as saying that the *Pandas* issue had been put to rest at least until June, meaning until after the next school board elections were complete. Many citizens left the meeting feeling as if they had been served half a loaf, and that they would have to face down the gibberish in *Pandas* again in the future. Indeed, other large Dallas-area districts have already contacted NTS for help in response to requests by teachers in their district for the *Pandas* text.

Standard Creationist tactics were followed in the Plano case: try to slide the book in quietly as a supplemental text, but withdraw it quickly if it gets any opposition so as not to go on record as being formally rejected. Many Texas science educators expect that *Pandas* will come to a court test in Texas this year, most likely in the Dallas area. For now, Plano has rejected it, although not as decisively as many had hoped. Other districts in the state are studying the lessons from the Plano fracas now, against the day they must challenge *Pandas* in their town.

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Healthy skepticism

Tim Gorski, M.D.

"Natural" doesn't mean safe

How many times does this need to be said?

In an article appearing a few months ago in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* [121:729-734, 1994], seven cases of symptomatic liver toxicity caused by Jin Bu Huan Anodyne tablets were reported. The "natural" herbal product is widely sold as a pain reliever and relaxation aid.

And just last month physicians at the University of Chicago reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* [273:489, 1995] on a case of liver toxicity apparently caused by a "nutritional supplement" of chaparral. Found in the southwestern United States and also known as the "creosote bush," the FDA warned of this herb's potential for hepatotoxicity some time ago but took no action to remove it from store shelves or require cautionary labeling. In the case reported, a previously healthy 60-year-old woman was hospitalized with liver toxicity so severe that it affected her central nervous system. This poor woman subsequently developed a life-threatening infection which destroyed her kidneys. She ultimately survived after receiving both a liver and kidney transplant.

Meanwhile, President Clinton has signed into law new legislation which will make it even more difficult for the FDA to regulate these "nutritional supplement" products and the outrageous claims made for them. Currently only about 3% of Americans use herbal remedies. The multibillion-dollar vitamin and "health" supplement industry evidently sees the remaining 97% as an enormous opportunity. They can accordingly be expected to expand their aggressive campaign of deception to convince the public that all of these products are completely harmless because they are "natural."

Cancer quackery behind noxious fumes emitted by dying woman?

Remember Gloria Ramirez? She's the woman who gained national attention when it was reported that her blood released toxic fumes that overcame a nurse and a doctor attempting to care for her in the emergency room of Riverside General Hospital in California. Ramirez, who died that night, was said to have received chemotherapy for her cancer earlier that day but her oncologist denied having treated her. Specialists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory have now suggested that Ramirez may have been recently treated with dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO), a substance that figures prominently in some cancer quackery. If she had been so treated, a form of the chemical, DMSO_4 , could have been released from her body fluids and would be expected to cause the sort of reactions experienced by the medical personnel caring for Ramirez.

Null hypothesis proven again! And again!!

Another well-done study has shown chelation therapy to be worthless in the treatment of atherosclerosis. The prospective double-blind, randomized, controlled study even included the vitamin supplementation as recommended by the American Academy of Medical Preventics and the American Board of Chelation Therapy. Nevertheless, among 34 patients with intermittent claudication (a disorder in which atherosclerosis reduces blood flow to the legs, causing pain and limiting physical activity), intravenous EDTA was no better than placebo at up to three months after twice-weekly

infusions over ten weeks of treatment. [*Circulation* 90:1194-99.]

Researchers at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, have also shown that carnitine supplements do not improve physical performance. Carnitine is a small molecule which plays a role in the body's burning of fat to yield energy. Accordingly, "nutritional supplements" of this substance are widely promoted as "fat burners," "energy enhancers" and "performance boosters" for athletes. But, as has been said before, the human body is far from a passive reaction vessel into which various substances can be loaded in order to drive a desired biochemical process. This was well shown in the Ball State study in which volunteers were tested on a stationary bicycle. There was no improvement in exercise performance after 1-2 weeks of carnitine supplementation. But half of the volunteers experienced diarrhea from the product.

Chiropractors not physicians

For several years, some chiropractors have opted for the easy way to a medical education. They've simply been calling themselves "chiropractic physicians." Former Texas State Attorney General Dan Morales knowingly allowed the deception, aided and abetted by a ruling of the Texas Board of Chiropractic Examiners (TBCE), despite its being in clear violation of the State's Healing Arts Identification Act.

In 1993 the TBCE underwent Sunset Review at which time the Texas legislature repealed all of the Board's rules and restricted its rule-making authority. The TBCE immediately set to work reissuing its rules, including that allowing chiropractors to hold themselves out as physicians. As a result, the Texas Physical Therapy Association, the Texas Occupational Therapy Association, and other plaintiffs, including the Chiropractic Society of Texas (a group devoted to the original metaphysical ideas of chiropractic) sued to overturn the rule. On December 13th of last year, Judge John K. Dietz finally ruled against the TBCE, throwing out a number of rules it had passed, including that approving the use of the term "chiropractic physician." This effectively ends, at least for now, efforts by Texas chiropractors to expand their scope of practice and deceive the public into believing that they are something other than chiropractors.

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX 76006, or call metro 817-792-2000. Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and a North Texas Skeptics Technical Advisor.

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

Because of one thing and another (holidays, O.J. mania, that annoying Panda book), I haven't cranked out one of these columns in awhile. So let's just use this one to blow through some of the news items you might have missed in the past few months.

Those nattering nabobs at the Center for Science in the Public Interest are at it again. Having sounded the shrill alarm that we'll all DIE if we eat Italian food, Mexican food, Chinese food, movie popcorn, or any other food containing the dangerous additive "Flavor," they have most recently turned their paranoia on milk. At a recent press conference, they informed the quivering public that drinking whole, or even 2% fat, milk will KILL YOU DEAD!!! They displayed a 400-pound pile of fat, to illustrate the amount of fat an average person would ingest in a lifetime if he drank whole milk (no explanation how, if milk is so lethal, he could live long enough to ingest all that fat, but never mind). They also claimed that in blind taste tests, most people couldn't tell the difference between whole milk and skim milk. Apparently, they have developed blindfolds small enough to fit over taste buds. If they ever test you, here's a hint: the one that tastes like a piece of chalk dissolved in a glass of water is the skim milk.



And now, news of the paranormal. First stop, Britain . . .

Add a new strange creature to the ranks of Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster: it's the Beast of Bodmin Moor, who allegedly slogs through a foggy bog about 250 miles southwest of London. People who have spotted it say the Beast is "big, black and scary," but maybe they've just been watching too much of the O.J. trial. One woman who has managed to snap a few fuzzy photos is convinced the Beast is really a wild puma or black panther. Local pub owners aren't too keen on solving the mystery . . . they say that every time there's a reported sighting of the monster, their business picks up. And, no doubt, vice versa.

While we're in Britain, we might want to drop by the William Hill bookmaking shop and place a few long-shot bets. The bookies are giving 500-to-1 odds that in 1995, either Elvis Presley will be found alive or the Loch Ness Monster's existence will be proved beyond doubt. They're paying 1,000-to-1 to those willing to bet that the Archbishop of Canterbury will confirm the Second Coming of Christ in 1995 . . . the same odds they're giving that a Briton will win the Wimbledon tennis tournament (no odds available on the chance that Jesus will win Wimbledon). And for real gamblers, they're offering 14 million-to-1 . . . the same odds as winning the British lottery . . . against Elvis crash-landing a UFO into Loch Ness and hitting the monster. The lottery actually looks like a smart bet in comparison.

If it's a sure thing you're looking for, subscribe to a new financial newsletter out of Hong Kong: "Financial Astrology." Editor Rebecca Nolan cares not a whit for economic indicators; instead, she predicts stock market futures by watching the stars. She's predicting that Wall Street will begin a slide on May 26, followed by major falls on June 6 and June 13, so don't say I didn't warn you. Nolan is a former math teacher who claims she set out to disprove astrology mathematically, only to discover that it was true . . . or at least, that it was a great way to make money.

Back here in middle America, where we grow 'em big and stupid, a Merriam, Kansas, man was hospitalized after he gouged his own right eyeball out and flushed it down the toilet. He claimed he had looked in the mirror and seen a pentagram in his eye and couldn't remove it any other way. Wonder if he thought to try Visine?

If you want to know which way the political winds are blowing, the best journal to read is, of course, the Weekly World News. You might remember their hilarious series of cover photos, in which an unbelievably wishy-washy space alien first met with George Bush, then Ross Perot, before endorsing Bill Clinton. Well, it seems that the alien is now disenchanted with Clinton (he's obviously a white, middle class, male alien), and the February 28 cover of the WWN showed him meeting with Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich. The story informs us that the fickle E.T. had spoken to Rush Limbaugh (could he be from "The Planet of the Dittoheads?!"), turned right (and I don't mean at Neptune), then held a two-hour summit meeting with the Republican leaders, during which he urged Gingrich to run for president. The alien says America needs a leader his planet can work with (on his planet, all the leaders are six-foot newts). He also had a suggestion for solving both the orphan problem and the school lunch problem, which he promised to reveal in his upcoming book, "To Serve Man." Stay tuned . . .



And now, to the subject of religion . . .

Longtime readers of this column (if there are any) will recall that I have explained before why I do not attack religious beliefs directly, as some of the atheists among the skeptics wish I would. Without going into detail, I have explained that I consider faith to be personal and only criticize religious people when they leave the realm of spirituality and venture into politics, medicine, hucksterism, or just plain idiocy. And there is no shortage of material, as you will soon see.

But first, I want to mention that every so often, I am reminded of what a good minister looks like, and last week was one such occasion. My uncle, Robert Davenport, retired after 14 years as minister of a church he built with his own hands down in Clifton, Texas. His small congregation gave him a retirement lunch, and 95 people showed up to honor him.

They came from his church, from other churches in the area . . . one couple even came all the way from South Africa, to thank him for the volunteer work he did a few years ago, helping them build a hospital.

One after another, people stepped to the microphone to recall how he had helped him: kids who had grown up looking to him as a father figure who took them on field trips and helped them with problems they were afraid to talk to their parents about . . . people who turned to him for help with fixing a car or building a house . . . people who knew they could always count on him for a few dollars when money was low and work was scarce, even though he was living on just a pension and Social Security himself and taking not a dime from the church collections. Even people who admitted disagreeing with his religious beliefs marveled at how he never tried to argue with them that he was right and they were wrong. He just accepted them as they were.

So if anyone out there thinks I'm too hard on some televangelist or other, it's not because I hate religion. It's just that I've seen someone who really does live his religion, and it makes them look all the more slimy in comparison. Speaking of which . . .

ROBERT TILTON is back in the news! Having seen his gospel of open money-grubbing fall out of favor, Tilton is now involved with a frighteningly radical group of fundamentalists in the deep south who believe that all the world's problems are caused by demons. Said demons can only be exorcised by screaming like Axl Rose. So the way to "protect" children from Satan is to hold them down and scream in their faces for three hours straight. TV's Inside Edition had some footage of this which the Dallas-based Trinity Foundation helped them obtain, and they rightly pointed out that it sure does look like child abuse. Tilton has now incorporated wailing at demons into his TV act, maybe just to show up those who said he couldn't possibly find a way to look any goofier than he did rolling around on piles of prayer requests on his old show. If it's a new shtick he's looking for, please allow me to make another suggestion: snake-handling.

It certainly worked for Dewey Bruce Hale of Enigma, Georgia, who was bitten by a rattlesnake he brought to services at New River Holiness Church. The local sheriff said he would have lived if his family had called the police or the hospital, but naturally, they didn't. A cousin of the freshly-recruited angel explained that the family feels "he didn't die because of the snake, but that he died because it was his time to go." I'd say it was his time to go the hospital! Or at the very least, to a different church.

Even wackier beliefs can be found at the First Love Church of Mars, Pennsylvania (Mars, Enigma . . . these town names are so appropriate!). Sheryl Lynn Rossi, the wife of pastor Richard Rossi, was found beaten nearly to death on a rural road, and after coming out of a three-day coma, she fingered her husband as the assailant. But the reverend can explain: Satanic forces were out to destroy him, so it must have been a look-alike, driving a car that looked just like his, who attacked his wife. Now, brace yourself for the weird part . . . she believes it! Mrs. Rossi, the Mary Jo Buttafuoco of Mars, Pennsylvania, recanted her allegation, at one point saying that it might have been a demon in human form (sounds like her husband to me!).

But the police aren't so trusting, or so religious: they are pressing charges, over the victim's objections. Rossi is out on bail and back to preaching, but about 150 of his 200 parishioners have left in disgust. Those who remain think the church is under attack by Satan, and point to such hard evidence as a pentagram found scratched into the gravel of the parking lot, and the numbers 666 burned into a nearby lawn. Police say this is the only report of Satanism they've ever received, and they are highly skeptical.

Don't those fools realize that no human being could possibly have scratched a pentagram into gravel?!

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In Memorial

Jim Baerwaldt

Science and rationalism in North Texas lost a good friend with the passing of Dr. James Baerwaldt on January 31 after a brief struggle against cancer. The North Texas Skeptics wish to join Jim's many friends and colleagues in remembering his contributions.

Jim was a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Arlington, joining the faculty there in 1996, where he served as an early chairman of the department. His students remember his inspired teaching of Introduction to Psychology among the many courses he taught during his long career. Jim is best known at the University for his development and teaching of the popular course Analysis of Parapsychology and Other Controversial Sciences, where students were challenged to examine the claims of ESP, clairvoyance, facilitated communication (FC) and other extraordinary claims using the scientific method.

NTS members will remember Jim's recent participation in our public program on FC, where Jim explained that he used an examination of the discredited practice with autistic individuals as one of the most obvious departures from the scientific method ever perpetrated in this century. Jim was always generous with his time and knowledge in promoting rationality and critical inquiry and served as a de facto Technical Advisor to NTS without ever actually holding the title. We recall his enthuasaistic efforts on many projects with our gratitude.

Jim Baerwaldt was great student and a great teacher of science. His contributions to the advance of reason over ignorance will be remembered.

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