



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Creation – evolution debate

by John Blanton

Incompetence vs. stupidity

The problem was that Mike Tyson lost his license to fight, and Evander Holyfield could not stand the company. So the Atheist Alliance International Convention asked me to debate local creationist Don Patton for Saturday afternoon entertainment. Turned out to be a good substitute.

Since I have attended Don's MIOS (Metroplex Institute of Origin Science) lectures since 1989, I felt like Einstein's mythical chauffeur, who sat through so many talks on relativity he was able to give the lectures himself. On second thought, maybe I should have studied for this exam.

Don is what we in Texas call a Young Earth Creationist (YEC). He is a notable supporter of the Paluxy River man tracks claims and has appeared on such forward-looking science documentaries as NBC's Mysterious Origins of Man. We have noted this program in past issues.¹ Besides Don Patton and fellow YEC Carl Baugh, it also featured Moses. Or maybe it was Charlton Heston.

Since I was playing on home turf I allowed Don to pick the topic. He chose "The fossil record is more compatible with the model of creation than the model of evolution." I chose the "not" side of the argument.

In preparing for a debate a considerable question is the argument your opponent will present. Truthfully, I did not give it much thought. I was sure that whatever Don cooked up would be fairly transparent to an audience of skeptical atheists. Would he bring up the Paluxy River "man tracks." Nah. God's not that good to me. Would he pull out some long hidden fossil evidence the American Museum of Natural History had kept hidden in its basement for 120 years? Nah. God doesn't hate me *that* much. But what would it be? Don stepped to the podium and flashed his first slide. And the truth was revealed.

Yes, Alex. I'll take Out-Of-Context Quotes for \$1000.

I should have known. This is Don's favorite. I could have kicked myself for sleeping through so many of his lectures.

Don launched into a long list of statements by *real* scientists, seeming to put evolution in a bad light. About the only way to deal with this tactic is to ask the audience to jot down the quotes and head out to the library immediately after the debate and read the full quotes. Actually, a better approach would be to have copies of the full quotes in hand at the start of the debate. Did I previously mention incompetence?

Remember, the argument was whether the fossil record supports evolution or creationism. Don's approach was to show that these famous scientist don't think so (and who are we to argue with them?)

Don is a sterling fellow in one respect. He freely supplies copies of his presentation text. I am a not so sterling fellow in one respect. I like to take one of the copies and run down some of the quotes.

I do not have the many references Don quoted, but the NTS library does contain a number of the resources. Here are two I could track down quickly:

First there is a quote from *The Blind Watchmaker* by Richard Dawkins:

And we find many of them already in an advanced state of evolution, the very first time they appear. It is as though they were just planted there, without any evolutionary history. Needless to say, this appearance of sudden planting has delighted creationists. ...the only alternative explanation of the sudden appearance of so many complex animal types in the Cambrian era is divine creation...

I will now play the full paragraph with Don's quoted text in **bold**:

Before we come to the sort of sudden bursts that they had in mind, there are some conceivable meanings of 'sudden bursts' that they most definitely did not have in mind. These must be cleared out of the way because they have been the subject of serious misunderstandings. Eldredge and Gould certainly would agree that some very important gaps really are due to imperfections in the fossil record. Very big gaps, too. For example the Cambrian strata of rocks, vintage about 600 million years, are the oldest ones in which we find most of the major invertebrate groups. **And we find many of them already in an advanced state of evolution, the very first time they appear. It is as though they were just planted there, without any evolutionary history. Needless to say, this appearance of sudden planting has delighted creationists.** Evolutionists of all stripes believe, however, that this really does represent a very large gap in the fossil record, a gap that is simply due to the fact, for some reason, very few fossils have lasted from periods before about 600 million years ago. One good reason might be that many of these animals had only soft parts to their bodies: no shells or bones to fossilize. If you are a creationist you may think that this is special pleading. My point here is that, when we are talking about gaps of this magnitude, there is no difference whatever in the interpretations of 'punctuationalists' and 'gradualists'. Both schools of thought agree that **the only alternative explanation of the sudden appearance of so many complex animals types in the Cambrian era is divine creation**, and both would reject this alternative. ²

Don presented this in the context of explaining that Dawkins, a *real* scientist, thinks the fossil record does not support evolution (so why should creationists or anybody else). I am sure Don had some reason for leaving out Dawkins' "Evolutionists of all stripes believe, however, that this really does represent a very large gap in the fossil record, a gap that is simply due to the fact, for some reason, very few fossils have lasted from periods before about 600 million years ago." I am sure the reader can guess why.

A lot of Dawkins' original meaning got lost in Don's ellipses (...). At some point an anti-evolutionist somewhere has plowed through 318 pages of Dawkins' text supporting evolution against creationism and has picked out this string of text to put a lie to the rest of the book. Dawkins should have named the book *Why Evolution Is Bad For You* and saved the creationists a lot of trouble.

One of Don's better moments was his use of the famous quote by Charles Darwin from his *The Origin of Species*. Here it is:

...innumerable transitional forms must have existed but why do we not find them embedded in countless numbers in the crust of the earth? ...why is not every geological formation and every stratum full of such intermediate links? Geology assuredly does not reveal any such finely graduated organic chain, and this perhaps is the greatest objection which can be urged against my theory. ³

Don makes a good point here. He wants to show a serious scientist casting doubt on the fossil record, and here is one. Darwin, who along with co-inventor Alfred Russell Wallace developed the theory of natural selection (not evolution—surprise!), took a large section of his book to point out the various problems he could see with his theory. The dearth of complete fossilized lines of descent is a problem even today for biologists trying to trace the record of life. In Darwin's time it was major. There were huge gaps.

Sort of like the gap in Don's quote. Pass over the ellipsis at the beginning of the quote. I assure you that gap is minor. Skip to the second ellipsis. Talk about a gap!

The first part of the quote is on page 125 of my copy of *Origin*. Don's quote picks up after the ellipsis on page 234. I love it! That's not a typo. That's a 109-page gap, big enough to fit punctuated equilibria inside with room to spare for Lamarckism and cold fusion, too.

Granted, in this use Don has not attempted to paint the wrong picture with this selection of quotes. In Darwin's time the fossil record was sparse, and Darwin was stating what was known at the time. However, I will ask that next time he uses this Don should make two separate quotes out of it and not make me re-read Darwin's book just to link the quotes. God's going to get you for this, Don.

Enough of OOC quotes. I'm tempted to just give the creationists a dictionary and say "Here. There are over 30,000 words inside. Just pick the ones you want."

In my own argument I must say I took a much more cerebral approach. Think Mike Tyson.

Since nobody had actually stated a definition of "creation model" (or "evolution model" for that matter), I felt free to do so.

The "creation model," I told listeners, is straight out of the Bible, and it's about as valid (home court advantage, remember). Besides pointing out with great fondness the two contradictory stories of creation in Genesis, I noted some obvious facts about the Bible:

- Adam and Eve – fictitious
- Noah – a fictitious character with no purpose (no flood to save everybody from)
- Abraham– a mythical figure
- Moses – actually Charlton Heston

If the Bible is not true, what is? Science is true. Here is what is true:

- The Sun was formed by the collapse of hydrogen (and helium) gas.
- The Earth was formed by accretion of heavy elements from a supernova.
- The Earth is about 4.5 billion years old.
- Life started spontaneously on Earth about 3.8 billion years ago.
- We are all descended from that first life.
- The fossil record reflects this great lineage without contradiction:
 - Fossils of ancient forms in ancient formations
 - Fossils of more modern forms in more recent formations
- Biochemistry reinforces this lineage without contradiction:
 - Analysis of DNA
 - Protein sequences

I had twenty minutes to make my presentation, so I naturally brought along about two hours worth of stuff. Most of that I

had to just flip through without explaining in great detail. I presented a lot of material that had nothing to do with the fossil record, just geology. This is not an accepted debating practice, but I wanted to talk about this stuff anyhow. I felt I had nothing to lose. Did I mention home court advantage?

What I did have fun with was whale evolution. A few years ago someone on the Skeptics List turned me on to Carl Zimmer's wonderful book *At the Water's Edge*. It's a book about recent work detailing the evolution of whales and other seagoing creatures from their land lubber ancestors.

Creationists have long had trouble with this concept, because whales were supposed to have been created once and for all in the water. However, they exhibit many features that seem to point to shore. The literature of the creation/evolution controversy is steep with the creationists' arguments against this premise. Here is what the notable creationist Duane Gish had to say about the matter:

There simply are no transitional forms in the fossil record between the marine mammals and their supposed land mammal ancestors . . . It is quite entertaining, starting with cows, pigs, or buffaloes, to attempt to visualize what the intermediates may have looked like. Starting with a cow, one could even imagine one line of descent which prematurely became extinct, due to what might be called an "udder failure." ⁴

The problem is, as Zimmer points out, while the creationists continue to make their arguments, the scientists continue to dig up new fossils. And the gaps continue to close.

That was then. Since the publication of Zimmer's book four years ago the situation has only gotten worse for the creationists. More fossils have been found, and additional studies based on biochemistry show a strengthening link to land based ungulates.

Turning to the fossil record for possibly the first time in my presentation, I showed prominent fossils along the line of descent from land based artiodactyl ungulates, hoofed animals with an even number of toes. These included:

- Sinonyx
- Pakicetus
- Ambulocetus
- Rodhocetus
- Basilosaurus
- Dorudon

Quoting from the Talk Origins FAQ:

We start with Sinonyx, a wolf-sized mesonychid (a primitive ungulate from the order Condylarthra, which gave rise to artiodactyls, perissodactyls, proboscideans, and so on) from the late Paleocene, about 60 million years ago. The characters that link Sinonyx to the whales, thus indicating that they are relatives, include an elongated muzzle, an enlarged jugular foramen, and a short basicranium...⁵

I have used Figure 1 from the Talk Origins FAQ to illustrate Sinonyx. Following illustrations of the other intermediates I got down to Dorudon, shown in Figure 2. Here I had some fun.

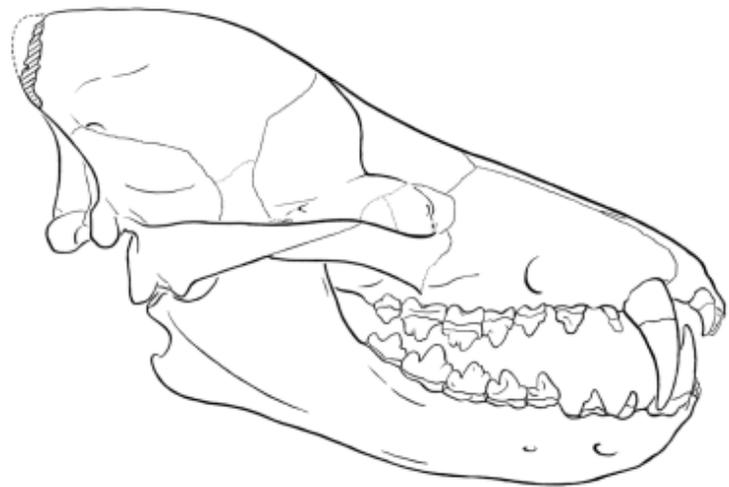


Figure 1. Reconstruction of the skull of *Sinonyx jiashanensis* (redrawn for RNCSE by Janet Dreyer).

From <http://talkorigins.org/features/whales>

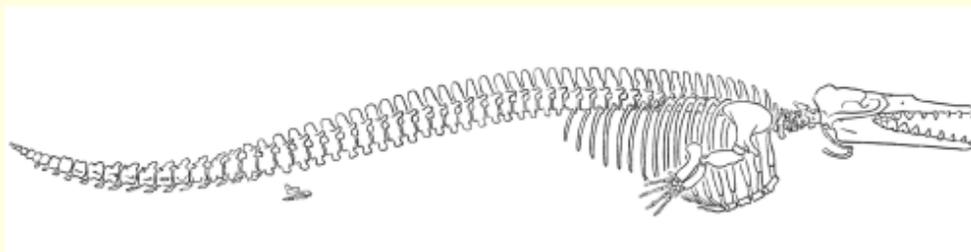


Figure 2. reconstruction of the skeleton of *Dorudon atrox* (redrawn for RNCSE by Janet Dreyer).

From <http://talkorigins.org/features/whales/>

What's that under the tail of Durodon? Those are feet bones. Bones not attached to the rest of the skeleton and certainly not used for walking or swimming or anything else. These are feet bones left over from Dorudon's *Sinonyx* ancestor. If whales were created as sea creatures, why were they created with feet?

I'm going to tell the story a little out of sequence here, because I want to get to Don's response. Don reminded the audience that some reputable scientists do not consider these bones as vestigial, because they serve a useful purpose. They are used to anchor muscles in the whales.

Now Durodons are not modern whales, having first appeared about 40 millions years ago. But modern whales do have the feet bones, sometimes. So I had to ask, very loudly and at great length and with great relish "If the bones are there to anchor muscles, then why do they look like feet?"

Don's shining moment, though, was in response to an accusation I made. Having endured nearly twenty minutes of his presentation of out-of-context quotes I spent a lot of my rebuttal time berating him for this tactic. I reminded the audience that once, actually about ten years ago, Jeff Umbarger and I reconstructed some of Don's OOC quotes. In one case we showed where he had taken three widely separated phrases from a *real* scientist's work and had put them down out of sequence to make his point.

Sharper than I expected, Don came back when it was his turn again, showing the audience an excerpt of the article Jeff and I published back in 1992 (which I had stupidly neglected to bring with me). Don mentioned that Jeff and I falsely accused him of saying something he did not.

Don has graciously sent me the mini slide presentation he used to make this point along with a kind note, which I will reprint here:

My point was:

Your claim that I was trying to say that those I quoted really agreed with the creationists position, is absurd. I emphasized over and over that they were devout evolutionists acknowledging facts contrary to their own interest. The fact that they are devout evolutionists makes the embarrassing facts they acknowledge even more believable. Therefore I want people to know that those acknowledging these embarrassing facts are devout evolutionists.

Your claim that I was really trying to leave the impression that Stephen Gould was a creationist, is mind-boggling. It ought to be embarrassing.

"Sincerely..."

Thanks, Don. I promise to be embarrassed in the future. Actually, I am a little embarrassed right now. The presentation text Don sent me does not seem to match what Jeff and I published regarding the quotes of the respected scientist in question – William D. Stansfield. Besides, where did Stephen Jay Gould come in here?

I'm taking this off line and putting the issue of the quotes in a side bar so readers can get back to the main story line.

Bullfrog

Don't get the idea Don used nothing but OOC quotes. During his rebuttal session he got to poo-pooing some of my statements that DNA similarities and comparisons of protein sequences reinforce the inferences of the fossil record. In the past creationists have laid out what they think are contradictions to these conclusions, and Don mentioned some of them. Then I was suddenly awake. He started reeling off a list of contradictions, and a bell went off in my head. The following chart is that bell:

<u>Molecule</u>	<u>Nearest Relative to Humans</u>
Fetal Hemoglobin	Horse
Tear Enzymes	Chicken
Albumin	Bullfrog
Blood Antigen A	Butter bean
Cholesterol Level	Garter snake
Milk Chemistry	Donkey

The chart is from *The Bullfrog Affair*, subtitled *The Enchanted Prince Croaks* by David C. Wise. As Wise tells it:

"Creation scientists" try to counter this body of biochemical evidence by claiming that certain protein comparisons actually show humans to be more closely related to vastly different organisms (e.g. bullfrogs, chickens, rattlesnakes) than to chimpanzees. A classic example is offered by former biologist Gary Parker, formerly of the ICR, in his book, *Creation: The Facts of Life*, in which he lists several molecules that show humans to be more closely related to quite different organisms than to apes: ⁶

Then Wise shows the aforementioned chart. About twenty years ago Duane Gish got stuck in this tar baby and was called down by Dr. Russell Doolittle. It was on a PBS production about creation in the class room. After Gish related these supposed contradictions Doolittle responded with "Oh, bullfrog!" Meaning, I guess, something else. That's the apparent origin of the "bullfrog" cat call that would sometimes greet Gish when he came to speak at a serious center of higher education. You have to read the whole article to get all of the details.

I didn't have the presence of mind to respond "bullfrog" when it came my turn, but I did wonder loudly when creationists were ever going to give up this dead corpse, or words to that effect.

Finally, Don got to go last. I took the last question, which was from NTS technical advisor, Tim Gorski. Tim is an M.D. in medical practice, who also heads up the DFW Council Against Health Fraud. I believe he asked about complexity and whether it was reasonable to expect humans to have more chromosomes than "lower" forms of life on the evolutionary scale. I noted this is not a requirement of evolution. For example, there is a simple worm out there that has many more base pairs in its DNA than people do in theirs, and lots of organisms have more chromosomes than people. Don had

mentioned this too.

I further pointed out that the audience might reasonably ask: "Why is this joker (me), with no formal training in biology, geology, paleontology... up here debating a creationists on these very topics?" That, I reminded them, is the wrong question. The question they should be asking is: "Why is it so easy?"

Responding to my response, I guess Don sort of got off track. I was not paying close attention. The debate was over. I was sitting in the middle of the auditorium with my back to the audience, going over all my missed opportunities.

And Don brought up the Paluxy "man tracks."

It is impolite and completely forbidden to say anything while your opponent is speaking during the debate. I swear I said not a word. But my arms shot straight up to the heavens. Yes, God. I do believe in you. My mouth was shut, but my brain screamed:

GOALLLLLLL!!!

There was polite laughter from the audience. Did I mention the home court advantage?

[A complete copy of the NTS debate presentation is on our Web site:[<http://www.ntskeptics.org/issues/debate/debate.htm>]

References

1. *The North Texas Skeptic*, October 1999. <http://www.ntskeptics.org/1999/1999october/october1999.htm>
2. R. Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, pp. 229-230. 1987, W.W. Norton & Company, New York.
3. C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species* in *The Origin of Species and the Descent of Man*. Random House, New York.
4. D.T. Gish, *Evolution: The Challenge of the Fossil Record*, pp 78-79. 1985, Creation-Life Publishers, El Cajon, CA.
(From the Talk Origins FAQ at <http://www.talkorigins.org/features/whales/>)
5. From the Talk Origins FAQ at <http://www.talkorigins.org/features/whales/>
6. From David Wise's Web site at http://members.aol.com/dwise1/cre_ev/bullfrog.html

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They Just Don't Get It

In response to being accused of misusing out-of-context quotes, Don Patton produced the following. Slide headings are in bold, and I have compressed multiple slides into single sections:

John Blanton and Jeff Umbarger

"Where we have been able to crosscheck the citations against the actual text, we have noted that the classic out-of-context stunt is being pulled to make it appear that mainstream science supports the MIOS view."

"Radiometric dating methods, says Don Patton for example, are just about worthless, even according to anti-creationist scientists such as William D. Stansfield, author of *Science of Evolution*."

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Volume 6 Number 5, May 1992

Actual Patton Handout

Dr. Stansfield's "Answer:"

"All the above methods for dating the age of the earth [indicating young], its various strata, and its fossils are questionable... A method that appears to have much greater reliability for determining absolute ages of rocks is that of radiometric dating."

John Blanton and Jeff Umbarger

"Perhaps it was our mistake but on listening to the MIOS presentation, we felt the speaker was telling us that a representative of mainstream science was reporting in a reputable journal that radiometric dating in general and the uranium-lead analysis in particular is fraught with such perilous assumptions as to render it completely unreliable."

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Volume 6 Number 5, May 1992

Don tells me that Jeff and I are accusing him of telling his audience that real scientists are supporting the creationist view. To demonstrate we were wrong he has shown the debate audience an excerpt from an Actual Patton Handout reflecting Stansfield's true feelings.

I have a copy of that handout, as well. It is titled *Descriptions of Young Earth Evidence by Anti-Creationist, William D. Stansfield*.

Dr. Stansfield is introduced as a Professor of Biological Sciences, California Polytechnic State University. Don's handout from 1992 contains nine quotes from Stansfield listing arguments that have been used for a young Earth. The quotes are titled:

- Water from volcanoes
- Uranium in the oceans
- Helium in the atmosphere
- Meteoric dust in strata
- Meteorites in strata
- Lava in the crust
- Pressure in oil reservoirs
- Human population dynamics
- Radiocarbon in atmosphere

Following that in the handout Don gives Dr. Stansfield's "answer", shown above. I sometimes don't pick up on things, but I and others in attendance that evening (4 February 1992) got the idea that the good Dr. Stansfield acknowledged a vast array (OK, nine) of arguments for a young Earth but chose to ignore them in favor of his own pet technique, radiocarbon dating.

Problem

Actually, Jeff and I did not use any of Stansfield's quotes in the 1992 story. We mentioned the above handout and dissected quotes from J.D. Macdougall and Everly Driscoll. About Stansfield we said in the 1992 story:

Hoping to see just how good the scientific evidence for the age of the earth is, we were told, instead, just how bad it is. Furthermore, the evidence presented was not from creationists but from honest-to-goodness, card-carrying scientists of the first kind. Really, folks. After taking in Don's complete lecture, we began to wonder why scientists even bother with the issue of the age of the earth. None of their methods ever seem to work for them. Radiometric dating methods, says Don Patton for example, are just about worthless, even according to anti-creationist scientists such as William D. Stansfield, author of *Science of Evolution*, which Don quoted often during his lecture.

Dr. Stansfield's quote, which we referred to but did not dissect, was under the heading "*Clocks*" *Unreliable*... Don's text from his handout (1992) goes as follows:

If we assume that (1) a rock contained no Pb^{206} when it was formed, (2) all Pb^{206} now in the rock was produced by radioactive decay of U^{238} , (3) the rate of decay has been constant, (4) there has been no differential leaching by water of either element, and (5) no U^{238} has been transported into the rock from another source, then we might expect our estimate of age be fairly accurate. Each assumption is a potential variable, the magnitude of which can seldom be ascertained. In cases where the daughter product is a gas, as

in the decay of potassium (K^{40}) to the gas argon (A^{40}) it is essential that none of the gas escapes from the rock over long periods of time.

It is obvious that radiometric technique (sic) may not be the absolute dating methods that they are claimed to be. Age estimates on a given geological stratum by different radiometric methods are often quite different (sometimes by hundreds of millions of years). There is no absolutely reliable long-term radiological "clock."

The quote is from *The Science of Evolution*, 1977, page 84. If you would like to see the full context of Stansfield's quote then check the following URL:

<http://www.theistic-evolution.com/stansfield.html>

I have not consulted with Jeff since the debate, but I will speak for him now. We stand by the full text and meaning of our report on Don Patton's use of out-of-context quotes. I am putting the whole business on line for review. Please check it out at the following URL:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/issues/patton/patton.htm>

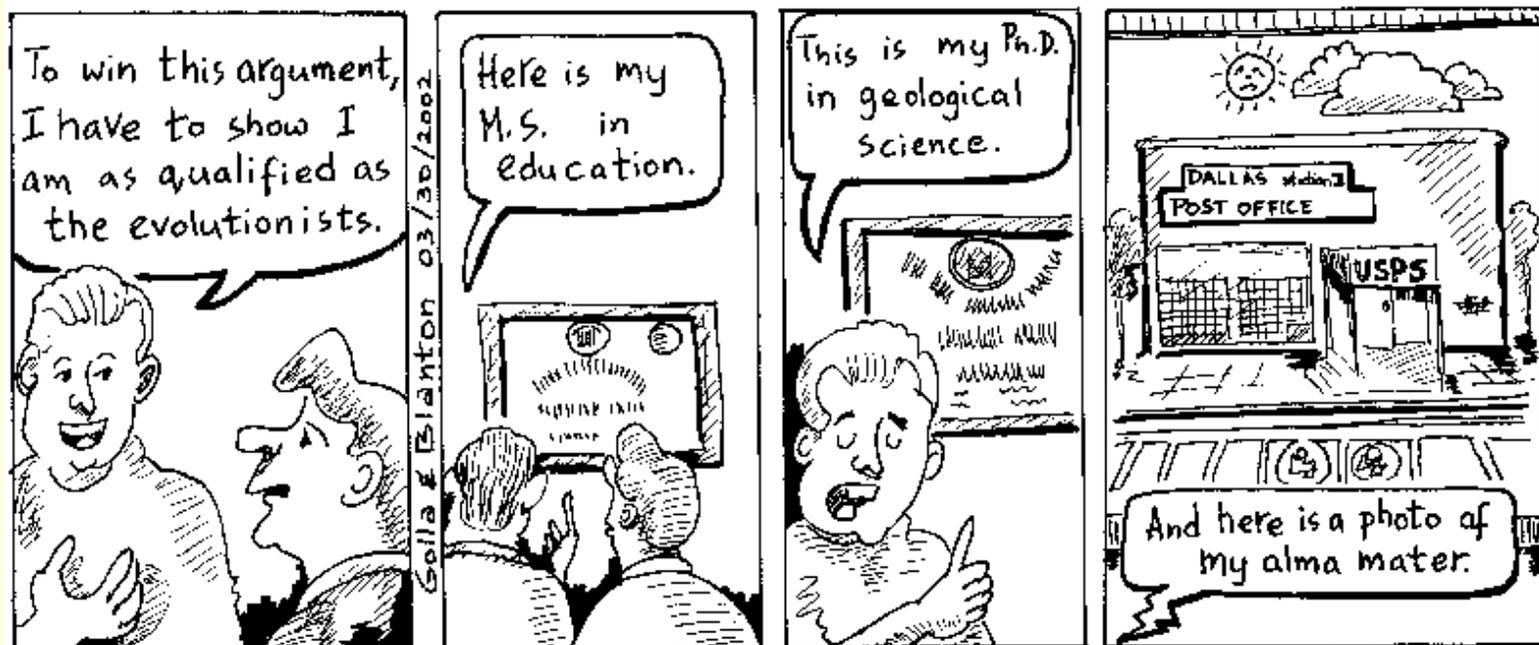
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