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A Visit to the Institute for Creation Research
Part One

by Karen Bartelt

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The lecture was given by geologist Dr. Steve Austin, who showed us a video which he said was also shown at the Mt. St. Helens visitor center. The St. Helens eruption was described in accurate detail, and there was a great emphasis on the velocities of the mudflows, and the amounts of material that were removed and deposited elsewhere.

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It was Austin's intention to use the Mt. St. Helens eruption to convince us that catastrophes can cause rapid, large-scale changes on the earth's surface. Austin said that he had once been an evolutionist, but that his observations of the Mt. St. Helens eruption had converted him to catastrophism and creationism (more about that later). He set up a "straw man," implying that his "catastrophist" view of geology was something new and revolutionary in the geologic world, and that the "uniformitarian" (i.e., mainstream) geologists totally ignore the role of volcanoes and other catastrophic events in the shaping the earth. One of our group leaders, a Ph.D. paleontologist, took Austin to task for having such a simplistic view.

Austin continued his presentation by showing us some of his slides of the Mt. St. Helens area. One slide was simply described as showing "strata 25 feet high deposited by Mt. St. Helens." He referred to this stratified volcanic ash only as "sedimentary rock," and observed that it took only a few hours to be deposited in layers. What was implied here, of course, was that large-scale sedimentary strata, such as the limestones and sandstones of Illinois, could be deposited in a similar, rapid manner. I asked Austin whether he had any evidence that any of the more typical sedimentary rock — limestone, sandstone, or shale, had ever been deposited rapidly, but he provided no such example. Our group's level of geologic expertise was above average, but I wonder how many less-skeptical people have left such presentations thinking that all sedimentary rocks show evidence of rapid deposition.

Young-earth creationists would be interested in a mechanism that allowed for the rapid formation of coal. Austin was interested in the burial of trees in a nearly vertical, root-down position at the bottom of Spirit Lake (apparently there are some trees in that position), and said that he was sure that coal was forming at Spirit Lake now. He then referred to the petrified forests found in Yellowstone Park, and described them as remnants of similar ancient catastrophes (to be fair, he never came right out and said "Flood of Noah.") The generally-accepted view of the petrified forests of Yellowstone

— that the trees represent twenty-seven forests, sequentially buried by many volcanic episodes — was not mentioned.

Austin also failed to mention why, if these forests in Yellowstone were such good models for catastrophic burial and coal formation, they do not contain any coal deposits. Erling Dorf, in his comprehensive article on the petrified Yellowstone forests, reported the presence of conglomerates from stream deposits, breccias from mudflows or landslides, volcanic tuff, from the numerous volcanic events, and lava beds. No coal!

Though Austin described himself as "an age-dating agnostic," he was eager to share with us the fact that he alone had radiometrically dated the Mt. St. Helens lava dome. Using potassium/argon dating, he determined a lava dome age of 350,000 years. His unstated conclusion was that radiometric methods are unreliable and give all sorts of bogus dates. There are, however, several other explanations of his results.

First, Austin sent young, low-potassium (and therefore very low in radiogenic argon) rocks to Geochron Laboratories, which specifically stated that it did not want to deal with young, low-potassium samples. He did it anyway and specifically states in his paper that he did not tell them about the origin of the samples. This puts potentially large error-bars on the data and also opens his research to ethical questions.

Second, Austin may have dated some of the solid material that came up with the lava rather than the lava itself. Austin also mentioned that the lava contained xenoliths — pieces of solid rock that came up with the lava. Although Austin stated that he was careful to remove the xenoliths, we have no proof that he succeeded, and he apparently made no effort to date the xenoliths separately. Austin's date was published in a "peer-reviewed" journal (Creation Ex Nihilo Technical Journal) only in the sense that the journal was published by other creationists. The peer-review process of a mainstream geology journal would have demanded that he explain his unusual results more completely. Therefore, contamination by rock that is 350,000 years old or older remains a possibility.

Third, some of Austin's previous forays into the radiometric dating of rocks demonstrate that he is not an expert in this field. Austin is the head of the ICR's "Grand Canyon Dating Project". As such, he is committed to casting doubt on the radiometric ages of the lavas in the Grand Canyon. In a 1992 publication, ICR Impact #224: "Excessively Old 'Ages' for Grand Canyon Lava Flows", Austin asserted that he found Cenozoic (relatively recent) lavas that gave Rb/Sr ages of 1.34 billion years. These assertions are completely debunked in Chris Stassen's "Criticism of the ICR's Grand Canyon Dating Project" at the Talk.Origins Archive: www.talkorigins.org/faqs/icr-science.html#sec2 (accessed 1-13-98). Stassen points out that Austin's Grand Canyon lavas came from different flows, and the "ages" of the flows may actually represent a minimum age for the mantle that served as source material for the flows. Despite the obvious problems with Austin's methods, Impact #224 is alive, well, and available at the ICR museum!

Austin's last point about Mt. St. Helens was that the rapid erosion of volcanic ash in the Mt. St. Helens area (which he calls the "Little Grand Canyon") was a good model for catastrophic erosion over much larger areas. He proposed the existence of large pluvial lakes above the current Grand Canyon, and that the Canyon itself was cut when the lakes drained catastrophically. Again, this presumes that recently-deposited volcanic ash has properties similar to those of lithified limestone, sandstone, and shale — something most mainstream geologists do not accept.

As a young-earth creationist, Austin presumably believes that the sedimentary strata of the Grand Canyon were laid down rapidly and catastrophically during The Great Flood. I was eager to hear Austin's response to what I would consider a general problem for catastrophists, whether we are talking about catastrophic erosion of sedimentary strata or floods depositing these strata. Many of the sedimentary strata in and around the Grand Canyon contain the tracks of animals. The red Kayenta formation, exposed nearer to Glen Canyon Dam, contains the tracks of dinosaurs. I have seen these tracks personally, and told Austin so. I asked Austin to comment on the fact that these tracks exist, and are difficult to square with a catastrophic formation of the layers of the Grand Canyon. It is inconsistent to have all life on earth obliterated by a flood, and then have animal tracks in the layers deposited by the flood. Austin stated that these certainly were animal tracks, laid down by animals walking through mud or sand, but he never satisfactorily explained how animals could happily meander through an area so soon after a global catastrophe.

At the end of the presentation Austin was confronted by another member of our group, who asked, "Whatever happened to Stuart Nevins? Does he publish anymore?" Those of you familiar with ICR literature may recognize the name from

tracts published in the late 70's.

Austin admitted that he had published under that pen name. So much for his recent, Mt. St. Helens-induced conversion to creationism! Our group of skeptics was beginning to realize what passed for reality at the ICR, and we had not even set foot in the museum yet...

References:

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