

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 13, Number 2

March 2005

Thoughts on John Mark Henry's Talk

by Clark Olson

REALL opted out of its monthly meeting on Tuesday, February 1st, so members could attend a talk given by John Mark Henry (JMH) at the Lincoln Library (LL) entitled "Intelligent Design (ID) – a Scientific Alternative to evolution." The audience filled the room (138 were counted). Many of the people appeared to be church members or friends of the speaker and many children were present. Some of these were sharing home schooling experiences before the program began, according to my wife, who overheard some conversation. The talk lasted until after 8:30 PM so there was very little time for questions and comments.

This evening was billed as a follow-up to a talk by John Henry three years ago lambasting evolutionary science. In that previous talk, he resisted discussing any alternatives to evolution until sufficiently pressed when he finally admitted he believes in the story in Genesis. The present talk was supposed to answer the question of what *scientific* alternative to evolution John Henry has in mind. The talk seemed disorganized and jumped around from issue to issue. Although he is a slick speaker, he left out various pieces of information necessary to make a coherent case, much less a scientific one. In the end, his proposal is just a dressing of ID splashed on top of young earth creationism. Considering that the subject was

intelligent design it is ironic the talk was not intelligently designed or organized.

In order to review the talk it is necessary to outline what is involved in a discussion of evolution.

1) Time: The subject of evolution is the history of life on earth. Therefore, it involves the dimension of time, 3 billion years or more since the origin of life. 2) Origin of life: There is no generally accepted single theory to explain it although there are a number of separate theories. Some people would like to exclude the topic from a discussion, but it is part of a continuum and JMH continually brings it up. 3) The

fact of evolution is that all living organisms on earth are descended from previous organisms, back to the first cell. Creation is continuous and species are not fixed. The evidence supporting this idea comes from a wide variety of studies in biology and geology. 4) The *theory* of evolution deals with the mechanisms of evolution—natural selection, sexual selection, genetic

drift, etc., and the exact placement of organisms in the "tree of life". Both JMH's first talk and the present one confused some of the issues listed here.

1) In this talk JMH did not discuss the dimension of time, but in his previous talk he said that he doesn't believe in radiometric dating. This comment was based on some private knowledge or experience he has. If he has some significant information, he should try to publish it, so that it could be evaluated by a recognized expert. However, since he didn't provide any information on this point, it seems unlikely that he knows anything about dating methods that would contradict current understanding of

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

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From the Chairman

Wally Hartshorn

Having attended John Mark Henry's presentation of "Intelligent Design: A Scientific Alternative to Evolution", I have to say that I found the experience, frustrating, and extremely depressing.

I was surprised at his strategy—and at how effective it seems likely to be. I went expecting to be bombarded with "irreducible complexity" and "specified complexity" and all manner of pseudoscientific terminology that would be difficult to counter in the Q&A period following the talk.

Instead, he avoided such mainstays of the ID literature and instead focused on demonstrating by analogy how ridiculous scientists are being for accepting evolution. His basic argument was that, deep down in their hearts, scientists **know** that Intelligent Design is true and that it is only by constantly reminding themselves that there is **not** a Designer that they are able to maintain the fiction the evolution works.

Okay, go ahead—demonstrate that he's wrong.

You can't, can you? And that's part of what was frustrating about it—there wasn't any **there** there. You couldn't point to any flaws in the evidence he presented because he didn't really provide any evidence to attack. Instead, he got plenty of chuckles as

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A Nod to Our Patrons

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the age of the earth and other milestones in evolution. Also, if he apparently thinks the earth is young (how young?), one might ask why he needs to rebut evolution, since there isn’t time for evolution to happen anyway?

2) Some of JMH’s complaints about difficulties in studies of evolution, such as the origin of DNA, the genetic code and the origin of cells, refer back to the origin of life, or somewhat later. Obviously, his concerns cannot be effectively debated at this time. This appears to be the argument from incredulity. Just because he can’t imagine it, it can’t happen. Or it is the “God of gaps” argument. He is expressing faith that a supernatural explanation will prevail while we, I suppose, argue, perhaps also with some degree of faith, that a naturalistic explanation will be forthcoming.

3) We can assume that JMH believed he had covered the occurrence of evolution in his first talk (along with some material on natural selection) and thought he had rebutted the scientific view. At this point, 3 years later, I’m not sure whether JMH systematically covered the different kinds of evidence for evolution. However, since he often asks us what the evidence for evolution is, I’m wondering how he could have properly covered all the evidence?

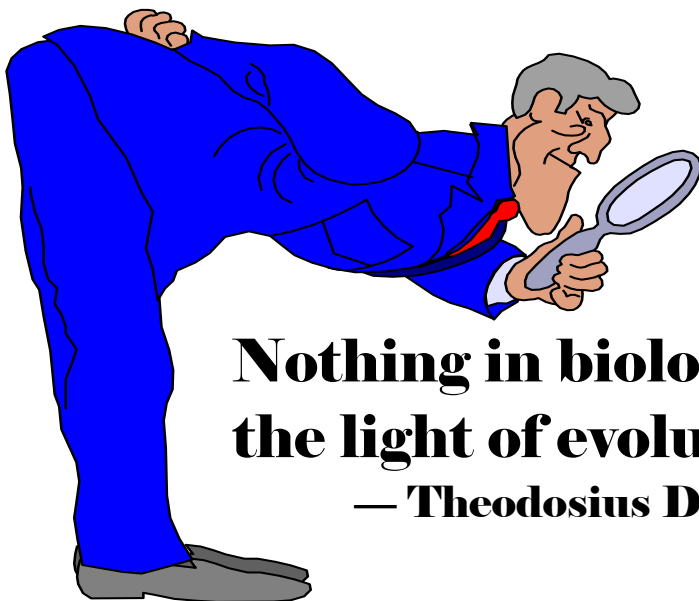
In neither talk did JMH say explicitly how creation occurred. Since there isn’t any time for evolution to have occurred, and his first talk purportedly refuted evolution, then creation must have been separate for all the millions of organisms on earth, past or present. How did this happen? One can only assume

it was directly and instantaneously out of non living matter. To a scientist this sounds like a miracle and is therefore obviously not science. It is a lot easier to conceive of organisms coming from pre-existing organisms via eggs and sperm, or budding and gradually changing over time than for complex organisms to appear mysteriously from dust. These ideas were covered in the 19th century with Pasteur and spontaneous generation and the principle of all cells arising from existing cells. There is an apparent difficulty with what happened at the origin of life but this was when there were no cells to eat up newly organizing molecules.

Special creation brings up a problem with the number of individuals necessary to start a species. In other conversations JMH has expressed disbelief that mutation could explain much. He admits mutations occur but believes they are always adverse. If this were true then how do we get so much genetic variability in a species? Strangely, he said in the present talk that he accepts selection for antibiotic resistance in bacteria and pesticide resistance in insects etc. As I remember in the previous talk he also accepted that there was cyclic (but not speciation) changes in Darwin’s finches, also implying genetic variability. Finally in the present talk he lampooned some exercises in an evolutionary studies workbook on genetic variability. Apparently he was lampooning the relation such an exercise had to evolution, not that there wasn’t such variability. Therefore, if we can’t have mutation, then there would have to be creation of many individuals for each species because no individual contains all the genetic variation existing in a species.

Since the present talk was supposed to be about ID there was no general discussion of evidence of occurrence of evolution, but he did want us to know that bat fossils have not been found. Thus, we can not see a transition from a mouse-like form to fully developed bat in the fossil record. Whether this re-

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Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.

— **Theodosius Dobzhansky (1900-1975), geneticist**

Websites on Scams, Frauds, Hoaxes and Urban Legends

by Lee Beneze

The Internet is a wonderful thing. It can be the source of timely, comprehensive, and accurate information on every subject known to mankind. Unfortunately, it is also the new medium of choice for the same con artists, scammers and hoaxes that are always with us.

The bad news is that the Internet has given tech savvy con artists a whole new way to fleece the gullible and the innocent. The good news is that the Internet can also be an excellent source of information for advocates and informed citizens.

This is a brief survey of websites that provide information on current cons and scams (both Net based and the more traditional kinds), hoaxes, computer viruses, phony "warnings", and the like. These are sites that are reputable, reliable, and timely.

"Timely" is often the key in defeating scams. Scams today literally move at the speed of light. In addition to the "oldies but goodies," like the "Nigerian 419 scam," are newer high tech ones, like "phishing."

These websites are among the better ones, but this is by no means an exclusive list. In fact, most of these website contain links to other informative sites.

One of the best overall, and certainly the most entertaining, is "snopes.com." Every well informed skeptic should be familiar with this site. Run by a California couple as a private venture (apparently as a labor of love), this website has everything from currently circulating urban legends to Net based scams and hoaxes. One strength of this site is that it is very timely. Any new scam or hoax being widely circulated on the Net is almost certain to result in a "debunking" explanatory article on this site within

days.

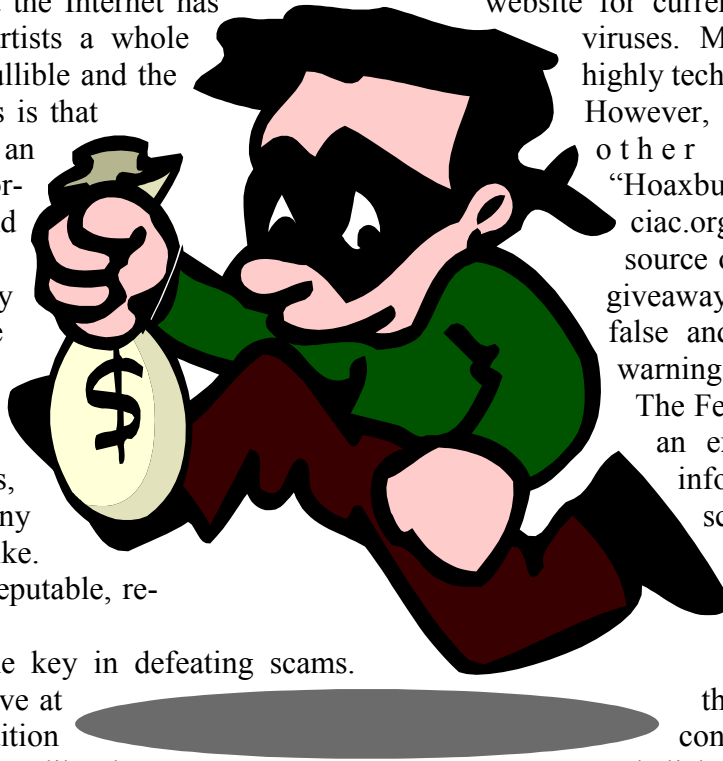
The United States Department of Energy (DOE) has an Office of Cyber Security, the responsibility of which is to protect American computers and computer systems from cyber attack. Part of this website, with the awkward name of Computer Incident Advisory Capability, is apparently the official federal website for current information on computer viruses. Much of this information is highly technical.

However, there is a connection to another DOE site called "Hoaxbusters" ("www.hoaxbusters.ciac.org"), which is an excellent source of information on phony Net giveaways, scam chain letters, and false and malicious computer virus warnings.

The Federal Trade Commission has an excellent website containing information on a number of scams, both modern (such as identity theft) and traditional (such as telemarketing fraud). Their site is at "www.ftc.gov." To access the information on scams and cons, go to the main page menu and click on "For Consumers."

Another site that focuses on consumer scams is posted by the National Consumer Law Center (NCLC). This is one of the very best sites for information on all forms of consumer fraud. The site contains a great deal of information on various consumer fraud issues. The website is "www.consumerlaw.org."

"Phishing" is the latest "high tech" scam. This scam involves the creation of phoney websites, designed to look like a bank or credit card website. The con artist entices the victim to the phoney website with an e-mail announcing that some problem with the victim's account. The victim is then requested to type in passwords and account numbers. Imagine what happens then.



Because this could seriously damage consumer confidence in the security of e-commerce, some large companies in the financial community have created a website to combat this scam: “www.antiphishing.org.” It is worth visiting, particularly if you are unfamiliar with this, the first really new con of the 21st Century.

One of the classics is the “Nigerian 419 scam.” This scam actually did originate in Nigeria in the 1980's; the number “419” stands for the part of the Nigerian criminal code that the scam violates. Despite the idiotic simplicity of the scam, it has collected hundreds of millions of dollars from the greedy gullible.

This starts with an e-mail from someone claiming to be the child or widow of a highly placed African government official now deceased. Millions of dollars are in an African bank account that needs to be transferred to an American bank account, and they would like to share millions with you in return for use of your account. Needless to say, a surprising number of people fall for this.

This one scam is so vast and global that it actually has multiple websites specifically devoted to it.

The United States Secret Service has a website devoted to this scam at “www.secretservice.gov/alert419.” It also connects to several other websites, such as “www.scam419.com” and “www.419fraud.com.” These website contain an overwhelming amount of information on the scam, how it works, who has been victimized, and what is being done to stop it.

Finally, particularly for a senior or one caring for a senior, the AARP has an excellent website containing a vast amount of information, covering everything from Social Security benefits to retirement leisure. Under “consumer protection” is information on identity theft, home repair frauds, home financing frauds, and consumer utility problems. The site is “www.aarp.org/money/consumer protection.”

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but represents websites that are particularly informative and reliable. However, a conscientious researcher must always be skeptical of supposedly helpful information. Con artists have been known to pose as advocates for scam victims in an effort to victimize them again. Although I am unaware of any specific sites designed for that purpose, they doubtlessly exist. ♡

(“Chairman” continued from page 2)

he pointed to numerous ways in which scientists could be made to look silly.

I wish that I had a copy of his presentation, because it would make it easier to provide some examples. (Perhaps he'd be willing to send me a videotape? We'll see.)

One of his points, for example, was that the fact that birds have bodies that were made for flying indicates that a Designer **designed** them for flying. I'm no expert, but I'm thinking that if birds didn't have bodies that were made for flying, they wouldn't fly.

I suspect you'll find that fish have bodies that are well suited for swimming. What would John Mark Henry do with that sentence? He would replace “well suited” with “designed” — QED.

Another frustrating aspect of the talk was how many examples he gave of very **bad** science instruction when it comes to evolution. He's right about that, but he takes it as an example of how poor the evidence is for evolution and how little faith science has in it, while I take it as an example of how science instruction in our schools needs to

be improved.

But mainly I left the talk depressed, because I suspect we will lose this battle. The harder we work to keep ID out of the classroom, but more people will wonder what we're afraid of. ID is taking on the aura of “forbidden fruit” (to use a Biblical reference). If the authorities don't want you to learn about it, bit must be good.

I suspect the result will be that people will turn to people like John Mark Henry, as well as books like “Of Pandas and People”. From them, they will learn plenty of bad science. I wonder whether it wouldn't be better to have science educators—**good ones**—take on the issue of evolution and Intelligent Design directly in the classroom. I don't mean in a unbiased, “here's the two sides, you decide which is right” fashion, but in a manner that backs the real science and explains the flaws in the pseudoscience.

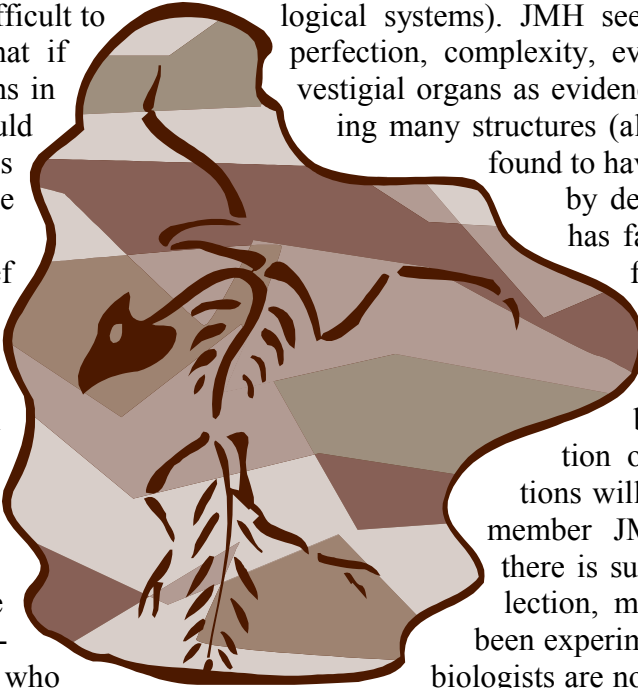
I'm sure the ID proponents would still complain about that, but science classrooms would be tackling the issue directly, rather than hoping it goes away. The latter seems unlikely. ♡

(“John Mark Henry Talk” continued from page 3)

cord is available or not, I don’t know, but it is interesting that he ignored the thousands (millions?) of fossils we do have for many other organisms in order to dwell on the lack of a record for one group, for which the bones are delicate and difficult to fossilize. Also, does this mean that if fossils of several intermediate forms in bat evolution were found, he would then be convinced that evolution is valid? That would be the God of the gaps argument again.

Interestingly, one of the chief proponents of ID, M Behe, who JMH cited several times, doesn’t seem to have any problem with the fact of evolution, see New York Times, 2-7-05, Op Ed page A-27

4) ID was his alternative to evolution. For him ID explains the occurrence of life on earth- it just appeared- and it indicates the mechanism of evolution- an intelligent designer did it. He did not say who



the designer was. If aliens, that just begs the question to some place in space- so that leaves God. He also did not say how the designer did it—it/he/she just did it. Much of the talk consisted of slides and videos illustrating design in cells and organisms (but not ecological systems). JMH sees intelligent design, i.e. perfection, complexity, everywhere. He dismissed vestigial organs as evidence of lack of design saying many structures (also behavior?) have been

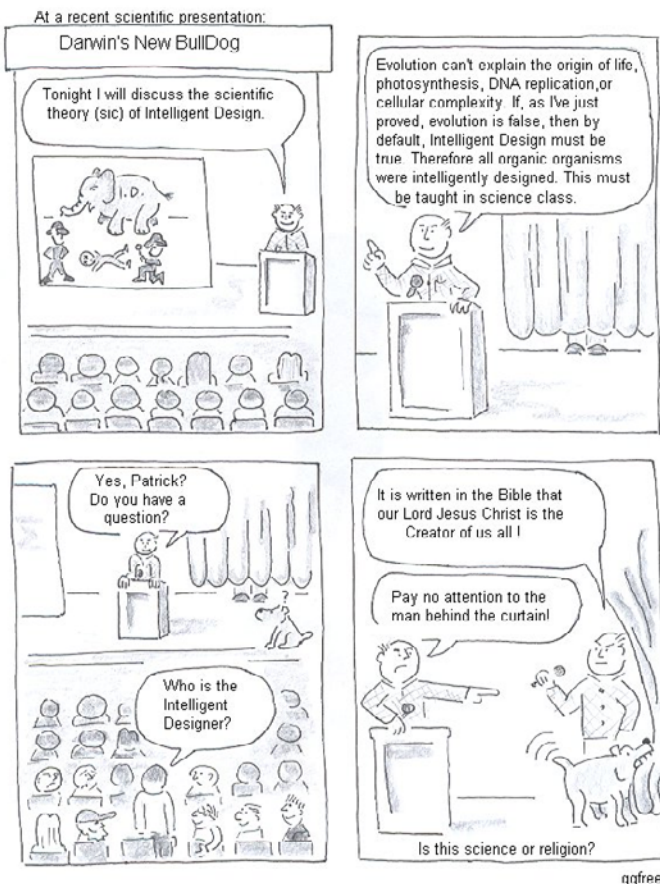
found to have a function after all (i.e. by design) (and apparently he has faith that function will be found for others also).

Some biologists also want to find a function for every structure too but believe natural selection or other natural explanations will suffice. I don’t even remember JMH acknowledging that there is such an idea as natural selection, much less that there have been experiments illustrating it. Other

biologists are not so concerned that function will be found for every structure/behavior because what counts is that the species as a whole is reproducing and each generation is being replaced in the next generation. I wonder how JMH would explain fetal wastage and birth defects. From a humanistic perspective it is horrible, but as long as a sufficient number of individuals survive and reproduce the species survives.

A general feature of the talk was the name dropping and statements from scientists who support ID. This is true, there are some like Behe, but there are hundreds or thousands who don’t. Various evolutionists were quoted to make various points. I don’t think any were really misquoted or taken out context, but of course, it is a clever rhetorical device to involve people of opposing views to seemingly bolster ones own point of view.

Another feature was to show how little evolution is actually acknowledged in biology. He had found a study in *New Scientist* (a reputable popular science magazine) that very few references to evolution were found in a survey of biochemical and microbiological journals. Also he himself found few references to evolution in a large introductory college biology text. These observations were apparently meant to show



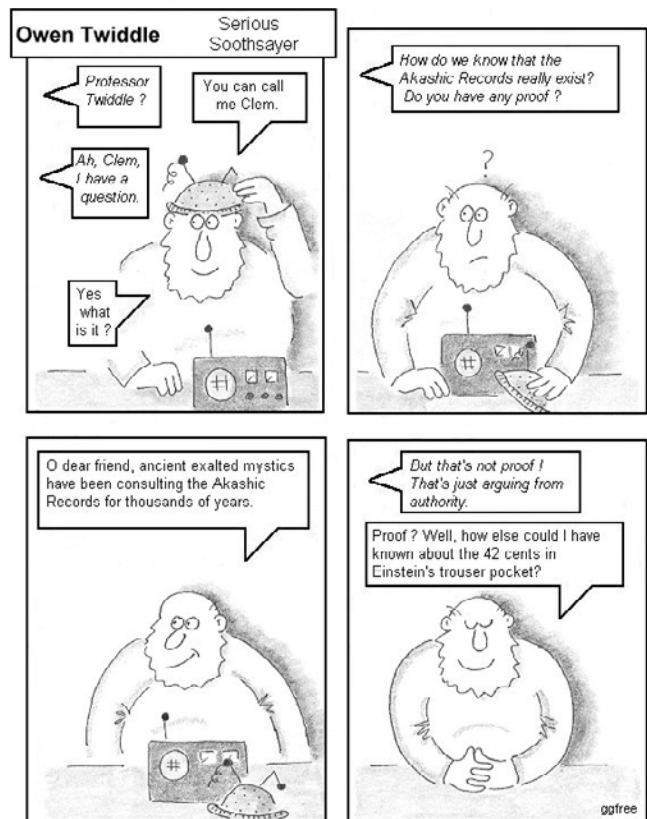
that even biologists do not take evolution seriously, and therefore the public shouldn't. The answer to this criticism is that biologists can not consider all aspects of a phenomenon they are studying to put in a journal paper. In contrast, there are over a dozen journals that do cover evolution, and *Science* magazine has 1-3 scientific reports and news items a week on evolution.

In conclusion, the talk purported to be a presentation of an alternative scientific theory to evolution. I thought it was unorganized and did not present any coherent theory. All it was, was a presentation of examples of design in nature, mostly of cells, and a use of various rhetorical devices to show evolution was wrong. The question is where does this design come from. The only answer was, it must come about from some designer, and the speaker was coy about labeling the designer as God. The only thing scientific about the presentation was the illustrations from books, which were the result of real scientific work. But he was unable to offer a scientific explanation of how these structures came to be. Apparently all he can think of is that they came to be out of special creation of every organism, miraculously out of nothing, in a short, recent time frame. All in all, he still seems stuck with Genesis, writing done by at least two authors plus editors (scribes and redactors) 600 to 1000 BCE and derived from Babylonian mythology.

Why should we be concerned? This talk may have expressed rather extreme attitudes of some creationists, but every opinion poll indicates somewhat between a third and a half of the general population rejects evolution as an explanation for the diversity of life on earth. As people who are scientists or are concerned with science we think that all citizens should understand science to the best of their abilities. This starts in primary and secondary public education (classroom teaching and standards). JMH would like to see the subject of evolution dropped in school, and apparently a lot of teachers already neglect the subject. This is like dropping the study of Illinois and American history from Springfield schools. There may be controversies in the presentation of history but we can't ignore it. Students going to conservative religious schools probably get a lot of creationism but those going to Catholic schools and other private schools apparently get a good background. Some students going on to college may get a

good exposure to evolution there. Most jobs that would require some acceptance of evolution probably require a college education these days. But it is very discouraging that even biology graduates, at least some middle aged ones I have met, do not accept evolution!

Careers that actually encounter evolutionary thinking include various environmental jobs, medicine, agriculture, mining, oil discovery, conservation. Trying to find out where evolutionary thinking is relevant is an area that hasn't been fully investigated yet in my opinion. While working for the IEPA I found that evolutionary thinking came into the Endangered Species Act, origin of populations of experimental animals for toxicity testing, various geology situations such as age of aquifers, age of coal seams, course of Mississippi River. I'm not sure always how to explain exactly how an evolutionary background would help but it is relevant. Interestingly, JMH acknowledges the reality of antibiotic and pesticide resistance (See above). Is there some room for compromise? ☹



Our Next Meeting

Pitldown Man, Vikings in America



Nova recently aired two programs of interest to REALL. We might be pressed for time to watch both programs, but we'll at least watch one, depending on how much discussion time we want.



"The Boldest Hoax" asks, who created and promoted Pitldown Man, a fossil skull that was claimed to be the missing link between apes and humans?

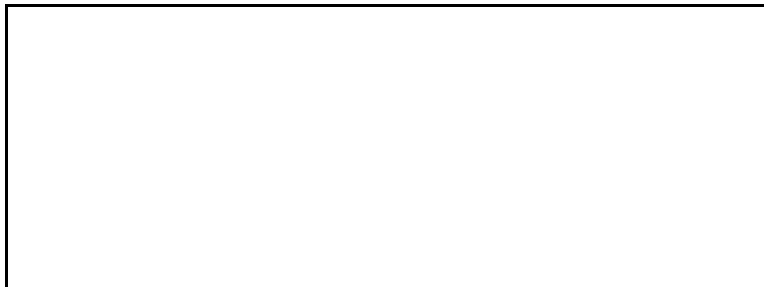
"The Viking Deception" considers whether the Vinland Map, claimed to show the New World long before Columbus arrived, is real or is a highly convincing fake.

Springfield, Illinois
Lincoln Library (7th & Capitol)
Tuesday, March 1, 7:00 PM

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