

NOSHA NEWS

Newsletter of the New Orleans Secular Humanist Association Winter 2003

New Orleans Secular Humanist Association

5331 Bancroft Dr.
New Orleans, LA 70122
<http://nosha.secularhumanism.net>

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NATIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Council for Secular Humanism
American Humanist Association
Atheist Alliance International
American Atheists, Inc.

MEETINGS

1st & 3rd Sundays
1:30 p.m.
Smith Branch Library
6301 Canal Blvd.
New Orleans

EVOLUTION DODGES ANOTHER BULLET Connie Gordon

On December 12, 2002, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) in Louisiana rejected a committee proposal to include disclaimers in all high school biology textbooks that would have declared evolution only a theory "which still leaves many unanswered questions about the origin of life." It would also have further stated, "Study hard and keep an open mind. Someday you may contribute to the theories of how living things appeared on earth." Thanks, in large part, to the lobbying efforts of board president, Paul Pastorek, who said, "I am not prepared to go back to the Dark Ages," the proposal failed. (NOSHA's Michael Malec, representing the ACLU, also testified, noting Louisiana's long and failed history of attempts to include creationism in the classroom.) The final vote was 7-3.

Would the disclaimer's passing have been so bad, you may ask. "Keep an open mind." What's wrong with that? That's already true of science. Without inquiring minds, there would be no scientific breakthroughs, no theory of evolution. Yes, it is only a theory, but one that has been tested and retested with new discoveries being made every day. The problem here is that those pushing for the disclaimer were creationists. Their goal is to disrupt the teaching of evolutionary theory in favor of the intelligent design explanation of the creation story (their "theory of how living things appeared on earth" about 6,000 years ago) as described in the Bible's Book of Genesis. The fallacy here is that the creation story is a myth with no possible means of testing its validity. And it is religion-based, constitutionally deplorable, and wholly non-scientific.

This is a never-ending battle, it seems, repeated again and again across the nation. The creationists refuse to back down and will continue their efforts to replace science with myth in our schools. Success on their part will greatly harm the future of scientific endeavor in our country. The Genetics Society of America (GSA) recently issued a Statement on Evolution, which summarizes the consensus of the scientific community regarding the theory of evolution. In part, it states: " 'Scientific creationism', 'intelligent design', and other terms have been offered as alternate explanations for past and present biological processes. However, these represent a collection of beliefs based on a literal interpretation of religious texts, and are thus disguises for religious doctrine, and not scientific theories. They ignore the empirical data around us and fail to provide a testable hypothesis. Consequently, since no testable explanation for biological history has been provided, they cannot be considered scientific theories, and should not be part of school curricula. Evolution is the only scientific theory to explain the biological history of life . . . the GSA hereby endorses the teaching of the facts and theory of evolution at all levels, including in elementary and secondary schools."

For the sake of our children and the future of science education, we will have to keep up the fight.

"Creationists make it sound like a 'theory' is something you dreamt up after being drunk all night."
--Isaac Asimov

PRO-CHOICE LANDRIEU RE-ELECTED

In the December runoff election for U. S. Senate, amid the mud-slinging by the two Catholic women candidates, at least one made a remark which should be embraced by all who are concerned about their constitutional rights. As Mary Landrieu was chastised by her opponent that her pro-choice position on abortion was anti-Catholic, she expressed that she was personally staunchly Catholic, and that she “consistently worked to protect life to the fullest extent allowed by the constitution.” She further clarified the mix of her own personal faith with the law of the land when she said, **“In a society such as ours, it would in my opinion be inappropriate public policy to impose such strict moral beliefs on others who do not share them.”**

Thanks, Mary, for understanding that religious principles are personal and should be kept separate from public policy. And congratulations on your second term in the U. S. Senate. The humanists of Louisiana will no doubt be calling on you.

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NOSHA ELECTS NEW BOARD MEMBERS

At the regular meeting on November 17, 2002, two new members were elected to the NOSHA Board of Directors, and six sitting members were re-elected. Two members chose not to stand for re-election. Denis Dwyer and Harold Dundee had served on the Board since its inception early in 2000. The two members elected to fill the vacated positions are Tim Ruppert and Vitas Paukstaitis. Members re-elected to another term are Connie Gordon, Dave Schultz, Harry Greenberger, Gina Cedotal, Barbara Forrest, and Sally Mooney. Other Board members whose terms run for one more year are Howard Bostock, Michael Malec, and Doug Hinton.

Following the meeting, the Board met to elect officers for 2003. All existing officers have agreed to hold their current positions. They are listed on the masthead of this newsletter.

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WINTER SOLSTICE CELEBRATION

At the regularly scheduled December 15 meeting, NOSHA members acknowledged the true reason for the early winter season of celebration, the life-giving, life-preserving sun. For millennia, peoples in the Northern Hemisphere celebrated the winter solstice as the time when the sun returns to overcome darkness. As seculars in the midst of a city of Christians, we held our own small celebration.

First, a video was shown: “Xena: Warrior Princess: A Solstice Carol”. This program from the now-cancelled “Xena” television series, depicted Xena and her sidekick, Gabrielle, defending the right of a group of orphans to celebrate the winter solstice. The local king had banned such celebrations, simply because he was a soured old coot whose wife had left him years before. Xena and her followers frightened the king into reinstating solstice celebrations with a series of “ghostly” visitations in his bedchamber. There was even the reinstatement of the local toy-maker, Sentacleerce, who had given up his business to work as tax collector. (Does any of this sound familiar?) At the happy ending, the orphans celebrated with decorated tree, feasting, gift-giving, and camaraderie, as we continue to do today, without the bindings of religious hijacking.

Following the video, Dottie Zander and friend entertained with some vaudevillian-type skits. And then we enjoyed cake, cookies, and other refreshments while visiting with one another.

At this writing, the solstice is past and the daylight hours increase. May the remainder of your winter be happy, healthy, and bountiful!

(Thanks to Marie Castle of Atheists for Human Rights, for loaning us the video and supplying brochures explaining the history of the solstice celebration.)

IN MEMORIAM

At the NOSHA meeting of May 5, 2002, a personable young man spoke on the uses and affordability of nuclear energy in our society. He was so impressed with our organization, that he became a member, though he did not attend subsequent meetings. He must have known then that he was gravely ill. On November 11, 2002 **Gary L. Groesch** succumbed to pulmonary fibrosis at the age of 50.

Gary was executive director of the Alliance for Affordable Energy, a consumer advocacy group that represented “every man” and challenged the energy industry to keep our heating and cooling bills affordable. A friend of Gary’s wrote shortly after his death: “If you were on the City Council, the governor’s staff or the Public Service Commission, you resented Gary, who challenged your meetings to be open and then your data with his own data, which were often embarrassingly accurate. You were challenged by the very pressure of his advocacy, or even the thought that he might show up, well-dressed, well-spoken, well-armed with the facts.” . . . Gary Groesch was a monument, an extraordinary and extraordinarily good man.”

And Gary was a humanist. In lieu of a traditional service, a tribute and jazz funeral were held at the Rock ‘n’ Bowl Cafe. He donated his body to science.

OF INTEREST TO HUMANISTS . . .

WASHINGTON—Humans now consume more of the Earth’s natural resources than the planet can replace, raising doubts about the long-range sustainability of modern economies, according to a June 2002 study published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Economic expansion has boosted demand for natural resources overshooting the planet’s ability to regenerate by 20 percent. The study says, “We are no long living off nature’s interest, but nature’s capital. Sustainable economies are not possible if we live beyond the means of nature.”

GENEVA—A new study conducted by Swiss neurologist Dr. Olaf Blanke suggests that “out-of-body” and “near-death” experiences might be influenced by a portion of the brain misfiring under stress. The paper describes one patient’s visions while she was being evaluated for epilepsy. Researchers point to a processing center in the brain known as the angular gyrus which aids the brain in analyzing sensory information to give us a perception of our own bodies. When it misfires, they speculate, the result can be visions of floating outside ourselves.

WASHINGTON—A recent poll taken by the Pew Research Center reveals that Americans and people from developing nations place a higher importance on religion than do residents of other wealthy nations. The poll showed that 59 percent of Americans said religion plays a very important role in their lives, almost twice as high as Canadians, with 30 percent. Religion was important to only 12 percent of Japanese, 33 percent in Great Britain, 27 percent of Italians, 21 percent of Germans, and only 11 percent of French. People in developing nations placed a high priority on religion, especially in Latin America; 39 percent of Argentineans said religion was very important.

LONDON—A prominent British atheist is mounting a court challenge against the exclusion of non-religious speakers in a daily segment aired on a popular BBC morning news program. Barbara Smoker said that limiting the BBC’s *Thought for the Day* slot to religious speakers violates Britain’s Human Rights Act. The segment includes contributions from all the world’s major religions on a rotating basis but has never included atheists, agnostics or any other secular speakers. “Around 30 percent of the population in this country does not hold to any religion and yet this large minority is denied a voice on *Thought for the Day*,” Smoker said. Smoker said her challenge was partially an attempt to impress upon the BBC and society that ethics can spring from sources other than religion.

BATON ROUGE—Evelyn Kennerson Thomas, pastor and founder of Mountain Faith World Outreach Ministries has been sentenced to five months in federal prison and restitution of \$40,406 to the state Department of Health and Hospitals for defrauding the Medicare program. Thomas was also the one-time owner of Victory Home Care Inc, and 24-Hour Professional Health Care Management; she admitted to filing false Medicare reimbursement claims. Chalk up one more for those faith-based programs.

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HARRY ON THE RADIO

On December 30, NOSHA president Harry Greenberger was an invited guest on Jeff Cruere’s WTIX radio call-in show, along with John Hogue, Executive Director of Louisiana Christian Coalition and Vincent Bruno, a leader in the Louisiana Republican Party as well as a partner with John Hogue on his radio show.

The announced topic was “Cloning”, coming as a result of the publicity surrounding the alleged first cloned human baby by a group associated with the Raelians religious cult. However, much of the discussion related to the claim of the Raelians that they have contact with space aliens who told them that the human race arose from clones originally produced by those space visitors.

Hogue and Bruno both conceded that the alien contact was possible and quoted biblical references to such appearances. Bruno related his own experience of many years ago, which he has rarely talked about for fear of ridicule, in which he and many others observed three UFOs which “could not have been manmade.” He is certain that they were from outer space and opined that in the Bible, Elijah’s “chariot of fire” was actually a description of what we would now call spacecraft.

Most callers to the show cited biblical reasons for opposition to cloning. Harry’s position was that scientific advances are neither good nor evil and that their applications depend upon the character of those who use them.

* * * * *

I have given the evidence to the best of my ability. We must, however, acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.

--*Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man, 1871*

MEMBERS' PUBLISHED LETTERS

In early October, South Louisiana averted what might have been a horrific storm when Hurricane Lili waned from a Category 4 to a Category 2 in the six hours before she made landfall. In the days immediately afterward, a number of letters appeared in the *Baton Rouge Advocate* attributing the storm's ebb to the intervention of "God's almighty hand" and "the power of prayer." NOSHA member, **Howard Bostock**, took exception to these explanations; the following letter appeared in the *Advocate* on October 22, 2002:

The *Advocate* published letters on Oct. 9 and again on Oct. 11 claiming that God changed Hurricane Lili from a force 4 to a force 2 hurricane. Please spare The *Advocate* readership from any additional embarrassing letters such as those.

Throughout the ages, men have ascribed as deeds of their gods events of nature that were not understood at that point in time. Ancient Greeks believed lightning bolts from their god Zeus created mushrooms. (I personally believe Thor, the Norse god of lightning and thunder, is responsible for the proliferation of anthills in my yard.) Romans believed the thermal waters of Bath were a gift from the goddess Minerva Sulla.

Science dispelled those ideas, but the practice of crediting a god for acts of nature persists to this day. It should not be encouraged.

On October 23, 2002, *The Clarion Herald* (the official newspaper of the New Orleans Archdiocese) published a scathing editorial describing secularists as enemies of God; a friend sent a copy to **Harry Greenberger**. Following is Harry's response, published in *The Clarion Herald* on November 20:

The *Clarion Herald* Oct. 23 editorial declaring secularists as enemies of God is based on a totally erroneous understanding of the provisions of the United States Constitution and the missions of the groups named as part of the anti-Christian, anti-Catholic, anti-religion, anti-life, anti-morality, anti-decency and anti-God secularists.

The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights has been interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court to mean that a "wall of separation" must be erected between government and religion. At the same time, that wall of separation protects government (tax-supported institutions) from any involvement stemming from a particular religion (Judaism, Christianity, Muslim, Buddhism, etc.) or religion in general. It is this "law of the land" which ACLU, People for the American Way, Planned Parenthood and the other secular organizations, say must be recognized and obeyed. Placing the biblical Ten

Commandments in public schools, courthouses, and the like, blatantly violates this Constitutional provision, as does required prayers in public schools and other public institutions.

Despite the rantings of this article's author, not even one of his despised organizations has a position that opposes the right of religious people and their churches to hold their beliefs and practice their religion in their houses of worship, in their homes, in their private clubs--anywhere except at tax-supported venues. Nothing could be less true than his statement, "Their GOAL is to remove God totally from the fabric of our civic and social lives."

How can even a devout Catholic accept this insane admonition: "Do not be intimidated by the forces of the Culture of Death...?"

The following letter, written by **Brent Fodera**, appeared in the *Shreveport Times*, December 26, 2002:

A recent letter condemned the pregnant Barbie as another hallmark of our society's depravity and laid blame for unwed maternity at the doll's feet. I wonder how the writer responds when her daughters are exposed to real-life pregnant women. Does she cover their innocent eyes and berate the afflicted offender? Perhaps she merely proffers another white lie to her children: They are fat not fecund.

But how does she explain the miracle of miracles, a pregnant unwed maiden giving birth to a demigod? Surely this myth is more influential than a plastic female figurine. Why doesn't the writer protest against the Bible, which exposes her children to murder, incest, sodomy, genocide, and so much more along those lines?

More to the point, however, I should address the belief that ignorance can protect our children from reality and maturation. By teaching her children that Jesus delivers babies to the hospital, the writer undermines her own credibility and does a disservice to the truth. She may believe that her children are too young for the facts, but I surmise that she has rattled their tender intellects with conundrum that the father and the son are one, but also are not one. If they can handle that one, they should be able to handle almost anything.

Well, as long as we lie to our children and condemn innocent scapegoats for our own failure, we can expect teen pregnancy and other social ills to continue.

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"I don't think we're here for anything, we're just products of evolution. You can say 'Gee, your life must be pretty bleak if you don't think there's a purpose', but I'm anticipating a good lunch."

--Dr. James Watson (co-discoverer of DNA)

REMOTE PRAYER REPORT MISREPRESENTED ITS DATA

Travis Kelm

Wired Magazine has uncovered evidence that data used to obtain two federal research grants totaling \$1.5 million were represented as positive even though they were not [Bronson P. A prayer before dying. *Wired Magazine*, Dec 2002].

The research, done by the late Elisabeth Targ, M.D. and colleagues, involved 40 patients with advanced AIDS who were randomly selected for either “distant healing” or a control group. The “healers,” many of whom were located thousands of miles away, performed various prayer-based ministrations after receiving photographs of the patients. After six months, the researchers concluded that the subjects who were not prayed for had spent six times as many days in the hospital and contracted three times as many AIDS-related illnesses [Sicher F, Targ E, et al. A randomized double-blind study of the effect of distant healing in a population with advanced AIDS. Report of a small-scale study. *Western Journal of Medicine* 169:356-363, 1998]. The researchers subsequently were funded by the NIH Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine to conduct two 150-patient trials—one on brain cancer and the other to redo the AIDS study.

Wired Magazine has reported that the study was “unblinded and then rebled to scour for data that confirmed the thesis” and that the journal editors did not know this fact when they decided to publish. The study was designed to measure death rates. When the data showed no difference between the prayer and control groups, the researchers conducted a chart review that was not properly blinded, looked for other differences, and reported that several were statistically significant. This analysis was improper because when many endpoints are examined, the odds of finding a few that appear significant are much higher than the odds of a single endpoint selected in advance proving significant. *Wired* referred to this as “the sharpshooter’s fallacy—spraying bullets randomly, then drawing a target circle around a cluster” and calling it significant.

Elisabeth Targ, a lifetime believer in parapsychology, was the daughter of Russell Targ, prominent parapsychologist who believed that some people could view objects at great distances through psychic means, a practice referred to as “remote viewing.” In April 2002, Elisabeth was diagnosed as having an incurable glioblastoma multiforme, the very same brain tumor that her remote healing research would study. She died four months later despite the efforts of “healers” and other believers worldwide who prayed for her.

WOODY ALLEN ON RELIGION

“The chief problem about death, incidentally, is the fear that there may be no afterlife—a depressing thought, particularly for those who have bothered to shave. Also, there is the fear that there is an afterlife but no one will know where it’s being held.”

“If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.”

“Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends.”

“If it turns out that there is a God, I don’t think that he’s evil. But the worst that you can say about him is that basically he’s an underachiever.”

“To *you* I’m an atheist; to God, I’m the Loyal Opposition.”

“In real life, (Diane) Keaton believes in God. But she also believes that the radio works because there are tiny people inside it.”

“I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work . . . I want to achieve it through not dying.”

“I do occasionally envy the person who is religious naturally, without being brainwashed into it or suckered into it by all the organized hustles.”

“If Woody Allen were a Muslim, he’d be dead by now.” – Salman Rushdie

VOLUNTEERS’ CORNER

On the evening of December 7, 2002, seven NOSHA members answered the phones taking membership pledges for New Orleans’ public television channel 12, WYES-TV. Thanks to **Harry Greenberger, Connie Gordon, Dave Schultz, Gina Cedotal, Dave Parkek, Jack Vanesco, and Tim Ruppert**. All could be seen “on TV” during breaks in programming, and station management recognized us verbally and with shots of the NOSHA banner. The only irate callers reported were those who were complaining about the station’s programming changes. Thanks for your help in “promoting” NOSHA as well as public television.

On January 22, 2003, NOSHA will be a co-sponsor of the Roe v. Wade 30th Anniversary Rally to be held at the Jewish Community Center. Thanks to **Harry Greenberger, Connie Gordon, Gina Cedotal, Sally Mooney, and Susan Fleet** who volunteered to represent NOSHA and support a woman’s right to choose.

Thanks to **Robert Bascle**, who volunteered to lead the discussion at the January 5 NOSHA meeting.

Thanks to **Susan Fleet** who volunteered to lead the discussion at the February 2 meeting.

GOOD READING

True North: Exploring the Great Wilderness by Bush Plane. A humanist's odyssey through Canada and Alaska. By George Erickson.

Remember how creationists hid their intent by running stealth campaigns for school boards? Well, here's a great response from American Humanist Association board member George Erickson, whose adventure/travel best seller True North... tucks candid criticism of creationists and missionary practices between tales of polar bears and killer whales while promoting the science that makes our standard of living possible.

As the author wings past Manitoba's Lake Winnipeg - a remnant of Glacial Lake Agassiz - he tells of Louis Agassiz, the Swiss naturalist and the lake's namesake who put the nails in the coffin of the Biblical Flood mythology.

Later, while examining a bedrock chip of the Canadian Shield, he describes how we've come to know the age of the earth, beginning with St Augustine's effort and the even more inaccurate reckoning later made by an Irish Bishop named Ussher.

A visit to 40-cannon Fort Prince of Wales on the shores of Hudson Bay provides an opportunity to compare the ethics of Moses Norton, its debauched, bible-waving 18th century commander who murdered two of his wives, to those of his contemporary - a highly ethical atheist Cree chief named Matonabbee.

On the barren shores of Baker Lake, NWT, he describes the abuse suffered by native children who were forced to attend Catholic and Anglican schools, and tells of the often-reprehensible missionary treatment of natives. A later chapter chides an anti-evolution evangelist who is peddling his wares on the streets of Juneau.

As they say - there is more to a book than its cover - and this truly applies to True North. Besides delivering marvelous tales of adventures with musk oxen, caribou, polar bears and some of the North Country's characters, Erickson's True North introduces new and unsuspecting minds to the way freethinkers operate. As a consequence, True North makes a marvelous birthday or graduation present.

Darwin, Diamonds, Death and Deceit - True North has them all!

Eugenie Scott - National Center for Science Education - "True North is a winner!"

Edd Doer - American Humanist Association - "I couldn't put it down."

Chicago Tribune - Erickson is the spiritual descendant of the great explorers he writes about."

Best-selling author Clive Cussler - "a wonderful book"

Toronto Globe and Mail - "at campsites beside northern lakes he does battle with ideologues like St Ambrose, who said, "To discuss the nature and position of the earth does not help us in our hope of the life to come. We've had far too few books like True North."

Dr. Harold Jurdahl, Univ. of Wisconsin - "a skillful capacity to combine many disciplines into a highly readable book: geology, biology, ecology, psychology, etc."

Canadian Flight - "an entertaining romp through the north, through history, through science, through astronomy, through exploration, a romp with something for everyone."

For a signed copy, mail a check for \$22.00 - which includes postage – to George Erickson, 2300 17th St NW, New Brighton, MN 55112. Profits will go to NOSHA if you mention NOSHA in your check memo or accompanying note.

True North can also be purchased in stores or from Amazon.com, but specify the author. (Fundamentalists are criticizing True North . . . in the book's "reader review" section of Amazon.com, so please enter your thoughts there, too!)

WINTER CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- January 5 Regular Meeting: NOSHA Member Robert Bascle led a discussion on “Enironmental Heresy: Our Environmental Legacy is Looking Better and Better” – Smith Library, 1:30 pm
- January 22 Roe vs Wade 30th Anniversary Rally, “My Grandmother’s Struggle, My Mother’s Freedom, My Choice to Protect!” – Jewish Community Center, 5342 St. Charles Ave., 7:00 pm
- January 26 Regular Meeting: Joe Cook, Executive Director, ACLU of Louisiana, will address “Civil Liberties at Risk: Defending Freedom at Time of War” – Smith Library, 1:30 pm
- February 2 Regular Meeting: NOSHA Member Susan Fleet will discuss selected topics from Noam Chomsky’s book, “Keeping the Rabble in Line” – Smith Library, 1:30 pm
- February 15 Darwin Day 2003, University of New Orleans: Keynote Speaker Dr. Michael Ruse, Professor of Philosophy and Zoology, Florida State University (Dr. Ruse is a philosopher of science, particularly of evolutionary science) – Building and Time to be announced
- February 23 Potluck Movie Night: “Citizen Ruth” – Home of Harry Greenberger, 5331 Bancroft Dr., 6:00 pm
- March 16 Regular Meeting: Marcy Murray, former candidate for Tangipahoa Parish School Board will discuss the anti-semitic campaign against her and public derision suffered from her protests against Christian prayers at public events – Smith Library, 1:30 pm

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New Orleans Secular Humanist Association (NOSHA) was formed to provide an opportunity for like-minded people to meet and exchange ideas and to promote awareness of secular humanist viewpoints in the community. We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems. We reject efforts to explain the world in supernatural terms and to look outside nature for salvation. We strive to make the public aware of the importance of the separation of church and state, to oppose the teaching of creationism and other religious doctrines in the public schools, and to provide a voice of reason when superstition is presented in the media. We believe in enjoying life here and now, and in cultivating moral excellence. We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest we are capable of as human beings.

To become a friend of THE NEW ORLEANS SECULAR HUMANIST ASSOCIATION, complete, clip, and mail in the following form:

Check one: New Member Renewing Member Mailing list only

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone and/or e-mail: _____

Annual dues are \$15. A renewing member can bring in a new member, two for one -- \$15 for two when one is new. Mail to Connie Gordon, 2509 Giuffrias Ave., Apt. 603, Metairie, LA 70001.

Note: If you’re wondering if your dues are paid up to date, look in the upper right corner of the mailing label on this newsletter -- the year you last paid dues is noted – “2003” indicates you’re paid up to date; if the letter “N” appears, you’re currently “mailing list only.”

