

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

A Short History of Red River Freethinkers

Davis Cope (26 April 2008)

[NOTE: Carol Sawicki needs some history for RRF for the 501(c)(3) paperwork, and I wrote this up in a kind of formal manner, not mentioning specific people. I hope to provide something more in the future, naming names. Let me encourage everybody to send along their memories as well. Last year was RRF's tenth birthday! Time to reminisce!]

The initial meeting leading to the formation of **Red River Freethinkers** occurred in the summer of 1997. It was advertised through *Minnesota Atheists*, *Minnesota Humanists*, the *Fargo/Moorhead Unitarian Universalist Church*, and the *Fargo Forum*. Also, the religion reporter of the *Grand Forks Herald* covered the meeting. About 25 people attended, representing a broad area around Fargo/Moorhead, from Grand Forks to Alexandria.

Organizational questions took a substantial amount of time. It was decided to meet monthly and to draw up a constitution, and volunteers offered to start a newsletter and a website. People had different hopes for the group. Some viewed it as an opportunity for nonreligious people to socialize, some as an opportunity for personal growth or presenting views skeptical or critical of religious influence both in general and in the local community. These different views led to arrangements still in place, such as meeting arrangements and our name. For example, monthly meetings normally involve a speaker or discussion topic but four meetings per year are specifically set aside for socializing (parties). Choosing a name was difficult because some wanted a specifically atheist organization, others wanted it open at least to agnostics, while others felt it should be open to a range of views about God. The term "freethinker" (one who forms views, especially religious views, on the basis of reason rather than on the basis of authority) was inclusive and caught the essence of our emphasis on reason and skepticism, hence the choice of name. Interestingly, the meaning is relatively unchanged since the introduction of the term around 1690.

Our regular monthly meetings started right away in 1997, and our newsletter, *The Red River Rationalist*, began monthly publication. A website was soon in place as well. Organizational questions were a frequent item for the early meetings, and bit by bit, issues were identified and worked out. Our constitution and bylaws were finally approved in August 1999.

In that same month, the Kansas State Board of Education made the international news by passing a set of science education standards that removed references to the theory of evolution and the Big Bang theory. Kansas is the only state with an elected board of education, and creationists had won a majority of the seats. In Fargo, the controversy prompted letters to the editor for weeks, and local Christian groups brought in one of the founders of the creationist Intelligent Design movement to speak on the local college campuses.

This situation was the setting for RRF's first major involvement with the community. In Spring 2000, RRF initiated the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar to examine controversial topics in the general areas of science and pseudoscience, religion and pseudoreligion. The informal seminar meets weekly on a local university campus during the school year, and speakers are limited to 40 minutes to insure at least 20 minutes for discussion. Although the meetings are officially an hour, discussion often

continues much longer. Speakers from all views and all backgrounds are encouraged and invited: scientists, ministers, students, faculty, members of the community, Christians, Muslims, atheists, etc. SRLS has met every semester since Spring 2000 under the sponsorship of RRF, as well as other groups who believe a forum for the open discussion of controversial topics is valuable to the community.

In the 1950s, 6-foot high granite monuments engraved with the Ten Commandments were donated to cities around the country and erected on public property. These obvious violations of church-state separation have been a source of contention and First Amendment lawsuits ever since. It should be kept in mind that federal legal precedents are set first at the District Court level, then at the Circuit level, and only a Supreme Court decision becomes a precedent for the entire federal judiciary. As of 2000, several Circuits had found that placing such monuments on public property was a First Amendment violation; in at least one Circuit, such placement had been found permissible; in others, no precedent had been set.

In 2001, the Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal involving a Ten Commandments monument on public property in Elkhardt, Indiana, thus declining an opportunity to set a specific precedent for such monuments. The issue made the national news, and a local reporter asked the Mayor of Fargo whether there were any plans to move the Ten Commandments monument standing on Fargo's Civic Center Mall. He replied that no one had asked for it to be removed. So, in August 2001, RRF made such a request of the Fargo City Commission. Our action was motivated by our concern to support church-state separation, in accord with our critical attitude towards religious influences.

The issue was referred to the Fargo Human Relations Commission, which held two public hearings, then unanimously (with one abstention) supported removal of the monument. Then September 11 occurred, and public discussion of what was already a highly emotional and controversial issue became impossible. RRF withdrew its request for the time being.

City Commission elections were held the following summer, and the first item on the new Commission's agenda for 2002 was a renewed request by RRF to move the Ten Commandments monument. It should be emphasized that RRF's sole request, from August 2001 through the federal court decision in 2005, was that the City of Fargo move its Ten Commandments monument from public to private property. This time the Commission gave a definite refusal.

RRF contacted the University of North Dakota Law School. As part of its program, third year law students, under the guidance of faculty, take on actual cases as training projects. The Law School had just added a Civil Rights Project, and the Commission's refusal became the basis for a First Amendment violation case. It was felt that standing, the question of whether one has the right to bring suit, would be clearer if the suit were filed by individuals, rather than by RRF as a group, so we arranged for a set of five plaintiffs against the City. The plaintiffs consisted of four members of RRF and a former mayor of Fargo, and suit was filed against the City in federal District Court in December 2002.

The case was greatly delayed. First, a similar case involving a Ten Commandments monument in Plattsmouth, Nebraska had already been decided at the District level (which required that monument to be moved from public property) but had been appealed. The Eighth Circuit Court, which is Fargo's Circuit, had upheld the decision, but a further appeal had been granted for an "en banc" Circuit hearing, a somewhat unusual procedure involving a hearing before all the justices of the Circuit. The Supreme Court had also finally agreed to hear a Ten Commandments case, in fact, two of them, one from Kentucky and one from Texas.

Altogether, our case was finally heard in Spring 2005. The Supreme Court handed down its decisions shortly after, removing the Commandments in the Kentucky case and, by a 5-4 decision, allowing them to stay in the Texas case. The Eighth Circuit immediately used the Texas case as a precedent to allow the Plattsmouth monument to remain, and the local District Court then used the Plattsmouth decision and the Texas decision as precedents, deciding in 2005 that the Fargo monument could remain.

RRF's tenth anniversary in 2007 was noteworthy in several ways. For the first time, our elected officers (President, Secretary, and Treasurer) did not include any of the original members from 1997, an important milestone in our viability as a group. A new constitution and bylaws were approved, and steps were initiated to achieve 501(c)(3) status.

RRF also returned to the Ten Commandments issue in the summer of 2007 with a new request to the Fargo City Commission. We asked that the City accept a "sister monument", a granite monument of a similar size but engraved with the statement "The United States is not in any sense founded upon the Christian religion", a quote from the Treaty of Tripoli in 1797 (passed unanimously by the U.S. Senate). The Commission initially reacted by attempting a policy of no monuments on city property (thus removing the Ten Commandments monument). This attempt was blocked by a successful public initiative for an ordinance that forbade the removal of any City monument over 40 years old.

The Commission approved the ordinance and refused the proposed sister monument, an action that denies our access to a public forum already used for presenting religious views and thus moves into the area of denying our First Amendment right to free speech. The national newspaper, *USA Today*, ran an article on RRF's proposal and the ensuing controversy.

During these years, our monthly meetings continued, the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar met, The Red River Rationalist appeared regularly, and the website stayed in place. This was made possible by the efforts of many, many volunteers who generously provided time, expertise, and hard work to keep Red River Freethinkers going.

As I write this in April, 2008, RRF has just filed suit in federal District Court to protest the City's action. Having experienced firsthand how First Amendment issues are treated in increasingly inconsistent and unfair ways both in the courts and in our very own community, our intention to speak up for church-state separation is stronger than ever.

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**"An atheist is
a man who has
no invisible means of
support."**

(John Buchan)

Book Review:

Michael Shermer puts it this way:

"Pope Brock's gripping tale of fraud and flimflam is at once compelling and disturbing - compelling because it's such a great read, disturbing because it reveals the endless gullibility of human nature."

I only began the book yesterday and unfortunately I'm already half done. That means in a day or two I'll looking for something else to read but this book, "**Charlatan, America's Most Dangerous Huckster, the Man Who Pursued Him, and the Age of Flimflam**" will be hard to top. Perhaps I should slow down a bit and really stick my nose into this flower. Mummm!

Pope Brock approaches this topic somewhat sarcastically. For example, rather than throwing out a disclaimer of a number of Dr. John Brinkley's, the goat gland doctor, claims, Brock reports Brinkley's claims this way "especially since his (Brinkley's) discovery that hysterectomies could be reversed by implanting ovaries from a goat." In fact, Brock notes that one of Brinkley's patients who received such a transplant, Mrs. Stittsworth, bore a child which she name Billy, no doubt as Brock puts it, likely named after the goat.

While most would find the above paragraph shocking --- almost unbelievable, Brock does not dwell on **shock**. This is not a shock book, rather by what I read so far, is more a book on just exactly what absurdity people will believe, how people can be taken in by propaganda (in this case broadcast radio), and what people will do to protect their own interests and beliefs. For example, dubbed a fraud and denied a license to practice medicine by the State of California, agents representing California traveled to Kansas to arrest the "goat doctor" only to be turned away by then the governor of Kansas --- because quote the governor "We people in Kansas get fat (I assume money wise) on his medicine." Politics --- isn't it great?

Of course, there is the value of testimony, people willing to get up and state "Wow --- Those goat glands really did it for me." And there is the mass media, he who controls the airways, in this case Dr. Brinkley himself. When news began coming out that Brinkley was a fraud, he began a media campaign denouncing the American Medical Association as **persecuting him**, claiming that their **persecution of him** was no better founded than Christ's. Turns out that all the criticism of Brinkley by those exposing him were drowned out by comparison by Brinkley's broadcasts and people still kept coming for goat glands from all over the world.

But if you want shock --- there is some of that too. I really have no idea how a book like this could be written **without** shock somewhere. Brinkley also had something social response system set up. He, who can afford the most, gets the best. For the poor there **was the mail order** "Special Gland Emulsion" that came complete with a rectal syringe. For those who could afford more, there was the goat glands which depending on the money amounted from a **sliver of a gland** to a brand new set of goat testicles implanted in the patient. For those that really had the cash however, young human testicles from death row inmates could be provided. One benefactor, Harold McCormick (obsessed with fitness) is rumored to have bought the testicles of a young athlete **who** it is said acquired some of McCormick's wealth.

To sum this up so far, I find this mesmerizing. The crossovers to religious people's claims of healing, what people will accept, and to what length they will go for problems that may be as slight as imagined

can not be ignored. What the H--- will I do tomorrow if I finish this book tonight? I recommend this book for any who might question the power of a placebo, religious testimonies, or the media.

- **Dave Johnson**, Forman, ND

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Recommended Reading

Recently, I began rereading the books of Edward Abbey. If you've never read Abbey, I recommend him highly. I suppose he may be a little rude and crude for some -- he likes to represent himself as an anarchist and his book, the *Monkey Wrench Gang*, has become a guidebook for some eco-terrorists. He also writes prose that is positively poetic and has been referred to as the "Thoreau of the West." Someone described him as a blend of Thoreau and Hunter S. Thompson.

Abbey's most popular books are probably *Desert Solitaire* (essays) and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (novel). My own favorite is *The Fool's Progress: An Honest Novel*. The next time you're looking for a good read, give old "Cactus Ed" a try.

- **Chuck Crane**

Monument Wars

Our Complaint against the City of Fargo has been filed in Federal Court. The City will respond shortly. In addition, our dispute has found its way into a case now before the Supreme Court (Summum vs Pleasant Grove City). We expect a long and expensive battle, but our attorney feels we have a strong case.

This effort is an expensive one. We have paid our attorney about \$2400 so far. We need are in need of whatever financial help our friends and members can provide. Thank you.

- **Jon Lindgren**

The Red River Freethinkers is organized by freethinkers to be a nonprofit educational organization. We

are a group of nonreligious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate Intellectual Freedom and the use of Reason. Articles and letters in this newsletter present ideas and opinions of individual writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

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Items for newsletter may be sent to P.O. Box 995, Alexandria, MN 56308

Red River Freethinkers Calendar

Regularly scheduled meetings are held at 2:30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month. The location for each meeting will be posted in this space in an upcoming newsletter.

Instead of our customary meeting in May, we are going to celebrate the marriage of Davis Cope and Mary Cochran (see the announcement below). This will be in place of our June solstice party and we will then have a regular meeting in June.

Davis Cope and **Mary Cochran** invite you to join them for a celebration in recognition of their marriage.

Food, drink, lively conversation, fellowship and a Dixieland style jazz band will be featured on Sunday, May 18, 2008, 4:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. at NDSU Alumni Center, 1241 University Drive North, Fargo, North Dakota.

In lieu of gifts, the couple requests that you make a Donation to your favorite non-profit organization. They would enjoy a note from you about that organization, if you desire.

BECOME A MEMBER!

Membership includes a subscription to this newsletter. Send dues, name, address, phone number and e-mail address to Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405.

Family membership	\$45/year
Individual membership	\$30/year
Student membership	\$15/year
Newsletter only	\$10/year

NOTE: If you received a complimentary copy of The Red River Rationalist and would like to be removed from our mailing list, please contact any of the officers.