



Houston Objectivism Society

Vol.6, No. 4 July 1993 Newsletter

“Planning for Success” at August Meeting

Joe Blackburn is an optometrist, investor and originator of Eye+Tech, now Pearl Express, a chain of quick-service optometry offices.

At the August meeting, Joe will present a workshop on planning for success. He will review some popular “success books”, relate Objectivist principles to success, and then outline some techniques which will help you achieve your goals.

Joe Blackburn is a member of the HOS executive committee and speaks from experience, as indicated in his profile which is featured in this issue.

For this meeting only, we will meet at the home of Warren Ross, which is northeast of the intersection of I-10 and Beltway 8 on the west side of Houston. A map is enclosed. Please join us at Warren’s, 1903 Ganyard, at 6:30pm on Saturday, August 28.

OPAR Group Graduates



Michael Gold, Dawn Phillips, Richard Beals, Brian Phillips, Jeri Eagan, Dwyane Hicks, Janet Wich, Clark Hamilton

For the past year, a group has met weekly at the Phillips residence to study *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* by Dr. Leonard Peikoff, using Dr. Gary Hull’s study guide. Studies were completed on July 4, followed by a Cajun dinner, featuring shrimp and crawfish served up by the Phillips and supplemented by others, in particular some exotic dishes prepared by Richard Beals.

The study of Dr. Peikoff’s book was

well worth the effort, enhancing both our knowledge of Objectivism and our ability to articulate issues.

Also attending the celebration were Warren Ross, Alice Ross and Joe Burwell.

After debating options for further study, group members approved Brian Phillips’ schedule for this summer:

August 15--Discussion of current events, with individuals responsible for 10-15 minute presentations.

August 22--The beginning of a study of Ominous Parallels by Dr. Leonard Peikoff, with individuals summarizing a section, followed by discussion.

All HOS members are welcome to attend these events, which will be held at the Phillips apartment, #3016, at 3pm on Sundays. (The Phillips apartment is in the building south of the clubroom.) The phone number of Brian and Dawn is 271-5145.

Fair Pair Host Bookshare

At the June meeting of HOS, Janet Wich and Jeri Eagan hosted a bookshare, at which members brought one of their favorite books and briefly reported why others would find it worth reading. A Greek theme further embellished the evening, with appropriate posters displayed and food provided.

Over twenty members presented a wide selection of fiction and non-fiction works, vying heatedly for the mystery prize, awarded at the end of the meeting for the book most likely to be read. New member Donald Granberry tied for second place with Pravin Shah. Donald’s book was *The Day the Universe Changed* by James Burke, and Pravin’s was “*Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!*” by Richard P. Feynman. But Dwyane Hicks swept the voting with his entry of *Hondo* by Louis L’Amour, winning a \$15 gift certificate from Bookstop. Everyone enjoyed the evening and applauded the efforts of Janet and Jeri. But the success of the event was also made possible by the

presence and enthusiasm of the attendees.

Three other new members were welcomed to the club at this meeting: Clifton Sarrarde, George Marklin and Mary Heinking. George and Mary just moved from New Mexico where they founded the New Mexico Objectivist Club.

Also at the June meeting, president Warren Ross announced that there were fifty four Houston entries to *The Fountainhead* contest this year, that pledges are due for the contest, that there were one hundred fifty two entries for the *Anthem* contest and that a Houston student won a third prize in the *Anthem* contest at the national level.

Warren and Jeri Eagan also brought attention to letters appearing in *The Wall Street Journal* written by Objectivists.

Profile: Joe Blackburn



Joe & Mollye Blackburn

HOS member Joe Blackburn is an

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optometrist who co-founded Eye+Tech in 1983, a Houston based chain of one-hour optical offices. In 1988, he sold Eye+Tech to Pearl Vision, which was then renamed Pearl Express. Joe is married to the former Mollye McLeod, from Houston, and they have two daughters, Ayn and Susan.

Joe was born in Vinita, Oklahoma in 1938 and grew up in Claremore, a town in northeast Oklahoma with a population of 9,000. He graduated from the College of Optometry at the University of Houston in 1964.

Joe, how did you discover Ayn Rand?

I was attending the University of Houston College of Optometry in 1961 and dating Mollye. We were invited to a friend's house for dinner, and, during the discussion on politics, he mentioned that he had just read *Atlas Shrugged* and how great it was. The next day we bought it and began reading it. Shortly thereafter I also subscribed to the Objectivist Newsletter.

What impressed you about the novel?

Well, you know when you're young, you see things the way they are and you realize they're not the way they should be. You have a lot of half-formed ideas and questions, but you haven't formulated any consistent, overall view. When I read *Atlas*, it was as if Rand reached into my head and pulled on a light switch. I read it almost straight through. At that time, I was interested in politics and some other issues, but my views were fairly fragmented. But after reading *Atlas*, I got an integrated viewpoint—I read it a number of times.

Do you think that the religious atmosphere of Oklahoma primed you, in a negative way, for Ayn Rand?

Most people living in small towns in Oklahoma are religious. I was always very skeptical of religion, so religion did not affect me. *Atlas Shrugged* doesn't really dwell on religion, it just puts it in its place. You know, in Objectivism, it's not what you're against so much as what you're for. A lot of atheists know that they don't believe in God, but they don't know what they're for.

I ask this because growing up in Kansas, not far from you, the Original Sin section of Galt's speech hit me like a hammer. Having heard a lot of nonsense

about this as a youth, I was shocked to learn fully what it meant and grateful for Ayn Rand's critique of it.

Oh, yes. I had come to the conclusion of tabula rasa long before. Religion is kind of compartmentalized in most people—very peripheral to their lives, telling them what not to do instead of what to do.

Did you attend school before you went to the University of Houston?

Yes, I started at the University of Oklahoma and then attended Oklahoma State University. I was initially interested in engineering, but I decided to work for myself and became interested in optometry. Even back in high school, I had had some entrepreneurial experience, with such things as selling fireworks or hauling hay. I liked the idea of making money on my own. Did you ever haul any hay? That's an honest way to make a living. I don't suppose there's anything hotter than a rusty tin barn in July in Oklahoma...and all the wasps in the world have a nest in there, and invariably they're after you.

After I graduated from school in 1964, we moved to Fort Worth to take a job with an optometrist. The good thing about that business was that the lab that fabricated the glasses was located in house. It was at that time that I learned how to make glasses myself.

We lived in Fort Worth for five years, then moved back to Houston. Initially, I worked in a Texas State Optical (TSO) store. After a few years, I bought a TSO in the FM 1960 area. Eventually, I co-owned four TSO locations over the next few years.

What was their status in the delivery of glasses?

They took about 7-10 days to deliver a pair of glasses, from a lab in Beaumont where they made them.

I had kicked around for years the idea of opening up a fast-service outlet for glasses, and around 1981 I started making plans to do so. I started selling my TSO's, then in February of 1983, I opened EyeSite at the Town & Country Mall in Houston. We were in a hurry at the time because we thought someone was going to beat us to the punch. In October, we opened up a couple of Eye+Tech stores—EyeSite was a limited partnership. Then we built a few more

Eye+Tech's and quickly ran out of money. The stores are pretty expensive, with the costs of the lab, the building itself, inventory and salaries—maybe \$600,000 a piece.

We talked to a number of venture capitalists, but that's pretty rough. You know, if you put ten of them in one room, working together, pretty soon you notice that one of them wants your foot, another wants an arm, and pretty soon, you start to notice that you don't have a body left.

At the same time, Gillette was looking for investments. Lenscrafter had been bought by U.S. Shoe, and fast-service stores were starting to spring up around the country. Gillette decided to buy 40% of our company and loaned us the money to build more. We built thirty eight stores in six states.

Then in 1988, Revlon tried to take over Gillette, followed by another attempt by Conistan Partners. As a result, Gillette was a billion dollars in debt. They decided to sell most of their non-core business ventures to get out of debt. In 1988, we sold Eye+Tech to Pearl Vision, a subsidiary of Grand Met.

Backing up a bit, I take it that the technology existed for some time to make glasses in-house.

Right, although the technology improved over the years because the manufacturers of the optical machines saw quick-service as a means of increasing their own sales.

What held people back from this kind of investment at the time?

They weren't sure it would work, there was an established pattern which people had grown accustomed to and nobody had stepped back to ask if this could be done better. When we started, we gave customers pagers in order to signal them that their glasses were ready, while they were walking around the mall.

At that time, there were about sixty five TSO's in Houston, and people thought we were crazy to spend \$700,000 to open up that first store. We just had to decide if this service would be a value to consumers, and we thought it tied in with such things as two-income families and with the faster pace of the time.

We built the company from a piece of paper, and then, when we sold it, we were doing about a million dollars in

sales per week.

Before the formation of HOS, there were a few of us in Houston who met together to listen to taped lecture series, but I believe you had a part in starting HOS.

Yes, I called Michael Mazzone, whom I knew from some legal work his firm did for me. He suggested I call Warren Ross. Warren, Brian Phillips, Anna Franco and I got together and started HOS.

You named your first daughter Ayn. Has that had any adverse consequences?

No, but a lot of people recognize the name as that of Ayn Rand.

I think that many more people have read Ayn Rand than many of us realize. Hillary Clinton mentioned a couple of weeks ago in Parade Magazine that she had gone through her "stage" of reading Ayn Rand.

It didn't take.

No. (laughter)

Should I ask how much you made with the sale of Eye+Tech?

We sold it for \$32 million and as a shareholder I shared in a portion of the proceeds of that sale.

I would imagine that you were delighted by that.

Yes.

"And how do you plan to put back some of what you've obviously taken from the community?"

I didn't take anything. I'm a trader.

After I entered the Air Force, I was surprised at how the actual experience of flying differed from my expectations. I expected the "free as a bird" feeling, but what I found was that flying is a very analytic, "just do your job" kind of activity. Did you experience any similar kind of contrast in starting and building a company?

When do you become successful? Is it when you take the first step or the last step? Any time you try to do anything, you have to grow along with the project, you have to accumulate more activity knowledge, you have to become more competent to deal with the situations because the situations become increasingly complex. As your business grows, the consequences of your decisions are multiplied, and you really have to get on top of what you're doing.

Have you had any success with non-

institutional type investments, e.g., with some acquaintance who has a new idea that sounds good?

I have had some successes and some failures. It's hard to pick those kind of things. I think one of the best successes we've had concerned a friend we met in making trips to Germany. He used to have a travel agency, and he decided to start up a travel information business. I invested in that, and U.S. Travel is now one of the top travel businesses in the country.

In any of these type of things, you're almost betting on the person.

I understand you're still working at EyeSite as an optometrist for a couple of days a week. Ayn Rand points out that productiveness is necessary not only to sustain yourself but also to give a purposeful orientation to your life. Is that why you still work as an optometrist?

I'm still a general partner in EyeSite and, therefore, I have a certain responsibility to that business. Something else I'm working on is writing. I want to write a novel, so I'm actually working on that now. I'm going to spend some time over the next few years doing that.

Knowing you, I would imagine that you've approached this in a structured way. Is that true?

Yes. I really think that the best start you can make is to get Ayn Rand's tapes on fiction writing. I listened to them, then I listened to them taking extensive notes. Then I outlined the notes. That course is excellent. I would recommend it to anyone, even if they're not thinking about writing. She really gives a great deal of concrete, technical advice about writing and provides numerous examples in the history of literature. And it's apparent from her extensive notes written prior to each published work and her use of outlines that she put in a tremendous amount of work before doing the actual writing, at which point, as she says, she was writing from her subconscious, which she had already prepared. It's similar to programming a computer.

What do you think about the status of the club over the past six years?

I think that the club is much stronger now than it's ever been. We have a newsletter that tells everyone what's going on, we have certain activities that are promoting Objectivism, we have

people who are interested and are coming to the meetings and they are prepared to take on some activities. So I think the club's in good shape.

What else would you like to see in the future for our club?

I am hopeful about our plans for new activities as headed up by individuals. But one thing I would like to see is the individual members becoming more successful, to become personally successful. To learn how to apply some of these principles of Objectivism to their personal lives, so they can become successful. I think that would be great. When you consider the gauntlet that most people have to run through in order to get to Objectivism in this culture we're living in, you realize that there's no reason in the world why every one of these people shouldn't be very successful in whatever they choose to do. There's some techniques that will help, and that's part of what I'm going to present at the next meeting.

Thanks, Joe, and thanks to both you and Mollye for your support of the club over the years. \$

Book Review

Hondo

by Louis L'Amour, Bantam Books, 1983, 179 pp.

Reviewed by Dwyane Hicks

Pick up *Hondo*, read the first page, then try to stop. From the first paragraph, one is transported to a hard, desperate land where competence is life and virtue is almost a thing perceived:

Nothing moved. It was a far, lost land, a land of beige-gray silences and distance where the eye reached out farther and farther to lose itself finally against the sky, and where the only movement was the lazy swing of a remote buzzard.

His eyes wandered along the ridge. To his right there was a shallow saddle, the logical place to cross a ridge to avoid being skylined. Logical, but obvious. It was the place an Apache would watch.

During an Indian uprising in the West of the 1800's, an army scout fights to survive and to rescue a mother and

her son, the woman having been abandoned by her husband to the Apache. The scout loves the woman for her being too proud and too brave to leave her home.

Hondo, Louis L'Amour's first novel, perhaps his best, was originally published in 1953. I've read two of his short story collections, finding them less mature, coming as they did from pulp magazines, but his novels always have something worth the read. This comes somewhat from those attributes which he acknowledges: his ability to tell a story, his knowledge of history and his knowledge of contemporary skills that purchased life on the frontier. But L'Amour is a profound moralist, and it is this aspect that generates his popularity and fuels the meaning of *Hondo*.

While many of L'Amour's stories focus on particular virtues, *Hondo* emphasizes the need to rely on *real* virtue, as such, drawn not from stale tradition or religious dogma but from the principle of survival and applied within a definite context. What we call intrinsic values are quickly shown by L'Amour to be life-threatening. Even a savage Apache knows enough to tell the Whites: "When religion makes you act like a fool, it is a wrong religion." And when a woman is required to judge a man whom she knows has killed, she remembers what her father had given her: "reserve of judgment, and to judge no man or woman by a grouping, but each on his own ground." With numerous examples in the drama of conflict, L'Amour illustrates what he calls "on his own ground" and urges us to adopt what we would call virtue which is objective.

In nearly every encounter with others, Hondo's behavior challenges some arbitrary or mistaken standard, in the context of survival in the West. Later in the story, the conflict of survival gives way to an inner conflict between values, which both Hondo and the woman he loves must face.

As to those who drop all standards, surviving on others with theft and deception, L'Amour takes a look at their souls, seeing evasion, envy of the good and the primacy of feelings:

Phalinger had killed. He had shot men in the back, and he would not hesitate to do so again. Yet he loved life and

loved it dearly, and in that awful moment of realization he saw in the clear, sharp beauty of the morning what wasted years he had left behind.

Lowe was a killer, as are many cowardly things, and he could not accept that there should live things and persons superior to him. Angie's father had always been a better man, but wanting the ranch, Ed Lowe had played a game, fooling the father more successfully than he could ever fool the daughter.

In a story by L'Amour, subjectivists are living on borrowed time. In the stark, strained environment of the western, principle is impatient and the lame in spirit are soon dying against the ground.

Hondo shows competence, independence and honesty as crucial...and normal. Consider the following dramatizations of these characteristics:

...There were nine Apaches, riding in a loose bunch, heading in a direction roughly parallel to his own. He lay still, avoiding looking directly at them for fear of attracting their attention.

I don't know if the eye pattern of a direct look would be more noticeable, but the caution is impressive, underlining the danger and the measures taken against it.

Hondo lives independently and grants that responsibility to others. Even when the woman he is growing to love refuses his escort out of danger, he disagrees but does not argue. He merely kisses her and, when asked why, says, "Handsome woman like you, walks with her head up, ought to kiss a man before she dies."

For *Hondo*, honesty is as casual as a drink of water. When an acquaintance approaches him:

"Knewed you ten years," Sproul said. "Never worked a day beside you."

"Don't like you," Hondo replied, testing the edge of the blade.

Hondo is a world where volition is not an issue; rather, control over one's consciousness and action is a requirement of life. Here, meticulous observation, identification and induction are natural, everyday skills which find food and water, avoid ambush by killers, give a man the history of a ranch and provide warning of a stranger's character. Reason is not a capacity which makes man

"the freak of the universe", and induction is not a problem to be solved—they are tools of the living.

The desert environment is not a fragile system of inestimable value—human beings are. Nature is interesting and of value, and animals are even worthy of affection, as long as they serve man's interests.

And the different but complimentary nature of men and women is not a social problem or the excuse to manufacture "victims"—it is an opportunity to add great value to one's existence.

All this is not to say that L'Amour is without fault or is never confused. For L'Amour the virtues are distinct and, therefore, not derived from the integrating principle of rationality. And he confuses independence with being alone, thereby undermining its value in a social, modern context. L'Amour's ethics is a common-sense, blue-collar effort in the face of hostile philosophy and without the guidance of a great teacher. Therefore, when he realizes the need to justify risk-laden action in the pursuit of profound values, he turns to a kind of Social Darwinism, briefly, to explain his hero's motivation. Fortunately, this is a page in *Hondo*, which can be mentally removed without affecting the work. As Dr. Peikoff tells us in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*: "Any explicit ideology in a work that clashes with its operative metaphysics is essentially irrelevant to its meaning."

L'Amour's association of independence with solitude is part of a mistaken but widespread view of individualism.

Enemies of individualism claim that modern man must conform to the thought of others and that a division-of-labor economy makes everyone dependent. Thus, to be realistic and successful, we must all become a Peter Keating. But the opposite is true. Living in a modern economy requires one to create value-equivalents to trade with others doing the same. Independence, that is, looking first hand at reality, is required to create and produce those value-equivalents and thereby sustain one's existence. (For a modern example of this, note, in this newsletter's profile, Joe Blackburn's decision to risk \$700,000 in EyeSite, at a time when sixty five TSO's existed in Houston.)

The friends of individualism too often accept the underlying premises and false alternatives of their enemies. If a social existence is mistakenly rejected as inherently dependent, the individualist must flee to the frontier of the present, perhaps prospecting for gold and developing a taste for squirrel, or write novels of the frontier past.

For too many, individualism is "rugged individualism", a view which sympathizes with L'Amour's values but only with nostalgia, i.e., as unrealistic for our age. This is why L'Amour refers to himself as merely "a good storyteller" and, predominantly, writes about the unsophisticated man of the past.

I sing of arms and men, not of presidents, kings, generals, or passing explorers, but of those who survived their personal, lonely Alamos, men who drove the cattle, plowed the furrows, built their shelters against the wind, the men who built the nation.

In truth, the virtues and outlook of L'Amour's heroes are not an escape. They are an affirmation of characteristics needed today, and you can enjoy them in *Hondo*. \$

How I Spent my Summer Vacation

by
Warren Ross

In early July, I and my wife travelled on vacation to Quebec City in Quebec Province, Canada. Quebec City is probably as close to an old French city as there is in North America. Settled in 1608 by the explorer Champlain, who claimed it for France, Quebec became part of the British Commonwealth in 1759 when the British defeated the French in a 20 minute battle. Rather than boring readers with travelogue details of the trip, I'll make a few observations of a more philosophical nature:

1) **history** - Quebec has an interesting history because of its location on the St. Lawrence, once thought to be a passage to India. After it became obvious that Columbus had not in fact discovered the "real" India, excitement was generated

when Jacques Cartier discovered the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Unfortunately for the dream of a westward passage by sea to the east, the Gulf narrows into a river and essentially stops a few hundred miles into the interior of Canada. Despite this disappointment for France (and Europe in general), the heroic men who explored and settled this area helped to open this continent for commercial exploitation. Of particular interest to me during the trip was a book I encountered on the origins of the Canadian fur trade. This trade brought the much wanted beaver pelts from the Northwest Territories to the traders in Montreal who exchanged them for European goods. The book emphasized that this was an enormous problem of *production*, specifically of transporting goods across a 2000-mile icy wilderness connected by rivers and lakes that are frozen seven months out of the year.

2) **ethnicity** - The slogan of the Quebec province, adorning everyone's license plate, is "Je me souviens", or "I remember". The slogan urges citizens to remember their history and traditional French ways of living (including language), and to keep them alive and emphasize them. The attitude is really one of being occupied by Britain rather than being a part of the British Commonwealth. We've all heard about recent separatist political agitation in Quebec, which has been growing for decades. A visit to Quebec demonstrates how deeply ingrained this tribalism is. All of the museums and travel brochures emphasize the importance of Quebec having retained its Frenchness. This Frenchness doesn't manifest itself in any special interest in a liaison with the French nation so much as a desire to use the French language and the French folkways—songs, style of dress, architectural styles, etc. This emphasis on Frenchness causes people in Quebec to lose perspective about legitimate values acquired from the British—only once on the entire visit was it mentioned that the British are responsible for the Parliamentary system with popular election of representatives. Prior to 1759, the French monarchy imposed a government on Quebec by sending its ministers directly from France.

More importantly, the people in

Quebec have lost perspective about the enormous benefits of being part of a modern semi-free nation state like Canada. Separation would mean, at the least, enormous costs for defense. More than likely it would mean increased political fragmentation (subgroups using the precedent for further divisions), higher probability of invasion by foreign powers, and higher likelihood that political freedom of its citizens would be abrogated by its own government. As Ayn Rand says in "Global Balkanization," to tribal mentalities, values such as those obtained by being a part of Canada are unimportant when compared to traditionalism. "[The tribalist] would kill and die for the privilege of printing on every postage stamp the word 'postage' for the English-speaking and the word 'postes' for the French-speaking citizens of his bilingual Canada." Today, in Quebec, I think he would consider fighting and dying to make Quebec monolingual—French only.

3) **politics** - This is not to say that Canada is a bastion of freedom. It is a semi-socialist country with socialized medical care and more generally a prevalent attitude that the government has the right and the obligation to "take care of people". And Quebec is one of the most socialist provinces of this semi-socialist country. The most obvious manifestation of that is high taxes. Tax on a meal or goods purchased in Quebec is 15.6%, which consists of 7% tax for Canada and 8.6% for Quebec. Thus the province's share of the "take" is larger than the whole country's. (In order not to discourage tourism too much, Canada and the Quebec province return taxes to foreign visitors after their visit if they fill out a form and send in all original receipts.)



For the interesting history (communicated by excellent museums), the beautiful national parks and because of my personal interest in French food (the French definitely have the British beat in cuisine), this was an enjoyable vacation. I would recommend it to readers, provided they go advised of the points above and travel as philosophical detectives rather than merely as uncritical absorbers of traditional French "culture." \$

Announcements

\$ *Atlas Shrugged*, the movie, is in the works, and Atlas Productions is looking for potential investors. If you're acquainted with a fan of Ayn Rand who could afford the \$100,000 minimum investment, Gloria Foster would like to hear from you. (A maximum of two people can function as one investor providing \$100,000.) A finder's fee is available. To provide Gloria with a name and number, write to her at 1226 N. Hayworth Ave., #14, W. Hollywood, CA 90046.



\$ Houston members of HOS attending the Thomas Jefferson School in San Francisco in August are Jeri Eagan and Donald Granberry.

\$ Upcoming Events: **The Great Garage Sale.** You say it's taking up space but it's too good to throw away? It's worth something but not the effort of selling it by itself? Don't throw it away! Exciting details in the next newsletter.


CHRYSLER

Plymouth

Dwyane Hicks

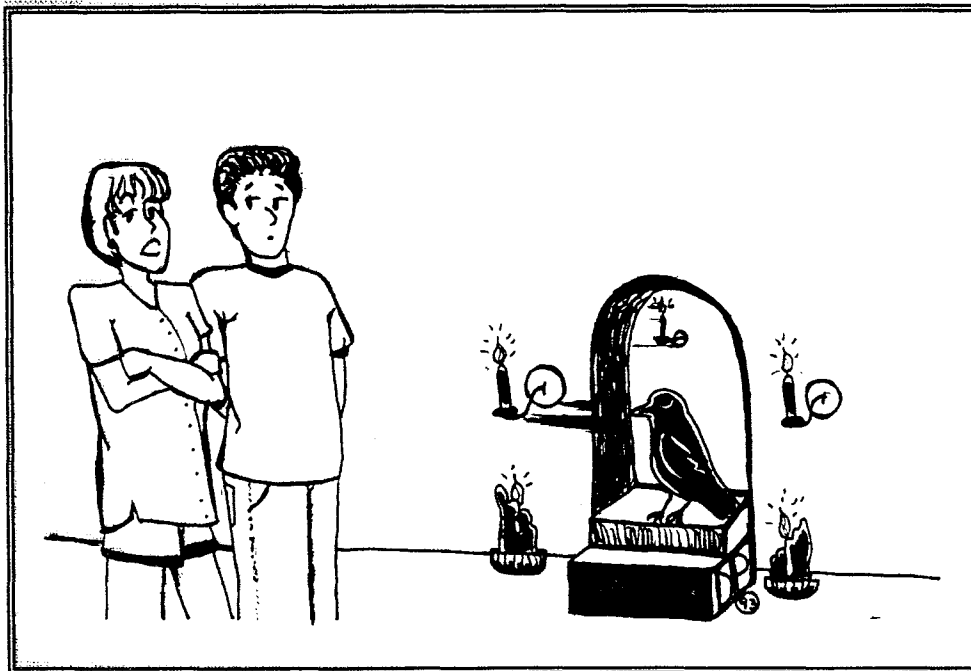
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 HOUSTON, TX 77031


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Yuks by Dawn Phillips and Dwyane Hicks



Bob, I think you're taking this "honor the crow" business too literally.



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<p>HOS President <i>Warren S. Ross</i> Editor: <i>Dwyane Hicks</i></p>	<p>HOS Executive Committee: <i>C. J. Blackburn</i> <i>Dwyane Hicks</i> <i>J. Brian Phillips</i> <i>Warren S. Ross</i></p>
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