

Wednesday's

Editorials, Columns & Letters

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Paper 'n Ink... something wicked this way comes...

By Lynn Brisendine

It is one of the stock plots in so many sci-fi movies. The Earth is hit by a monstrous rock from space.

Two recent flicks come to mind which have a planet-killing asteroid crashing through our atmosphere, hitting the Earth with a cataclysmic force.

In many of these movies, scientists come to the rescue by sending a barrage of nuclear missiles or men riding in rocketships and souped up shuttles to intercept an incoming object. They plant bombs to blow it apart before it hits and annihilates everything, from the largest animal to microbes on this planet.

The possibility of such an event taking place is not just science fiction. Historic events point to this scenario actually occurring in the ancient past.

We all know about the asteroid which struck what we now call the Yucatan Peninsula, in present day Mexico, which many scientists think doomed the mighty dinosaurs.

The idea of such a disastrous collision is that the original shockwave, coupled with the tremendous heat generated, was bad enough. But the damage of such an event went far beyond the initial explosion. The crater which resulted saw massive amounts of dust, coupled with the smoke from fires burning down entire forests, and blocked sunshine for years, causing havoc to both animal and plant life.

Last week three events took place which give credibility to such catastrophes actually taking place. Astronomers watched with the rest of us as a massive rock structure, some estimate it to be half a football field wide, weighing several tons, missed us by 17,000 miles. That seems like a pretty big miss, except for the fact that when calculating any spacial difference, the object was truly a near miss, and thank goodness this big rock sailed right on by.

The folks who keep an eye on spacial events had this thing calculated to its nearest point of us for months after sighting the incoming hunk of space rock. The announcers covering the story had a special countdown where they knew the exact second when it attained its nearest point and immediately afterward began to report its moving away. This thing was moving four or five times faster than a bullet fired from a rifle.

While many of us were observing this massive object coming and going without damage to anyone or anything, another space rock made news over Siberia.

This thing sneaked up on everyone. It blazed its way through the atmosphere, leaving a huge smoking trail following a glowing meteor.

Several estimates of size and speed of this object have appeared. The last of these specu-

lations saw this mass being 55 feet in diameter and weighing several tons.

Another less significant event took place over California last week as a smaller space chunk burned up in a spectacular fireworks show far above the landscape.

So, we saw three different events within a few days of one another take place. One object we had sighted and calculated its flight path, two others came as a surprise.

Some reports coming out of the Siberian incident talked of the Russian citizens' fear and thoughts that they were being attacked by a secret American weapon. And that scenario, too, is spooky in so many ways.

Our atmosphere is a pretty significant boundary, one that protects us from a huge amount of junk flying in from deep space. The amount of material striking our atmosphere and burning into ash daily is considerable.

The Siberian meteor blew up some ten miles above the Earth. The resulting explosion, estimated to be two or three times the earliest atomic bombs, caused a great deal of havoc on the ground below. The blast broke windows in a Siberian city and saw hundreds injured from flying glass or accidents resulting from the chaos of such an event.

Astronomers are quick to tell us that nothing so large or threatening is coming at us that they can observe with the equipment available to them at this writing.

Some are excited about a future space telescope that will allow us a better look at space events in the future.

Some movie plots revolve around using nuclear bombs to blow the space monsters to pieces, thus saving us from a direct hit. Many researchers and astronomers tell us this is a flawed concept. Blowing one of them to pieces would see the mass continue to move our way and thus cause the same damage as the object before the explosions. Of course, men or weapons making a journey to intercept these speeding objects would be a difficult ordeal.

Many of these people are thinking that we should, if ever we can foresee such a massive object come our way, use specially designed space engines, flown to the object and affixed in such a way as to use their propulsion to move the object ever so slightly, forcing the trajectory to alter and miss us.

Whatever, the possibility of these huge rocks coming into contact with us is not just a possibility but, odds are, a probability. The good news in all of that is the odds extend over millions of years.

That is a comforting thought only disrupted by remembering what became of the Thunder Lizards of eons and long odds past.

State Capital Highlights

Compiled by Ed Sterling, Texas Press Association

Texas joins other states in legal challenge...

AUSTIN — Attorney General Greg Abbott on Feb. 13 announced Texas had joined 10 other states in a legal challenge to a federal law, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010.

The preamble to the 848-page law states its purpose: "To promote the financial stability of the United States by improving accountability and transparency in the financial system, to end 'too big to fail,' to protect the American taxpayer by ending bailouts, to protect consumers from abusive financial services practices, and for other purposes."

Abbott, however, said the law "is bad for banks, harmful to businesses and worse for consumers who want to borrow money. It gives too much power to the federal government — and puts taxpayer dollars at risk. Under this law, unelected federal bureaucrats can unilaterally liquidate financial institutions in which the state invests taxpayer dollars. The State of Texas could be denied basic due process rights and taxpayers' dollars could recklessly be put at risk," Abbott said.

Over the last few months, The Associated Press and other national media entities have noted that Abbott, on behalf of the state, has sued the Obama administration more than two dozen times since January 2009. Complaints in the many federal lawsuits to which Texas has

been party vary widely, including such topics as health care reform, offshore drilling, voter identification, redistricting, air-quality regulations and school prayer.

Survey spells out needs

Members of the 83rd Texas Legislature, in crafting a state budget for fiscal years 2014-2015, will know what's on the minds of people with disabilities.

On Feb. 13, the governor's office posted funding priorities as expressed in a survey of 1,131 citizens who responded to a survey conducted in the third quarter of 2012 by the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities.

Respondents ranked issues and gave open-ended input on any issue important to them. Some of the highest-ranking issues expressed in the survey include:

- Access to efficient and quality healthcare (expressed by 90.1 percent of respondents);
- Access to affordable healthcare (89.9 percent);
- Ensure that emergency notification and warnings are provided in multiple formats, including formats that are accessible to people who are blind, deaf, hard-of-hearing, or use American Sign Language (85.7 percent);
- Increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities (85.6 percent);
- Accessible evacuation transportation (84.9 percent);
- Adequate, efficient Special Education programs, ser-

vices and procedures (84.7 percent).

Also:

- Emergency planning processes that include people with disabilities (84.2 percent);
- Ensure appropriate (educational) accommodations are available during testing (83.2 percent);
- Education of employers about disability rights law related to employment (82.3 percent);
- Accessible post-disaster housing (82.2 percent);
- Integrate people with disabilities in the planning process for emergencies at the State and local level (82.0 percent);
- More resources and support for family caregivers, including respite services (80.0 percent); and
- Strengthening existing anti-bullying laws in schools related to students with disabilities (79.1 percent).

DNA database is credited

Steven McCraw, director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, on Feb. 14 recognized the CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) database for achievements.

The CODIS section of the DPS Crime Laboratory Service received a unit citation for recent accomplishments. Notably, in November, CODIS registered the 10,000th cold hit, ranking fourth among the states in the number of hits, the DPS reported, and explained that "cold hits" are unexpected matches between DNA of known criminal offenders with biological evidence from crime scenes.

Since 1998, the DPS CODIS Lab has helped solve more than 640 homicides, 3,300 sexual assaults, 4,200 burglaries, 550 robberies and hundreds of other crimes in Texas and other states, McCraw said.

The Brownfield News welcomes and will publish engagement and wedding stories under a long time policy.

The News will accept and publish for free weddings which are newsworthy. We will provide our readers this service with the understanding that we reserve the right to edit the content for space. We will not accept (for free) a wedding story which details an event more than one month old. Should you wish to have a story published concerning an event more than a month old, we have an affordable and workable wedding package available.



Thinking in Type...

By Brian Brisendine

Last week was a close call for our planet and everything with fins or feet that call it home.

A space rock the size of several football fields skimmed past with a mere 17,000 miles separating it from Earth's surface -- an infinitesimal distance in the vastness of space.

Scientists spotted this fast-moving hunk of rock more than a year ago and quickly deduced it posed no threat to us.

News reports also included impressive footage of a large meteor entering the atmosphere and burning up over Russia.

The resulting sonic boom shattered windows, damaged buildings and injured hundreds of people on the ground.

Several scientists made the rounds on television news shows to discuss the "what-ifs" of such an event.

What if it had been bigger? What if it had hit the planet?

They all agreed that neither of these rocks would have led to the end of the world.

However, they all also agreed, that rock is out there somewhere.

Somewhere in space right now, they said, is a rock with the necessary size and trajectory, to someday collide with earth with such a massive impact as to end all life.

It got me to wondering just how fragile are we?

An internet search of similar intent led me to an interesting video that ponders "how successful are human beings?"

At this writing there are just shy of 7.1 billion human souls walking the earth.

It would seem an impressive number, until compared with some of the other animals we share the planet with.

There are roughly 10 billion bats flying the night skies.

Likewise there are 10 billion small birds known as African Red Billed Queleas dotting the Savannah.

A quick search of that species

prompts videos showing huge amorphous clouds of the birds swarming, even engulfing herds of elephants in a cacophony of flight. It's impressive to say the least.

In our oceans, one single school of Atlantic herring can encompass an entire cubic mile and contain more than four billion individual fish.

But all of those numbers pale when we consider our smaller neighbors on the planet Earth.

Insect numbers are hard to comprehend, even imagine.

If we count all of the aphids on just the soybean plants in North America, the number is a quadrillion.

That's a 1, followed by 15 zeros.

A single ant is only a few millimeters long, but anyone who has ever picnicked or left an open container on the counter in the summer knows that where there is one ant, there are many, many more.

In fact, if we put every ant on the planet on a scale, they would outweigh all of the other animals on the planet, combined.

Ants as a group make up 15 percent of all land animal biomass. What's this biomass thing?

If we could take all the living things in any living place -- a scoop of soil or an entire ocean -- that is biomass.

All 7.1 billion humans on earth weigh in at a hefty 287 million tons.

Just one species of krill weighs a total of 500 million tons together.

Again, the numbers continue to spiral.

Take aspen trees -- not actually individual trees -- but colonies that grow from a single clone connected underground.

The heaviest single organism on earth is an 80,000 year old aspen grove named Pando, alive and well in Utah. It weighs in at almost 7,000 tons.

There is an underground web of forest fungus in Oregon that covers the land of 1,600 football

fields, the largest known single organism by area in the world -- weighing more than 75 space shuttles combined.

That's big.

Lets go small.

The single most massive chunk of earth's biomass can't be seen by naked eye -- it's bacteria.

In a single spoonful of soil, there can be 10,000 different species of bacteria.

Three septillion -- that's a 1, followed by 24 zeros.

That's the total number of bacteria found only in all of the cow stomachs on earth.

Imagine how many there are in all -- it's literally incalculable.

The most amazing piece of Earth's biomass is viruses.

They are tiny and they are everywhere and they affect every branch of life.

How many viruses are there? Nobody knows.

Scientists estimate the combined weight of viruses found in our oceans would equal the weight of 75 million blue whales -- the largest animals ever to live on Earth.

If you connected the microscopic viruses end to end, they would stretch 100 times the diameter of the Milky Way galaxy.

It makes my head spin. Or maybe I have some new virus.

Regardless, humans have done pretty well.

We've only been around 200,000 years and just five centuries ago there were less than half a billion of us on the planet.

Now there are more than 7 billion. In the time it took you to read this column, several hundred more were added.

So things are looking good for the human race and life as we know it.

On the other hand, in the time it took you to read this column, that giant space rock hurtling in our direction advanced several hundred thousand miles toward Earth.

So maybe not...