

John Birch Society plagued by \$9 million budget deficit

BELMONT, Mass. (AP) — The John Birch Society, for 28 years the leading edge of a conservative movement that has blossomed in the Reagan years, has come upon hard times.

The group that crusaded against big government and a world communist conspiracy is staggering with a \$9 million deficit and for the first time is appealing widely for financial help.

In addition, the question of how much to criticize President Reagan has sparked an internal battle that has turned the widow of society founder Robert F. Welch against the group's new leadership.

"I have nothing to do with the society. The people who are running it are not standing on what it started out to be at all," said Marian P. Welch, in her 80s and living in a retirement home in Weston, 10 miles from the Boston suburb of Belmont that her husband made Birch headquarters.

A member and former large contributor, Dr. Charles Proven, is considering starting a rival organization. "The society has completely changed direction," said Proven, a physician in McKeesport, Pa. "It is

engineered for a state of collapse." Welch, whose husband once accused President Dwight D. Eisenhower of being a "dedicated, conscientious agent of the communist conspiracy," says her complaints include the way the new Birch magazine, *The New American*, regularly bashes Reagan.

In an August issue, for example, *The New American* said Reagan has allowed the erosion of the U.S. military's ability to fight while "saying what he knows the average Americans citizen wants to hear about defense."

Welch said, "They are tearing him apart." When her husband died last year, she was assistant managing editor of *American Opinion*, the monthly founded by her husband. The publication was dropped nine months after his death for the new weekly, costing her her editorial post.

Charles R. Armour, a 23-year society employee who became its new president in June, said the organization is the same as when Welch founded it. The new magazine is examining the "Reagan record instead of his rhetoric," he said. "We have the obligation to lay this on the line."

A tougher editorial stance, however, has not yielded higher circulation. The number of readers has dropped from 50,000 to about 30,000, says Armour, and it now appears twice monthly instead of weekly. Armour concedes the need to tone down some of its rhetoric.

The membership of the society itself is "several tens of thousands, not more than 50,000," said society spokesman John J. McManus, declining to be more specific.

Former society chairman A. Clifford Barker of Newport News, Va., who introduced the new magazine last fall, lost his job after a June showdown at an executive council meeting in Cincinnati. He was not replaced.

Ten days before his removal, a letter over his name to members urgently appealed for money, saying staff members were unpaid and expenses were exceeding income by \$40,000 a week.

"The situation is so critical," said the letter, "the future of your organization is on the line."

The loss of major contributors through businesses reverses and death was blamed for the financial crisis.

Researchers test contacts on rabbits

HOUSTON (AP) — University of Houston researchers are hoping contact lenses being tested on rabbits and designed to protect humans from ultraviolet rays of the sun will be available to the public by next summer.

"It's a soft contact lens that has the ability to absorb ultraviolet radiation — the first I know of anywhere in the world," Dr. Donald Graves Pitts, a university scientist, says.

Pitts, a professor of environmental optometry and visual science, used similar research with rabbits in the 1960s to find ways to protect astronauts' eyes from radiation in space and on the moon.

Pitts' UVX lens is intended for people who abuse their eyes at the beach or poolside, particularly in sunny climates like Texas.

About 40 rabbits have custom-fitted UVX contact lenses. Rabbits are used because their tearing systems are superior to humans, who must blink to keep eyes lubricated, Pitts says.

Throwaway materials go into man's models

STEPHENVILLE (AP) — Building scale models of historical buildings sounds like serious business. But there is something light-hearted in the materials Wayne Sherrod uses for his replicas — Frosted Flakes boxes, Breeze detergent boxes, record album covers and milk jugs.

Sherrod had set his hobby aside for nearly eight years until some skeptical friends — building models of rockhouses using matchsticks and pebbles — didn't seem to take his high school hobby seriously.

To prove the replicas can be made of the throw-away materials, Sherrod pulled his dusty collection from the shelves and took it to the friends. One look at the detailed work and the skeptics were believing.

Returning to the craft, Sherrod hopes to finish a project that had several obstacles when he began in 1976.

Sherrod wants to complete a replica of the Baptist Church that used to be on Tarleton Avenue, but the fate of the church and a large house that was adjacent to the structure seems to be a mystery.

One project that Sherrod didn't have trouble with was a replica of the Old Presbyterian Church.

Sherrod measured the dimensions while the structure was being moved to the local museum grounds. He actually helped with the church's belfry which gave him more insight, and he was able to construct the interior of the chapel.

The model, with lighting inside, has been on display at the relocated church, at an antique shop and other places, Sherrod said.

Stephenville High School art students for the past seven years recognize Sherrod's work by another model that he donated to art instructor June Vistzky.

The replica is the only one Sherrod has created that isn't of a local landmark, but the model is familiar to people all the same.

It's a scale replica of *The Munsters* television show's haunted house. The model is used by Ms. Vistzky's students as a study reference in architecture.

How does one create a replica of something that's only flashed across the TV screen occasionally?

"I watched the *Munsters* a lot and sketched real fast," Sherrod said, "You've got about a 30-second shot of the house every day."

Six Flags' birthday marks 25 years, 52 million visitors

ARLINGTON (AP) — Twenty-five years and 52 million people ago, there were more cows than kids roaming the banks of Johnson Creek and the rustic old Waggoner DDD Ranch north of town.

And probably as many cows as kids knew that the Texas mystique was forged from beneath the six flags of Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy and the United States.

That changed in August 1961 with the opening of a squeaky clean, multimillion-dollar theme park midway between Dallas and Fort Worth.

Called Six Flags over Texas, the 105-acre family entertainment center opened with a staff of 600 and an all-inclusive ticket price of \$2.75 for adults and \$2.25 for children.

Today, the park has doubled in size, employs 2,500 people, entertains an average of 15,000 visitors daily at \$14.95 and \$7.95 apiece and expects to draw more than 2.5 million by the end of October.

"Based on attendance alone, it is the largest tourist attraction in the state," says Six Flags publicist Bruce

Neal, who has been with the park 17 years. "There is no place else in Texas where 2.6 million people went last year."

A toast then to Six Flags as it celebrates a \$600,000 silver anniversary and reigns as the flagship of Six Flags Corp., a network of seven major theme parks sprinkled across America.

The Arlington entertainment center was the first of the nation's regional theme parks, so-called because it drew most of its customers from the Southwest. Neal says there are more than 30 such parks scattered around the country today and all bear earmarks of the Texas original.

California's Disneyland opened six years earlier, lures visitors from around the world and remains in a class pretty much its own, challenged only by its sister park, Disney World in Florida.

Half a dozen major hotel chains have moved into the Arlington area to accommodate visitors to Six Flags, the nearby water and wildlife parks,

a wax museum and the born-again Texas Rangers baseball club.

"These are all clean acts," said Neal. "With Dallas to the east and Fort Worth to the west, there's just a heck of a lot to do, and a large part of it is family oriented."

After pioneering the world's first Log Flume and the first tubular rail roller coaster, the Runaway Mine Train, Six Flags introduced the first modern parachute ride, the Texas Chute Out, and the world's first freefall ride, the Texas Cliffhanger, Neal said.

To celebrate its anniversary, the park opened what it calls the Avalanche Bobsled and expanded the Music Mill Amphitheater to more than 10,000 seats.

Despite the changes, general manager Bob Bennett says Six Flags has retained the three principles upon which it was founded: a wholesome atmosphere, immaculate cleanliness and a staff of young students. Beer and booze are no-nos.

Couple lives in a zoo — literally

PRAIRIE CREEK, Ind. (AP) — Pat Hctor and his wife, Sharon, are living in a lion's den.

When their house burned down last winter, the couple took temporary refuge in a building next door normally used for raising their newborn exotic animals.

But with young cougar cubs in the makeshift living room, bobcat babies on the way and new exotics arriving almost daily, rebuilding their house has taken second priority.

"And with zoos opening and closing, this is a many-faceted business," Hctor says. "Most of the time this place sounds like a bookie joint."

Hctor says he is one of about 200 active dealers in the United States who make a living from breeding and trading wild animals.

Hctor and his wife also publish *The Animal Finders' Guide*, a nationally distributed publication where exotic breeders can sell their animals to collectors and zoos.

"Most zoos are living museums — they don't want babies," he said. "It's not a good breeding environment because the animals have all these people staring at them all the time."

Hctor's yard has proven to be a successful breeding ground. The stars of his collection are three ligers — a hybrid breed of his lion and tiger. Hctor says there are few other ligers in the world.

Wandering around Hctor's property, one takes in a scene more like the African bush than rural farmland in central Indiana.

Brush-tailed porcupines bristle in suspicion at strangers. Toucans screech a questionable welcome. Squirrel monkeys scream and a tiger growls.

The public at one time was welcome to visit, Hctor says, but liability insurance rates make that impossible now.

"We raise certain animals here, but I capture and haul every species

for private owners who have hundreds of acres of animals such as elk, deer or buffalo that must be relocated, he says.

Indiana, surprisingly, is a fairly good area to raise such wild animals, Hctor says.

"There are places that would be a little better for some of them, but as you get warmer, you get more disease and insects," he says.

"Winters create tremendous problems, though," he adds. "We have to chip the ice out of water pails, or if a female is going to drop her baby, we have to get her inside. My bedroom is my lion den for a while each winter."

The personal dangers involved in raising exotic animals are evident all over Hctor's skin: "If you can't see the tendons in your hand or the holes in your leg or see your couch torn to shreds, you shouldn't be in this business," he says matter-of-factly.

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