

San Francisco, CA
(San Francisco Co.)
Examiner
(Cir. D. 155,722)

NOV 9 1984

Allen's P. O. B. Est. 1888

UFOs never stole anyone's baby, astronomer

By John Flinn

Examiner staff writer

Ancient astronauts, extrasensory perception and astrologers' predictions might make for amusing reading in the supermarket tabloids, but they make Andrew Fraknoi's blood boil.

Fraknoi, who teaches astronomy at San Francisco State University, is constantly amazed when students ask about the latest reports of UFOs.

"The nearest planet is billions of miles away," he said. "Do you really think someone would come all that way just to harass a couple of drunken fishermen in Minnesota?"

Fraknoi is a member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, a group of scientists dedicated to debunking such stories.

The organization will hold a day-long meeting at Stanford University tomorrow, with sessions dealing with ghosts, the "psychic arms race" and

evidence of ancient astronauts.

"Scientists have realized that they have an obligation to explain these so-called phenomena in real-world terms," Fraknoi said.

Among the group's members are astronomer Carl Sagan, psychologist B.F. Skinner and writer Isaac Asimov.

It was founded a decade ago by James "The Amazing" Randi, who has made a career out of duplicating "feats" performed by psychics.

Randi's most famous expose was of Israeli magician-turned-psychic Uri Geller, who claimed to be able to bend forks and other metal objects through mental powers.

He demonstrated how Geller bent the objects against his belt buckle while witnesses were distracted.

At the Stanford meeting, Fraknoi will give a presentation debunking psychic claims, including his pet peeve, astrology.

"Astrology is enormously popular,"

he said. "We estimate that it's a half-billion-dollar-a-year business."

Thousands of years ago, people thought the positions of the sun and planets affected their lives, but Fraknoi finds it hard to understand how modern people still believe it.

"This is the space age," he said. "We've sent probes to Mars and Venus, so you'd think people would realize that the planets don't have mystical powers that affect their love lives."

Psychics who use astrology to predict the future make headlines in the National Enquirer, but few of the tabloid's readers apparently care about the psychics' track records, Fraknoi said.

He cited a study in which astrono-

mers Roger Culver and Phillip Ianna calculated the accuracy of 3,000 predictions by psychics Jeanne Dixon, Carroll Righter and others.

Only 11 percent of those predictions, which included assassinations, celebrity weddings and wars, proved correct.

So why are horoscopes among the most popular features in newspapers?

"Life is tough and people are looking for simple answers," Fraknoi said. "With astrology, you don't have to make difficult decisions. The stars have already made them for you."

He said he seen no harm in reading horoscopes — as long as they don't make decisions based on them.

"I'm worried by students of mine

who have told me they wouldn't go out with certain people because they were born under the wrong sign," Fraknoi said.

Another speaker at the Stanford meeting will be Dr. Wallace Sampson, an internist who teaches at Stanford's medical school. He specializes in debunking claims of psychic medicine.

He is incensed by the growing number of practitioners who claim to be able to cure cancer and other diseases through the power of positive thinking.

"There is five to 10 years' worth of data on the subject and no one has been able to prove that it works. There is absolutely no reason to believe that positive thought can be transmit-