

# Skeptics' job: Find,

# expose the phonies

By TOM FORSTROM  
Of the Statesman-Journal

John Merrell, as much as anyone, would like to believe in UFOs and visitors from outer space.

But John Merrell, more than most, knows they don't exist. Or if they do exist, he points out no one has ever produced any scientific proof of it.

And, as far as he and a group of investigators he helped form are concerned, the same is true of psychics, astrologers, water witches, Bigfoot, perpetual motion machines, cures for cancer and a host of other fraudulent, pseudoscientific, parapsychological or supernatural phenomenon pawned off on the public as real.

Merrell, 30, of Beaverton, is cofounder of Northwest Skeptics, a group branded by some as "eccentric debunkers" but considered by others as a valuable source of investigative talent.

It's serious business, and a time-consuming, non-profit one at that. For example, in just three days recently he figured he ran up about \$250 in long-distance phone bills alone just trying to track down the background of a radio "psychic" who, according to Merrell and NW Skeptics, misrepresented his credentials on almost all fronts.

Some might ask, "So what? Who cares?" about a "harmless" psychic and his references.

For one thing, according to Merrell, "He has made medical predictions on (a Portland radio station). He shouldn't really be making medical predictions."

The danger, he said, is that some callers will believe the psychic and may take his "predictions" and "advice" over that of a physician.

The psychic, who was pulled off of one television program after the station was contacted by NW Skeptics, is one example of the type of investigations the group does.

In that particular case, Merrell and others literally checked dozens of people and places all over the United States and Canada, including the Johnny Carson program, Toronto newspapers, other "psychics," researchers, writers and others who might shed light on the radio show's guest.

If off-the-cuff medical advice is not enough, Merrell and others are simply concerned about truth.

The Skeptics, on their own or through the urging of others, try to get to the bottom of claims or procedures or unusual phenomenon that could hurt the public. Some-

times, however, what they do is mostly for fun.

Northwest Skeptics, which calls itself basically a non-member group of "consultants," is patterned after a large, international group with the high-sounding name "The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal." Their acronym is SCICOP.

There is no lack of scientific, investigative or cognizant ability among SCICOP's "membership." Its roster includes philosophers, science writers, engineers, psychologists, anthropologists, statisticians, chemists, biologists, zoologists, authors and critics, astronomers, physicists and even magicians.

**The address for Northwest Skeptics in Oregon and Idaho is: Northwest Skeptics, 4885 SW 152nd, Beaverton, OR 97007. In Washington, the address is: Box 70191, Seattle, WA 98107.**

On the committee are the likes of Issac Asimov, scientist and science fiction writer; B. F. Skinner, professor of psychology at Harvard; Paul Kurtz, chairman of the committee and a philosophy professor in Buffalo, N.Y.; Carl Sagan, astronomer at Cornell; and others who have made themselves widely known through a variety of efforts.

The Northwest Skeptics listing of consultants includes similar professions, with many coming from state and private colleges and universities.

So why do such groups — the Skeptics and SCICOP — exist, especially when their efforts are mostly "free time" and non-paying ones?

Merrell explains his involvement: "We have been able to provide answers, and that's a great feeling. Maybe that's why we do it. And sometimes it's fun."

Northwest Skeptics, says printed material supplied by the group, was formed "... to create a body of concerned citizens with the potential to counteract some of the spread of counterfeit science within the Northwest." The Skeptics are not attached to any political or religious organization, and the key aim is to act as a "educational clearinghouse" of information.

Some people, Merrell said, have criticized the Skeptics as a closed-minded group of debunkers, a group whose collective mind is made up in

advance, a group which purposely picks targets and goes after them with a vengeance.

Those characterizations are wrong, he said.

"We're just the opposite. We're serious investigators. We look at ourselves as detectives."

There are some things the Skeptics will not look into. Basically those involve religious beliefs and occurrences. They also do not investigate criminal activity as such, but do turn over any appropriate findings they make to police agencies or to social service agencies.

But of things they do investigate, he said, "Any time there is a serious public hazard, we'll look at it. There are some dangers. We can call attention to it when something needs looking into."

Merrell is on a UFO subcommittee for the SCICOP organization, and as such, he investigates the so-called sightings and landings and crashes that appear periodically in the media.

He keeps an open mind, he said. In fact, he wishes that ET, or something like ET, would show up on Earth, or that there would be a cure for cancer, or some true psychic event would occur. The international group even has a prize fund of about \$2,000 ready to give to anyone who can prove, under close, scientific observation and testing, that a real paranormal event occurred.

"I hope, and I think all 16 members of the subcommittee hope, there will be extraterrestrial visitations, but the more we investigate, the more skeptical we become.

"But," he added, "the hope is always there. There is the chance of extraterrestrial life.

"We hope we will come across a true psychic, or a cure for cancer. Unfortunately, the investigators always find an error in the way the story was given to us, or a fraudulent method, or a person making profits."

He admits there may be "miracles," such as an unexplained remission of cancer, or some other medical event beyond the comprehension of doctors. But, he said, each "miracle" has to be looked at in reference to the thousands of non-miracles that occur daily.

Still, he maintains, "We can't rule anything out."

Merrell, who is an electronics salesman in Portland, teamed with Michael Dennett two years ago to form Northwest Skeptics.

