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December 1982 "BASIS", newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics  
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Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet

Vol. 1, No. 6

Editor: Mike McCarthy    Publisher: Dan Byrd

Bay Area Skeptics is the first local chapter of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)

## FROM THE CHAIR

by Bob Steiner

How do you judge the strength and health of this new organization known as the Bay Area Skeptics? Let me count the ways:

Public reaction has been enthusiastic. People come forward wanting information, wanting to participate, wanting to meet other people interested in our organization and in our ideas, and wanting to do something -- anything -- to further the interests of the organization.

This enthusiastic reaction has been supported by words, deeds, and money. And it includes people in the Bay Area, throughout the country, and around the world.

Organizations have contacted us for information and for speakers.

The media have reacted warmly and are much interested in covering the views and progress of Bay Area Skeptics. When mystics come along, the media have shown a considerable inclination to contact us: for appearances, for confrontations with the mystics, and for information regarding mystical claims.

People contribute both letters and articles to "BASIS".

Many people have come forward volunteering their time, skill, and information in examining the claims of mystics. We have been able to build a cadre of skilled scientific consultants and investigators in a wide variety of fields.

When the founders found ourselves inundated with paper and short of money, a cry for help went out. It is a healthy organization when that cry is answered. Mike McCarthy has agreed to be Editor of "BASIS". I've known Mike for some time now. He has participated in presentations to the public, on skepticism as well as on other topics.

Mike is a Scientific Consultant for BAS, and is a skeptic by any definition of the word. Speaking of words, Mike has considerable skill and experience in their use, both spoken and written, and in

the editing of them. With the increased contacts with the media and the public demanding my time, and with the increased correspondence that crosses my desk concerning Bay Area Skeptics, it is indeed a comfort to find such an able person willing to do the editing of "BASIS". Mike's considerable knowledge of and access to a computer/word processor is the icing on the cake.

Earl Hautala, a skeptic, subscriber, and alert thinker, has stepped forward to share some of the burden and joys of handling much of the paper that comes our way. Earl has been instrumental in bringing Bay Area Skeptics to the attention of many, including having it and me introduced at a meeting in San Francisco where a "clairvoyant" was the speaker.

Others have also volunteered their help. Hang in there -- we'll find a use for your talents.

The Board members and others continue to contact the media with ideas and reactions about the possible existence of mystical powers, and about the positive existence of Bay Area Skeptics.

And, happily, people have replied to the request for money. With the time made available by the volunteers, we will shortly embark upon finalizing our recognition as a tax-exempt subsidiary of THE COMMITTEE FOR THE SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION OF CLAIMS OF THE PARANORMAL (CSICOP). When this finally comes through, contributions to Bay Area Skeptics FROM INCEPTION will be recognized as a tax-deductible charitable contribution.

CSICOP, and its excellent magazine, "The Skeptical Inquirer", have been supportive to Bay Area Skeptics, its first local chapter.

The word of our organization and reactions to it have produced such good, uh, vibes that we will shortly be seeing other local groups springing up, and subsequently affiliating with CSICOP.

All of the above, with the considerable contribution of time, effort, and money of you folks who are reading this right now, have enabled us to make the inroads on behalf of reason that we have made in the past several months.

And that, friends, is how you can judge the strength and health of this new organization, Bay Area Skeptics. Thank you all for that!

The end.

## B.A.S. CALENDAR

DEC. 1, 7:30 PM. BAS MEETING, open to the public, Campbell Public Library, 70 North Central Ave., in San Jose. Free. Subject: "Psychics and Police Work."

DEC. 10, 7:30 PM, BAS SACRAMENT SUBCHAPTER MEET, at Terry Sandbek's, 3955 Ridge Street, Fair Oaks, near Sacto., call (916) 965-4606 for info. All welcome.

DEC. 15, 8 PM, "Does ESP Exist?" BAS debate after ESP "demonstration", at The Grotto, 5033 California (at 12th Ave.), S.F., \$3. Lively.

JAN. 8, 8 PM, BAS PARTY, at Robert Sheaffer's, 1341 Poe Lane, San Jose (directions in next month's "BASIS"). See blurb this issue.

FEB. 28, 8 PM, Bob Steiner's Annual Leap Year Party. Details in a later issue.

EVERY SUNDAY, 11 AM, KGO, FM-104, BAS board member Andy Fraknoi's "Exploring the Universe" with guests, call-ins, frequent skeptical comment. Bob Steiner was guest in Nov.

### B.A.S. PARTY IN JANUARY!

Come to Robert Sheaffer's "Social Gathering and Psychic Humbuggery" Jan. 8 at 8 PM in San Jose (directions in next month's issue). Free. Bring your own elixir; snacks provided. Meet other BAS members, see "psychic events" occurring BEFORE YOUR OWN EYES! What skeptic can resist?

### NOTICE -- CHANGE OF EDITORSHIP

As discussed elsewhere in this issue, there is a new editor for the "BASIS".

Send all Letters to the Editor and materials for publication, including calendar events, to the Editor:

Michael McCarthy  
1222 Via Dolorosa  
San Lorenzo, CA 94580  
(415) 276-2369

Send all other correspondence regarding BAY AREA SKEPTICS to the Chair:

Bob Steiner  
Box 659  
El Cerrito, CA 94530

DEADLINE for submissions for the January issue of "BASIS" is December 18th.

## NOVA: "THE CASE OF THE UFOs": STARTING THE SEASON OFF RIGHT!

by Robert Sheaffer

We have all seen the sensationalized treatment that UFOs have received on TV, even from "responsible" news organizations, with their exciting but unsubstantiated claims of dramatic UFO encounters. A refreshing change was the season opener for NOVA (actually a production of the BBC) telecast on PBS stations October 12 and 13.

This past February, John Groom, writer and producer of the show, was at my house to discuss approaches to the subject and sources of information, and at that time I became aware that he would not dish up just another piece of journalistic trash. I was not disappointed.

Not only were many of the most famous UFO incidents on record discussed and recreated, but, significantly, a special effort was made to seek out natural explanations wherever possible to account for the alleged UFOs sighted. Both UFO believers and skeptics appeared on the program, although the balance seemed to weigh in favor of skepticism, as I think must necessarily be the case when we faithfully adhere to the scientific method.

I would say that the show's greatest weakness was not in excess belief of skepticism, but in a failure to be able to discern APPROPRIATE skeptical explanations. Not ALL prosaic explanations have equal merit. In my view, far too much time was spent on Dr. Persinger's hypothesis that UFOs are somehow the result of "earthquake lights", or balls of light supposedly caused by strains in the earth's crust.

Persinger says that the many weak earthquakes in the U.K. cause luminous displays. Rubbish, I say; here in California we have weak earthquakes every few days, and in the Bay Area we would see UFOs nightly. If Persinger's theory were true, UFOs would correlate with fault lines; we could go up in the Santa Cruz mountains, and photograph UFOs aplenty. Yet in fact, California does not lead the country in UFOs. Sorry, folks, but UFOs correlate with population, not with earthquakes.

Persinger even attributes the Travis Walton "UFO abduction" to the effects of these geological fuzballs on poor Travis's brain! Far more convincing was the finding of polygraph operator Jack McCarthy about Travis: "gross deception" -- a finding that the "National Enquirer" and APRO tried to cover up, but that was brought to light by Philip J. Klass of CSICOP.

If you missed the show, try to catch it when it is rerun. We will also try to have a showing of it at a future BAS social gathering.

ACTIVE MONTH FOR B.A.S.!

Nothing loath to push ourselves into the public eye, BAY AREA SKEPTICS enjoyed a banner media month for its young career.

Board member ANDY FRAKNOI'S NEW RADIO SHOW hosted BAS CHAIR BOB STEINER to talk of educating the public in logical thinking.

Bob Steiner appeared for a whole week as the voice of reason on San Francisco's KGO TV NEWS SPECIAL ON PSYCHICS, a great show that is discussed elsewhere in this issue. Congrats to Bob and to KGO's quality reportage.

Board member ROBERT SHEAFFER hosted a discussion of his great book "The UFO Verdict: Examining the Evidence" at The Grotto in San Francisco.

Bob Steiner (again!) opposed a supposed PSYCHIC POLICE-HELPER on a S.F. TV show.

Board member TERRY SANDBEK appeared on a Sacramento RADIO TALK SHOW and signed the host up for BAS! (See article.)

BAS received favorable mention in the "Sacramento Union" through Terry Sandbek's efforts.

IF YOU SEE a BAS member on TV, hear one on the radio, or read about our organization, please clip, tape, and otherwise make a permanent record or at least a detailed note, and let the "BASIS" editor know. Thanks!

DON'T YOU BELIEVE IT

by Tony Bizjak  
Sacramento Union Staff Writer

[This article was reprinted from the November 8, 1982 issue of the Sacramento Union.]

For 20 minutes, two psychics amazed callers to a Sacramento radio talk show with how much they knew about callers' personal lives and troubles.

Then they told a little about themselves.

"We are fakes," Bob Steiner and Terence Sandbek replied. "We don't read people's minds."

Steiner, a San Francisco Bay Area magician, and Sandbek, a Fair Oaks psychologist, explained they were merely perpetrating an old magician's trick called "cold readings", in which the trickster speaks in general terms and feels his way through a fake psychic reading by playing off clues the subject unwittingly gives.

Sandbek will never forget the next caller.

"A guy said, `Mr. Steiner, can you tell me how my job is going to do next year?'"

"We said, `Did you hear what we just said? Did you understand?'"

"He said, `Yes, but do it anyway.'"

The scholars had unwittingly proven two poignant points: You can fool people with little effort if they are predisposed to believe and -- more frighteningly -- some people will continue to believe what has just been proven to them to be untrue.

It is this kind of gullibility Steiner and Sandbek are trying to counteract as members of a national organization dedicated to critically investigating pseudo-scientific claims by dubious people.

It is called "The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal."

One of its members, James Randi, a magician, carries with him a certified \$10,000 check which he will give to anyone who performs a feat he can neither duplicate nor explain by normal means.

No one has taken the money.

A local chapter of the group, Bay Area Skeptics, has a similar challenge for \$1,000.

The money comes from Steiner's pocket. He issued the challenge five years ago and doubts anyone will be able to take the money from him.

The reason for all of this, according to another member, San Francisco astronomer Andrew Fraknoi, is that scientists are sick and tired of "amazing nonsense" coming from people about alleged psychic powers, UFOs, ancient astronauts, the Bermuda Triangle, psychic surgery, and so on.

"These pseudo-science claims have had the stage for so long," Fraknoi said. "Scientists have not spoken up. So we thought perhaps that is what we should do."

"Our main aim is public education."

Sandbek said he is discovering people in Sacramento who "thought they were the only person around who was a skeptic." He is forming a Sacramento spinoff of the Bay Area chapter.

A skeptic, he said, is someone with an open mind, but who interprets life by rules of logic.

"The skeptic validates what his senses perceive by using objective

rules", he said. "The person who is gullible has subjective rules. He might say, `I don't know, I just feel that is the way it is.'"

Such a person might see something unusual in the sky and figure it is a UFO.

While he was governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter reported seeing a UFO one evening moving toward him, then away. Robert Sheaffer, vice-chairman of the Bay Area Skeptics, checked out Carter's claim by standing in the same spot, on the same day of the year at the same time in the same direction.

He saw Venus. At twilight, when it is the only bright light in the sky, Venus can appear to be moving in and out.

"Does that mean Carter is a nut?" asked Fraknoi. "It just means that sober, well-intentioned people, when surprised by something unfamiliar, can make judgements like that."

Psychics are a different matter. The skeptics say all they have run into are hucksters using magicians' tricks.

A man who says the angels can tell him which playing cards are favorable or unfavorable has challenged Steiner to a stud poker game for the \$1,000.

"I will set up minimum controls to eliminate trickery," Steiner said. "The deck will be fairly shuffled. It will be a straight probability shot."

Already, the challenger has said his psychic powers won't work, if Steiner is giving off negative vibes.

"That is their total copout," Steiner said.

Psychics, he said, are unsinkable rubber ducks.

"The best you can do is disprove a particular psychic claim," he said. "As Randi says: `One more down and another million to go.'"

Randi coached Johnny Carson in what sleights of hand to look for before alleged psychic Uri Geller appeared on the Carson show.

Geller was unable to do his tricks -- which include bending a key and starting a clock with mental telepathy -- and blamed his inability partially on negative vibes from Carson.

Since then, Randi has duplicated Geller's tricks.

"He even wrote a book because he was so upset by this magician billing himself as a psychic," Fraknoi said.

Steiner calls psychic surgeons the worst kind of fakes. He has duplicated psychic surgery in front of physicians who knew they

were witnessing a hoax, but could not catch the sleight of hand. During psychic surgery, the doctor claims to reach his hand into the patient, without cutting him open, and pull out diseased material.

This surgery is usually conducted in the Philippines at considerable cost to the patient.

"They take people who are desperate and rob them of their money, their lives, everything," Steiner said.

Fraknoi said: "This is a case where we feel very strongly we are doing some good."

Steiner uses a hidden balloon stuffed with chicken innards and blood. It is just one of several ways to do the trick, he said.

"I believe there is life in the stars," Fraknoi said. "What I don't believe is that spaceships full of alien beings are coming here across light years, picking up two drunken fishermen in Mississippi, and going home."

"I say, 'Show me,' Fraknoi said. "People don't do that enough."

Neither do the skeptics say humans are incapable of appropriating psychic power.

"But it is unlikely it is going to come from an old converted magician or a fortune teller," Fraknoi said.

"People have a desire to believe," Steiner said. "All their lives they are taught to believe in magic. If you please the right entity, you will be taken care of."

Part of the fault lies in the education system, he said, where an ostensibly reliable teacher feeds students ostensibly reliable information.

"You are tested on how well you absorbed the information, but you are not taught to question the information," he complained. "You have not learned critical judgement."

**DAMON RUNYON'S LAW:**

"The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that's the way to bet."

**NEWS FROM SACTO**

Board member Terry Sandbek, who teaches in Sacramento, was on the local Eric St. John radio talk show recently, and files this

report:

"The subject was psychics and their ilk. Eric is a skeptical talk show host who is quite discouraged that the media has been so willing to promote these people.

"He was still smarting from a recent drubbing from a local psychic. He had publicly refused to allow any more psychics on his show. But to be fair, he said he would allow on the show any psychic who could divine his middle name.

"Sure enough, someone called in with his middle name, so he was obliged to keep his word and let the psychic appear on the show.

"Eric was thrilled to learn that an organization such as BAS had been formed. While I was on the show, he was impressed with the "BASIS" newsletter that he wrote out a check on the air, and let all of his audience know what he was doing."

\$MONEY!\$

## FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

by Robert Sheaffer

While BAS is a local group, we are attracting a lot of attention and hence have subscribers across the country, indeed, around the world. There is no problem in sending "BASIS" to subscribers around the country, since a letter to Florida costs the same as a letter to Berkeley; but overseas subscribers are another matter.

The overseas rate for airmail is 80 cents an ounce, or \$9.60 a year in postage ALONE not counting the cost of publishing. Thus we must henceforth send all foreign subscribers (beyond Mexico and Canada) by surface first class (1-2 months for delivery), which still costs 30 cents/oz. The other alternative is to charge \$12 per year for foreign airmail subscriptions.

While we are on the subject of money, let me say it outright: BAS is broke and has always been broke; in the hole, in fact. Costs of publishing, postage, stationary, and our recent news release exceed our assets. Each BAS Director has already contributed far more than the minimum \$5 annual donation, as have a number of other generous consultants and subscribers.

We'd like to ask some of you who share our goals to do the same. I realize not everyone may be in the position to do so, but if you can spare \$5, \$10, or \$20, it would help keep BAS solvent. We have every reason to believe we are a tax-deductible, non-profit organization per IRS definition, although all the red tape has not been cut through as of this writing.

If you support our aims and our research, have benefitted from the information in "BASIS", and/or are interested in meeting other skeptics in our various get-togethers -- could you please help

cover some of the expenses we are incurring in trying to make BAS a viable and a visible organization? Thank you.

"In the past few years, there seems to have developed a growing tendency on the part of some people to see popular science writing as a kind of sensational escape literature. But quantum mechanics is NOT Zen Buddhism. Photons do NOT display manifestations of consciousness. Consciousness is NOT a rival scientific theory of the origin of species. Evolution is NOT speculation, and so on. If people read popular science with misguided expectations, in the long run this will manifest itself in a loss of popular support for, and interest in, real scientific research."

-- Jeremy Bernstein, "Science Observed"

Editorial

## THE NEW YEAR AHEAD

We finish 1982 on a distinctly upbeat note for an organization less than six months old. Bay Area Skeptics has already had a good impact in our area and is expanding with all due speed.

We have over 150 subscribers at the moment, and pass out another few hundred copies of the newsletter each month, both to the interested and the hostile. The Skeptic's Challenge is making the rounds, and may yield interesting results in the future. The Bay Area journalist community is now aware of our existence and has already found several occasions to turn to BAS for skeptical counterbalance to credulous claims. This is a remarkable record for such a young group.

Best of all, people like me have somewhere to turn for confirmation that, yes indeed, there IS good reason to be skeptical when faced with dazzlingly fatuous tales of modern wonders.

Last year, I attended a psychic demonstration, and found to my surprise that fully a third of the audience were not true believers. Apparently, they were dragged along by believing friends. As the show progressed, they grew more and more uncomfortable, both at the ludicrous tricks of the psychic and at the credulous enthusiasm of their friends. When the psychic revealed himself as simply a stage magician, the sense of relief from these skeptics was palpable. Unaware that others like themselves in the audience felt the same way, they had begun to fear that the world was turning upside down; that it was they who were unreasonable for being rational, while their friends were quite reasonable in insisting that nonsensical card tricks constituted evidence of otherworldly powers.

When the wildly improbable is marketed on every supermarket counter

as the conventional wisdom, reasonable men and women can start feeling pretty lonely. BAS has been formed, in part, to counter that feeling.

There is certainly a combative element to our charter, for we do have our subscribers who enjoy a good tussle with the forces of unreason. But there is also for many of us the social element.

It is a relief to spend a little time among people who will agree when you say that rationality is not a cruel weapon devised by conspirators to put shackles on the minds of men; that the "National Enquirer" is not, in fact, a reliable source of information about spacemen, talking plants, or magical medical breakthroughs; that it is not unreasonable to believe that Las Vegas survives not merely because true psychics are unwilling to use their powers for monetary gain; and that a few clever card tricks do not necessarily constitute evidence of mystical powers beyond the ken of science simply because the trickster says so.

Our plans for 1983 consist of continuing and multiplying our present activities: challenging gullible media reports of paranormal occurrences; persuading journalists that BAS is a valuable resource for information about and experts on paranormal claims; further persuading journalists that it is irresponsible to treat claims of paranormal events as harmless "fun" stories not subject to the normal rules of journalistic ethics.

We are trying to collect information on the careers, predictions, and flaws of local "psychics", in hopes that at least some people will be impressed by a record of failure. And we continue to seek opportunities to speak and debate on the side of reason and common sense in the media, and before schools and community groups.

To accomplish our goals, we are fortunate to have many subscribers who are experts in various fields of the paranormal, who are familiar with the personalities and literature of everything from UFOs to psychic surgery, and who can handle themselves ably in a public forum.

But let us not neglect our many subscribers who may not be experts on UFOs or the Bermuda Triangle, but who would like to learn more, and who would like to make a contribution to our efforts against the tidal wave of irrationality.

Many of us are eager to support the purposes of this group, and there is much we can do, even though we are not experts or technical specialists. We can perform and assist in research; we can give moral support as members of the audience at speeches and debates to counterweigh heavy representation from true believers; we can watch for opportunities for action. We can, in other words, serve as a valuable resource for BAY AREA SKEPTICS.

That is one reason why the December 1st BAS meeting was scheduled to include expert information on a common object of our attentions:

the use of psychics in police work. Future meetings will likewise include expert discussions.

This kind of theme meeting will help bring the subscribers up to date on an area of study; let us know what BAS has done and decide what to do in the future in this area; and to suggest ways in which the general subscribership can offer support.

I want to urge you to try to make it out to at least one BAS event in the near future. You will find your fellow subscribers, board members, consultants to be bright, convivial, rational, mildly anarchic, and definitely stimulating.

-- The Editor

## EXPIRATION DATE

Look at your mailing label. If the first character is the letter "I", this issue is brought to you per your inquiry or because we thought you might be interested. Please subscribe as soon as possible (by making out a \$5.00 check to Bay Area Skeptics and mailing to Bob Steiner, Box 659, El Cerrito, CA 94530), so you can continue to receive "BASIS".

If your first character is the letter "S", yours is a subscription, and the next four digits represent the month and year of expiration of your subscription. Please save our meager funds by renewing well in advance (in the same manner as in the previous paragraph), so we don't have to send a renewal notice. Thanks. -- Editor

"Lead men to the truth, prepare them to distinguish right from wrong by teaching them first to recognize a fact, then to examine the facts and add them up to make a conclusion.... There is no more all-inclusive faith, no more central idea in the world today."

-- Thomas Jefferson

## SCIENTIFIC CONSULTANTS TO BAY AREA SKEPTICS

The following is a current list of BAS Scientific Consultants:

Wayne Bartz, psychologist, American River College, Sacramento.  
Kenneth D. Bomben, PhD, chemist (moved to Okla., but still a valued colleague!).

Bart Brodsky, Berkeley.

William Cromack, MD, psychiatrist, San Mateo.

Donald Goldsmith, PhD, astronomer and author, Berkeley.

Richard Goode, MD, surgeon, Stanford University Medical Center.

Ron Hipschmann, educator, The Exploratorium, San Francisco.

Mel Magliocco, mechanical engineer, San Rafael.

Michael McCarthy, technical writer, San Lorenzo.

William McConnell, PhD, psychologist, Dept. of Public Health,  
San Francisco.

Andrew Neher, psychologist, Cabrillo College, Aptos.

Robert Painter, PhD, microbiologist, UCSF.

Bing Quock, Lecturer, Morrison Planetarium, California Academy  
of Sciences.

Margaret T. Singer, PhD, psychologist, UC Berkeley.

There are a few other would-be consultants who either have not yet  
replied to our invitation, or have not kept their subscriptions  
current. If that includes you, please take care of it soon!

Note: Affiliations are given for purposes of identification only.

-- Editor

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Opinions expressed in "BASIS" are those of the authors and do not  
necessarily reflect those of BAS, its board or its advisors.

The above are selected articles from the December, 1982 issue of  
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AREA SKEPTICS, 4030 Moraga, San Francisco, CA 94122-3928 or by  
leaving a message on "The Skeptic's Board" BBS (415-648-8944) or  
on the 415-LA-TRUTH (voice) hotline.

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