

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet  
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Editor: Kent Harker

## CREATIONISTS ATTACK SCIENCE EDUCATION

[The following is a rebuttal written for The National Center for Science Education in response to a renewed attempt on the part of fundamentalist creationists to foist their conception of origins on the public schools. After a sound defeat in the courts they have simply turned their efforts in other directions. Used with permission of the NCSE.]

Prominent scientists in several fields have joined with teachers to affirm that there is no room for dishonesty in science classrooms, and no room for fundamentalist religion disguised as science. Articles presenting the scientist's views and warnings appear in the new issues of "American Biology Teacher" and "The Science Teacher", two important journals for educators. Both articles denounce a religious organization's elaborate attack on science education. Both tell how the organization has used misrepresentation, misquotation, innuendo, false statements and other distortive devices to promote the political movement called creationism.

Creationism is a fundamentalist political movement built on narrow biblical exegesis. Its political goals are broad, bold and almost universally underestimated by the public and the press.

The originators of creationism, early in this century, sought specifically to suppress knowledge of biological evolution and to outlaw all discussion of that subject in public schools. Today's creationists have more extensive aims: They strive not only to eradicate knowledge of biological evolution but to bring all science education under religious control and censorship. They hope ultimately to evict much of modern science from the schools, and to replace it with a system of pseudoscience that conforms to the creation narratives and other episodes in the Bible.

The organization whose campaign for creationism is condemned in "American Biology Teacher" and "The Science Teacher" calls itself the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA). It is actually a religious group. It accepts only Christians, and only those Christians who will declare that the Bible is the unerring word of God. It does not require that its members have professional training or experience in natural science.

Several months ago, the ASA produced and elaborate, 48-page booklet

written explicitly for teachers, and then sent copies of the booklet to tens of thousands of teachers throughout the country.

The booklet distorts various principles of science and misrepresents basic topics in paleontology, biology, zoology, anthropology and other disciplines. It depicts scientific findings about the history of life as flimsy speculations. It promotes classic creationist pseudoscience, and it urges teacher to convey that material to students. It also urges them to lead students into believing that science requires validation by popular culture and biblical religion.

The response to this booklet in the new issue of "The Science Teacher" comprises nine short essays by outstanding scientists in the fields that the ASA has abused most conspicuously.

An editorial introduction states two themes that recur prominently in the essays themselves. First: In trying to promote fundamentalist religion and denigrate science, the ASA writers use pseudoscience to encourage and exploit a popular belief that is simply false -- the notion that fossils provide the major evidence, or the only evidence, of evolutionary relationships among living things. ("That notion is wrong," the editor points out, "and it never has been right; it is a folktale, but the ASA writers affirm it..." Second: Although the ASA booklet is deceptive, it may seem respectable to lay people.

Most of the essayists provide explanations of specific cases in which the booklet twists scientific concepts or misrepresents scientific literature. For example: Stephen Jay Gould, a paleontologist and evolutionary biologist at Harvard, analyzes as a "lamentable rhetorical trick" the ASA writers' misleading use of a sentence taken out of context that Gould published in "Natural History" two years ago.

Creationists, Gould observes, "do not follow the norms of science or the traditions of fair and decent argument -- and must therefore be judged as ideologues, not as promoters of honorable pluralism in debate."

Lynn Margulis, Professor of Biology at Boston U, ends her essay thus: "We must resist the ASA's charming booklet, for we can deduce from their own phrases that the writers are neither driven by intellectual curiosity nor concern with an accurate description of life on earth. They are committed to biblical religion, and they want to impose their values and beliefs on our biology students."

Michael Ghiselin, a zoologist and historian of science at the California Academy of Science, concludes his essay in "The Science Teacher" with this declaration: "In science, right conduct consists of evaluating evidence honestly and according to the canons of scientific reasoning. To misrepresent the evidence and the criteria of judgment is not merely to provide misinformation; it is to set an example of dishonesty. Telling lies to naive and trusting young

persons is bad. Doing so for the purpose of proselytizing is worse."

The response to the ASA's booklet in "American Biology Teacher" comes from William Mayer, Professor Emeritus of Biology at the University of Colorado. Mayer, who for many years has been a prominent defender of integrity in science education, begins by calling attention to the ASA's misleading name. Then he describes some of the methods by which the ASA writers have tried "to provide a veneer of scientific respectability for hyperorthodox Christian fundamentalism masquerading as science."

These methods include, Mayer says, selecting information to support a preordained conclusion, misrepresenting the significance of the information selected, misrepresenting the nature of biological processes, and advancing "a series of non sequiturs and out-of-context quotes" to suggest that scientists know nothing at all about the origin of humans.

Mayer observes that the ASA booklet has been written smoothly and with restraint, and that it differs in that way from much of the literature promoted by creationist groups.

"Blatantly ridiculous assertions have been muted," he says, "but the basic issue is the same. Science that contradicts the literalist interpretation of the Bible must be 'corrected' and replaced by a 'science' that is clandestinely based on revelatory supernaturalism.

## FOR THE RECORD

The following anonymous letter was sent to BAS in response to the meeting in which a Dalmatian was to demonstrate knowledge of arithmetic. (See the June issue for the story.)

"After seeing your club/group/ society, et al in action Thursday night, May 28th in Campbell may I state that in my opinion you/your group must feel that you have reached the highest peak of achievement by browbeating and overwhelming an animal -- a poor defenseless dog who was unable to answer you in kind.

"In as much as this was premeditated and planned I am quite sure you all enjoyed leading the lamb/dog to slaughter.

"I am sure this will go down in skeptics history as one of your greatest achievements.

"My suggestion for your next challenge is a defanged rattlesnake, at least you would all have something in common. As for your gestapo leader I feel that he would be right at home running a crippled children's concentration camp.

"May your goodly deeds go on forever."

Editor's reply: I doubt that the author of this letter is a subscriber to "BASIS", so he/she will probably not see our response.

It is important that the "BAS CHALLENGE" be properly understood by the public. We offer a challenge. The claimant offers his/her proof. The claimant comes to us -- this was the case with Mr. Todd -- not conversely. The \$11,000 offer of our small group is not a great sum, but significant enough to make it count for putting our money where our collective mouths are, and large enough to hurt if it is lost.

If the writer of the letter had HIS money on the line would he just fold his arms and smile, being careful not to offend anyone? It is a foregone conclusion that a true believer is going to be offended upon learning that his/her pet (no pun intended) notion will not stand up under scrutiny at least, or that arrant fraud is exposed at worst.

In cases of our investigations, clear exhibitions must be presented to reveal the emptiness of a challenger's claim. There must be little room for doubt in the minds of the claimant and the observers that he/she has either successfully demonstrated the putative miracle or that there is no substance to it. There can be no middle ground. We cannot award \$18.65 of the \$11,000 for "pretty good."

The charge that we "browbeat...a poor defenseless dog" is simply ludicrous. To be able to browbeat a dog is to accord it with as much anthropomorphism as Mr. Todd mistakenly does. The only negative reaction the animal seemed to exhibit was confusion. "Where is my beloved master?" he seemed to wonder. There was clearly some anxiety in the dog when he did not please his OWNER (he missed a couple of questions put to him by Mr. Todd). I don't think there was a person in the room who was not thoroughly charmed by this clever, devoted animal.

But the dog was not being tested: Mr. Todd's CLAIM was the test. Would we have awarded the \$11,000 to the dog for a successful demonstration? The only one that could be construed to have taken a beating was Mr. Todd, and he is neither poor nor defenseless. One must remember it was he who came to BAS to show us up and take our money. We believe him to be sincere -- sincerely mistaken. If he was embarrassed or beaten by the experience he knew beforehand what he was doing. He is an adult. He was asked some hard questions which would not have been difficult were his claim true. If asking tough questions and requiring solid evidence for a spectacular claim against \$11,000 is too much heat then one ought not enter the arena. Tests of fantastic propositions are not for the faint-hearted.

The only premeditation and planning was that we were confident

animals of the canine species are incapable of cognition. In fact, a preliminary test (which the meeting was) is quite UNstructured so as to allow the claimant to "do his thing." The really rigorous part comes after, and nobody as gotten that far.

The epithets of "gestapo" and "concentration camps" do not deserve a rejoinder.

In the final analysis, our challenge stands: successfully show a paranormal feat under controlled conditions and you take our money. Since it is our money, we set the conditions -- BUT THOSE CONDITIONS ARE EXPLAINED AND MUTUALLY AGREED UPON OUT FRONT. Then don't complain after the fact that it ain't fair.

## RAMPARTS

[Ramparts is a regular feature of "BASIS," and your participation is urged. Clip, snip and tear bits of irrationality from your local scene and send them to the EDITOR. If you want to add some comment with the submission, please do so.]

From the "S. F. Chronicle" we learn that the American Society of Dowzers is holding its annual convention on the grounds of U. C. Santa Cruz. The activities this year include classes to teach dowsing. Presumably if one learns how to dowse on the campus grounds of a major university it must be scientific. Pseudoscience is wont to throw rocks at the "establishment," but it sure likes to be as close as possible in hopes a little credibility will rub off.

When there are no theories for some phenomenon, any idea is just fine. Most dowzers tell us there is some mysterious force associated with the underground "vein" that causes the witching rod to move. ASD officer Carl Bracy, however, says, "You have to ask very specific yes-no questions. You get a positive response or nothing."

So, apparently, dowsing rods have mind and ears of their own. If you ask them wrong or vague questions they won't listen to you. Be careful the next time you pick up some ordinary-looking wire because it might be a CIA plant.

In a demonstration for the "Chron" reporter, Bracy said confidently, "There's a stream right down there." as his rod quivered excitedly. After asking his stick a few more questions, it bobbed, dipped and shook to tell its master that the stream was about 110 feet deep. (One might sincerely ask what might happen with a moving stream of water eroding the ground out from under our very feet. Where would it flow from or to?)

In a confusing -- and contradictory -- explanation Bracy continued, "It amounts to certain energies that everybody is born with, like

involuntary muscles like the heart."

During one of the lessons, student Kate Workman of Aptos was unsuccessful in her attempts to find a nickel in the grass. "I must be asking the wrong questions. It [the rod] doesn't seem to go along well with my energies." She was observed later using less esoteric methods to hunt for the nickel: her eyes.

Another officer of the group, Haney Blassingame, asserts he can find gold. He also disclosed that, "some dowzers secretly ask their sticks health questions, but most shy away from the topic because the AMA frowns on such discussions." Indeed, if the AMA catches you in a discussion with your divining stick they might well stick in a hand -- to help you into the office of your local shrink. On the other hand, they might hit the road for fear that it is contagious.

Bracy's parting shot is a classic. "People come to me to find wells or underground streams because I've found them before. Of course, if you tell a well driller to drill in one spot and he doesn't find anything, you can be bad-mouthed for a long time."

The "San Jose Mercury" reports, in a feature article, that one CHUCK MIGNOSA, a MAGICIAN, made a 26-mile drive to Palo Alto on the El Camino at noon. Blindfolded and hooded. (For readers in other areas, the El Camino is a major street, with frequent stop lights, that goes all the way down the S. F. peninsula.) Why is this newsworthy for Ramparts? Just because it is so rare to find the truth.

Mignosa does not make paranormal claims for the cleverness of his feat. In a refreshing tribute to the craft of sleight-of-hand, Chuck explains, "I realized I could use magic to help people experience something other than words. Magic gives you permission to let the child inside you come out and play. It opens up a little crack -- to see that maybe there is more to life than what you see." Another magician in the hub-hub added, "As many grains of sand as there are in the world, that's how many ways there are to fool you."

It is fun to be fooled when you are told you are being fooled by honest practitioners.

There are several psychics who do the same stunt claiming the feat is proof of their paranormal powers. Are you listening, psychics?

The "Sacramento Union" reports that one JOSE BUGARIN, known as "Brother Joe" to his admirers has been charged with practicing medicine without a license and fraudulently treating cancer patients. His attorney said, "He's no different than Billy Graham. This...appears to be a witch hunt; a case of religious persecution."

It's a good thing the attorney didn't say Brother Joe is no different than W. V. Grant, which probably would be closer to the truth (see the July issue of "BASIS" for the Grant story). In any event, the Board of Medical Quality Assurance conducted a sting operation, and Joe made the mistake of pulling chicken livers from a healthy officer of the BMQA in an unspectacular psychic surgery attempt.

The undaunted Bugarin called upon his many satisfied customers to come forth to testify of his many psychic gifts, which, of course, has nothing to do with the case. He probably did the real thing with all those other people and just fudged on this one case with those nasty people at the BMQA.

But he has learned how well it works to divert attention from the clear distortion of reality by calling for "validations," as they are known in the craft. Faith healer W. V. Grant used almost the same words, as does a well-known Bay Area psychic. Joe only charges \$180 (of course he doesn't have to pay for all that expensive and useless hospital equipment) for a complete surgery visit, and his patients don't have those disfiguring scars you get charged \$58,000 for by your local sawbones. The post-op recovery is also much easier: rinse the red dye off your cardigan.

The redoubtable "San Jose Mercury" picked up a story from a court in New Orleans in which a couple of aerospace engineers filed suit against Oral Roberts. "Their suit insists that he prove his faith-healing powers and his declared conversations with God or be ordered to air a disclaimer. The public needs protection against religious corporations that are perpetrating financial rape across America."

Hear hear. We should soon expect to hear cries of religious persecution by those most odious of all scoundrels, secular humanists.

## UFOs: THE LATEST FINDINGS

by Don Henvick

San Francisco. Mid-April. Just got back from CSICOP conference in Los Angeles and I thought I'd check out the Whole Life Expo. Sarah Meric of Southern California Skeptics is in town, so we make it a joint BAS/SCS project.

The booths and stuff are fun and I get on everyone's free mailing list, but the real attraction is a panel discussion called "UFOs - the Latest Findings." Sounds good. Maybe we can pick up some good stuff on the JAL case or give Robert Sheaffer something to check out, so we troop over to the Sheraton Ballroom to hear the New Age UFO pitch, along with maybe 800 other people. (About what BAS meetings draw, right?)

We settle down to listen and it turns out these UFOlogists are contactees and fellow travelers. Author Brad Steiger is presiding, so you know we have gone over the edge.

First up, a couple explain how they shine lights on the Crystal Skull (a computer from Atlantis) and see pictures of UFOs therein.

Not good enough? Okay, how about the guy who says the Star People are bringing Sasquatches to earth for vacations. More? A guy from L.A. says his group is working from Star People blueprints and busily constructing anti-gravity machines and interdimensional time drives.

Why haven't we been told this stuff before?

I like the guy who says he can see the UFOlks just fine but they won't appear to the rest of the world because it's not vibrating at a high enough frequency. Hey, I'm vibrating so fast my fillings are shaking loose. The rest of you are slacking off.

Our favorite is coming up. Dr. Fred Bell has been schmoozing with extraterrestrials for a hell of a long time and asks for a volunteer willing to take poison in order to demonstrate alien technology. Naturally, I raise my hand.

Up on the stage, he has me hold my arm out straight while he pushes down on it near the elbow to check my strength. Yes, the old muscle-testing scam. Now it's poison time. He whips out a tube of airplane glue and wants me to take a deep breath. I give him my best you-gotta-be-kidding look, but he AIN'T kidding. Well, I did volunteer. So I open one nostril, take a sniff, close my eyes and think of the Skeptics. As my brain cells begin to die from the fumes, Bell grabs my arm, near the wrist this time, and easily pushes it down.

Astounding. The Star People have discovered the principle of the lever. Can the wheel be far behind?

Bell now whips out zillions of years of technological development in the form of The Amazing Nuclear Receptor. Looks like a cheap necklace to me -- but in my present dilapidated condition, what do I know? The Receptor goes around my neck and Bell demonstrates that because of it, now he can't push my arm down. One reason for this might be that he's pushing SIDEWAYS! In fact, his shoving keeps ME from pushing my own arm down. The Receptor has made me stronger than I realized.

I am so dazzled by this flim-flam (and stupefied by the airplane glue) that I stumble back to my seat, shaking my head.

Does anybody actually believe this stuff? Even the panelists, when they had finished their own bits, looked like they were biting their lips to keep from laughing at the OTHER guys on the panel.

I did learn something useful, however. It was announced that one particular date this summer is the last day of the ninth hell of the Mayan calendar -- when life as we know it will end and the world will step into the unknown.

The date they mentioned happens to be my birthday. Should be one hell of a party.

## CHANGES, CHANGES

It is said that nothing is so constant as change, and there have been some changes around here.

"BASIS" itself has undergone some obvious modifications, due in part to a new laser system but mostly to the much-appreciated eyes of our readers and LA CENTRA ADVERTISING, a Palo Alto professional graphics company. The president, BRUCE LA CENTRA has donated his own time and talents as well as those of his layout artist, PAT. They have other ideas in the works for which we anxiously wait. Readers' comments are always welcome, and more often than not, incorporated.

The leadership of BAS has changed. Erstwhile Chair Robert Sheaffer is writing a new UFO book, writing for the "Skeptical Inquirer", trying to raise a family in a new home he is fixing up, and advancing in his professional career. He could no longer devote the quality of time we have come to rely on. It was Bob Steiner, together with Robert whose energy and vision worked to co-found BAS. Our great thanks are extended to Robert Sheaffer for his selfless contribution of time, energy and money to the cause. Thanks, Robert.

Our new Chair, LARRY LOEBIG, is no stranger to BAS: he has served as Vice Chair under Robert; Larry is full of ideas and enthusiasm. Steiner and Sheaffer are big shoes to fill, but Larry is certainly up to the task. Mark Hodes, a stalwart man will now stand behind Larry as Vice Chair. It's a one-two punch.

Two new board members were appointed to replace those whose time and efforts have helped build a strong group. YVES BARBERO, a frequent contributor to the pages of "BASIS" and a thoroughly dependable man-in-the-trenches, will put his hand with SHAWN CARLSON, a U. C. Berkeley Ph.D. candidate to help us. Shawn has published some of the most penetrating and disturbing -- to astrologers -- analyses of astrology to date.

SHARON CRAWFORD, who has been giving valuable assistance in rewrite deserves more credit for the help she renders. She will be working more closely with me and will have a greater voice in the material for the newsletter. She brings a desirable different viewpoint, excellent skills and experience.

There is a new determination and vigor in the Board to concentrate our efforts more effectively to help stem the tide of irrationality. Again, thanks to the outgoing, and congratulations and welcome to the new guard. -- Ed.

## FIRE ENGINE STORIES

by Yves Barbero

When I was fairly young and making my first Holy Communion, an elderly priest told a group of us the following story.

"A young lad made a good confession prior to taking Communion, that is, he didn't hold anything back and his heart was pure (how the priest knew the lad's heart was pure, I can't guess). On his way out of the church, he was fatally struck by a speeding fire truck ...and went straight to heaven."

In my later years, I asked myself if it really happened or if it was just allegorical.

I decided it probably didn't happen -- the priest had heard some version of it in his childhood. Maybe at the time, it was a milk wagon (I was pretty young and he was pretty old) and it got updated in the priest's mind.

I'm not saying that the priest lied. In fact, I think he was quite sincere and undoubtedly pious. His need to get a point across to the seven-and-eight-year-old children in the church and a vague recollection of a story he heard in his childhood mixed to form this Fire Engine story.

Although this is a crude example, the phenomenon should jog the memory of each of us. Who of us has not changed a story around, played with the dialogue a bit -- kind of smoothed out the edges, if you will, to get his/her point across? Again, we're not exactly lying and if we're intellectually careless, we may not even be aware that we're doing it.

It's the rare saint among us who has not done it.

To carry this observation over to literature, one of the differences between a good yarn and a literary portrait is that in a good yarn (such as a popular detective novel or a science-fiction story), the hero will always discover the truth and things will in general fit nicely (unlike the real world). In a literary portrait, the hero may be larger than life but the situation resembles realism.

Without getting into the many nuances of what constitutes good literature, it's safe to say that the author who can distinguish between a wishful-thinking fantasy and (at least his idea of)

realism has got a leg-up over his rivals. Indeed, the clever writer will combine a stark realistic background with a larger-than-life hero.

John LeCarre's Smiley immediately comes to mind.

It is a difficult thing to do in literature, which is why Mr. LeCarre is paid so well. Can we expect the person with a sincere heart but no training to keep his/her mental hygiene continuously on to avoid telling Fire Engine stories?

If we extend the phenomenon to the world of the psychic believer, we can readily explain why so many practitioners genuinely think they're on the right track.

Suppose psychic John Smith hears a story from follower Mary Adams about how she feels vibrations every time she passes her dead husband's favorite chair. Since it falls into his belief system the story becomes real for him and he mistakes it for the truth; that is, he mistakes it for an observed phenomenon. It becomes a Fire Engine story.

Unlike the writer, he has no motive to question it. He's not trying to present an accurate picture of the world (or even trying to create a deliberate fantasy -- the kind good writers of fantasy share with their readers) but a picture which fits into a pre-existing framework. Unlike science, for instance, the belief-system exists first and the observations are made to fit like a glove and may be unconsciously tailored.

In fact, some might think it ironic that the writer of fiction turns out to be more realistic than the psychic, because even when he deliberately writes fantasy, there is an understanding between him and the reader that the work is fiction and only to be enjoyed, not believed.

Modern science has made it possible for us to understand the universe without the heavy-handed structures of the past. This is not to say that we have all the answers, or even most of them, or that it's going to be simple.

But why hold on to the leaden notions of the past, trying to make them work by creating clever Fire Engine stories?

UFO UPDATE  
by Robert Sheaffer

UFOs have been in the news a lot lately, and, as usual, much of what is reported is wildly unreliable. Let me at least stick one finger in the dike in an attempt to stem the tide of nonsense.

Many (in the Bay Area, at least) saw a TV program this past March

19 titled "The UFO Experience". This was obviously a re-run of tired old trash: several of the people interviewed in the show have been dead a few years.

What they didn't tell us about the cases pronounced to be "unexplained" is that many of them were indeed explained by Philip J. Klass in his latest book "UFOs: The Public Deceived". (Great news: Phil is busily at work on an all-new book, debunking some of the currently fashionable UFO nonsense. It'll be brought out by Prometheus early next year.)

The narrator's assertion that these allegedly unexplained cases are so strong that "scientists who dismiss UFOs are simply unable to refute them" is blatantly false: Nearly all of them are explained in either "UFOs - The Public Deceived" or "The UFO Verdict". What gave me the best laugh from this show was the backdrop for the narrator, supposedly a photographic darkroom with pictures of unexplained objects hung up, as if to dry. One of them was my own photo hoax, the Banana-split ice cream dish UFO: it's Plate 10 in my book, "The UFO Verdict"!

You may have seen the newspaper articles proclaiming that UFOs had been sighted by National Guardsmen and others in Alaska this past March 17. One observer described it as "bigger than a jetliner." Another said the object had "a cloud of smoke thrusting downward with one red and one white light." Yet a third described it as "the size of two football fields with three lights on the side and an egg-shaped cloud around it." James E. Oberg, noted space author and CSICOP Fellow, looked into this one, and identified it conclusively as the launch of the Kosmos 1833 satellite by a powerful new Soviet booster rocket.

What about those size estimates by the observers? What about those colored lights, and the other details? Active imaginations, I'm afraid. The experience of 40 fruitless years of UFO reports is clear: You just CAN'T take eyewitness accounts at face value. Ask any investigator of auto accidents.

Finally, I'm sure that by now many have heard about the alleged "secret government document" which supposedly confirms the crash of a flying saucer near Roswell, New Mexico in July, 1947, and the recovery of the bodies of dead aliens. The document also talks about "MJ-12," or the "Majestic 12" (apparently something like "The Magnificent 7"), key people involved in investigating the alleged saucer crashes. One of them was supposed to be Dr. Donald Menzel himself, arch UFO skeptic at the time.

The "secret document" was allegedly received in a proverbial plain brown envelope by one UFOlogist who claims he has no idea who sent it. It could have been faked by anyone with a typewriter and a camera. When ABC News showed this "document" to the contacts they use at various government agencies, all of them pronounced it a fraud. Ted Koppel was NOT impressed by it.

Worse yet, the document lists the supposed MJ-12 members as of the fall of 1952, and EVERY ONE OF THEM HAS SINCE DIED. What are the odds against this? Take a random group of twelve respected scientists and government officials in 1952; what are the odds that all twelve would be dead thirty-five years later?

Contrast this with the then-secret "Robertson Panel" of scientists which was convened by the CIA a few months later to inquire into UFO reports, and whose proceedings have since been declassified. ("Nothing to it" was their conclusion.) It had fewer members --only ten -- yet I know that at least three of the ten are still alive, and several of the others I'm not sure about. (One of these panel members was none other than Berkeley's Luis Alvarez, physicist extraordinaire, slayer of dinosaurs, and respected Advisor to the Bay Area Skeptics. Other still-living members of that panel are Thornton Page of NASA, and Fred Durant of the Smithsonian.) It strikes me that this "secret document" must have been composed much later than the date it bears, and the fictitious "MJ-12" group was populated with people who are all safely dead in 1987.

Another interesting question to ponder: if a saucer crashed in 1947, and the government confiscated the bodies of aliens, why would the CIA convene a secret panel of top scientists in 1953 to try to find out what, if anything, UFO sightings represent?

In spite of all the hoopla, and the promises of fantastic revelations, the National UFO Conference held in Burbank in June reported disappointing attendance, and probably lost money for its promoters. No smoking gun has yet been produced -- at least, no convincing one -- and the news media is now concentrating its attention on the testimony of Oliver North instead of on alleged saucer crashes.

The Great UFO Brouhaha of 1987 is now apparently over. In its wake, UFOlogy has been inextricably linked in the public's mind with wild claims of dead aliens in pickle jars, and with exceedingly implausible alien abductions replete with highly-Freudian sexual overtones. This will make it harder than ever for UFOlogists to get the respectability they so desperately seek, but have not earned.

## FROM THE CHAIR

by Larry Loebig

I would like to thank Robert Steiner and Robert Sheaffer, past Chairs of Bay Area Skeptics, for the excellent job they have done, and in advance, for all they will do for us in the future. Thanks also to Terence Sandbeck for his contributions; and welcome Shawn Carlson and Yves Barbero to the Board of Directors. I would also like to welcome Sharon Crawford, our new Associate Editor of "BASIS".

Robert Steiner has recently achieved a long-standing goal: he is President-Elect for the Society of American Magicians. He will officially begin serving his term in July of 1988.

Recently I have been traveling -- not exotic places, I assure you. Somehow Bay Area Skeptics pops up in conversations and inevitably a copy of "BASIS" is handed out or the La Truth Line telephone number is communicated.

From some people's reactions I get the distinct impression we appear, on first impression at least, to be somewhat frivolous.

Testing dogs?

Yes! Specifically a dog whose owner claims he would publicly demonstrate incredible powers in near-test conditions. The Amazing Dalmatian, named Sonny, would not only recognize numbers, but would perform arithmetic calculations -- not just the simple stuff, but higher mathematics. As long as the answer was between one and ten.

Furthermore, said pooch would perform these marvels faster than a human could, even if the human used an electronic calculator. If the dog were to fail, a fifty dollar reward would be offered. And may I point out, not one skeptic stepped forward with or without calculator to take up the challenge for the fifty dollars.

At the meeting we learned the dog is in touch with the great Harry Houdini. On Command, said dog was to answer questions directed to the great departed magician and escape artist: responses would, however, be limited to questions which could be answered with a simple yes or no, appropriately barked out.

If you are still with me you will admit this is a difficult position from which to sound credible.

In defense of the skeptics let me say the dog was charismatic.

At one time P. T. Barnum could have filled a large auditorium with paying customers, displaying an act no less exotic than, IN PERSON ... ONE NIGHT ONLY ... LIVE ON STAGE ... Canine Mathematician communicates with famous dead wizards!

At this point I was asked, "What is your next meeting?"

"Witchcraft." I replied.

This month's Bay Area organization in the spotlight is:

Spiritual Rights Foundation Inc.  
Box 39, 2550 Shattuck Avenue  
Berkeley, CA 94704

a non-profit organization devoted to promoting and demonstrating psychic ability. They publish a monthly newsletter and sponsor the

activities of the Academy for Psychic Studies. Send for a free copy of their informative and revealing newsletter. Classes and services for clairvoyance and psychic healing are offered and all are encouraged to attend.

Here is a sample: "INTENSIVE CLAIRVOYANT TRAINING PROGRAM: For the Sincere only! This training leads you through the practical use and development of your psychic abilities to a kindergarten state of mind..."

Most education takes one in the other direction. That says it all.

## BAY AREA SKEPTICS PICNIC Sesquicentennial Celebration

On Sunday, August 16, the Bay Area Skeptics will celebrate the sesquicentennial of the birth of Johannes Diderik Van Der Waals, who in 1910 was awarded the Nobel prize in physics for his work on hot air. This achievement was most remarkable because Van Der Waals, being Dutch, never served in the U.S. Senate.

The picnic will be from noon to five p.m. at Juana Briones Park, corner of Arastradero Road and Clemo in Palo Alto. This is your opportunity to share conversation and gluttony with the Bay Area Skeptics. Spouses, kids, and friends are most welcome. Bring a main course for yourself and a salad, beverage, or dessert to share. A barbecue will be available. See the Calendar for directions.

There will be some magic demonstrations for the kids (and the kid in the rest of us). COME!

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The above are selected articles from the August, 1987 issue of "BASIS", the monthly publication of Bay Area Skeptics. You can obtain a free sample copy by sending your name and address to BAY 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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