

ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER OF THE GEORGIA SKEPTICS

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 6
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1992

CONTENTS

ALABAMA SKEPTIC NOT CONVINCED BY FAITH HEALER, by H. Scott Hestevold, University of Alabama
NOVEMBER MEETING: Talk on Cosmology by Georgia State University Astronomer
Donald J. Barry
THE STS-48 MISSION, by Michael Norris, UFO Encounters Magazine
NESSIE EMIGRATES?, by Rick Moen, Bay Area Skeptics
FORTUNE SELLERS AND MIRACLE SEEKERS ON CHANNEL 2, by Rebecca Long, Georgia
Skeptics
MARFA LIGHTS REVISITED, by Rebecca Long, Georgia Skeptics
EAR CANDLING TO CLEAN THE MIND AND SINUSES, by Rebecca Long, Georgia Skeptics
SO YOU'RE A SKEPTIC? SOME ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, by Rick
Moen, Bay Area Skeptics, with Becky Long, Keith Parsons, and Jan
Nienhuys
ATLANTA STARGAZERS PREDICT A WIN FOR BUSH
FIRST ANNUAL GEORGIA SKEPTICS PICNIC

Georgia Skeptics is a non-profit local group which shares a common philosophy with the national organization CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), and seeks to promote critical thinking and scientific inquiry as the most reliable means to gather knowledge of the world and universe. Like CSICOP, Georgia Skeptics encourages the investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and helps disseminate the results of such inquiries.

Material from the Georgia Skeptic newsletter may be used by anyone, provided attribution is given to the author and the organization.

For further information, contact the Georgia Skeptics through the Astronomical Society of the Atlantic BBS at (404) 321-5904, or:

Becky Long, President
2277 Winding Woods Dr.
Tucker, Georgia 30084
(404) 493-6847

Joining the Georgia Skeptics organization is encouraged because membership dues help us to disseminate the results of skeptical inquiries to the public and to hold educational events. Yearly dues are \$17.50 for individual memberships, \$21.00 for families, and \$12.50 for full time students.

ALABAMA SKEPTIC NOT CONVINCED BY FAITH HEALER

by H. Scott Hestevold, University of Alabama

Those who saw faith-healer W. V. Grant at the Northport Civic Center, or who watch his television show, know that he presents himself as a conduit between Jesus and the afflicted; after laying hands on the diseased, Grant claims that Jesus thereby heals them of cataracts, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, lung disorders, mental retardation, reproductive problems, arthritis, and the "water retention factor" where "the epidermis of the skin" holds water.

Since I know of no compelling evidence that anyone has been cured of such ailments through Grant's ministrations, and since Grant's methods have been exposed by magician James Randi in his book *The Faith Healers*, I will not give my money to W. V. Grant.

Much of Grant's "healing" service includes "calling out", revealing the names, doctors, and ailments of followers who are apparently selected randomly from the audience. After assuring the audience that neither he nor anyone else has spoke with the afflicted, Grant implies that this information has been revealed to him by God.

Does God talk to Grant? I doubt it. In Northport, Grant "called out" a man, claiming that he had a long vertical scar beneath his shirt and that he had suffered a number of work-related injuries. Grant then revealed the names of the man's two physicians. When asked by Grant whether or not he had spoken to anyone that evening about his ailments, the man admitted having shaken hands with Grant, but denied telling Grant anything else. As the gasps subsided, Grant claimed that Jesus would perform "closed-heart surgery" and then pronounced the man healed.

Alas, a friend and I had arrived more than two hours earlier and observed Grant talking at length with this man. I heard the man tell Grant in detail about having had open-heart surgery and about work-related injuries.

Another of Grant's demonstrations is "miraculous" leg-lengthening in which a follower's short leg appears to grow visibly. This can easily be accomplished by secretly pulling the shoe away from the heel of the "normal" leg which causes the other leg to appear shorter. The illusion of growth is created by pushing the shoe back on the heel. The supposedly short leg does not grow; rather the "longer" leg gets shorter as the shoe is pushed back.

The leg-lengthening was performed every night of the Northport crusade. Curiously, one of those evenings, Grant "called out" a well-dressed man who confirmed Grant's revelation that, in addition to leg and back ailments, he suffered great financial woes. After Grant declared that his troubles would end, the man fell to the floor, seemingly "filled with the Holy Spirit." This man wore one shoe with an elevator heel; thus, Grant failed to lengthen the leg of the one man in the auditorium who was afflicted with a short leg.

During the Northport crusade, Grant repeatedly advertised his Eagle Bible Institute's "Home Study Course" which allows one to attain by mail the rank of "licensed" or "ordained" minister. Appearing on the registration form for

this course is the claim that the Eagle Bible Institute is chartered with Kingsway Bible College, accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Specialized Colleges and the American Association of Specialized Colleges.

In The Alternative Guide to College Degrees and Non-Traditional Higher Education, the accrediting procedures of the ACSC are called "superficial at best"; the sole requirement to become a candidate for accreditation is a check for \$110. The 1989 edition of the Encyclopedia of Associations reveals that the ACSC and AASC accrediting agencies are both defunct.

One should not be surprised that a substantial part of Grant's services is devoted to fund raising.

On the opening night of his Northport crusade, Grant displayed a stack of envelopes that he claimed were numbered consecutively from 1 to 120, announcing that certain members of the audience would be moved by God to take an envelope and that God would guide his hand to give each member the envelope God intended him to receive. By taking an envelope, the follower agreed to donate to Grant the number of dollars equal to the number on the envelope. Thus, the person taking envelope No. 1 was expected to donate \$1, whereas the person taking No. 100 owed Grant \$100. In return, Grant promised that the donors would receive an "Angelic Visitation" and that God would give back 100 times the donated sum.

My friend and I were able to spot distributed envelopes with numbers ranging from \$64 to \$117. If the envelopes were numbered as Grant claimed, their average number would be 60.5. Curiously, the average number of the envelopes we spotted was 98.

In The Faith Healers, James Randi describes the envelope fund-raising technique, reporting that Grant used it at his 1986 Fort Lauderdale crusade. Randi also reports that he and his colleagues found envelopes bearing duplicate high numbers when sifting through the trash afterwards.

Perhaps one should discount the old adage that where there's smoke, there's fire. If you're confident that Grant can access for you the healing powers of Jesus, then give him your money and enjoy the show. I have more confidence that the sick and poor will be better served by donations made to a church, soup kitchen, or relief agency.

H. Scott Hestevold is an associate professor of Philosophy at the University of Alabama. The above article was originally published as a guest editorial in the Tuscaloosa Sun, and is reprinted with the permission of the author and the publisher. The article was provided to Georgia Skeptics by Emory Kimbrough.

NOVEMBER MEETING
BACKWARDS IN TIME - LESSONS FROM COSMOLOGY

When: Sunday, November 15, 1992, 4:30 p.m.
Where: Steak and Ale Restaurant, Savoy Dr., NE Atlanta

The November meeting of the Georgia Skeptics will feature a talk on cosmology by Georgia State University astronomer Donald J. Barry. Mr. Barry's talk will emphasize how physical models, together with data from astronomical observations, define the Big Bang model, and how competing models are evaluated on the basis of the scientific method. Mr. Barry will also talk about controversies concerning purely physical models as opposed to speculative models invoking philosophy, etc., and the dangers and insights of going beyond pure empiricism.

Mr. Barry is President and founder of the Astronomical Society of the Atlantic, the South's largest amateur and professional astronomy organization. He is currently with GSU's Center for High Angular Resolution Astronomy, and is completing a PhD thesis involving the use of mathematical methods to correct astronomical data for atmospheric aberrations. A devoted proponent of science education, he is a gifted teacher and is known for his ability to explain scientific facts and concepts in a way that is both accessible and enjoyable.

THE STS-48 MISSION

by Michael Norris

On September 12, 1991, the Space Shuttle Discovery (STS-48 mission) lifted off the ground for an orbit around the Earth. During the mission, the onboard cameras captured a number of very interesting events, and many people do not believe the official explanation NASA is giving for them.

In all, there were five separate incidents from the mission that raised suspicion. They have been discussed on Larry King Live, the popular TV show Sightings, and in various UFO literature.

Four of these mysterious events from STS-48 were recorded by Donald Ratsch, who lives in Baltimore, Maryland. He videotaped them while watching NASA Select Television, which broadcast the STS-48 mission live on his cable channel six (Dundalk Community College). The fifth event, which was taped by another individual, will be discussed later.

Ratsch noticed while reviewing what he recorded from the mission, there were four footage segments that seemed to show unidentified flying objects. The one event from the recording that has generated the most interest and controversy, though, is what is called event #2 (see photos).

In event #2, an onboard camera on the Discovery was recording a view looking toward the Earth, as the shuttle was approaching New Zealand in its orbit. The scene showed several objects that moved into the camera's view (see figures 1 & 2).

The videotape reveals that one of the bright objects (figure 3) - which is of

extreme interest to many investigators - seems to appear from out of the clouds. The object is then seen moving in a northwest direction just below the horizon of our planet. Suddenly, a flash of light appears in the lower-left of the screen (figure 4), and the object, which was moving in a northwest direction, immediately makes a 145 degree right-hand turn. It then seems to disappear into outer space (figure 5).

The moment the object appears to move into outer space, a fast moving projectile zips across where the object was traveling before it suddenly changed course (see figure 6).

The incident that was later called event #5, was acquired by Harry Jordon of Omaha, Nebraska. He was listening to the STS-48 mission on his short wave radio. As he was listening to the astronauts talking, he heard one of them say, "What's that? What is that?" Jordan then phoned a friend, Clair Roberts, who then adjusted his satellite dish and tuned into the NASA frequency and pressed "record" on his VCR.

Mr. Roberts recorded an object on his VCR that zipped across the screen from right to left, and so event #5 was born. All these events comprise the evidence that has spurred a great deal of controversy.

Some ufologists, after reviewing event #2, believe that the object that did a 145 degree turn was an alien spacecraft. They also say the flash of light, which was followed by a zipping projectile, was the result of an armed response to the craft by SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative). NASA officials, along with other scientists, disagree with those claims.

After Ratsch realized that he had recorded some bizarre footage from the mission, he sent copies of the events to Vincent DiPietro in Sykesville, Maryland, for video analysis. That's when it all began.

DiPietro is an engineer at Goddard Space Center and an active member of the Mutual UFO Network. He works with image processing and has even designed and built image processing equipment. DiPietro told me during an interview that he has analyzed images from space in the past, and is skeptical of the idea that the images seen on the tape are spacecraft.

After DiPietro analyzed the videotape and did computer enlargement and enhancement, he sent a copy of his results to Representative Beverly B. Byron, in Washington, D.C. Representative Byron then forwarded the tape to the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee for review and comment. George E. Brown Jr., Chairman of the committee, responded to Representative Byron with the following explanation:

The Honorable Beverly B. Byron
2430 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Ms. Byron:

Thank you for forwarding to me the letter and video tape that was sent to you by your constituent, Mr. Vincent DiPietro. As you recall, these materials depict events filmed during the STS-48

mission of the Space Shuttle which Mr. DiPietro thought were "curious".

I asked my staff to review carefully the materials as you requested. I might add that my staff has accumulated a great deal of experience in these matters and would be happy to meet with you or Mr. DiPietro.

My staff tells me that the objects that Mr. DiPietro observed are probably ice crystals. Each day the Space Shuttle dumps overboard a significant volume of waste water. This water forms crystals that travel along with the Shuttle. When lighting conditions are proper, these crystals can be seen floating by in various directions.

This is a phenomenon that is seen on all Shuttle flights.

At one point of Mr. DiPietro's Event #2, he notes that several of these objects make a radial change in direction in response to a flash that occurs to the left of the TV screen. This flash was most likely the firing of an attitude control rocket on the Orbiter - these firings are normally in the form of very short bursts which appear (as it does on the DiPietro video) as a bright flash. In response to this firing, the ice crystals that are in the path of the rocket's exhaust are propelled rapidly in a direction opposite the flash.

As I noted earlier, these are common events that occur on all missions of the Space Shuttle. This no doubt accounts for the lack of attention by the astronauts and everyone in Mission Control to the events noted by Mr. DiPietro even though it is clear that the astronauts were looking in the direction of the camera and the ground controllers were watching the transmissions from the camera.

I am confident that when NASA responds to your request their conclusions will be similar, if not much more detailed.

Thank you again for contacting me about this concern of your constituent.

Sincerely,
George E. Brown, Jr.
Chairman

Scientists at NASA also agreed with this explanation.

I received a copy of the STS-48 mission tape in the mail from Fearson Hicks. After watching the tape several dozen times, I was still puzzled about the different events.

Don Ecker, California UFO Research Director, acquired a copy of DiPietro's tape and appeared on Larry King Live. On the show, he debated with James Oberg about the identity of the objects.

DiPietro heard that the program was going to air and was one of the two callers on the show. He told me later during our discussion that when he called the show, he tried in a "rational sort of way" to explain what he felt was going on - the objects were nothing more than ice crystals.

DiPietro said to me that he was surprised to see a copy of his videotape with the blowups and video enhancements on the show. He said that because no one called him to ask questions of the data or even the results of his investigation.

Expressing concern and annoyance, DiPietro felt that investigators were just "running with the story" without doing their homework. DiPietro told me that he wishes ufologists would just drop the case, because he believes the tape could potentially be embarrassing to serious UFO researchers and may even set back ufology.

DiPietro explained that he did detailed analysis of the events in the video. When I asked him what he thought of the main object in event #2 (see figure 3), he said that when he zoomed in on the object, it didn't get much bigger, suggesting that it was not very large to begin with. He said that if it was a big object, it would get extremely large when you zoomed in on it - and this didn't happen. Also, he told me, if you look very closely at the object when it accelerates after making its turn, pieces of the object appear to flake off as if it was ice that was just hit by gas from a trim rocket.

I asked DiPietro if he saw the show Sightings, which ran an episode on the STS-48 mission. He told me that he did. I asked him about the argument presented during the show which said that the flash of light seen on the lower left-hand side of the screen (see figure 4) was not a trim rocket adjustment because no change in the position of the horizon line of the Earth was apparent after the flash of light. DiPietro then said that was not even an argument. "The trim rockets will alter the course of the spacecraft by very minute amounts - not even in degrees, minutes or even seconds of arc," he said.

I asked Mr. DiPietro if he remembered seeing Dr. Jack Kasher, Professor of Physics from the University of Nebraska, during the Sightings show, which he said he did. Asking him about Kasher's claim that NASA's explanation defies the laws of physics, DiPietro said he disagreed with his analysis.

Dr. Kasher says that only two of the objects he tracked on the tape moved in the direction they were supposed to if a booster rocket actually fired. Four of the objects, he said, continued the trajectory they were following before the flash of light. Also two of them went up to the left, in the opposite direction, according to Kasher.

I asked Mr. DiPietro what of all the events from the mission, if any, still leave a question mark next to them. He responded by saying that the two projectiles that appear to zip toward the objects that turned, are still very suspicious to him (see figure 6). DiPietro explained that the projectiles left a trail similar to a rocket, and the fact that they appear as attempting to strike the path of the two objects in the video may be more than coincidental.

All in all, DiPietro said the events "produce a weak case for UFOs if any,

and to keep publicizing that these are UFOs just discredits legitimate UFO investigations." Summing up his final verdict, DiPietro said, "I have a very open mind with these things. The problem I have with STS-48 is, I believe, except for a few things that I cannot explain - you're not seeing UFOs." So there's where it ends. Were the objects taped during the STS-48 mission alien spacecraft and a demonstration of SDI technology? Or were the objects nothing more than ice crystals, along with the wishful thinking of a few UFO researchers who remain in hot pursuit of the smoking gun. We may never know.

Michael Norris is the Editor and Research Director for UFO Encounters. The above article is Copyright 1992 by Aztec Publishing, Volume 1, #3, and was reprinted with permission. Subscriptions to UFO Encounters are \$17.95 a year (12 issues). Subscriptions, letters, and all correspondence may be sent to Aztec Publishing, P.O. Box 1142, Norcross, GA 30091. Tel (404)279-1732, FAX (404)279-1263.

NESSIE EMIGRATES?

By Rick Moen

"Unsolved Mysteries" of Wednesday 23 September 1992 featured a segment on the Lake Champlain (New York) "monster". Did we see good, clear photos of the beastie? Take a wild guess.

No, according to skeptic David Bloomberg: What we saw was a bit of video footage showing nothing more than bumps in the water, which the witnesses were nonetheless SURE were really a GROUP of monsters! One of the photographers claimed that a monster raised its head out and STARED RIGHT AT HER, but the camera was pointed the wrong way. Darn! Don't you hate it when that happens?

The prize evidence in this case, though, was a print photo from a woman who, we are told, was so embarrassed that she threw the negative away, retaining only the print. Fortunately, she overcame this shyness long enough to provide the latter to a visiting "researcher", who then made it public. (Bay Area Skeptics will gladly hold people's embarrassing cryptozoological negatives for them, to help ward off all those nasty suspicious types suggesting that PHOTO HOAXES might be easier without inconvenient scrutiny of the original film.)

Narrator Robert Stack intoned to the viewers that there were numerous other sightings, just after the picture was published. Imagine that!

Reprinted from the September 1992 issue of BASIS, the Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet.

FORTUNE SELLERS AND MIRACLE SEEKERS ON CHANNEL 2

by Rebecca Long

On November 16 - 18, Channel 2 Action News at 5:00 p.m. aired a special report on psychics who predict the future for money. Reported by Steve Gasque, who evidenced a skeptical attitude throughout the broadcast, the show was a rare exception to the typical credulous media coverage of paranormal claims. Information on both sides of the issue was presented, allowing the viewers to critically examine the claims of the psychics and decide for themselves as to their validity.

On the program, several psychics predicted Gasque's future using techniques ranging from Tarot reading and palmistry to looking into his water glass. A followup will be aired in six months to see how well the psychics did, and to determine, in Gasque's words, "If they are just making money at your expense."

Gasque did a commendable job of research in preparation for the program, and had a good understanding of techniques used by psychics such as cold reading, and making vague predictions which can later be liberally interpreted in order to claim success. As a result, when the psychics on the program predicted his future, he made an effort to pin them down to specifics.

Prior to the program, Gasque told me that several of the psychics he interviewed had significantly changed their predictions based on his reactions or comments. In one case, the psychic predicted that Gasque would definitely leave Channel 2 within six months. When Gasque stated that this was not likely, the psychic changed the prediction and said a promotion was in store.

According to Gasque, fortune tellers are found all over Atlanta, and typically sell their services for between \$35 and \$65. He concluded the program by stating, "If you use psychic readings for entertainment, perhaps, experts say that's probably OK. But if you use psychic readings as a substitute for psychological or medical counselling, that can be harmful."

Although we must wait six months for the result of Steve Gasque's putting psychics to the test, there is ample historical data for reviewing the overall track record of psychic predictions. For example, an ongoing yearly review of psychic predictions by Bay Area Skeptic and Skeptical Inquirer Columnist Robert Sheaffer, has not found ONE successful prediction which is both surprising and specific. Sheaffer has noted that psychics tend to make predictions that something ongoing will continue (such as economic uncertainty, conflict in the Middle East, or marital strife for Charles and Diana) or are impossible to verify ("secrets will weigh heavily on Dan Quayle"). Most predictions are vague, with liberal credit taken for anything even remotely resembling the original prediction. The successes are touted and the numerous misses conveniently ignored.

During the same three day period that the Fortune Sellers report was aired, Action News at 6:00 ran an investigative report by Pam Martin on religious miracles, covering both Conyers and Medjugorje. Unfortunately, this report

was much more credulous than the companion broadcast, and consisted primarily of testimonials of supernatural occurrences and accounts of how pilgrimages to Marian apparitions had revitalized people's religious faith.

In a manner all too often typical of media coverage of the paranormal, token skeptical statements were presented but quickly dismissed. As an example, Martin showed video footage taken outside the Channel 2 TV station which duplicated "authentic" footage of the "Miracle of the Sun" filmed in Medjugorje. However, this was quickly countered with, "But that doesn't explain this . . ." followed by a show of a rosary that the owner said had turned to gold six months after he went to Medjugorje. The latter was reported completely uncritically, without question or comment.

Claims of rosaries or other personal possessions changing to gold are a hallmark of Marian apparitions. However, none of these claims have been reliably verified. I have personally observed inexpensive silver-colored jewelry tarnishing to a goldish color over time. In addition, noted skeptical investigator Joe Nickell has pointed out that thin silverplating can be worn off by repeated rubbing, revealing brass, copper, or other gold-colored metal underneath.

Ms. Martin also showed people holding pictures of the sun and "The Golden Door". Despite the fact that she had been provided with a copy of the Georgia Skeptic article by Dale Heatherington, which showed this phenomenon to be an artifact of the Polaroid camera design, she made no mention of this explanation and left the clear impression that miracles were occurring.

Ironically, despite the overall credulous nature of the report, Ms. Martin might have inadvertently provided some valuable information and insight on the Conyers apparitions. The program showed scenes of Nancy Fowler, during what was implied to be an actual ("live") visit from the Virgin Mary, in which she was reading Mary's message from a neatly handwritten script. The producer of the program subsequently confirmed that this was the case.

THE MARFA LIGHTS REVISITED: "WE BECAME ONE WITH THE LIGHTS!"

By Rebecca Long

"The lights traveled as if along a predetermined path -- as if guided by some sort of intelligence," commented Georgia Skeptic investigator James Long, describing with tongue in cheek the legendary lights observed by countless tourists from the official viewing area near Marfa, Texas. "This is not inconsistent with car headlights."

As previously reported in the May/June 1991 issue of The Georgia Skeptic, folk accounts of mysterious lights bobbing and dancing on the plains near Marfa Texas go back hundreds of years. The Marfa Lights were the subject of a recent episode of the TV show Sightings, as well as an article in the Summer 1992 issue of Skeptical Inquirer.

The general consensus of most reasonable investigators of the Marfa Lights is

that the lights seen by tourists from the official viewing area are car headlights cresting the distant hill. As pointed out by Herbert Lindee in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, tourists are frequently led to believe that there is no highway in the area where the lights appear. This fact, combined with the abundance of colorful lore, sets the stage and quickly leads to a suspension of disbelief among the viewers.

In his *Georgia Skeptic* article, James Long described his own observations of the Marfa Lights in early 1990. He subsequently returned to Marfa in 1991, but no lights were visible. During early 1992, James and I went there together and confirmed that the lights regularly observed from the official viewing area on Highway 90 were in fact car headlights on Highway 67. After determining the route of Highway 67, observations just after dusk confirmed that the lights consistently followed this path. Once total darkness had fallen, however, and there was no longer a frame of reference visible, the lights seemed to appear and disappear at random, capriciously winking on and off. It was a most delightful illusion.

Later into the night, as James and I drove along Highway 67, we could see "reverse" Marfa Lights from the plain below in the direction of the viewing area. We enjoyed the knowledge that to observers below, our car was probably appearing as a Marfa Light. James remarked, "I am one with the Marfa Lights!"

After personally observing the car headlight phenomenon in Marfa, it is my opinion that the clearly non-simulated footage of the Marfa Lights on the Sightings show was consistent with car headlights.

The car headlight hypothesis is definitely NOT consistent with eye-witness accounts of the Marfa Lights. In a typical account, described in Dennis Stacy's *The Marfa Lights: A Viewer's Guide*, "A night computer operator was reportedly driving home from work when he saw what he thought was another car approaching. The next thing he knew, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, a cantaloupe-sized ball of light was hovering outside his rolled-down pickup window. He floored the gas pedal, but the light-ball stayed with him for almost two miles before finally disappearing."

Judith Brueske, in the quaintly titled book *The Marfa Lights: Being a Collection of First-Hand Accounts By People Who Have Seen the Lights Close-Up Or In Unusual Circumstances, and Related Materials*, specifically points out that the lights are distinguishable from car headlights by their aberrant movements. Among the many sightings recounted by Brueske is the experience of Robin Campbell, who claims to have seen lights "materialize out of the field in the middle distance, 'coming through the field like little fireballs.' They approached the highway and kept rolling and rolling out onto the road and then onto the other side of the road,' generally northeast." According to another of Brueske's witnesses, "They came straight at us like a train, all bunched together." And in still another account, "suddenly a huge red and green light appeared right behind the car . . . It seemed like it was right on top of the back window."

However, as with any anecdotal accounts, descriptions of the lights are necessarily plagued with inaccurate initial perceptions of the event, alterations in memory over time, and even the growing of the tale with the telling.

Skeptics seeking to solve the mystery of the Marfa Lights are also faced with the problem that the descriptions of the lights are as varied as they are numerous. Accounts vary from colorful spheres which approach witnesses at close range, to soft glows, to tiny sparks like dancing candle flames. I venture that, should skeptical investigators ever encounter and rigorously demonstrate a mundane explanation for some particular manifestation of Marfa Lights, there will always be other some other claimed phenomenon requiring explanation. "But those aren't the real Marfa Lights. The REAL Marfa lights are . . ."

EAR CANDLING TO CLEAN THE MIND AND SINUSES

by Rebecca Long

I recently had the pleasure of catching parts of the Discovery Expo held at Atlanta's Inforum the weekend of October 10-11.

Offerings to please the mind and psyche included a talk by Stanton Friedman on UFOs and the government coverup thereof, and a program by Colin Andrews on the latest developments on crop circles (with the latest sounding like more of the same old). Budd Hopkins explored the telltale physical and psychological symptoms of UFO abductions, to help concerned citizens determine if aliens have ever abducted them but erased their memory of the event. Hopkins and Friedman also participated in a panel discussion on UFO abductions, led by professional "abduction therapist" Robyn Quail.

Timothy Leary, now a designer of computer software, spoke on his 35 years of investigation into consciousness expansion and shared a recently developed technique based on cybernetics. Another highlight was a talk by Elizabeth Fortune entitled "The Dolphin/Whale Connection: Healing the Illusion of Separation". Ms. Fortune used dolphin stories, slides, and videos of people swimming with dolphins to help participants with their creativity and to accept their multi-dimensional being. (I understand that human birthing with dolphins present is also big these days.)

Other talks and exhibits featured spiritual surgery, aura photography, crystal bowl meditation, palmistry, foot reflexology, introducing more ceremony and rituals into daily life, communing with spirits and improved problem solving through the power of the drum, and utilizing your sexual forces to gain multi-dimensional access. Two aura photographers, with identical-looking cameras producing identical-looking output, each explained to me how their product was superior to that of their competitor.

Some alternative health care concepts represented at the Expo were the prevention of brain aging through intelligence enhancing drugs, and several versions of light therapy. Representatives from holistic cancer clinics were present and advertised assorted alternative cancer therapies, which included laetrile, chelation, and more. There was even a talk on the link between the medical community, the international bankers' conspiracies, and the New World Order.

Offerings to delight the palate included such treats as humus burgers (yes, humus as in dirt), and blue-green algae juice. I did sample the latter, which was mostly apple juice but had a very unnatural tint and there were things floating in it.

My favorite exhibition was called "Ear Candling", which was claimed to be an "ancient art" for "cleaning out the inside of your head." Not just the ears, mind you, but "the whole head, brains and all - it's all connected you know." Treatment cost \$30.00, took about 45 minutes, and consisted of sticking a "special" hollow candle into the ear of a person lying on his side on a table. Supposedly, the burning hollow candle created a vacuum which would gently suck "impurities" out of the head. There was an aluminum pieplate around the candle to catch the drippings, and during the treatment several tablespoons of weird grey gook would accumulate on the pie plate. It did not look at all like melted candle wax, but was quite foul in appearance. This material was identified by the vendor as bacterial residue and other "debris" from inside the head. I requested to purchase one of the special candles, planning on later analysis, but they were not for sale.

After people were been treated, I observed that they would take the grey gook with them and proudly show their friends, comparing their debris to that of others and making knowing comments. Several clients vigorously attested to the benefits they had received from this service.

After completing the ear candling process, clients could receive a psychic reading from the same vendor. Could being "candled" before a psychic reading be a hygienic practice to prevent the spread of psychic social diseases? And \$30 and 45 minutes for a treatment? Wouldn't a vacuum cleaner be much cheaper and quicker? More suitable for today's fast-paced high-technology society?

But these are moot points. Dr. Gary Lotner, of the Atlanta Allergy Clinic, kindly confirmed what most people would guess if they don't actually know: there is no opening from sinuses, much less the brain, to the outside world through the ear!

SO YOU'RE A SKEPTIC? SOME ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

By Rick Moen

With Becky Long, Keith Parsons, and Jan Nienhuys

Most members of the public (and the press) think being a skeptic is an odd thing to do -- if it occurs to them to think about it at all. The questions long-time skeptics tend to hear from them, usually the same questions year after year, strongly reflect this prejudice. Your questioner may be moderately curious about your strange hobby, and willing to make conversation about it, but is generally one step away from dismissing skeptics as an odd sort of blowhard crank harassing (for some reason) harmless New Agers, and is just looking for an excuse to do just that. Nonetheless, this is your opening, your chance to establish that you are a reasonable, intriguing person worth listening to, and also your chance to start dispelling misconceptions widely held concerning skeptics, often spread by hostile

parties.

Having brought this matter up at the recent CSICOP "Skeptic's Toolbox" workshop in Oregon, I was assigned the project of compiling a list of the most common questions and some effective answers. "Effective" here means not so much providing a literal answer as conveying a sense of humor and proportion, and an air of benignity, tolerance, respect for one's audience, and due modesty -- for THOSE are the very qualities the questioner (most often) expects not to find. At that point, THEN, you may be taken seriously and listened to -- which is why making a good first impression on these near-inevitable first questions is so important.

I've had considerable help in compiling these questions and answers from across the skeptics' movement, via electronic mail: Becky Long, President of Georgia Skeptics; Keith Parsons, founder and former head of the Georgia group; and Jan Willem Nienhuys, officer of the Dutch group Stichting Skepsis, all contributed responses, marked below with our initials. This is an ONGOING project, whose results may eventually be included in a handbook for skeptical activists. Your contributions of brief answers AND QUESTIONS are welcome.

Question: "If it doesn't hurt anyone, why bother?"

RM: Skeptics are simply curious about which fringe-science claims have merit, and which don't. It's a hobby. Of course, some such claims (like psychic surgery) DO hurt people, and skeptics disclose that. Other claims don't hurt people, but that's beside the point -- is the claim BOGUS or not? Many fringe-science fans consider truth merely a booby prize. Skeptics don't: Although they don't claim to have a lockhold on it, they DO pursue it.

JWN: Good point. If ignorance doesn't hurt you, then don't become a skeptic. Much superstition makes life quite miserable for quite a few people. Having millions of people killed because of pseudoscientifically bolstered race theories shouldn't happen again. More people than you think are ripped off by the paranormal racket, e.g., [provide anecdote]. Billions of dollars are being spent on very doubtful cures -- so people's wallets ARE hurt.

KP: Selling out your intellect is always going to hurt you -- financially, intellectually, and even emotionally. Anyone who thinks that entertaining nonsensical beliefs aren't harmful should read W. K. Clifford's essay, "The Ethics of Belief", which makes and wonderfully illustrates the point that we should not form beliefs except on adequate evidence and sound reasoning. Accepting shoddy beliefs can erode your whole way of thinking.

Question: "You say it doesn't work, but how do you explain anecdote X?"

RM: Hey, you got it wrong: I never volunteered to explain everyone's weird stories. Of course, I like weird stories, especially unexplained ones, but some are unexplained because of missing details or ones that the questioner (totally honestly) has gotten wrong, and maybe some will never be explained. The point is for YOU, not me, to look for alternative, conventional explanations before jumping to conclusions. Now, if you want, I can tell you about a similar, baffling case that I DID explain when I chased down enough facts. .

JWN: I haven't been there, and I can't form an opinion on the accuracy of the witness involved (erring is human), but [other anecdote about same or related matter].

KP: When the evidence for the claim is an anecdote, that's precisely the reason I don't have to explain it. Uncorroborated anecdotes are worth very little, for many reasons: They must generally be unusual, to stick in our memory, and therefore aren't representative. Also, most anecdotes have been told and retold, and become closer to folklore than to real evidence. Even when it's something one person says he himself remembers, memory can play numerous tricks, and is less a tape recorder than a village storyteller. In a sense, each time we recall events, we tell ourselves a story reconstructed to fit our beliefs, wishes, and expectations.

Question: "What do skeptics believe, anyhow? What's a skeptic?"

RM: You might as well ask what a carpenter believes. Carpentry isn't a belief: It's the effective application of tools. That's also what skeptics do, in their case with MENTAL tools applied to claims on the fringes of science, tools like scientific methods, old-fashioned footwork, and checking whether those claims contradict themselves.

JWN: Someone who is interested in examining paranormal and other claims that seem to contradict scientific knowledge. They believe in tests. Skeptics, by the way, are usually interested in testing things that official science finds a bit below its dignity.

KP: The kind of skepticism that skeptics' organizations practice is the kind espoused by scientists. Skeptics welcome new ideas, but suspend belief until a claim has been subjected to a conclusive test. They don't accept a theory just because it sounds appealing, or makes them feel good.

Question: "When did you become a skeptic?"

BL: I joined organized skepticism as soon as I discovered that there were actually folks out there scientifically investigating supernatural claims, instead of dismissing them out of hand. At one time I suppose I didn't quite know what to make of the whole unsolved mysteries media genre: Although I didn't believe the supernatural explanations, at some level I naively assumed that "they" (something like the FDA) wouldn't allow publication or TV-special coverage of such claims unless the descriptions were at least somewhat truthful. Learning how many of the most familiar claims are fabrications from start to finish was an eye-opener.

RM: That's kind of like asking me when I finally started thinking just a bit. I've always been a bit interested in this stuff because it's fun, but noticed organized skeptics' efforts starting in 1975, and in 1982 found a local group that intrigued and entertained me enough to get involved with it. Maybe I was given a push when my congressman, Leo Ryan, was murdered by a sometime faith-healer and his cult in Guyana, in 1978.

KP: The first time I realized I had been duped by something. As a child, I really wanted to believe in flying saucers, the Loch Ness Monster, ghosts,

and the like. At some point, I began to realize on what a shoddy basis it all was built. Becoming skeptical was not, however, a datable experience like being "born again": Skepticism is something you grow into, as you learn about critical thinking.

Question: "What do skeptics think about spiritual matters? Are skeptics atheists?"

RM: No, skeptics basically aren't involved with religious issues, and their own religious beliefs, in their private lives, are all over the map. Religion is mostly concerned with questions like "what must I do and not do" and "what must I take on pure faith". Skeptics AS SKEPTICS are curious about claims (on the fringes of science) that can be checked for evidence, not about morals or pure faith. However, some matters of EVIDENCE that are CALLED religious, such as faith-healing and so-called scientific creationism, are skeptics' business as testable claims, rather than as religion.

JWN: Most skeptics I know are agnostic (atheist sounds like someone actively opposing something and preaching about his/her belief), but as a rule, skeptics don't interfere with others' beliefs or faith, unless empirical claims are made (like weeping Madonnas, Indian statues that can make women pregnant, or faith-healers using tricks, or people who say they can fly). Non-interference with religion and faith is more or less standard policy for skeptic organizations. An exception is India, where lots of people proclaim themselves godmen on the basis of simple magic tricks.

KP: Religious orientation varies with the individual. Some skeptics hold religious beliefs; quite a few are agnostic. In my experience, skeptics tend not to be dogmatic atheists, because being dogmatic about anything goes against the skeptical attitude.

Question: "What do skeptics do that's constructive?" Isn't skepticism a negative concept?

RM: First, skeptics have fun looking at fringe claims to see if they might have merit, and often actually hope they do. At worst, that's harmless. Second, when skeptics do a good job, they help people avoid wasting their time on notions that don't pan out. I'm grateful for being steered away from wild-goose chases, aren't you? Sounds constructive to me! Third, on rare occasions, we've confirmed that we've actually saved lives. [Describe helping Randi with faith-healing investigations. . . .]

JWN: They figure out what's behind all kinds of strange things. Usually, reality is more wonderful than what's dreamt of in all superstitious philosophies.

KP: T. H. Huxley said that someone who clears the weeds and thistles from a field does service, just as much as someone who comes along later and plants an edible plant or grain. So, skepticism is certainly worthwhile. More than that, though, skeptics do many constructive things, such as encouraging logic and critical thinking, and promoting science education.

Question: "Shouldn't people have a right to believe whatever they want? Who elected you thought police?"

BL: I believe thought control occurs when misinformation is knowingly propagated, depriving people of their right to base their beliefs on the facts.

RM: Of course people should believe what they want, and skeptics wouldn't want it any other way. Also, they CAN'T be thought police, even if skeptics wanted to, since all they do is give out information -- usually information most people haven't seen or thought about. If anything is thought control, it would have to be DEPRIVING people of skeptics' work and ideas. Skeptics want to give ALL explanations a fair chance on their merits, while many less critical paranormal fans don't. Who are the thought police, then?

JWN: We are more like a consumer's organization. We provide information to anyone who is interested, and we challenge those who are actively trying to sell worthless or doubtful information.

KP: Of course, anyone has a right to his own opinions, and no one should be persecuted over personal beliefs. Skepticism is not a religious movement to convert the unrighteous, nor are skeptics busybodies out to set everyone else straight. Basically, we advocate being an educated consumer in a huckster-filled marketplace of ideas. People have a right to believe whatever they want, and skeptics have a right to question it. Ours is a small voice, hardly anybody's "thought police".

Question: "What do you get out of being a skeptic?"

RM: Entertainment. An excellent chance to make a fool of myself in public. On rare occasions, a suspicion that I might be doing someone some good.

JWN: I meet interesting people. I find a way to explain about science to people who would otherwise not be interested. Skeptics want to give all explanations a fair chance on their merits, while many less critical paranormal fans don't.

KP: I feel I am making a contribution to something I consider important. I also admit to a mildly vindictive pleasure when I see rip-off artists and con-men (by no means all those making paranormal claims) exposed for what they are.

Question: "Isn't skepticism a closed-minded, dogmatic position? How can you pretend to do impartial inquiry when you are logical positivists/fundamentalist materialists/secular humanists/reductionists/scientific realists . . . ?"

RM: Look, if I partook of ALL the highly varied ideologies I've been accused of mindlessly following as a skeptic, I'd be one horribly confused little guy. However, this misses the point: Skeptics DON'T ASK to be trusted on faith, based on their personal impeccability: Things they say either have merit or don't, and you can judge that for yourself. They AIM for impartial inquiry, but it's the RESULTS' merit, not THEIR merit, that either stands on its own or doesn't. You be the judge.

JWN: We don't like inquiry in matters of opinion: If someone says he always

knows in advance whether the baby is a boy or girl, some people may think this nonsense, others believe it immediately, but the skeptic would be interested in testing. (Often, scientists don't like to do that, because they think it's a waste of time).

KP: These labels don't reflect the way skeptics are, but rather the way true believers see or want to see them. To true believers, anyone who even mildly questions their precious beliefs is not just wrong but also a dogmatist or dangerous fanatic. Statements like this attempt to brush aside skeptics' reasoning by attacking them personally. (One would be hard pressed to find a single living, breathing logical positivist on earth, today.)

Skeptics are open-minded, in that solid evidence DOES persuade them. Having an open mind doesn't mean refusing to learn from experience: After disproving 100 poltergeist cases, you hold out little hope for case 101. Skeptics will be persuaded if the evidence warrants, but have high standards for what they WILL believe.

Question: "Have you ever had what you considered a genuine psychic experience? What would convince you that a particular claim is genuine?"

BL: I've had a few intriguing experiences that I can't explain, and that friends have adamantly labeled psychic, but I don't have the ego to think that just because I can't personally explain something, that means it's contrary to the laws of nature! It's reasonable to ask a skeptic what evidence would convince him of a particular claim's validity. However, the focus should be on the weight of the evidence, itself: The claim's validity doesn't hang on whether a particular skeptic is convinced.

RM: I've had experiences I FOOLED MYSELF into thinking were genuinely paranormal -- specifically deja vu sensations. I've also seen eerie lights in the sky. The former are well-known quirks of brain function that I didn't understand at the time, and the latter I never did chase down, and no longer remember enough details. Those aside, as far as I know, I've never had a paranormal experience -- yet. The point is that I fool myself and jump to conclusions like anyone else, which is why magicians love people like me as audiences. The point is NOT to claim that people don't have anomalous experiences (they do), but rather to find the best INTERPRETATION for them, instead of jumping for a psychic one. [Tell story about Randi being amazed by Arthur G. Lintgen successfully "reading" classical records' grooves.]

As far as a particular claim being genuine, I'd do my best on my own, investigating it. Then, if it still looked interesting, I'd bow to real expertise and find out what a VARIETY of people who REALLY know the subject think. (That's where "skeptical" experts help, by adding to the variety of views to consider.) I'd try to figure out how preliminary the results are. I'd consider alternative interpretations. In the end, I'd either say "yes", "no", or "I don't think we know yet"-- judging each case uniquely.

JWN: No. The closest was a vivid dream of my mother the day after she died. I'd be convinced by a recipe for a not too complicated experiment that can be done by anybody and that consistently yields the claimed results.

Question: "What about [cases of skeptics making intolerant statements; lawsuits against skeptics; sundry controversies]?"

RM: Well, first, skeptics aren't perfect: They lose patience, they lose tempers, they make mistakes. They're also perceived as a threat to some very lucrative businesses that don't appreciate critical scrutiny. So, they must be extremely careful, and expect to pay dearly if they mess up. Second, unfortunately, any crank or zealot can call himself a skeptic, and some do. Therefore, SOME statements by self-described skeptics I absolutely disavow. However, respectable skeptics' GROUPS make every effort to get rid of people like that, make amends for their misdeeds, and distance the groups from them. This is far more than you see from uncritical fringe-science groups, and what more can one do?

KP: As with all organizations, many people who call themselves skeptics make statements not in keeping with skeptical ideals, and they SHOULD be criticized by other skeptics. However, intolerance among skeptics is unquestionably less common than some claim: Often, the very act of questioning cherished belief systems is automatically labeled intolerance. It is NOT intolerant to criticize shoddy thinking, poor logic, fallacies, and manufactured evidence. If that's intolerance, then I'm happy to admit that I'm intolerant.

QUOTE: Skepticism is a good place to start from; that way you won't go overboard when some "IT" happens to "YOU." Reverend Ivan Stang, Church of the Subgenius

ATLANTA STARGAZERS PREDICT A WIN FOR BUSH

Shortly before the 1992 Presidential Election, the famed "psychic" Jeane Dixon predicted a win for George Bush. The Atlanta Journal quoted local astrologers as predicting a win for Bush as well.

According to the Atlanta paper, "Two Atlanta astrologers say that, contrary to national surveys, President Bush is in a better position to win Tuesday's election than Gov. Bill Clinton or billionaire Ross Perot.

'His birth chart seems to indicate that he will win,' astrologer Louise Bromley said. "Of the three, he had the most positive influences on the day of the election.'

Said astrologer Maxine Taylor, "Bush has got it and Clinton doesn't. On Clinton's chart, he does not have the indicators for victory."

FIRST ANNUAL PICNIC A BIG SUCCESS

The first annual Georgia Skeptics picnic was held on September 20, 1992, and

was graciously hosted by Dale and Ann Heatherington at their beautiful home in Roswell, Georgia. Feasting and lively conversation were followed by a juggling performance by Charles Shapiro, songs for Skeptics by Larry Johnson, and a Skeptics Quiz Bowl game. A fantastic time was had by all who attended.

THE END