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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.

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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.

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MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

The May 1993 meeting of the Georgia Skeptics will be held on Sunday, May 16, at the Steak and Ale Restaurant on Northlake Parkway in NE Atlanta (near the Lavista Rd. exit from I-285), beginning at 4:30 p.m. Dinner follows and is

optional, but is encouraged to support the restaurant for providing facilities.

The speaker will be Dr. George Ganaway, Director of the Ridgeview Center for Dissociative Disorders. He will be speaking on the role of hypnosis and dissociation in hidden-memory claims, and the introduction of false memories of alien abductions and Satanic ritual abuse through hypnosis. He will also discuss intriguing and controversial research he is currently conducting involving the creation of a screen memory of alien abduction in a volunteer test subject (his wife).

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## FIRE IN THE SKY: THE WALTON TRAVESTY

by Anson Kennedy

The Georgia Skeptics have joined the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) in challenging the claim of Paramount Pictures that its new film *Fire in the Sky* is based on a true story.

On November 5, 1975, a 22-year-old logger by the name of Travis Walton was allegedly abducted by a UFO near Snowflake, Arizona. Witnessed by six companions, his experience is possibly the most unique and controversial alien abduction tale in the short history of the phenomenon. Now, some seventeen years later, Paramount Pictures has brought this incredible story to the silver screen. On March 12, 1993, *Fire in the Sky* opened in theaters across the country.

Scripted by Tracy Torme' (who also wrote last year's CBS miniseries on alien abductions, *Intruders*), the movie is loosely based on Travis Walton's book, *The Walton Experience*. The term "loosely" is used because Torme' has significantly altered the portrayal of Walton's UFO experience from what Walton himself described, because Torme' has created a fictional UFO investigating organization to replace the real group involved, and because Torme' combined several real individuals into "composites", all under the guise of literary license. However, after examining the full evidence of the case, he may be forgiven these fictionalizations -- for how can one be too critical of fictionalizing a work of fiction?

Philip J. Klass, chairman of CSICOP's UFO Subcommittee (which also includes such noted skeptics as Robert Sheaffer and James Oberg), investigated the Walton case immediately after it occurred. As detailed in his book *UFOs: The Public Deceived* (Prometheus, 1983), Klass found significant evidence of "gross deception" in the months following Walton's disappearance.

According to Walton, he and six other loggers were driving from their work site at Turkey Springs, in Sitgreaves National Forest, to their homes in Snowflake about forty-five miles away. Sometime after 6:00 P.M., both Walton and one of his companions, Allen Dalis, saw a saucer-shaped object hovering over a slash pile of cut timber in a clearing. Walton claims he jumped out of the truck (luckily, he was sitting next to the door) and ran towards the

object, which was emitting a yellowish light. Suddenly, the object let loose a flash of brilliant blue-green light which reportedly "blew him [Walton] back ten feet" according to Walton's friend and employer Mike Rogers, who was driving the truck at the time. In a panic, Rogers sped off leaving Walton at the mercy of whatever controlled the UFO.

Upon reaching Heber (a small town between the work site and Snowflake), Rogers contacted Undersheriff L.C. Ellison, who met them in the village. Rogers and the rest of his crew told Ellison their story, whereupon Ellison called Navajo County Sheriff Marlin Gillespie. Gillespie, his deputy Kenneth Coplan, Ellison, Rogers, and two other crew members (the other three refused to go along) returned to the site and searched for several hours for Walton.

In UFOs: The Public Deceived, Phil Klass describes the surprising response of Walton's family to the extraordinary news of his abduction by a UFO. At approximately 1:30 a.m. on the morning of November 6 (and after abandoning the search for the night), Coplan and Rogers went to notify Walton's mother, Mary Kellett, of her son's disappearance. Mrs. Kellett's calm response upon being awakened and told her youngest son had been kidnapped by a UFO was "Well, that's the way these things happen" and then she proceeded to describe two instances when she and/or her oldest son, Duane, had also seen UFOs. Later that morning (approximately 3:00 a.m.) when Mrs. Kellett notified Walton's sister, Mrs. Grant Neff, that "a flying saucer got him [Travis]," Mrs. Neff surprised Coplan with how calmly she too took the news.

Phil Klass later learned that shortly before Walton's alleged abduction, he had told his mother that if he was ever abducted by a UFO she should not worry because he would be fine.

The rest of the that day, November 6, was taken up by an extensive search of the area where Walton allegedly disappeared. Curiously absent from the site was any physical evidence of anything happening, in spite of the "explosive" force of the blue-green beam. Dry pine needles lay undisturbed on the forest floor. No blood, no shreds of clothing, and no evidence of the blast effects were found by any of the nearly fifty searchers involved.

By November 7, law enforcement officials were concentrating on the possibility that Walton might have been the victim of foul play at the hands of his coworkers. Walton's other brother, Donald, also felt that the UFO story was a cover for something else. To this end, Rogers and his crew volunteered to take polygraph examinations the following Monday, November 10.

On November 8, Phoenix UFOlogist Fred Sylvanus interviewed both Rogers and Duane Walton. The tape of this conversation reveals several striking details. Not once during the entire sixty-five minute interview did Duane or Rogers express any concern over Walton's well-being. Rogers described the UFO as "beautiful." Duane stated he had been seeing UFOs for the past "ten or twelve years. I've been seeing them all the time." He also stated that he and his brother Travis had made an agreement to "immediately get as directly under the object as physically possible" if one of them ever saw a UFO. Duane went on to state that he felt Walton was "having the experience of a lifetime .... All I can say is that I wish I was with him."

Polygraph examinations of Walton's crew were conducted on November 10 by C.E.

Gilson of the Arizona Department of Public Safety. Gilson asked four "relevant" questions, three of which dealt with whether Walton had been seriously injured or killed by the one or more members of the crew. The fourth question, added at the last minute, was, "Did you tell the truth about actually seeing a UFO last Wednesday when Travis Walton disappeared?" Not surprisingly, the six crew members were unanimous in their responses of "No" to the first three questions and "Yes" to the last. Five were judged to be truthful, but results on the sixth (Allen Dalis) were "inconclusive." In his formal written report, Gilson said, "The polygraph examinations prove that these five men did see some object that they believe to be a UFO and that Travis Walton was not injured or murdered by any of these men, on that Wednesday (5 November 1975). If an actual UFO did not exist and the UFO is a manmade hoax, five of these men had no prior knowledge of a hoax. No such determination can be made of the sixth man whose test results were inconclusive."

Later that day, November 10, Travis Walton reappeared at a gas station in Heber. Calling his sister collect after midnight, Walton begged for help when her husband answered the phone. After informing Mrs. Kellett of the call, Grant Neff picked up Walton's brother Duane and the two drove to Heber to pick up Travis. The telephone operator who handled the collect call called Sheriff Gillespie to let him know of Walton's reappearance. Gillespie then called Deputy Glen Flake and asked him to keep a look out for the men returning to Snowflake.

Deputy Flake missed Neff, Duane, and Travis Walton on the way in, so he went to Mrs. Kellett's house. It was after 2:00 a.m., but the lights were on and Duane was outside siphoning gas from one car to another. He made no mention to the officer that his brother had been found and was inside the house. Flake did not reveal the information the telephone operator had provided.

Duane Walton also did not tell the deputy that he had performed a physical examination of his brother. Duane later claimed that during this exam, he found no bruises, burns, or evidence of any physical injury except for a red puncture mark on the inside of Walton's right elbow. Travis Walton's physical condition was curious given his reported violent encounter with the blue-green beam.

In any case, Duane decided to drive Walton to a doctor in Phoenix after the deputy left. They made an abortive attempt to see a hypnotherapist, but Duane backed out saying that Walton was not ready for regressive hypnosis. It was not until the afternoon of November 11 that a cursory exam by two doctors was performed. Like Duane, they found no evidence of physical injury, except for the mark on Walton's arm. One of the doctors, Howard Kandell, stated it "was compatible with a puncture wound such as when somebody takes blood from you." He went on to note that Travis Walton claimed he had not noticed it before, in spite of the fact that both Duane and the hypnotherapist had seen the mark earlier. Walton later said he believed that the puncture wound near his vein was from a "thorn".

More telling, though, were the results of the urine analysis performed on a sample from Walton. Walton had claimed that he had not eaten while aboard the UFO, and had lost ten pounds during his five-day ordeal. The urinalysis showed no trace of drugs, but also no trace of acetone. After going without

food for more than a couple of days, the body begins to break down its own fat. The waste product of this is acetone, and it is excreted in the urine. If Walton had been without food for several days, his urine should have shown some traces of acetone.

The doctors who examined Walton were members of APRO, the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization, and it was at this time that APRO became intimately involved in the case. It is also at this time that the National Enquirer became involved. Coral Lorenzen, who had made the arrangements for the medical examination, received a call from the National Enquirer about the case. She convinced the paper to pay Duane and Travis Walton's expenses while they were "sequestered" in a local hotel, in exchange for exclusive rights to the story.

When Duane finally called Sheriff Gillespie to inform him of Walton's reappearance, he told the sheriff they were in Tucson where Walton was receiving a check-up. He changed the story in a later phone call, saying they were at a private home in Phoenix. At Gillespie's insistence, Duane reluctantly agreed to let him interview Walton. The Walton brothers refused to allow Gillespie to record the interview, but Travis did agree to take a polygraph exam later in the week.

Seven days after Walton had disappeared and two days after his sudden reappearance, his story was hitting the local newspapers. The Tucson Arizona Daily Star quoted Duane as saying, in part, "I'm not a UFO buff and neither is my brother". This statement flatly contradicts Duane's earlier statements to UFOlogist Fred Sylvanus.

Gillespie had scheduled Walton's polygraph examination for Friday, November 14, but Walton did not show up. The excuse was that the press had "laid siege" and Duane did not feel that Travis was ready to face the press. This is curious, since a team of reporters from the National Enquirer had been interviewing Walton already. Also, Duane could have had the polygrapher come to the hotel where Travis was staying if he was concerned about exposing him to the media.

Some of the most damning evidence that the entire case was a hoax surrounds the various polygraph examinations and the behavior of the principle players: Duane and Travis Walton, and Mike Rogers. APRO announced on February 7, 1976, that both Travis and Duane had passed an exam given by George Pfeiffer, who worked for Tom Ezell and Associates. But that test was flawed in a number of respects. First, Pfeiffer allowed Walton to dictate a number of the questions he asked. While it is not uncommon for polygraphers to allow the test subjects and/or sponsors to outline the general area to be probed, allowing the subject to dictate specific questions violates the basic principles of polygraphy and should invalidate the test results. Also, Pfeiffer was relatively inexperienced, having been practicing only two years. This inexperience expressed itself when he judged Walton's "No" answer to the question "Before November 5, 1975, were you a UFO buff?" to be truthful. Walton's answer directly contradicted information provided by both his mother and brother Duane and by Walton himself during an earlier psychological examination.

Later in March of 1976, when Pfeiffer's employer Tom Ezell had reviewed the

charts, he concluded that it was impossible to determine if Walton and Duane were answering the test questions truthfully. Ezell was significantly more experienced in polygraphy than Pfeiffer. Ezell stated in a letter to Phil Klass, "Upon review of this examination, I find that to me it is not acceptable. In the first place I would not be a party to an examination in which the subject dictated the questions to be asked ... Because of the dictation of the questions to be asked, this test should be invalidated. Also, upon examining the resultant charts, I find that I cannot give an opinion one way or another" whether the subjects had been truthful or not. Yet this is the examination to which Walton refers when he states he has passed a lie detector test.

But the real "bombshell," as Klass describes it in his book, was the fact that Walton had failed an earlier polygraph examination miserably and this information had been suppressed by APRO, which had been proclaiming the Walton case "one of the most important and intriguing in the history of the UFO phenomena." This test was administered by John McCarthy, who with twenty years of experience was one of the most respected examiners in the state of Arizona. His conclusion: "Gross deception". Further, McCarthy reported that Walton was holding his breath to try to "beat the machine". Proponents of the Walton case never mention this examination.

If the case is a hoax, what possible motivation could Walton and the others have? Two possibilities have been identified. First, every year the National Enquirer offered a multi-thousand dollar award for the "Best Case" of the year (up to \$100,000 for "positive proof" of ET). Walton and the other crew members divided a \$5000 award from the National Enquirer.

The second, more compelling motive involved a contract Mike Rogers had with the U.S. Forest Service. Rogers had contracted with the Service to thin out the Turkey Springs area over a year before Walton's experience. He won the contract when he submitted the low bid of \$24.70/acre in June of 1974. The contract term was 200 working days ("working days" to allow for bad weather and the long mountain winter) to thin 1277 acres, later reduced to 1205 acres. Rogers was seriously behind schedule and in fact had received an eighty-four day extension (accompanied with a \$1.00 per acre penalty for missing the completion date). Only five days of this extension remained at the time of Walton's alleged abduction. At the time of Walton's disappearance, Rogers was in serious trouble: he had over a hundred acres left to finish in five days or he would default on the contract and lose some \$2500 -- money sorely needed to get through the winter months -- or he would need to request a second extension and accept another penalty for failing to finish on schedule a second time.

Just two weeks prior to Walton's disappearance, NBC-TV aired a two-hour movie featuring the abduction tale of Betty and Barney Hill. Rogers has acknowledged watching the first portion of the movie, the portion that detailed the Hills' "abduction." Klass speculates in his book that "to a man facing two unattractive alternatives on his Turkey Springs contract, the account of the Hills' "UFO-abduction" could easily suggest a third." By making Turkey Springs the site of an alien abduction, Rogers could claim his men were too afraid to return and continue working -- providing an "act of God" that could result in contract termination with no penalty and full payment to Rogers.

During the months after Klass revealed the results of his investigation, Rogers and Walton entered into a lengthy negotiation with him to have the flawed polygraph exams re-administered -- this time with a mutually acceptable, independent polygrapher. Rogers issued a "challenge" to Klass: Duane and Travis Walton and Rogers would agree to be retested by "a mutually acceptable examiner of high standing and proper credentials" and that, if all parties passed the tests, Klass would pay all costs involved; if any of them failed, Klass would be "reimbursed." Klass agreed in principle with most of the conditions, however as time progressed and negotiations continued it became clear that Rogers was engaging in delaying tactics and was, in fact, doing everything possible to not be retested. Ultimately, none of the principles in the Walton case was given new polygraph examinations.

And there the case remained for seventeen years, with proponents still proclaiming it one of the best documented abductions in history and skeptics decrying the multiple instances of intentional deception which imply "hoax." Then comes Fire in the Sky and a media blitz to promote the "true story." Travis Walton has made appearances on national talk shows (from CNBC's Tom Snyder show to Larry King Live on the night of the movie's premier), tabloid television shows (such as Hard Copy and Fox's Sightings), radio call-in shows, and has even appeared via satellite on local news programs. The week of the premier, Walton was interviewed on WAGA Channel 5's Good Day Atlanta morning show.

In the February 1993 issue of the Mutual UFO Network's MUFON UFO Journal, Travis Walton "takes time to address his critics." Describing himself as a "naive country boy" (Walton hardly seemed naive when he accused Phil Klass of being a government disinformation agent on Larry King Live - a charge for which he has absolutely no proof - or points out "logical fallacies" in Klass's position) Walton tells of his shock at the "attacks" he received from skeptics such as Klass. He repeats throughout his article that Klass' claims had been refuted time and time again. Unfortunately, Walton provides little information in the article which actually refutes Klass' evidence; instead, he offers tantalizing tidbits which seem intended more to entice the reader to buy a copy of his newly revised book (whose title he has changed to, oddly enough, Fire in the Sky) than to actually "set the record straight". Walton claims that the various charges against him "starkly contradict each other" [emphasis in original], but provides no specific examples of these contradictions. He says, "So the irony is that when one's foremost detractor [Klass] makes an internally inconsistent scattergun assault, he is actually making a perverse sort of endorsement because it says loud and clear that the detractor himself doesn't believe that any of his attacks has sufficient merit to stand alone." It is a perverse sort of logic which will go through such convolutions in an effort to justify a failing position.

In a recent issue of his Skeptics' UFO Newsletter, Klass wonders if Walton will refute the fact that his first polygraph exam indicated "gross deception," or that his mother was abnormally calm upon hearing word of his disappearance, or that he - along with his mother and brother - had a long history of seeing UFOs prior to November 5, 1975, or that the lie detector test he did pass was seriously flawed. The list can go on and on.

So what can we make of this long and twisted tale? At the time, the Walton

experience seemed little more than yet another in a long line of elaborate hoaxes. It continued to have its supporters among the UFO community, but enough questions surrounded it that few considered it "proof positive." Now, a multi-million dollar movie billed as a "true story" is in theaters across the country. Prior to its release, UFO fans were predicting how this would "raise the public's awareness" of UFOs in general and the alien abduction phenomenon in particular. Of course, they said the same thing about last year's Intruders. Although Intruders might have raised public "awareness", the movie seems to have had little impact on the public's perception of these things or the credence given to them. We expect that Fire in the Sky will sway the public about as much. Unfortunately, we also expect that Hollywood will make more of such "fiction as truth" productions. The bottom line for the public is to always view these productions with a critical eye.

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Anson Kennedy, an electrical engineer, is Vice-President of Georgia Skeptics, Chairman of the UFO Committee, and co-founder of the new Media Watch Project. He is also the moderator of the Paranet Skeptics computer echo.

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## PARANORMAL FRAUD EXPOSED

by Detective Bruce Walstad

In March of this year, I received a phone call from fellow PACC (Professionals Against Confidence Crime) member Bob Steiner. Bob explained that he had received a request to investigate some alleged paranormal activity at a Chicago bar and restaurant, The Red Lion Inn. Bob put me in touch with a Ron Pine from the Chicago area, who related to me what had been going on at the inn. Pine's friend, Dr. James Iaccino, a college professor, had been told by a former student, James Horan, that The Red Lion Inn was haunted by three female ghosts. He convinced Iaccino to go to the inn with him to see first hand the ghostly occurrences. During their eight hour ordeal at the inn, Iaccino witnessed 30 paranormal effects. Bottles moved from table to table, coins flew about the room, a tape recorder kept coming unplugged from the wall and all sorts of other "scary" stuff occurred. Iaccino came away from the evening quite rattled and duped, according to Pine.

Over the next several weeks, Pine questioned Iaccino on numerous occasions about Horan, and the ghostly things he had observed. Pine and myself had many phone conversations during this period and the following was discovered. Horan was in the process of writing a paper of some sort on ghost hunting. This paper was to be later converted into a book. Horan was seeking to have Iaccino and the college back his discoveries and theories. It also turns out that Horan is an amateur magician.

Pine learned that Iaccino and Horan were again planning to meet at the inn for another evening of haunting and Pine managed to get me invited.

The event took place on Easter evening at the inn. I arrived at 9:00 p.m., a

few hours after the others had met. Upon my arrival, I was greeted by a true "cast of characters" in a large candle lit room (ghosts like candlelight I found out). In attendance was Dr. Iaccino, James Horan, Horan's girlfriend, Justin (a friend of Horan's), Justin (owner of the inn) and two members of the local skeptics group (Al and Danielle).

Looking around the room I noted VCR's, tape recorders, toilet paper hanging from the ceiling (to detect the ghosts' movements), bells on thread around all the doors, baskets of pennies on the floor, bottles covered with baby powder on all the tables, and other assorted nonsense. A block of wood had fallen off the top of a bottle it had been placed on, and later, the same block jumped off the side of the bottle it had been laid against. Within minutes of my arrival, the ghosts had struck again. One of them moved a large roll of toilet paper across the women's room floor.

As the evening progressed there were no further events of paranormal activity. I did witness, though, some rather odd people doing strange things. I observed Ouija board messages being written by the ghosts, I saw a demonstration of "Automatic Writing" (this is where a spirit possesses you, and causes you to write messages to the living). I heard fist hand accounts of exorcisms and saw Justine go into trances and talk to the ghosts. I did my best to watch Horan throughout the evening and on one occasion I saw him move a bottle, but one of the skeptics caught him too, and at once called him on it.

At one point in the evening I was able to speak privately with Iaccino. I had him explain to me, and show me what had occurred the last time he was there with Horan. According to Iaccino, whenever things flew about the room, he had his back to Horan. Iaccino also made mention that when things were found moved it was after the room had been in total darkness.

At about 1:00 a.m., I stood up and explained who I really was, and why I was really there. I addressed the group with my opinions about what had been occurring. I called attention to the fact that Horan had been caught moving a bottle earlier. I explained what Iaccino had told me about his observations from the last meeting, as to his back being to Horan as the items were thrown around the room. I watched Horan during my exposure of him. He slumped into his chair, and turned a "ghostly" pale. He did not respond to me in any way, nor did he defend himself. I then confronted Horan with the block of wood trick. This particular item is known among magicians as "The Telekinetic Timber", a stock magic effect. Horan at once denied that's what it was. I had the chance earlier to examine it, and it was just like the one I own. Horan finally admitted it was a trick (after a brief and most interesting conversation). Horan then sat quietly and I pushed him to the limit to see what would happen. I called him a fraud and a magician. He gave no response.

The evening ended with Iaccino telling Horan just what he thought of him and his magic show. He also made mention of what Horan's future will be regarding Iaccino's and the college's backing of Horan's discoveries and theories.

This article originally appeared in the July 1992 issue of PACC Bulletin, and was reprinted in the February 1993 issue of The REALL News, the official

newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land. It is reprinted here with permission of the author and REALL. Detective Bruce Walstad is a police officer, a magician, and the president of Professionals Against Confidence Crime.)

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## GEORGIA SKEPTICS MEDIA WATCH

by Rebecca Long

How can the organized skeptics movement know if progress is being made toward providing the public with factual and rational information on paranormal and fringe science claims? Due to the enormous influence of the news media on public perceptions of extraordinary claims, Georgia Skeptics members Bill Evans and Anson Kennedy are initiating a Media Watch Project. Although still in the planning stages, this effort will monitor and trend media coverage of the paranormal, assess the credibility of the reporting, and provide meaningful feedback to the media on their performance.

In the interim, below are some interesting highlights from recent news media coverage of paranormal claims.

### Udder Nonsense

On March 2, 1993, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution ran a rather sensational piece on alleged cattle mutilations in the Sand Mountain area of northern Alabama. Replete with puns, the article was headlined "Close Encounters of the Herd Kind" in the afternoon edition. I would have preferred the more appropriate title used above.

Cattle "mutilations" are new to the southeastern states, but have been drawing the attention of the credulous since around 1967. Supposedly, cow corpses are being discovered which are "mutilated" with "surgical precision" using an "intense source of heat" (generally presumed to be laser technology in advance of that on earth). The corpses are "mysteriously drained of blood" (with no blood on the ground), though at the same time they typically have "cooked hemoglobin" and other cellular changes. Much is made of the fact that the sexual and excretory organs are missing, as if this is especially significant. There is "no sign of a struggle". Usually only one side of the face is damaged or a single eye ominously missing.

Extraordinary explanations abound, which range from satanic rituals or government agents, to high voltage power lines. But the most favored of the bizarre explanations is that aliens from UFOs are performing strange genetic experiments. Of course, there is also the requisite attendant claim of a government coverup of "the truth". Linda Moulton Howe, the "queen of cattle mutilations", has produced not only a television documentary on this subject, but also an over-sized coffee table style book with full color glossies and closeups of gruesome animal corpses.

A central player in the local drama is Ted Oliphant, who was prominently featured in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution article. Oliphant is a policeman who moved to Sand Mountain specifically to study UFO phenomena after the area was declared the "UFO Capitol of Alabama" by the state senate. Oliphant previously produced a film documentary on unsolved mysteries, in which he included cattle mutilations. He has been a professional speaker on the UFO circuit, and last year gave a talk in Atlanta sponsored by the UFO Forum.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Oliphant believes that cattle mutilations are caused by UFOs. He certainly fuels the mystery when the Atlanta paper quotes him as saying, "We've got something I can't release right now." An article in the Chattanooga Times/Metro, February 13, 1993, quotes Oliphant as saying that scientific tests have failed to identify the cause of death.

Skeptics will find many obvious similarities between the cattle mutilation phenomenon and the crop circle craze, including some of the key personalities involved. In both cases, proponents are taking something quite ordinary and trying to force it into the extraordinary. Even the alleged characteristics of the two phenomena are dubious, and we have only the word of persons making money on the UFO circuit that they occur at all. With crop circles, we heard widely touted claims of chemical and molecular changes in the plants, yet saw no credible evidence. Similarly, Linda Moulton Howe frequently speaks of "necropsies" and "microscopic analyses" which show bloodless tissues and cellular changes. This terminology makes her endeavors sound quite scientific. But have any scientific analyses of bloodless cattle with precise laser incisions appeared in reputable, scientific journals?

To the contrary, photographs appearing in credulous stories of extraterrestrial cattle carvings contradict the very claims of the proponents. Skeptics noticed the same with crop circles. Colin Andrews and Pat Delgado claimed in their book *Circular Evidence* that plant stalks were bent but not broken, yet photographs in the same volume showed numerous broken and damaged plants. Linda Moulton Howe authored an article in the MUFON Journal describing bovine organ removal with "surgical precision", yet the accompanying photographs show nothing of the sort.

Most skeptics believe that the "mutilated" cattle died of natural causes, such as disease or lightning strike, and the corpses were subsequently partially devoured by small scavengers. These scavengers would naturally go for the softer tissues, and for a single eye or side of the face since the dead animal would be lying on its side. The claimed evidence of intense heat and "cooked hemoglobin" are consistent with a lightning strike as the cause of death. The lack of blood on the ground is equally unsurprising, since the "mutilations" occurred after the animals were deceased.

Thus it is apparent that there is no need to invoke supernatural or extraterrestrial explanations for this phenomenon, when the mundane will suffice.

The Atlanta paper's article was somewhat entertaining and the puns humorous, but unfortunately this is serious news. According to the press coverage, farmers and their families are frightened, and have resorted to arming themselves with shotguns. But again, perhaps this too is overstated in the

story.

When Georgia Skeptics member Ron Butler read the Atlanta Constitution's cattle mutilation story, he called our attention to a little sidebar that was published the previous day. The following feature, entitled "News for Kids", appeared on March 1, 1993:

"Is the news I get from the newspaper really true?" -- Tamiesha Florence, 11, fifth grade, Park Street Elementary, Marietta

"Yes, Tamiesha, the news is true -- or as close as we can make it. Sometimes reporters and editors make mistakes; but it is our goal to tell you facts, and stick with facts. That's true for daily papers like the Journal-Constitution, and for the news you see on TV.

"In stores, near the cash register, you've probably seen some newspapers called 'tabloids,' with big headlines about space aliens and such; those are different. They are meant to amuse you, and you shouldn't believe all of them."

John Walter, Managing Editor,  
Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Some Kudos for the Media

On April 5, 1993, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution featured an article by Maureen Downey titled "Psychic Fare." Ms. Downey made an obvious effort to present both sides of the issue, and interviewed CSICOP fellows Dr. Joe Nickell and Dr. Ray Human, and also yours truly, to obtain the skeptical perspective. But perhaps even more noteworthy was a companion piece in which Ms. Downey critically evaluated some of the psychics' claims and drew her own conclusions. She described the predictions as having a "one-size-fits-all feel", and noticed that psychics were ready with modifications to their insights if told they weren't correct. "For example," she writes, "one woman, told by a psychic that she was raising her children "alone," explained that she was married. At that, the psychic said, "But I get the feeling that you think you are alone." Ms. Downey further noted that the psychic offerings were sometimes "New Age bromides."

This was a commendable departure from the standard formula of quoting experts on both sides, and with the credulous viewpoint given the final say. Ms. Downey's article sets a positive example for readers interested in critically evaluating paranormal claims.

In the February 1993 issue of REALL, the official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land, David Bloomberg describes some interesting examples of positive reporting on the paranormal by national television networks. He writes:

Some good news and some weird news in the media recently. In December, Dateline NBC featured a story about homoeopathic medicine and doctors. They sent in a healthy producer undercover, and the homeopath "diagnosed" him, using Kirlian photography among other things, as having

several diseases. The "medicines" given to him were standard homeopathic derivatives. One was supposed to cure his "constitution", and the doctor said it was derived from a moss. NBC had it analyzed by a chemical laboratory and found it to be 85% water, 15% ethanol. Let's have a round of applause for NBC, who did their homework and gave viewers the facts rather than the usual poor investigation we often see from the networks when dealing with the paranormal and fringe science claims.

While we're applauding NBC's news department, let's also hear a little for whoever is in charge of I-Witness Video. Sunday, January 3rd's show had a segment about crop circles. The beginning looked pretty standard, complete with spooky music, some views of British corn fields, a couple of New-Agers twirling dowsing rods and crystals, and some "man on the street" statements from people who thought the circles were caused by UFO's, strange underground forces, or the weather, but it couldn't be a hoax. But there, the similarities ended. For this segment was about a group of hoaxers who videotaped themselves doing the deed in the middle of the night (using a light-intensifier lens and wireless mike to get decent video and sound). The hoaxers used nothing more than a piece of rope and their feet, and they managed to make a very nice, sharp, circle which certainly looked exactly like any other circle we've seen all over the media. The next morning, the hoaxers visited the spot to see their handiwork, and a neighboring farmer wandered by. He said, "I don't think any human could have done this," and remarked upon the lack of footprints! But, of course, many crop circle "experts" would have us believe that any hoaxers must leave footprints. The guy who raped the whole thing called it a "good old-fashioned prank." Of course, I somehow doubt that this will settle the matter.

Since we're giving out hurrahs to TV stations, let's give one to CNN Headline News, too, for a short clip with Robert Sheaffer of the Bay Area Skeptics, featuring his year-end review of psychic predictions for 1992. A psychic tried to argue with Sheaffer that she had predicted the LA riots, but CNN took the liberty of actually re-playing the tape of her real prediction, and it didn't quite make the grade (she had referred to the homeless getting organized -- not even close by any rational standard).

Tampa Bay Skeptic Dr. Gary Posner provided the enclosed ad for a television expose of the profusely advertised 1-900 psychic lines, which have become a \$100 million a year business and receive about ten thousand calls a day. The main users are lower-middle class people who can ill afford to waste the money. In the Spring 1993 issue of the Tampa Bay Skeptics Report, Dr. Posner writes:

As this ad from TV Guide promised, ABC-TV's PrimeTime Live newsmagazine on February 18 did indeed hit the telephone psychics where it really hurts, right in the (crystal) balls.

Primetime's investigation described the "bankroller" of the huge Psychic Marketing Group, and also the owner of one major hotline, as having criminal records for offenses such as theft, pimping, and fraud. Some of the hotline workers interviewed on the show admitted to faking it, and one indicated that

when the hotlines were short-staffed, sex-line girls were used. Personnel were even directed to keep potential suicides on the phone as long as possible before referring them to a reputable suicide hotline.

On February 1, the TV show "Dateline" featured a segment on homeopathy. The premise of homeopathy is that a disease may be cured by extremely dilute concentrations of the substance producing the symptoms. Supposedly, the greater the dilution, the more potent its effect. A Dateline investigator with a certified clean bill of health was diagnosed by an M.D. homeopath, using glitzy pseudoscientific devices, as having a variety of "bodily malfunctions". A variety of homeopathic remedies were then prescribed. In the case of one treatment, costing several thousand dollars, the remedy was shown to contain nothing but water and alcohol.

One additional critical commentary on the paranormal was found in an unlikely source: Family Circle magazine. The February 23, 1993, issue carried an article entitled "Do You Believe in Magic? New Light on the New Age", by Nancy Clark and Nick Gallo. The article describes the disillusionment of the followers of J. Z. Knight, who channels the cro-magnon entity "Ramtha", and how self-proclaimed bearers of enlightenment can become demagogues who exploit the human potential rather than celebrating it.

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## "MEDUSA'S LAIR" - SOLVING THE NEBULOUS?

by Hugh H. Trotti

There are some ancient mysteries which we are destined never to solve, although in some cases we know far more than the peoples of the times that produced them. Our geographical and astronomical knowledge is far better, though we may always be ignorant of the social subtleties and historical details of olden times.

The ancient Greeks had a tale of three sisters of unusual abilities called "Gorgons" - Medusa was one. She was the one with serpents for hair, whose glance turned men to stone. She lived with the other Gorgons past the ocean, "on the edge near night".

Where was that? At first glance one would say that this is exactly the sort of description that could never be solved by us, and is probably not even a good object of speculation. But these things can be deceptive, and we may not need to classify this as poetic but uncertain description, for there may be a simple pointer to the Gorgons' location.

In Homer's Odyssey, there is an interesting phrase used by Odysseus as he speaks with the king of the island Phaiakians:

"...my island lies low and away, last of all on the water toward the dark, with the rest below facing east and sunshine..."

Again, when the goddess Athena is describing the island Ithaka to Odysseus, after indicating the island's fame, she goes on:

"...whether among those who live toward the east and the sunrise,

or those who live up and away toward the mist and darkness."

From these references in Homer - the most widely known stories of the ancient Greeks, whose phrases became "set" in repetitious formulas - we see that "the dark" most likely simply represented the west. The west and darkness is repeatedly contrasted with the east and the sunlight.

We may not be able to go further. There is considerable evidence that the Greeks received much myth and legend from Mesopotamia. Is the "lair of the Gorgons" simply west of Mesopotamia? In the shaky geography of the ancient world, this could even represent Egypt, where there was once a female Pharaoh who wore a serpentine crown that included the cobra. Were the "stone men" simply early statues misunderstood?

Greeks lived on the coast of Asia Minor and on the islands off that shore; were the Gorgons thought to live west of those places - perhaps in Crete? In my book *Beasts and Battles* I had speculated that "Medusa" may have been an ancient priestess of a religion that turned men to "rigor mortis" - the stony rigidity after death. There is evidence that in very early times there may have been human sacrifice in the lands around the Mediterranean, and it was tempting to point to the small ceramic female figures from Minoan Crete that held serpents and connect them with "Medusa" as priestess of some religion that may have practiced human sacrifice.

But here we admit to speculation without much proof. Perhaps it is better to stop with the evidence we have found that the Gorgons were thought to be located "in the west". Such a place is indicated by the habit of the ancient poets that we have seen of equating the east with light and the west with the dark. (We remember that an Egyptian place of burial was across the Nile and on the western side; the west seems to have been sometimes equated with death long ago.)

The point that we would like to stress here is that the most odd or unlikely things may yet be susceptible of being explained - if only we could range widely enough in our research.

Our next example is a number famous among fundamentalist Christians: "666". Fundamentalist preachers are fond of referring to "the devil" or "Satan", whose number is, according to Christian tradition, 666. That people take such things seriously is brought home to us in the various lawsuits instituted by the soap company Procter and Gamble, in connection with its emblem of a male face whose beard ended in curls that were claimed by competitors to represent the three famous sixes, thereby - it had been said by those competitors for sales advantage purposes - showing that P & G might be "in league with" you-know-who. "...which was nonsense, of course".

Before we laugh at this, lately a friend told me that a customer asked to have a bill for six dollars and sixty-six cents changed higher or lower so as not to represent the dread number. And P & G found it necessary to change the beard on its emblem, so as to straighten out the curls. The Winter, 1992 issue of the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer* reported that the vehicle licensing office in Britain would no longer issue the number "666" on license plates.

Perhaps these worries result from lack of knowledge of the history of the

Christian religion. The early Christians thought that the world would soon end, and that then "those pagans" would be punished. The noted scholar Michael Grant, in his book *Nero*, stated that the number 666 represents or stands for Nero's name in ancient Hebrew usage. If so, that Roman emperor is the "beast" whose number the three 6s represent. It seems doubtful that the uniformity of such a number could represent different letters, such as "N" or "R", but Grant may well be right, because there are other ways to write "666". Some Bibles have "Six hundred three score and six" as the way the number is written. In that case, we have the words "hundred", and "three", and "twenty" (twenty being a "score"), to use in addition to the "six". And the number could also be written so as to use the designation "sixty". The various differences that may be utilized to write the number may well provide the way that the number could represent "Nero".

Certainly the Christians and Jews of the time of Nero had ample reason to despise him. If Grant is right, modern Christians need have no fear of the number, since it represents a person long since dead and relegated to the dustbin of history.

Editor's Note: Many reputable scholars disagree with the premise that the number 666 is a cipher representing any person or institution. For example, in his book *The New Age: Notes of a Fringe Watcher*, CSICOP Fellow Martin Gardner shows that mathematical games can be used to derive the number 666 from almost any name.

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Op. Cit., Book XIII, Lines 240-241; (p. 204).

Trotti, Hugh H., *Beasts and Battles*, New York: Rivercross Press, 1989, esp. p. 107, and illustration p. 104. Also the Egyptian goddess Isis resembles Medusa through her link with serpents as described in the Roman adventure novel *The Golden Ass*, though there she is a beneficent figure.

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Skeptical Inquirer, Winter 1992, Vol. 16, No. 2 p. 128.

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AT A LOSS FOR A PROPHET

by Rick Moen, Bay Area Skeptics

There's a long tradition of off-season April Fools pranks on the electronic mail forums. Occasionally, someone pulls a wonderful one on the Usenet Skeptics' forum (sci.skeptic), and we saw a beauty this past September 12th. The best part of this was the totally serious replies that immediately appeared, CRITICIZING SAVASTIO'S TRANSLATION, totally missing the hilarious disclaimers at the bottom, and the other broad tip-offs in the text. You see, superior-grade street theater can be as close as your computer screen!

Michael Savastio's message read as follows:

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FROM: Michael Savastio  
RE: Did Nostradamus predict the end of communism?

Richard Long wrote: "Nostradamus's `Seventy-three years and seven months' in quatrain B.44 may mean the duration of the communistic regime in Russia. What does the original quatrain say?"

Here is the quatrain of Nostradamus that foretells the fall of communism:

Original French:

Nous sommes ici, mais ou sont tes amis, Alice  
La bas, sur l'herbe.  
Qui est le garcon en maillot rouge?  
C'est Guy, mon cousin. Et le garcon sous l'arbre est son compain.

My Translation:

A man with a map on his forehead shall rise and fall.  
Once a king, now he waits in line for toilet paper and chicken feet.  
The old man who rides the great eagle called it the evil empire.  
Three-score and thirteen years, and now bleeding-heart liberals are  
calling it the same.

You'll have to forgive the lack of meter in my translation. I believe it is more important to capture the author's intent than to make it sound nice.

As you can see, this quatrain (along with every other one written by Nostradamus) leaves a lot of room for speculation. You could say it refers to the fall of the Soviet Union, if you use your imagination, but I'm not totally convinced myself.

The above article first appeared in BASIS, the Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet. It is reprinted with the permission of Bay Area Skeptics.

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THE END