



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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How *not* to sell your home

HOBNOBBING WITH HOBGOBLINS HAUNTS HOMEOWNER

By John Thomas

I read last fall that a New York court found a house to be "haunted as a matter of law." Depressed by what I assumed to be fairly serious judicial goofiness, I looked up the case report. The facts turned out to be more interesting than I expected, and the result, while wrong, was not completely unreasonable.

In 1967 Helen Ackley and her husband bought an old Victorian house on the Hudson River in Nyack, New York. In her 1977 *Reader's Digest* article, "Our Haunted House on the Hudson," Ackley claims she soon learned the house was haunted by a band of friendly ghosts and poltergeists. She had the usual footsteps on the stairs, swaying lamps, mysteriously opened doors and windows, and cold spots. Ackley even saw one ghost appear as a cheerful old man in 18th-century costume. Fortunately the ghosts approved of the Ackley's remodeling projects, and they even left gifts for the family on special occasions.

Ackley's article closes with this prophetic musing: "Now we wonder: if the time comes for us to move again, is there any way we can take our other-worldly friends with us?" Unfortunately for the Ackleys, they could not.

Through the years Ackley promoted her house as haunted and publicized her close encounters with ghosts. She was the subject of articles in the local press and even featured the house on a 1989 walking tour as "a river front Victorian with ghosts." But in 1990, the Ackleys decided to sell, and made a contract with Jeffrey Stambovsky, an out-of-towner not familiar with the home's reputation. When Stambovsky did find out about Ackley's ghostly roomers, he sued to rescind his purchase contract.

The trial court refused to cancel the contract, but the New York Appellate Court, in *Stambovsky v. Ackley*, decided to let the plaintiff off the hook. The court doesn't say exactly why Stambovsky wanted out of the purchase, but it did treat his request as reasonable.

The appellate judges held that since Ackley had undertaken to inform the public at large about the ghosts, she also had a duty to inform prospective purchasers. Why? Because haunting was not a condition which could " ... be ascertained by

reasonable inspection of the premises." The doctrine of let-the-buyer-beware was not applicable here, and Ackley could not deny the existence of ghosts whose reality she had so long promoted. In that sense, the house was haunted "as a matter of law."

Whether Justice Rubin, who wrote the opinion, took the existence of Ackley's ghosts seriously is doubtful, given his tongue-in-cheek references to being "... moved by the spirit of equity"; or, on the claim that haunting would be revealed by inspection, to a "... hobgoblin which should be exorcised from ... legal precedent." However, the court did take Stambovsky's fears seriously, and this is the problem. The implication of the decision is that ghosts are real, or at least fear of them is reasonable, even though there is no credible evidence at all that ghosts or poltergeists exist.

I think the decision is wrong because I believe that court judgments should be aligned with reality. I agree with the dissenting judge, who felt that if the doctrine of buyer-beware was to be discarded here, it should be for a more substantial reason than ghosts. "The existence of a poltergeist is no more binding upon [Ackley] than it is upon this court."

Still, the decision is not obviously unjust. After all, Ackley created the problem for herself. And while Stambovsky may not have had an unreasonable fear of ghosts, he may have had an entirely reasonable fear of the effect on the value of his property of others' unreasonable fear of them.

The problem of to what extent the law should compensate fear has troubled the legal system in other contexts, such as exposure to chemicals or disease-causing agents where no physical injury results, or even might result. Surely we should compensate only reasonable fears, and we should determine what is reasonable by testing a specific fear against objective standards.

A similar ruling would be likely under Texas law on similar facts. Indeed, some local entrepreneurs promote their businesses as haunted. One is the Catfish Plantation in Waxahachie, covered by Mark Meyer in the September-October 1990 *Skeptic* ("Supping with the Specters"). What will happen when these owners decide to sell the restaurant? They might be hoist with their own petard, as was Helen Ackley. It would be bad law, but it might be fun to watch.

(John Thomas is the former President of the North Texas Skeptics and serves as an NTS technical advisor. He has an undergraduate degree in physics from the University of Texas-Austin. He has a law practice in Grand Prairie, Texas.)

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

I must apologize for missing last month's issue. It was caused by a scheduling conflict with the editor and my own personal family crisis. Just a few weeks ago, my mother passed away after a long fight against cancer. The events of the past month have been very hard on my family and me ... but oddly enough, they have also given me some insight on a current news story and strengthened even more my commitment to the North Texas Skeptics and CSICOP. Allow me to explain ...

Almost every day, the local newspapers print letters defending Robert Tilton against Attorney General Dan Morales. I quote from a letter to the Dallas Morning News by Leo Marzoni of Dallas: "Where is the crime? ... Our government should not be in the business of protecting us from bad decisions or from losing money to slicktalking evangelists. ... This total misuse of funds is a far grander harm to the citizens than the Word of Faith."

Meanwhile, Bob Ray Sanders repeatedly defends Tilton on his KLIF-AM radio show, saying that he should not be prosecuted, he's committed no crime, he's just practicing freedom of religion, Dan Morales is on a vendetta against him, etc., etc., ad nauseam.

I hear very little comment from these compassionate folk on the new lawsuits Tilton is facing from people who were ripped off by him. One of these is 67-year old widow Mary Elizabeth Turk of Oak Cliff. Several years ago, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. But because of her strong faith in Robert Tilton's promises to heal her via television, she did not go to a doctor. Instead she sent whatever pitiful amounts of money she could scrape up to the Prophet of Farmers Branch. Now, at long last, she realizes that his promises were nothing more than a ploy to get people to send him money. But alas, it's too late.

Doctors told her that if she had let them treat her at the outset, she would most likely be healthy today. Instead, she is dying. And her death, and God only knows how many others, can be laid squarely on the expensive doorstep of Robert Tilton.

To Bob Ray Sanders and to all the radio callers and letter writers who defend Tilton as a harmless preacher practicing freedom of religion, I want to ask one question:

"What if this woman were YOUR mother?"

My mother suffered much pain and discomfort, and died much too young. But because she did get the best medical care from the outset, at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, she had five years of life she otherwise would never have had. I wouldn't trade those five years of her life for all the ill-gotten riches of Robert Tilton. Too bad he doesn't feel the same way.

As to the question of why Dan Morales should prosecute, ask yourself, "What if this man claimed to be a doctor instead of a preacher, told a sick person to throw away her medicine, and she died as a result?" And what if he pulled this little stunt in massive numbers, leading to countless deaths and illnesses? The public would demand that the perpetrator be prosecuted, for everything from murder or manslaughter to practicing medicine without a license. What is the Attorney General for if not to protect the public from charlatans who enrich themselves by preying on the innocent?

To Leo Marzoni, to Bob Ray Sanders, and to all those who continue to defend this man and others like him, and question the motives of those who try to stop him, I ask again:

"What if he did this to YOUR mother?"

Because I know that if some "slicktalking evangelist" had done it to my mother, and the Attorney General refused to prosecute, I'd go after him personally with fifty feet of rope, a gallon of gasoline, and a Bic lighter.

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Speaking of Bob Ray Sanders, he recently had "prominent UFO researcher" Stanton Friedman as a guest. Friedman was in town to play a MUFON meeting. He held forth for an hour on a variety of nonsensical topics, mostly centered around his new book, which is yet another rehash of the discredited Roswell, New Mexico, saucer crash yarn. But this time, he has an eyewitness! True, the witness was only five at the time he saw the saucer people ... he never mentioned it to anyone for forty years ... he apparently forgot all about it until a "dramatic reenactment" on NBC's Unsolved Mysteries jogged his memory ... but nevertheless, he's an eyewitness!! And you can't argue with that. At least Bob Ray couldn't: he said Friedman was so fascinating, he wished he could talk to him "for eight more hours."

Well, if he'd had twelve bucks, he could've gone to the MUFON meeting. They are a "scientific research group," you know. At least that's what they say in their new radio spot, running in pretty heavy rotation on KUII (1190 AM). In the spot, MUFON is described as America's largest group dedicated to researching UFOs through "the scientific method." Gee, I thought that was CSICOP.

Apparently, "the scientific method" is to fire your own researchers when they declare something to be a hoax, as MUFON did in the case of the Gulf Breeze photos. The spot also says MUFON is a nonprofit group, so I guess they spent all those \$12 admissions on the radio schedule.



CBS recently broadcast *Grave Secrets*, a made-for-TV movie "based on a true story" of a haunted house built on a graveyard in Houston. Naturally, the movie showed all sorts of ghostly things happening right on camera, although none of the "actual" incidents, which allegedly occurred repeatedly over a long period of time, were ever captured on film.

Both the movie and an *Inside Edition* feature on the story behind it implied that the daughter of the home's owners died of a heart attack induced by ghosts. Now it's always been my theory that even if there were such things as ghosts, they certainly wouldn't want to kill you ... because then you'd be a ghost, too, and you could kick 'em in the sheets. Both the movie and the news story mentioned that the daughter was taking chemotherapy for cancer, but neither made clear what I learned from my own mother's experience: that prolonged chemotherapy can do severe damage to the heart.

Incidentally, just like the Amityville house, all the alleged ghostly doings abruptly ceased when the people who sold the story moved away. The people who have lived there since have noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps the movie would have been more appropriately titled *Grave Doubts*.



Well, the Academy Awards were not good to JFK, but they did stir up even more publicity for Kennedy conspiracy Trekkies. On a preOscar edition of *Entertainment Tonight*, Oliver Stone used the phrase "historians like myself," and I spit a drink across the room. On Oscar night, as JFK's editor accepted one of the film's few awards, for "Best Editing," he praised Stone's "dedication to a higher truth." Guess all the lower, more mundane truths were edited out.

Then, after the Awards were over, Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America and former aide to Lyndon Johnson, denounced JFK to the *New York Times*. Valenti called the film a "hoax" and a "smear" plucked from "a slag heap of loony theories" in Jim Garrison's book, which he described as "hallucinatory bleatings." He compared the film to Nazi propaganda and said "Does any sane human being truly believe that President Johnson, the Warren Commission members, law enforcement officers, CIA, FBI, White House aides, and assorted thugs, weirdos and Frisbeethrowers all conspired together as plotters in Garrison's wacky sightings? And then for almost 29 years, nothing leaked? But you have to believe it if you think well of any part of this accusatory lunacy."

This colorfully-phrased question naturally leads us to the April issue of *Film Threat* magazine. It contains an article in which two irreverent reporters spend three days in Dallas at the Kennedy conspiracy symposium. It's a very funny look at a group of guys who "for once in their lives ... can talk about the assassination all they want without someone saying, 'Shut the hell up already about that crap, will ya?!'" The symposium is described as being a lot like a *Star Trek* convention, "but without the lame nylon uniforms." And the sidebar of "Things Actually Overheard at The Symposium" is worth the price of the magazine. A couple of samples: "Oh boy, the guy who drove the ambulance is here!" and "I know a guy who saw LBJ jump out of his car and take a shot at JFK."

And finally, James Earl Jones recently embarrassed himself by hosting yet another "blow the lid off JFK" (so to speak) TV special. This one promised to show the previously unknown link between the "three great mysteries" of our time: the JFK assassination, the Bay of Pigs, and Watergate (Watergate? A secret? Is there anyone out there who doesn't know more about Watergate than you ever wanted to know?). Ed Bark's review in the *Dallas Morning News* summed the show up in one word: "Appalling."

Enough on this tired subject. Next month: Dr. Crenshaw!!



And now, since I've missed a month, let's catch up on some of the top news stories from around the world:

ABC recently aired a Happy Days reunion special. All the original cast appeared, except for Erin Moran, who played the daughter, Joanie. According to Inside Edition, Moran was invited to appear, but she replied that all the other cast members were "evil," and she "prayed for them." Guess she'll never forgive them for making her do Joanie Loves Chachi.

A Russian reporter recently investigated villagers' reports of an "abominable snowman monster." He found the remains of the animal, determined that it lived on bark, and declared that it should more properly be called "a forest monster." I suspect that the more accurate, technical term might be "a beaver."

Jim Rodenburg of the Omaha Stock Yards has made a job offer to Elvis Presley. He wants Elvis to reappear and become a spokesman for the pork industry, because Elvis was known to have loved pork chops and could eat four pounds of bacon at a sitting. He neglected to mention Elvis' greatest qualification: he keeled over dead from a heart attack.

At a recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Chicago, a survey was read which shows that more than one-third of American adults believe astrology has some scientific merit, and nearly one in seven reads horoscope columns. Despite this widespread support for astrology, a judge in Detroit has dismissed a lawsuit filed by a disgruntled horoscope reader. James Blakely sued for \$9 million, claiming that following Sydney Omarr's astrological advice had caused him "an enormous amount of problems" including his failed marriage. Omarr claims he knew in January that nothing would come of the lawsuit. His Magic Eight-Ball told him so.

A Salem, Massachusetts, man was recently convicted of using witchcraft to bilk an heiress out of more than \$500,000. The prosecutor described the heiress as "innocent and vulnerable" (a.k.a. "stupid"), and said the man took advantage of her belief in the occult to extort money from her. He apparently convinced her of his strange powers by pulling a series of bizarre stunts, such as branding his name on her breast. He ended up rich, and she ended up looking like Laverne DeFazio. No word yet on whether the jury has voted to burn him at the stake.

A group of meteorologists claims that the Biblical account of the parting of the Red Sea could have been accomplished by wind. They say that a steady wind of 45 miles per hour, blowing for 10 straight hours, could have moved the shallow waters enough to create a path for the Israelites. Wonder if they'd be interested in my theory that just before Jesus walked on the water, there was a sudden freeze.

And finally, in Irvington, New Jersey, a substitute teacher from the Caribbean became so upset with her roomful of rowdy seventh-graders that she performed a voodoo ritual in class. She began shaking and chanting, waved a cross at them, threw some kind of powder, and told them their souls were going to the Lord. Police charged her with endangering the welfare of a child and making terrorist threats.

Rumor is that she asked the arresting officer, "You mean this isn't the Voodoo Economics class?"

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An Ageless Story

By John Blanton and Jeff Umbarger

Part I

The flier from the Metroplex Institute of Origin Science (MIOS) advertised "The Scientific Evidence for the Age of the Earth." Since this is a subject of concern to anyone interested in modern science and cosmology, we decided to give it a look. Besides, neither of us had been to a meeting of MIOS since they moved their monthly lecture series to the Ridgewood Recreation Center in northeast Dallas, and we were anxious to see how they were doing in their new home. Just fine, it turns out.

We had concluded from the title that MIOS Chairman Don Patton would be presenting scientific evidence that our favorite planet was less than 10,000 years old. Our mistake. This is not to say that MIOS is one of those proponents of *old Earth* creationism. Far from it. Don's group is among those creationists who still maintain that the earth (and the universe of Carl Sagan, as well) was created just a day or two before the first humans appeared on the scene. In MIOS lectures previously Don has also been known to espouse periods of extremely rapid evolution, if you have not already guessed.

Hoping to see just how good the scientific evidence for the age of the earth is, we were told, instead, just how bad it is. Furthermore, the evidence presented was not from creationists but from honest-to-goodness, card-carrying scientists of the first kind. Really, folks. After taking in Don's complete lecture, we began to wonder why scientists even bother with the issue of the age of the earth. None of their methods ever seem to work for them. Radiometric dating methods, says Don Patton for example, are just about worthless, even according to anti-creationist scientists such as William D. Stansfield, author of *Science of Evolution*, which Don quoted often during his lecture.

Don's talk consisted to a large part of a discussion of citations from legitimate journals of science, these citations being mainly critical of modern geological dating methods. Following the lecture, MIOS was gracious enough to supply handouts of most of these citations, and that along with notes we made from the slide presentation enabled us to follow up on the evidence. One of us (Jeff) spent an evening at the UNT library making copies of the citations that could be located. The citations, as presented by Don, turned out to be even more interesting when compared with the complete text from the journals.

Here, from the MIOS lecture, is what appears to be a highly derogatory critique of radiometric dating practice. Under the heading "SHIFTY URANIUM" it reads:

"The fourth assumption presupposes that the concentration of uranium in any specimen has remained constant over the specimen's life. ...ground-water percolation can leach away a proportion of the uranium present in the rock crystals. The mobility of the uranium is such that as one part of a rock formation is being improvised another part can become abnormally enriched. Such changes can also take place at relatively low temperatures."

I note here that the text from the handout is reprinted *exactly*. The cited text was from an article in *Scientific American* by J.D. MacDougall entitled "Fission Track Dating" (see Note 1).

Although I had gotten the impression from Don's presentation (wrongly, it now seems) that this statement pertained to the uranium-lead dating method, a review of the complete text reveals that the process being discussed is, as the title indicates, dating of mineral samples by counting the tracks of nuclear fission products within crystals. Far from being critical of the method, the author promotes it highly in the complete copy. The "fourth assumption" being described by the author is the fourth, and the weakest of the required assumptions, the first three being 1) radioactive decay rates are constant [they are], 2) "fission tracks are produced with 100 percent efficiency" [laboratory experiments indicate they are], 3) the tracks are perfectly retained by the crystal [they are generally, but, for example, heat can anneal the material and shorten or eliminate the tracks]. The complete text concerning the fourth assumption, quoted directly from the *Scientific American* article follows:

"The fourth assumption presupposes that the concentration of uranium in any specimen has remained constant over the specimen's lifetime. This assumption is usually valid, but there can be exceptions. A combination of elevated temperatures and ground-water percolation can leach away a proportion of the uranium present in rock crystals. The mobility of the uranium is such that as one part of a rock formation is being impoverished another part can become abnormally enriched. Such changes can also take place at relatively low temperatures. Andrew J. W. Gleadow and John F. Lovering of the University of Melbourne have compared heavily weathered grains of apatite, a common mineral in rocks with unweathered grains still embedded in the parent rock. The weathered grains contained approximately 25 percent less uranium than those in the parent rock and yielded anomalous age determinations."

I am sure that the editor who prepared this material for the MIOS lecture had the comfort of the audience in mind when he eliminated the words "*This assumption is usually valid, but there can be exceptions. A combination of elevated temperatures and ...*" from the lecture materials. This part *is* particularly wordy, and it does break up the train of thought being developed. Nothing lost, however. Interested readers can stop by the library and read the complete article by J.D.

Macdougall. This fascinating account outlines the theory and application of the fission track dating method which appears to be both robust and broadly applicable. For example, as described by the author, the technique has been used to provide a reliable date (2.0 +/- 0.3 million years) for a sedimentary stratum in the Olduvai Gorge, and it has also been used to determine that a supposed 18th-century Chinese glass ring was really a 70-year-old forgery.

In the second part of this story, we'll look at some claims MIOS makes for moon rock dating, and the dubious and deceptive schemes used to support their claims.

Notes:

1) J.D. Macdougall, *Scientific American* 235 (6), 118

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A Coinkadink?

By Mike Sullivan

You may have seen his act on cable TV's The Comedy Channel one night while flipping through the dial: the 300-pound stand-up comedian who calls himself "The Todd." Between his "celebrity hair impressions" and slice-of-life gags, he strings together a series of hilarious pseudo-connections like this:

"Satan has the same letters as Santa ... they *both* wear red and black ... you never see them *together* ... A COINCIDENCE???" I think *not!!!* "

"There are three members of The Monkees still performing ... there are three Beatles still alive ... you never see them *together* ... A COINCIDENCE???" I think *not!!!* "

The audience goes crazy over the goofy connections The Todd devises, and soon the whole crowd is shouting "I think *not!!!*" as he sets up each new "coincidence."

I doubt I can top his pithy observations of life's ironies, but I'll take this opportunity to recount some perfectly explicable coincidences that I've run into in the past few months while on *The Skeptic* editing beat.

Item: In mid-January, NTS Technical Advisor Dr. Ray Eve sent me a clipping from the journal *Science* about research into popular techniques used in business training and personal development. The research was conducted by the Committee on Techniques for the Enhancement of Human Performance, headed by UCLA's Dr. Robert Bjork.

Among other things, the item mentions that the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a test widely used by employers in employment screening and career guidance, was found to only be of use in gauging the test-taker's *mood* at the time of the test, and is not a reliable indicator of anything else. *Science* quoted the report: "Unfortunately ... the popularity of the instrument is not coincident with supportive research results."

I tucked the clip in the folder for the in-process issue of *The Skeptic* and wondered how I could use it in an article, since I had nothing working on that topic at the time. Little did I know then ...

Item: In early February, my wife attended a management training seminar put on by her company in Washington, D.C. During the week, she called one night and asked almost in passing if I had ever heard of a test they had taken that day -- the "Myers-Briggs Test!"

Thanks to Dr. Eve, I had, and I faxed a copy of the *Science* story to her to bring to the attention of the seminar leader. A COINCIDENCE???" I think *not!!!*

Item: I had been corresponding with Rick Moen of the Bay Area Skeptics in San Francisco recently regarding

preparations for the 1992 CSICOP conference in Dallas. Rick also manages the computer bulletin-board system of the group, and I had been a regular visitor on the system hoping to find story ideas for *The Skeptic*.

Deadline was fast approaching for the February issue and I had about a 2,000-word hole to fill with no other story prospects in the hopper. On the day before deadline, I decided to download from Rick's system and reprint in the February issue of *The Skeptic* an article written by Robert Sheaffer of the Bay Area Skeptics about their annual review of psychics' predictions for the past year. This I did, and had the story ready to send to Associate Editor Keith Blanton that night. Since Keith had not started work on the issue yet, I was the only one who knew I was planning to run the story at that time.

Item: The next night, Pat Reeder transmitted his monthly column to me for editing for the February issue. Owing to a slow kooky-news month, Pat based much of his February column on -- *Sheaffer's psychics story!!* A COINCIDENCE??? I think *not!!!*

Item: Early on in our efforts to help CSICOP select a site for the 1992 conference, we contacted the Dallas Convention and Visitor's Bureau. I gave the specifications for the meeting to a DCVB staffer, who sent them out to several area hotels as sales leads. Interested hotels would follow up with me individually for further details and preliminary selection.

The DCVB system worked well: that same morning, the calls started coming in from over a dozen hotels on the DCVB lead-distribution list, and I spent the better part of the day on the phone talking to hotel sales reps.

Item: One of the calls that came in early that morning was from a hotel sales manager asking innocently if we were still accepting proposals for the CSICOP meeting site. I assured him that we were, as I had just put out the lead that morning, and I mentioned that I was surprised the DCVB had gotten the word out so quickly.

He instantly replied that his hotel was not a member of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce and so did not receive leads from the DCVB program. Instead, he said, he had *read* about the CSICOP meeting in the August issue of *The Skeptic*, which had been passed on to him from a friend the day before. A COINCIDENCE??? I think *not!!!*

Coincidences like these are easily explained: man is by nature and by training a pattern-recognizing creature. We find connections between perfectly normal events and think them extraordinary; of course, what would be truly extraordinary is if these types of connections *never* came up!

So how do I explain these three recent very clear coincidences? Here are my theories:

The first case is the hardest to put together. My wife mentioned the test she was given in her seminar simply because she felt it might warrant my skeptical interest. She was right, and the clip from Dr. Eve was still fresh in my mind; had she gone to the training session six months earlier or later, I probably would not have made the connection.

The business about the Sheaffer article is easy. I downloaded the story from Moen's system because it was timely, the right length for the space I needed to fill, and written by a well-known skeptical author. Pat Reeder earns his living scanning news wires and writing about the off-beat for his radio comedy service. He picked Sheaffer's story off the Associated Press wire, as he mentioned in his column. I would have been more surprised if Pat had *not* seen and used the story that month.

The hotel sales manager later told me that his property must constantly work to find business to fill their rooms on the weekends, since they cater primarily to weekday corporate guests. He told me that he and two other salespeople there do nothing but "turn over rocks," subscribing to dozens of journals, newsletters and industry magazines just to learn about upcoming meetings. A skeptical friend of his read about the CSICOP meeting in *The Skeptic* and passed it along to him for follow-up.

As so many others have pointed out, the billions of possible loose ends we have in our lives provide ample stock for millions of these simple intersections.

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Letters

We welcome letters from our readers. Please make your comments brief and related to topics of interest to NTS members. Letters must be signed, and are subject to editing for space considerations.

To the Editor:

I read the letters at the end of the March issue of *The Skeptic* with both amusement and a sense of futility. Mike Sullivan's letter was sincere, never condescending, and made every effort to give Bette Epstein and the North Central Texas Chapter of the American Society of Dowsers the opportunity to speak at a meeting or submit an article about their claimed skills and even offered \$2,000 cash if they could prove a paranormal effect under scientifically controlled conditions with the results being published regardless of the outcome.

I was not surprised, though still a little disappointed, that Bette Epstein declined Mike's gracious offer. By the definition of the word, I am a skeptic. Prove your theory and I'll believe you. I will be the first to shout with joy if psychic powers existed AND COULD BE SCIENTIFICALLY TESTED AND REPEATED, however I have little patience for people who claim certain powers or abilities without proof or decline to repeat their claims under controlled conditions and influence other less skeptical minds while taking their money. Bette is a good example of the above-mentioned.

Bette says directly about dowsing, "I believe it ... I know it ... it is a vital part of my life on a daily basis and is as real to me as breathing." Anyone of us could make similar claims about anything yet those claims would have no validity unless they could be scientifically controlled, tested and repeated in other experiments. One usually doesn't see mainstream doctors making wild unsubstantiated claims or quack cure and stay in business very long. Back up your claims with proof, Bette.

The statement Bette made that really amused me was, "I would never degrade my other senses by proving to your group that I can see, smell, hear, taste or feel ... and I wouldn't need to prove to you that I have a well-developed sense of energies that surround me."

This is a false analogy. She obviously doesn't need to prove the first set of abilities since these are common to ALL people and can be shown to be common to all people whereas her claimed dowsing abilities are NOT common to all people, therefore she MUST prove this ability to be taken seriously. If everyone has these abilities then help us, not hinder us, to prove it, Bette.

Finally, her last statement cinched my feelings about her. "However ... if your club would one day like to have a lesson in dowsing so that they, too, can develop their gifts of the spirit ... I am an excellent teacher and am offering my time to you." This was especially amusing for two reasons.

First, she will not let her senses be "degraded" by scientific exam yet she's very eager to give lessons in dowsing to the ones who want to investigate her for which I'm sure she'll charge a small amount.

Second, since when does a "teacher" rate their ability as a teacher? I thought this was evaluated by those who are being taught along with the quality and validity of what is being taught and not by the teacher, especially a "teacher" with no teaching credentials.

Bette, if you are so sure of your "powers" and believe that everyone can do the same then you shouldn't be afraid of proving your "powers." Since you refuse to be tested I must conclude that you are nothing more than others like yourself, a simple capitalist and nothing more.

Jeff Baker

Arlington

Editor's note:

We have received another letter from Ms. Epstein. In it, she says that although she does not wish to submit to our challenge, her 9 year-old daughter *does*.

Ms. Epstein says that her daughter Cassie is "a very good dowser, especially for lost objects. If you are interested, this would be what we ask: There can be no more than three witnesses for each "side" present during the experiment, and these folks must stand at least thirty feet from the act. We make this request because we know of the interference of negative energy."

We *are* interested, and we have forwarded our paranormal challenge instructions to Ms. Epstein to pass along to Cassie. The instructions detail the basic requirements leading to the drafting of a test protocol before negotiations proceed. The challenge amount has also been increased by several thousand dollars with the addition of other signatories.

Read future issues of *The Skeptic* for reports on Cassie's response and for a copy of our standing challenge instructions. Please contact us if you would like to become a signatory of the challenge.

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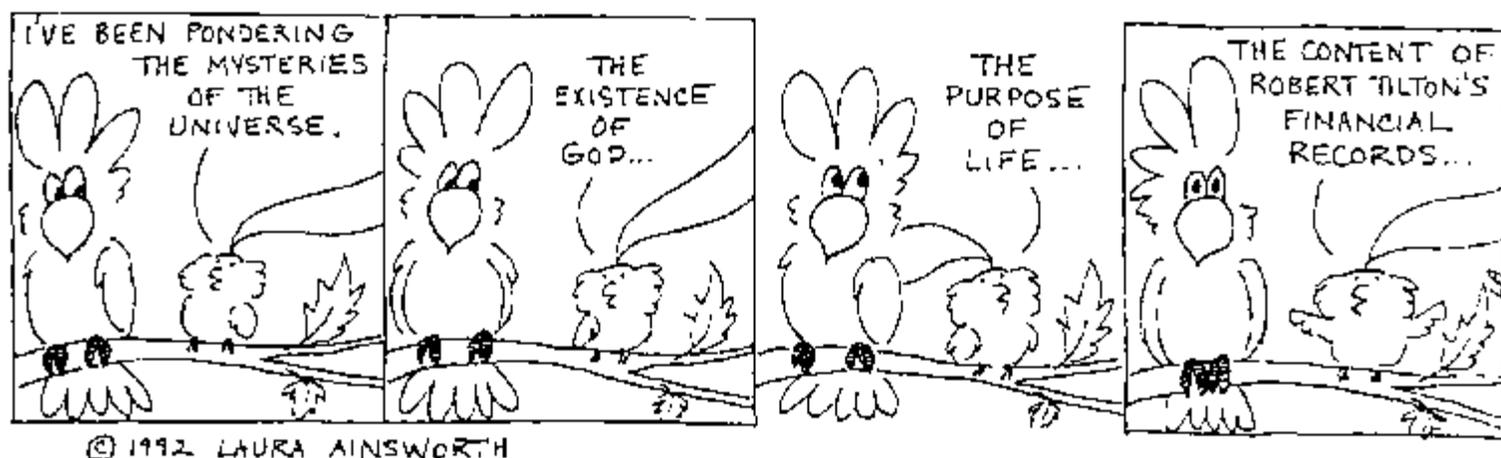
Clarifications

Because of an editing error in the "Laser Specs" story in the March issue of *The Skeptic*, proper attribution was not given to Dr. Tim Gorski. Dr. Gorski is Chairman of the Greater Dallas/Ft. Worth Area Council Against Health Fraud. We regret the error.

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Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon

By Laura Ainsworth



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