



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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The Third Eye

By Pat Reeder

With a very successful CSICOP conference now history, let's take just a moment to catch up with the headlines from around the world and across the universe.

That peripatetic space alien is back on the cover of the Weekly World News, this time walking arm in arm between President Bush and Bill Clinton (before we go any further, let me answer the obvious question: "Yes, I DO buy every copy of the WWN that features a space alien clasping hands with a major political figure! I must stay up on current events, you know!"). This time around, the alien brings us the news that "Five U.S. Senators Are Space Aliens!"

Only five? Judging from the way Congress handles the nation's business, you would think it was teeming with hostile space aliens, bent on destroying the republic. But no, there are just five, and here they are...Alan Simpson (R-Wyo.), Sam Nunn (D-Ga. ...Oh my God! They're on the DEFENSE COMMITTEE!!), Nancy Kassebaum (R-Kan. ...yes, it's the "Year of the Alien Woman," too), Orrin Hatch (R-Utah. ...which finally explains the origin of the name, "Orrin"), and naturally, the first man in space, John Glenn (D-Ohio).

The alien has allegedly revealed this vital information because he is angling for a cabinet post. He must be lusting after a large office with a window, too, for he has also revealed that shape-shifting aliens are everywhere, including your neighborhood...and he gives us tips on how to recognize them! If you suspect that the people next door are space aliens (and if you've ever lived in an apartment complex, I'm sure you've had that feeling), then here are six ways to tell:

1. Sleep or work patterns of abnormal length, or sleeping at odd times of the day or night (they are still living on Alpha Centuri time).
2. A mood change, fear, or physical reaction when near electrical hardware.

3. Anxiety, stress or discomfort when using Earth transportation.
4. Constant information gathering.
5. Ownership of unusually large amounts of high technology equipment, such as computers.
6. The misuse, or fumbling with, common every day items, which are unfamiliar to aliens.

Well, I guess that settles it. I'm an alien!!

Speaking of odd creatures from other planets, heavy metal rocker Ozzy Osbourne made the news recently. The Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal of a case won by Ozzy in which the parents of teenagers who committed suicide blamed Ozzy's lyrics and backward-masked messages for causing the tragedy. The Court ruled that Osbourne's records are covered by freedom of speech protections. The band Judas Priest recently won a similar case on the same grounds. Osbourne appeared on Entertainment Tonight to voice his relief, and he even declared that he is not a Satanist, but is a Christian himself. Perhaps he's a Magic Christian.

Anyway, as happy as I am that the Court tossed out this tragic but ridiculous case, I almost wish that they had at least agreed to hear it. Perhaps we could finally get a High Court ruling that backward-masking is utterly meaningless and has no effect whatsoever on the listener. After all, as vinyl records recede into history, killed off by CD's (which cannot be played backwards), hysterical critics of backward masking will have to rely solely on the argument that the message is delivered and understood subconsciously when heard in reverse. And as Penn Jillette says, "Use your head: If backward masking really worked, Ozzy Osbourne would be the Prime Minister of England."

Well, Ozzy isn't the P.M., but he is once again safe in America...at least until he decides to take another whiz on the Alamo.

Here's some news that should make James Randi feel warm all over...Faith healer Morris Cerullo visited India recently, and placed an ad in local newspapers, claiming that people would be cured of their ills by his prayers. He drew a crowd of 30,000 people, many arriving by stretcher, wheelchair or ambulance. At the end of the session, Cerullo pronounced everyone cured.

Ah, but here comes the good part! Cerullo was challenged by doctors in the crowd, as well as by a number of people who did not feel noticeably healthier than they had when they arrived. The mob became angry. Chaos broke out. Cerullo came close to getting lynched (which should be no problem for him to heal himself from), but Calcutta police managed to hold the crowd back long enough to get him out of harm's way. He was immediately ordered to leave the country and placed on the next U.S.-bound flight.

I sincerely believe America is the greatest nation in the world...but I must admit, when it comes to dealing with faith healers, we could learn a thing or two from India.

Conspiracy buffs were no doubt saddened by the death on October 21 of former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, whose theories gave birth to the JFK industry, as well as the Oliver Stone flick in which he was played by Kevin Costner...not a bad thing to have in your obituary. He died at the age of 70, after a long illness, which was not disclosed. I suspect Terminal Paranoia. Surely, nobody believes it was "Natural Causes!" I suggest that immediately after the funeral, we dig up the grave to make sure that it's actually him in there.

On October 12, Columbus Day, NASA began a huge SETI project, described by a NASA spokesman as "the most comprehensive search ever conducted for evidence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe" (spurred, no doubt, by the first presidential debate on October 11th, which offered eloquent argument for the necessity of such a search).

But some cannot understand why the government would spend so much money trying to find a weak radio signal from another planet when they already have so much astounding hard evidence of alien visitations...everything from a crashed flying saucer to a pack of faux-humans in Congress. In fact, one person (who, in a spirit of charity, I shall allow to remain nameless) wrote a letter to the Dallas Morning News asking just that question. He demanded to know why we

were directing our resources to SETI projects, while scientists ignore the mounting, irrefutable evidence of repeated alien abductions of responsible, intelligent human beings! To put it in his words, "why are our best minds" ignoring alien abduction stories?

I think if you look hard enough at that last question, you'll find that it contains its own answer.

The Associated Press reports that Scientologists have launched a flurry of lawsuits around the country against the Cult Awareness Network, claiming religious discrimination because the Chicago-based network rejected their applications for membership. The Scientologists claim that the network is guilty of kidnapping church members and "deprogramming" them, and they want to join the network so they can "get this organization back to its stated, educational purposes and away from discrimination." As Boston Scientologist Chris Garrison put it, "We only want to talk to them." And if you've ever been talked to by a Scientologist, you know what a pleasant experience it can be.

Cynthia Kissler of the Cult Awareness Network denied that they have ever engaged in kidnapping. She says that all their counseling is voluntary, but she did note that "we get flooded with complaints from people who have been victimized by Scientology. We get more complaints about them than almost any other." Kissler says that there are now 30 lawsuits pending from Scientologists, and she calls it "a campaign of harassment." CSICOP sympathizers should have no difficulty in relating to that.

Finally, as I write this, news has just arrived that Lisa Marie Presley has given birth to Elvis' second grandchild. In accordance with the rules of Lisa Marie's respectable and legitimate religion, Scientology, the birth took place in complete silence.

Wonder why it is that from the second you arrive in this world, the Scientologists expect you to keep your mouth shut?

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Healthy Skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

Gero Vita Resurfaces

Area residents are the targets of a new marketing scheme for Gero Vita GH3, the notorious "antiaging" quack remedy. The promotional mailing arrives without a return address and consists of what appears to be an advertisement for the product torn from a newspaper. Attached is a note with the addressee's first name and the words: "Try it. It's only 1/2 price! -R," so that it appears to be a recommendation from someone the victim knows personally.

The product advertisement is a welter of pseudoscientific claims that build on the initial claims of Rumanian doctor Ana Aslan that she had invented an effective anti-aging treatment. Experimenting initially with aging rats, she subsequently devised a "secret formula" that supposedly turned a disheveled bedridden 109-year old "in a terminal stage of senility" into "an alert, vigorous" spry man "with much of his memory restored." Another 68-year-old woman is said to have had her wisdom teeth appear after starting the treatment. It's later claimed that "meticulous records" were kept on 111 patients treated over 15 years, who are said to have "lived 29% longer than the normal life expectancy." It's not mentioned what "normal" life expectancy was used for comparison, as life expectancy naturally varies with a person's attained age, as any actuary knows. Later, the ad says that experience with "thousands of patients" proves the effectiveness of the treatment. Unfortunately, no one has ever been able to get the treatment to "work" outside of Rumania.

The original Gero Vita GH3 was given by injection and contained procaine, a local anesthetic, it being well-known that the best placebos, (which by definition are therapeutically worthless) have some kind of noticeable effect nonetheless. The current marketing scheme, though, is for an oral product which may contain para-aminobenzoic acid (PABA), apparently on the strength of the fact that PABA is known to appear in the urine of people who receive procaine

injections. "Another Discovery Added to GH3," according to the mailing, is the "brain fuel" L-glutamine, a "shortage" of which, it is alleged, "can cause your brain never to get into 'high gear.'"

The predictable testimonials of amazing benefits are offered along with these ridiculous pronouncements. A month's supply is offered for \$19.95 with a money-back guarantee.

Law enforcement authorities have acted repeatedly against Gero Vita GH3, the promoters of which are said by one official to "somehow always stay one post office box ahead of the law." And, indeed, the address given for Gero Vita Laboratories is that of "Postal Plus," a mail receiving service in Phoenix, Arizona.

Rejuvex

Florida-based Ginsana USA, in addition to promoting its ginseng preparation which is claimed to improve physical endurance, is now aggressively marketing an herbal/vitamin/mineral product called Rejuvex over local radio stations. The advertisements imply that estrogen therapy for menopausal women is dangerous and encourage listeners to use this "natural" remedy instead. But despite the supposed hazards of hormone therapy, its manufacturers include "raw mammary, raw ovary, raw uterus, raw adrenal and raw pituitary powders" in their preparation. The product is sold not only through health food stores, but through otherwise reputable outlets such as Eckerd's as well.

As anyone who has contact with the "detail representatives" of the ethical pharmaceutical industry can testify to, great care is taken not to point too enthusiastically to the significant health benefits of hormonal replacement therapy for menopausal women lest it go beyond the FDA-approved product labeling of estrogen medications.

But here is a small-time operator getting away, not only with claiming that its concoction can do what estrogens can in relieving menopausal symptoms, but that it can "protect from both osteoporosis and heart disease" just like estrogens as well! One naturally wonders why the stuff wouldn't have the same occasional side-effects and contraindications as estrogen, since it supposedly has all the benefits.

The FDA is aware of this product, but it's anyone's guess when, or if, they will take any action against it.

Pro-Quackery Bill Under Consideration

But if law enforcement finds it difficult to protect consumers from the lies and deception of the vitamin, supplement, and health food industry now, it will be made even tougher if legislation sponsored by Senator Orrin Hatch becomes law. This past June, the Utah Republican introduced S2835, The Health Freedom Act of 1992, which was developed with the help of a supplement industry group that includes several manufacturers of herbal products. Accordingly, the new freedoms that S2835 will bestow are on the billion dollar business of health and nutrition schemes, scams, and frauds.

The Hatch Bill will gut the consumer protection powers of the FDA by prohibiting the classification of vitamins, minerals, herbs, or any other "nutritional substance" as a drug, no matter the dose and no matter the health claims made for them by promoters. S2835 would also downgrade the standard of truth in assessing promotional claims made for such products from that of a scientific consensus to "scientific evidence, whether published or unpublished [emphasis added]." Manufacturers would also be able to seek immediate court review of any FDA warning letters.

If the Hatch Bill becomes law, the health food industry will be free to call anything it pleases a "nutritional supplement" and be thereby entitled to make false claims with impunity so long as it continues to engage in its sham reliance on "scientific evidence." The passage of S2835 would put an effective end to the FDA's irksome (from the industry's point of view) consumer protection efforts in this profitable area, since such attempts could be tied up in the courts while business went on as usual for the supplement entrepreneurs.

[Editor's note: Readers can write to Sen. Hatch by addressing their comments to Senator Orrin Hatch, United States Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510. The Senate's telephone number is 202-224-3121.]

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. We welcome new members and would like especially to suggest that you let your doctor know of the existence and efforts of the Council in combating false, misleading and questionable claims in the areas of health and nutrition. The Council has found that most physicians do

not have the time and inclination to look into what they quite rightly consider to be rubbish. But with your help, the Council can provide the resources your doctor needs to advance the cause of skepticism in this important area. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX, 76006, or call metro 214-263-8989

Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and an NTS Technical Advisor.

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ICR's New Museum

by Dan Phelps

Readers of The Skeptic who enjoy museums of pseudoscience, such as Carl Baugh's Creation Evidences Museum, may wish to visit The Institute for Creation Research's (ICR) Museum of Creation and Earth History in El Cajon, California. According to ICR's August '92 Acts & Facts and Impact newsletters, a 4000 square foot creation museum is now open at ICR headquarters. From the pictures in their newsletter, the museum appears to be a big-budget operation. Unlike Reverend Carl Baugh and his crude exhibits, the ICR seems to have spared no expense in its lavish displays. The displays include live animals "illustrating the fifth and sixth days of Creation Week", "exhibits centered around the Fall and the Curse", a room representing the inside of Noah's Ark during the Flood Year (presumably sans animal poop), a model of the Grand Canyon, a realistic cave and a large model of the Tower of Babel.

The creationists title their museum "A Walk Through History" and describe the tour thus -- "... with visitors taking a tour through the newly created universe, then the Garden of Eden, followed by entrance into the regime of sin and death. Then they enter Noah's Ark, emerging from the Ark into the greatly changed post-diluvian world, with great fossil beds, volcanoes, and river canyons."

"Soon they experience a world affected by the great Ice Age, after which they enter the domain of pagan pantheistic evolutionism, centered in the Tower of Babel and its confusion of tongues, with tribes scattering thence all over the world with their false religion, as learned in Babylon. Artifacts recording these ancient cultures and migrations are seen as viewers pass, along with fossils of early men and animals of the so-called Pleistocene Epoch." The museum then turns to New Testament themes and the creationist's odd view of Medieval to recent world history and the history of science. The tour ends with "A closing gospel message urges any unsaved visitors to accept Christ and look forward to His soon return to complete all His purpose in creation and redemption."

Most of us had hoped that redemption could be reached without embracing pseudoscience in this fashion. Anyhow, the tour is free, but there is a bookstore at the exit at which visitors are encouraged to purchase books and tapes. Further information can be had by calling the museum office (619-448-0900, ext. 44) or by writing the ICR at P.O. Box 2667, El Cajon, California 92021

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CSICOP Honors World's Scientists, Journalists and Magicians at Awards Dinner

By Mike Sullivan

IRVING, Texas -- CSICOP's 16th annual conference concluded with an awards dinner on October 17th that highlighted the achievements of skeptical inquiry represented by an international group of recipients. CSICOP presented awards to citizens of Great Britain, Canada, Russia, France and the United States in probably the most internationally diverse CSICOP conference to date.

Oxford zoologist and best-selling author Richard Dawkins accepted CSICOP's annual "In Praise of Reason" award at a dinner celebrating outstanding achievements advancing the cause of critical thinking. The famous British scientist said during his acceptance remarks that he could think of no virtue for which he would rather be honored than reason.

Russian scientist Sergei Kaptiza, physicist and editor of the Russian edition of Scientific American, was presented with the Committee's Outstanding Skeptic of the Year award.

Toronto magician, author and broadcaster Henry Gordon was presented with CSICOP's "Responsibility in Journalism" award for his many years promoting prosaic explanations of unusual events in the Canadian media.

JAMA Article Lauded

Also honored at the CSICOP awards dinner was Andrew Skolnick, associate editor for The Journal of the American Medical Association's Medical News & Perspectives section, who was given the Committee's "Responsibility in Journalism" award as well. Skolnick is responsible for JAMA's strong attack on the pseudoscientific and fraudulent claims made in a purportedly scientific article published earlier in JAMA's own pages about the benefits of Marharishi Ayur-Veda medicine (see JAMA, May 22-29, 1991, August 14, 1991, and October 2, 1991).

Skolnick carefully documented what he says was the intentional deception by the authors of the article, who had signed written statements before publication of the report stating that they had no financial interest in the procedures and products discussed. Skolnick found evidence that in fact, the therapy touted in the original piece is a trademarked line of products and services marketed by the Marharishi Mahesh Yogi, inventor of Transcendental Meditation, and all three of the authors are personally connected with the TM movement and the promotion and sale of these financially lucrative but scientifically bankrupt products.

Award-Winning Reporter Silenced

Skolnick told the audience that he was restricted from discussing details of the story because JAMA has been sued for an astonishing \$200 million plus legal costs as a result of the six-page expose published in JAMA on October 2, 1991. He did make an impassioned plea for reform of a tort system that allows such legal nonsense, in which plaintiffs can use the courts to silence their critics and strain the time and resources of the defendants who have been proven guilty of nothing.

Skolnick mentioned the plight of CSICOP founding fellow James Randi, who was forced to resign from the Committee last year because of a series of frivolous lawsuits by former stage magician and spoon-twister Uri Geller. Skolnick addressed the irony that because of the pending suit, the American justice system effectively prohibits a journalist in this supposedly free nation from discussing his own work during an acceptance speech for his award-winning story. Skolnick's report has already won several awards from other journalism and scientific organizations, including an award from the National Association of Science Writers and a coveted Laurel from the Columbia Journalism Review. (See Skeptical Inquirer, vol. 16, no. 3, p. 254 and vol. 16, no. 4, p. 355 for more information on the JAMA caper.)

The evening was capped off by an astonishing mentalism act put on by Steve Shaw, professional mentalist and magician. Steve was one of the two famous "Project Alpha" subjects who totally hoodwinked scientists investigating supposed psychic powers at Washington University in 1980-83. (See Skeptical Inquirer, vol. 7, no. 4 and vol. 8, no. 1.)

Shaw performed several mentalism tricks that would put the lame stunts performed by even the best "psychics" and cutlery-benders to shame. He correctly identified objects supplied by the audience and traced over a random line sketch made by a volunteer on a marker board, all while blinded with coins taped over his eyes, his entire face duct-taped shut and covered again by a blindfold examined by the volunteer.

He also told audience members who he "called out" by their initials what their exact birthdates were along with their secret wish written on slips of paper at the start of the show. The slips were sealed in envelopes which Shaw held above

his head in a fist throughout the exposition. He even told an audience member their Social Security number--getting every digit correct in a single attempt!

Shaw performed several other exciting tricks that many people would consider only possible through "genuine" psychic powers. As he demonstrated so dramatically more than an decade ago in Project Alpha with his mentor James Randi, Steve Shaw showed that any competent conjurer can fool not only the general public, but even reputable scientists who certainly ought to know better. The audience that evening included plenty of both, as well as many practicing magicians, and all were entertained and amazed by the skill and art of Shaw's flawless act.

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When Our Heroes Come to Town

By Mike Sullivan

It's hard not to come off sounding like an impressionable hick who just fell off the turnip truck when trying to describe to my non-skeptical friends the intellectual high I received at the Dallas CSICOP conference. I'm also sure they think I'm quite a name-dropper as well, after hearing me gush about all the great thinkers I had just spent the weekend with, not that many of my friends have ever heard of any of these folks who are so familiar to skeptics everywhere.

Try to tell someone what it's like to meet Richard Dawkins when they've never read his books and they have only a very tenuous grasp of evolution at best. Try to explain the energy created in the room by Walter Stewart when he described his work uncovering systematic fraud at the highest levels of the scientific community. Or attempt to relate the excitement in the air when you're in the same room with Ray Hyman, James Randi, Phil Klass, Henry Gordon, Susan Blackmore, Eugenie Scott, Bob Steiner, L. Sprague and Catherine Cook de Camp, Joe Nickell, Sergei Kapitza, and about two dozen other great minds.

During his remarks at the CSICOP awards dinner Saturday night, Phil Klass mentioned that the real strength of the skeptical movement is in the individuals who make up the local skeptics groups like NTS. He said that we, not the dozens of "big names" of skeptical inquiry in the room that night, were the real heroes of rationalism and that we were on the front lines of reason.

His remark struck me as sincere, but as I pondered it after the meeting, it seemed to me that groups at the local level wouldn't even exist if it weren't for the inspiration and encouragement we get from these great people. Anyone who has read any of the hundreds of books authored by the constituents of the skeptical movement cannot help but be impressed by their passion for truth and their initiative in uncovering it.

Not that the North Texas Skeptics have anything to be ashamed of. Our members and technical advisors have themselves been active crusaders for truth, and have many books, technical papers and Skeptical Inquirer articles to show for it. Nearly every branch of science is represented within our ranks. Most importantly, we have a link to others of like minds around the world through CSICOP and other similar organizations.

I'll always be impressed seeing the "big names" of science and skepticism in person at CSICOP conferences, just as I'm inspired when reading their accounts in their books and articles throughout the years. But as Phil Klass pointed out, some of the real work is done "in the trenches" by folks that live right here in North Texas.

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Answering The Call

By Mike Sullivan

The North Texas Skeptics joined a very small subset of local skeptics groups last month when we hosted the CSICOP conference here in Dallas. Only a few other groups in the country have ever done so, and sadly, there are very few groups that have the membership and organization required to pull it off.

Thanks to NTS founder and technical advisor Ronnie Hastings who ran the whole show Sunday morning during the bus trip to Dinosaur Valley State Park. Ron captivated the group with his incredible knowledge of the site, its science and its history, and few people on earth can stand in the Paluxy river bed and explain the awesome dino tracks as well as Ronnie did. Even Dr. Dawkins, no stranger to Glen Rose himself, was impressed. The scene of Dr. Dawkins reciting Hamlet as he stood beside Ron and an ersatz "man track" is not one I'll forget anytime soon. Ron made us all proud to be part of the North Texas Skeptics.

Thanks to NTS president Joe Voelkering for arranging the presentation by televangelist watchdog Ole Anthony. Ole and James Randi both thought it a worthwhile session, as did nearly 100 attendees who stopped in during the Friday lunch break.

Thanks to Skeptic columnist Pat Reeder for getting our stylish NTS/CSICOP conference souvenir T-shirts produced and delivered on time. Pat handled the entire effort, including delivery to the hotel in the middle of a Texas-style gully-washer Thursday night!

Many, many thanks to NTS board member Mary O'Grady. Mary spent lots of time and energy in arranging a tour of the Superconducting SuperCollider lab for some international visitors. Barry Karr thanked Mary from the podium for her efforts, and I would like to second his thanks.

Thanks to Marilyn Sullivan, John Blanton, John Thomas, Jeff Baker, Richard Love, John Park, Mark Riley, Doug Shaw and Ray Eve.

Finally, we'd like to thank the entire CSICOP team. Mary Rose Hays, Doris Doyle, Paul Loynes, Barry Karr, Lynette Nisbet and the CSICOP executive board did a fabulous job.

We are going to make the argument to CSICOP that instead of re-inventing the wheel every year when conference time rolls around, they might want to consider holding the gathering in one or at least a very few cities where things have gone well in the past. Because of the help of all of the people during the NTS effort, we'll make sure it's not another 16 years before the conference is held in Texas again!

If you want to let CSICOP officials know what you thought about the Dallas conference and whether CSICOP should return to Dallas sometime soon, you can address your comments to Lee Nisbet, Special Projects Director, CSICOP, Box 703, Buffalo, NY 14226-0703.

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To: All Hands

A conversation with the President of the Georgia Skeptics, Becky Long, illustrates a typical reaction:

She said they'd love to host the Conference, but didn't have enough members to do it. She looked shocked when she discovered the Georgia Skeptics out number us by about a factor of three! That was followed by, "How do you get them to do so much?"

I told her:

1. - I don't know.
2. - It's sort of like being around a bunch of Richard Feynman clones -- multi-talented self-starters who like to solve problems.
3. - They motivate themselves far better than I could hope to.
4. - Things seem to run best when I manage to simply not get in the way.

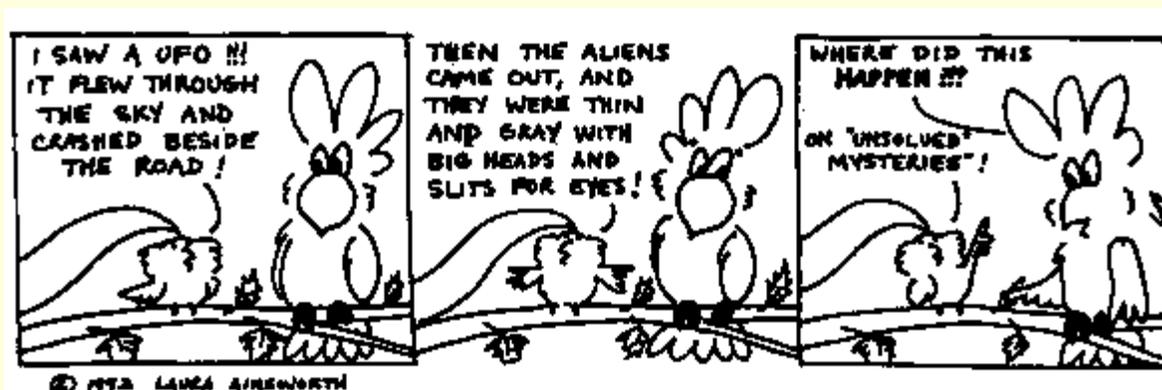
As one "good ol' boy" pilot examiner used to say: "Ya done real good..."

Joe Voelkering -- President

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Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon

By Laura Ainsworth



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