



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Other Sources

By John Blanton

A lot of interesting stuff comes our way every month. We can't share all of it with readers of The Skeptic, but we can give you a sample and let you know how to tune in.

SUN

Writer and UFO debunker Phillip J. Klass publishes a bi-monthly newsletter on the UFO craze. His dry wit and hard-hitting style make the *Skeptics UFO Newsletter (SUN)* a great read. The antics of the UFO crowd ensure there is no shortage of material. Here is a sample from the March issue:

Canadian UFOlogists Expose UFO Case Endorsed by U.S. "Expert"

The case of a "UFO landing" in the back yard of a dentist in the outskirts of Carp, Ontario, (30 miles west of Ottawa) captured on video tape by an anonymous cameraman and featured on NBC-TV's *Unsolved Mysteries* and Fox-TV's *Sightings* in early 1993, has been exposed as a hoax by the *Canadian UFO Research Network (CUFORN)* in the March/April issue of *UFO* magazine. The anonymous cameraman called himself "Guardian." The case had earlier been investigated and endorsed by Bob Oechsler, with a more qualified endorsement by Dr. Bruce Maccabee, despite the fact that the video was accompanied by obviously hoax Canadian government documents and still photos of "Ets."

Klass further cites quotes from the *CUFORN journal* article to the effect that the supposed UFO parked on the ground looks very like a pickup truck. Even windshield wipers are visible on close examination.

The principal (alleged) witness to the incident was the dentist's wife, who initially claimed that she did not know who had made the video tape. But later, according to the *CUFORN* investigators, she "admitted that Bobby Charlebois, a UFO buff who had called himself Guardian for many years, was, in fact, a family friend and would visit them several times a week!" *SUN* wonders: will NBC-TV and/or FOX-TV produce a sequel revealing that the Canadian video is a hoax? Don't hold your breath...

SUN is eight pages and is published bimonthly. Subscription rate (six issues) is \$15/year for U.S./Canada. Overseas rate (airmail) is \$20/year. Make checks payable to Phillip J. Klass and send to 404 "N" Street SW, Washington, D.C., 20024.

CSICOP

Here's a recent press release:

"Psychic" Must Pay Skeptics Up to \$120,000

AMHERST, NY — Self-proclaimed psychic spoon-bender Uri Geller has paid to the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) the first \$40,000 of up to \$120,000 as part of a settlement agreement to a court-described "frivolous complaint" made by Geller against CSICOP.

The settlement ends a four-year battle in the Washington, D.C., courts that began with Geller filing a \$15 million suit against CSICOP and magician James "The Amazing" Randi, alleging defamation, invasion of privacy, and tortious interference with prospective advantage. Geller filed suit because Randi had stated in an April 9, 1991, interview with the *International Herald Tribune* that Geller had "tricked even reputable scientists" with tricks that "are the kind that used to be on the back of cereal boxes when I was a kid. Apparently scientists don't eat corn flakes anymore."

CSICOP, an Amherst, New York-based not-for-profit scientific and educational organization dedicated to investigating claims of psychic phenomena such as those made by Geller, was not charged with any specific conduct. CSICOP maintained throughout that it was a frivolous suit brought by Geller to harass the organization. The U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., ruled in favor of CSICOP and awarded almost \$150,000 in sanctions against Geller.

In efforts to overturn the sanctions award Geller then lost two motions for reconsideration in the District Court, followed by a 3-0 loss in the U.S. Court of Appeals and most recently another loss in the appeals court when his petition for rehearing was denied on January 25, 1995.

The settlement agreement calls for Geller to pay CSICOP \$70,000 in cash over three years and the first \$50,000 of any sums recovered by Geller in a new action he is bringing against his former attorneys. In addition, Geller must also drop another suit against skeptical book publisher Prometheus Books and other skeptics filed in London, England.

In an earlier suit that Geller had brought against Prometheus Books, Victor Stenger, and Paul Kurtz in Miami, Florida, Geller was compelled by the Court to pay Prometheus books an additional \$20,000 in legal fees.

Barry Karr, CSICOP executive director, commented: "Although we settled for somewhat less than the entire \$150,000 awarded to us as sanctions for the frivolous suit, we are very pleased with this victory. Prior to filing suit, Geller, an Israeli citizen living in England, placed his assets in trust, rendering uncertain our ability to collect. Instead of spending thousands more in legal fees to pierce the trust in London, we decided it best to end it now."

Paul Kurtz, CSICOP chairman, said: "When the principles upon which CSICOP was founded are at stake, we are prepared to do battle all the way, if it should prove necessary. We believe deeply in a free press, freedom of speech and scientific inquiry, and the importance of dissent." He characterized the Geller suit as the "kind of suit being used as a means of silencing debate on significant scientific issues."

Bad news from Science

The April 7, 1995, issue of *Science*, the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), has an item that will keep you awake at nights:

Creationism: Alabama Cracks Open the Door

Science educators are nervously awaiting the selection of school textbooks in Alabama later this year. Their fear: Guidelines for science teaching adopted by the state board of education last month may open the door to the teaching of creationism in that state. The guidelines, which apply to textbooks for kindergarten through 12th grade, emphasize that evolution is only a "theory."

Editor Constance Holden further notes: "Under the current course guidelines, adopted at the last go-round in 1988, evolution is not 'qualified,' and creationism is not mentioned, says geologist Scott Brande of the University of Alabama, Birmingham." The new guidelines will specify that "explanations of the origins of life and major groups of plants and animals, including humans, shall be treated as theory and not as fact."

Indeed, Fransden [John Fransden, chair of the Alabama Academy of Sciences] notes, evolution foes "have succeeded in removing all the wording" that could hinder state approval of creationist texts. The scientists worry in particular that a book explaining "intelligent design" that was rejected in the past, called *Of Pandas and People*, may be back in the running.

Holden also points out that "In Louisiana, for example, school authorities at one parish recently instructed teachers to read a disclaimer to students before any discussion of evolution."

I originally got interested in *Science* because the creationists were always quoting it (see below). Creationists like to quote real scientists out of context to help make their point that even those guys don't believe in evolution, and *Science* is a good source of original material written by contemporary scientists. To have *Science* delivered to your door once a week you need to join the AAAS. That's \$97 a year, \$72 if you are a postdoc, and \$50 if you are a full time student. The address is P.O. Box 2033, Marion, OH, 43306-2133.

Good news from Scientific American

The July issue of this popular magazine carries writer Phillip Yam's "Profile: James Randi." The two-page interview details the early life and the struggles of America's favorite skeptic. A dark side is also revealed as Randi recounts his resignation from CSICOP following their being sued by professed psychic Uri Geller. Randi tells of feeling abandoned by CSICOP during the crisis, but a subsequent news release from CSICOP seeks to defuse the issue. We have a copy of CSICOP's response for those interested. Later news over the Internet from Randi states that he will become a regular columnist for <M>Scientific American. Look for the first column in the fall.

Consumer Reports tells it like it is

An article in the July issue is titled "A 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000-to-1 shot." You guessed it. It's about a homeopathic remedy. Over-the-counter *Vagisil Yeast Control*, *Yeast Gard*, and *Vaginex Yeast Care* contain the folk remedy pulsatilla, and two of these products contain homeopathic dilutions of <M>Candida albicans, the yeast that causes vaginal infections, and the related fungus <M>Candida parapsilosis. Specifically, the dilution used is to the extent indicated in the title, which means there is likely not a single molecule of either ingredient in a barrel of the product.

The *Consumer Reports* article goes on to describe a cold remedy, a sleep aid, and an arthritis product being marketed in homeopathic form. This reporting is not unique for this consumer advocacy publication. *Consumer Reports* regularly comes down on the side of good science while investigating and reporting on consumer products.

Creationist literature

We've got it if you are interested. The most recent addition to my collection is Don Patton's *What is Creation Science?*, a leaflet he handed out when he presented a talk to the NTS in March. In it Patton quotes, out of context, approximately 35 citations of famous, real scientists to demonstrate that evolution is all wet [my words].

In a previous issue of *The Skeptic* Jeff Umbarger and I revealed the context for a similar set of citations, showing what the authors really said. If anybody wants to take this latest offering and dissect it, the Skeptics will be mighty grateful. Contact me for a copy. I have sent Don e-mail asking permission for unlimited distribution of his leaflet. I can't think of a better way to counter this tactic than to give it wide public exposure.

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NTS Examines Penn & Teller

By Gregory Aicklen

Penn & Teller came to Fort Worth to perform at the Will Rogers Auditorium on July 15. Well-known as first-rate performers, the pair are also acclaimed among skeptics for their debunking of psychics and other charlatans. Aside from Penn & Teller television specials, including the classic "Penn & Teller Get Killed," Penn Jillette has acted in several TV shows. One of my favorites is Penn's appearance on the Steven Banks' show where he joined Banks in singing "Clothes of the Dead."

Although my wife Paula and I are not the kind who enjoy having the wool pulled over our eyes, we decided to investigate first-hand the startling and even unsettling acts said to be performed by the daring duo. To control for the effects of cultural bias, we brought along two of our Asian friends, who agreed to provide an independent assessment of the effects that Penn & Teller had on the audience.

Fork a Card, Any Card

The show opened with a ho-hum card trick. A card trick? So much for "outrageous." To be sure, the cards were sheet metal and weighed 17 pounds each, and Penn & Teller used dual forklifts to shuffle, cut, and perform other feats of "sleight of forklift." And the audience participant (victim?) needed a hammer and chisel to separate the selected card from the deck, a task performed to Penn's rendition of "Honky Tonk Women." But as any mathematician will tell you, a card trick is a card trick regardless of scale.

By this time, our friends Mitch and Corinna (not the names their parents knew them by) were laughing too hard to respond to our questions. In fact, except during the last few minutes of the intermission later in the show, our independent cultural bias eliminators were effectively useless. We theorize that Mitch and Corinna have lived too long in this country and have been tainted by American society. There is, fortunately, no known cure for this condition.

Penn & Teller's show consisted largely of relatively traditional magic routines set in wildly non-traditional trappings. To the delight of the few skeptics in the audience (How do we know that only a few skeptics were in the audience? ... come on, this is Texas!), Penn & Teller demonstrated how several of the tricks were done. For example, Teller performed his well known sleight-of-hand demonstration in which he pretends to discard a lit cigarette, extract another from an imaginary box, and light the new butt up. Turning so that the audience can see what actually happens, Teller repeats the routine while Penn explains each step to the audience. This is an effective and amusing demonstration that, far from ruining the show, enhances the audience's respect for the skills of the performers (and has everyone frantically trying to spot the sleight of hand throughout the rest of the show).

Throughout the show, as Paula and I furiously scribbled our observations on the backs of ticket stubs (not an easy thing to do while gasping for breath and wiping tears from our eyes), we were astonished by the abuse heaped upon members of the audience. We were especially bothered by the treatment of the three small children who were called out of the audience to throw darts at a large target imprinted with the names of books of the Bible. For some strange reason, everyone so abused, even the children, found the abuse outrageously funny. We feel that with sheer force of personality, applied with a demonic understanding of "mob psychology," the magicians manipulate the audience with such skill that there is justification to fear the eventual genesis of a Penn & Teller cult. We shall not relax our vigil!

Bare Facts

Early in the show, I decided that a close inspection of both magicians was warranted. To that end, during intermission I made sure to briefly introduce myself to both magicians in the hopes that this would increase the probability that I would be chosen to come on stage at some point. To my everlasting regret, my tactic worked all too well.

As the show neared its end, Penn, who does all of the talking during the show, called for two volunteers from the audience to assure that the two magicians had nothing up their sleeves. Teller strode up the aisle looking through the audience. Spotting me in the aisle seat, he tapped my shoulder and off I went, along with an attractive middle-aged woman, towards the stage and my appointment with skeptical destiny. In the spirit of scientific honesty, I must report the odd fact that the first coherent thought that crossed my mind as I made my way along the darkened aisle to the brightly-lit stage was that I hoped I had remembered to zip up my pants after my earlier visit to the men's room.

On stage Penn & Teller removed their shirts, Penn removed his microphone transmitter, and both magicians presented themselves for inspection to me and my audience partner. Penn then asked me if I was satisfied that he had nothing hidden on him. In true skeptical fashion, I certified to the rest of the audience that I was sure there was nothing hidden "any place that I could see."

At this point my memory is not clear, but the next thing I knew, Penn & Teller were standing on that stage stripped down to their boxers and asking me if I was satisfied yet! Now I must admit a shameful thing: as Penn & Teller removed their trousers, my deeply ingrained male locker room reflexes overrode my skeptical nature and I was ready to stop right there! I hurriedly asserted that I was completely satisfied that there was nothing hidden on either of the magicians. Were it not for my female audience partner, I fear that that would have been the end of it (yeah, sure).

When she was again asked if she were satisfied, my partner echoed my earlier sentiment that there was nothing hidden any place that was visible. Penn immediately thundered "We're Penn & Teller ... don't call our bluff!" A large, opaque sheet of plastic was brought on the stage and held at waist height between the audience and the four of us on stage. My fellow audience member let out a gasp and my eyes rolled as Penn & Teller proceeded to strip naked and ask once again if we were finally satisfied that there was nothing hidden on the two magicians.

It took all the maturity and will power that I could muster to defeat those inhibitions that have been with me since high school gym class, but I can state, with more certainty than I have about most other things, that there was nothing hidden on either Penn or Teller, anywhere, at all, period. Whew!

No doubt a concession to the conservative, family values orientation of this portion of Texas, Penn & Teller then donned knee length tee shirts that my fellow audience member and I were allowed to inspect (they were very plain, very empty). After we left the stage, Penn & Teller proceeded to materialize hats, flowers, glasses of wine, and many other items from thin air. It must have been thin air, because I would hate to imagine where such things might be secreted on a naked body!

Let me conclude this narrative with the following observations:

The term "stark nekkid" will never mean the same to me again.

I have more respect than ever for the oft repeated claim that if you want to spot trickery, you need to hire a good magician. Mere mortals do not possess the powers of observation needed to cut through the misdirection and deceit that is the stock in trade of many charlatans.

Penn & Teller put on one fantastic show. Go see 'um!

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My pattern with Penn

After having been unable to attend Penn & Teller's performance in Ft. Worth, I was all the more disappointed to find out the next morning from *Skeptic* columnist Pat Reeder that he and three other NTS members had enjoyed a treat any skeptic would envy: dinner with Penn.

It turns out that Pat had made an appointment to interview Penn for a book project on novelty records that Pat is working on for St. Martin's Press. After the show, Pat met up with Penn, and they were joined by frequent *Skeptic*

contributor Virginia Vaughn and Danny Barnett; Ginny is a friend of Penn's and had planned to visit after the show anyway. As Pat tells it, Penn liked hanging out with the skeptics, suggested they all go to dinner after the interview, and so they did, at Razoo's in Ft. Worth. By not attending the show that night, it looked as if I had missed my once-in-a-lifetime chance to visit with one of the greats of pseudoscience debunking, Penn Jillette.

The reason I had not attended the Penn & Teller performance that evening was because I was getting ready to leave for the annual International Jugglers Association convention, being held this year in Las Vegas. The week-long festival is the highlight of the year for hundreds of jugglers from around the world, and I have been attending every year since the St. Louis festival in 1990. The IJA convention is always a great time, with round-the-clock fun, mingling and juggling with the greatest object manipulators in the world, and is capped off by two consecutive nights of championship competitions and public performances.

So off we went to Las Vegas, where we met and juggled with about 600 of our closest friends. We were having a fabulous week beginning Sunday afternoon, enjoying the warm weather, great food, Las Vegas shows and all the great juggling. And who should just happen to walk into the gym on Thursday afternoon, dressed in black jeans, a black "Team Satan 666" T-shirt, ponytail and black glasses but former street performing juggler Penn Jillette!

Penn hung out and juggled clubs with the rest of us for several hours Thursday, blending right in to the crowd of jugglers from around the world. He hadn't lost much of his skills from the days doing 6-a-day theme park routines with Michael Moschen in New Jersey. He could still pass clubs in complex patterns at least as well as some of the better jugglers in the bunch, and he kept the fun-meter pegged with a constant comedy patter.

Later that night, Penn attended the big "Cascade of Stars" show on the UNLV campus, where 16 top juggling acts performed in the giant show that caps off the week. Driving back to the Hacienda hotel after the show, my juggling partner Bob Neuman and I happened to pull up at a stoplight behind a pink Ford Bronco with Nevada license plates "6SIX6." I wondered out loud, "What are the chances that Penn drives a pink Bronco with `6SIX6' plates?" Pretty good, as it turned out: we pulled alongside at the next light where we could make out his distinctive profile, as well as read the fancy lettering on the door: "Pink Death." Penn drove just ahead of us back to the hotel, where he returned to the gym as we did for several more hours of juggling until the early hours of Friday morning.

So although I didn't get a chance to join Pat, Laura, Ginny and Danny for dinner with Penn, I can say I passed clubs with the dude . . . and he still knows how to post a four-down line pattern and work the rotating feed.

— Mike Sullivan

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