

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the of Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

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Electronic Version

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe- science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

Editor: Wally Hartshorn Editorial Board and Organizing Committee: David Bloomberg (Chairman), Wally Hartshorn, Bob Ladendorf.

REALL

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From The Editor

-- Wally Hartshorn

Spring seems to have finally arrived, although the rain is getting a bit monotonous. In any case, better weather raises the spirits (no, I'm not talking about channelling) and I suspect it brings an increase in some types of the "paranormal". Crop circles, for example, seem to do better in nice weather. The number of UFO sightings probably also increases, due to

more people being outside in the evening. It ought to be an interesting summer, and The REALL News will cover it all.
Articles

This month's issue brings another article from Martin Kottmeyer about UFOs. I realize we've given UFOs quite a bit of coverage, and I considered holding the article for a month and running a non-UFO article instead. However, the interest survey that was handed out at the first meeting showed that interest in UFOs was very high among the members of REALL. Martin Kottmeyer's articles are always informative and enjoyable, so as long as he keeps writing them, we'll keep printing them. Our speaker at last month's meeting was Detective Bruce Walstad, as David discusses in the chairman's column. If you missed his presentation, you missed a lot! However, we have the next best thing -- two brief articles written by Det. Walstad. Last but not least, REALLity Check returns after a one-issue absence, with plenty of items to get your dander up.

Goodbye (sort of)

As I mentioned in last month's column, I've decided not to seek the position of editor, so this will be my last issue. I just have too many other responsibilities right now. (I'm in four clubs and edit four newsletters.) However, it won't be the last you'll see of me in The REALL News, as I plan on writing articles for the newsletter in the future. Until then, I'll see you at the meetings!

From the Chairman

-- David Bloomberg

Well, I'd call our last meeting a great success! Everybody I talked to, ranging from the magicians, to our guests from St. Louis, to REALL members, to "independents" thought Detective Walstad was great, and I agree! I'd like to thank him for coming and talking to us. I'd also like to thank Professor Hayler and Professor Egger for allowing us to speak to Professor Hayler's class and use her classroom. It was a great opportunity for several reasons.

Of course, it was an opportunity for us to hear about psychics and other cons from the point of view of the law. It also helped answer one of the questions we are frequently asked, "Why bother with this stuff?"

From another point of view, it was an opportunity to reach out to a group of people -- the students -- who might not normally know about us. Even if they don't join REALL, they will hopefully remember what they saw and heard, and apply it later in their lives and careers.

For those of you who didn't make it (shame on you), it is not easy to sum up Detective Walstad's presentation. It was not a simple lecture, but a mixture of stories, humor, explanations, magic, and a lot of information.

The non-paranormal cons Walstad went over ranged from opportunistic scams like the radon gas neutralizer (an empty plastic tube) to the ever popular pigeon drop, which has been worked for years. He pointed out that, while the greed of the mark is often used in a con, in many other cases, the cons play on fear or duty.

From the paranormal aspect, Detective Walstad discussed storefront psychics, some of whom routinely break the law by informing clients that they are "cursed" and must pay big bucks to have their aura repaired. Along these lines, Walstad performed a cold reading on an audience member. When she complained he was being "too general", he came back and hit close enough to the mark that she appeared momentarily stunned, even knowing he wasn't really "reading her mind". He also did several card tricks which could be used by psychics to show their "powers". While I figured out how he did one of them, I must admit that I am still absolutely in the dark about the other. Once again, even knowing they are "tricks", they are quite astounding, and somebody already predisposed to belief in a psychic would likely find such belief cemented.

Other discussion of the paranormal centered around "psychic detectives". He discussed their methods, their claims, and the truth about them. The whole thing can be summed up simply as, "they don't work." In addition, he pointed out how they can, if taken seriously, often cause police to waste time that they should be spending on correct procedure.

Of course, Detective Walstad talked about a variety of other things, and was much more entertaining than this column

is, but I've found it extremely difficult to do mentalism tricks through a newsletter.

-Announcement-
Elections!

If you want to be a Board member (and who doesn't?), come run. If you can't make it, but still want to run, call me and let me know (or send a psychic message).

The Saucer Error

By Martin Kottmeyer

Ufologists from time to time express the sentiment that UFOs just can't be a myth. Look at them. That shape. How do you explain where it came from. Space travel was supposed to involve rockets, not these disc-shaped marvels. The whole phenomenon is just so, well, alien from what you'd expect.

J. Allen Hynek, one of the leading ufologists of his time, put it this way:

"Why flying saucers? Why not flying cubes or flying pyramids, or for that matter, why not flying pink elephants or even flying buildings, reported from a hundred different countries? Indeed if UFO reports were entirely the result of excited imaginations, why not hundreds, possibly thousands, of totally and radically different types of reports as people of different cultures let their locally conditioned imaginations loose?" (Hynek UFO Report, Dell, 1977, p. 28)

John Prytz, who has defended the extraterrestrial hypothesis against psychosocial interpretations of the UFO phenomenon in a fascinating series of articles, devoted a whole article ("UFO Genesis" MUFON UFO Journal, September 1982, pp. 10-14) to exploring this conundrum. There weren't any "sci-fi films" playing in 1947 and the serials before that date, *The Purple Monster Strikes* and *Flash Gordon*, only involved rockets. He checked the newspapers of the period and couldn't find anything in the cultural environment which could have stimulated the saucer phenomenon. The period was boring. He concluded, "The timing of the genesis of the modern UFO phenomenon, which cannot be logically accounted for, is yet another forceful argument for the external nature of, and external intelligence behind, the UFO, and yet another nail in the coffin of the pro-internal- intelligence advocates."

UFO historian David Jacobs has echoed Prytz in his paper, "The New Era of UFO Research" (*Pursuit*, #78, 1987) and more recently in *Secret Life* and asserted there was no precedent for the saucer configuration in popular science fiction films, popular science fiction, or popular culture in general. The objects seemed "well beyond that produced by the technology of 1947 and it became immediately apparent that the witnesses were seeing something that could be entirely unique."

There is a trivial sense in which Prytz and Jacobs are simply wrong. Disc-shaped spacecraft have a number of precedents in popular culture. They appear in the well-known and widely distributed Buck Rogers comic strip as early as 1930. *Flash Gordon* was battling a squadron of deadly "space-gyros" in 1934 in his strip. Even better, they can be seen dangling around, thanks to the gloriously crude special effects of 1938 Hollywood, in the *Flash Gordon* movie serial, "Rocketship" based on that strip. Science fiction illustrator Frank R. Paul repeatedly used disc-shaped space vehicles in his art for the early pulps. Others followed his example. I regard these as trivial however because I accept them as coincidences inevitable in a large body of artistic creativity. Artists utilized every geometric form they could think of and when imagination failed them they preferred to fall back on the convention of the rocket. If the images of science fiction were the determinant of what people should have been imagining in 1947 we should have had a wave of ghost rockets, not flying saucers. So what was the determinant?

Oddly enough, we got flying saucers because of a journalist's error. 1947 was an exciting time in aviation history. New advances and innovations were turning up regularly and speed records were being broken as pilots aimed to break the sound barrier. Chuck Yeager would win that prize on October 14, 1947. Four months earlier, on June 24, 1947, Kenneth Arnold surprised the world by reporting nine objects flying by Mount Ranier at the incredible speed of 1,200 miles per hour. It was an incredible mystery and was such a sensation that it made front page news across the nation. Soon everyone was looking for these new aircraft which according to the papers were saucer-like in shape. Within weeks hundreds of reports of these flying saucers were made across the nation. While people presumably thought they were

seeing the same things that Kenneth Arnold saw, there was a major irony that nobody at the time realized.

Kenneth Arnold hadn't reported seeing flying saucers.

In a memoir of the incident for the First International UFO Congress in 1977 Arnold revealed the flying saucer label arose because of a "great deal of misunderstanding" on the part of the reporter who wrote the story up for the United Press. Bill Bequette asked him how the objects flew and Arnold answered that, "Well, they flew erratic, like a saucer if you skip it across the water." The intent of the metaphor was to describe the motion of the objects not their shape. Arnold stated the objects "were not circular." A look at the drawing he did for his report to the Air Force shortly after the incident confirms the truth of that statement. It is hard to describe in a word or two; beetle-shaped is the best I can come up with. However you describe it, one thing is clear. It is not the elegant alien geometric perfection we have come to know and mystify ourselves over.

We can from these facts derive the answers to Hynek's questions. The reason excited imaginations didn't come up with hundreds of radically different variations is that they were constrained by Bequette's description of the objects. The phrase "flying saucers" provided the mold which shaped the UFO myth at its beginning. As time progressed people would draw them, looking as they sound like they look. They in turn shaped hoax photos and the imagery of films like *The Flying Saucer* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and dozens of alien invasion films and TV shows in the decades that followed. It remains the stereotype to the present day. By one tally 82% of the craft descriptions in alien abduction reports fall into the flying saucer category. It can be found in nearly all the well-known cases: Betty & Barney Hill's interrupted journey, Herb Schirmer, Travis Walton, the Andreasson affair, Whitley Strieber.

Prytz's and Jacobs' arguments miss the mark because one doesn't need to look beyond Bequette's error to understand the unambiguously cultural genesis of the saucer mystery. Arnold's report was itself the source of excitement in the otherwise almost boring period of 1947. The speed of the objects caught everyone's attention and guaranteed that the whole world would add the phrase "flying saucers" to their vocabulary within a matter of days. Science fiction had nothing to do with this; the interest in fast planes was the determinant.

Bequette's error may not prove to be the ultimate refutation of the extraterrestrial theory for everyone. But it does leave their advocates in one helluva paradox: Why would extraterrestrials redesign their craft to conform to Bequette's mistake?

A Brief Meeting With Jackie Mari, Psychic

by Det. Bruce Walstad

The meeting place, the Talking with Aaron Freeman Show, Channel 50, WPWR-TV (Gary, Indiana), Sunday, November 22, 1992, 12:30 AM. This was my first meeting with Mari, and I suspect it was my last. Mari was not fond of me, nor did she take kindly to my observations and remarks regarding her paranormal abilities.

Mari is a Chicago area psychic who claims to have helped the police in hundreds of cases. This meeting was a result of the media coverage she was getting on a case she claims to have recently solved, involving a missing person.

Mari's ability as a psychic was proven before the show ever started as upon her arrival she pointed out the show's other guest as "the cop."

Prior to the show, I had done some research on Mari, and her claims of paranormal abilities. During the taping I was able to get out a few differences in her claims, which did not sit well with her. Mari was very difficult to pin down on anything. I did manage to get her to admit that a Chicago Tribune quote of her's regarding the hundreds of police investigations she has solved, were not exactly police investigations, nor had the hundreds of cases actually been solved. Throughout the show, while I was speaking, Mari employed a number of defensive tactics, including ignoring my remarks, talking over me and bending the truth a bit with her responses.

At one point Mari offered to send me some video tape of her making some prediction prior to an incident. Needless to say, to date I have received no video tape from Mari.

All in all I felt I held my own during the show. As mentioned earlier, Mari did not exactly take to me, as she told the host, referring to me, "He is not a nice person, and I don't like him."

Lights, Camera, Action

A Tale of Two TV Shows

By Det. Bruce Walstad

Psychics Wished Me Well

In mid-February I received a call from a producer of the Maury Povich Show. They asked if I would come on an upcoming show regarding psychics. The producer wanted me to give the skeptical point of view. I was told I would be up against three psychics. I agreed, and was off to New York for the taping. I was briefed by the producers and met with Maury. The plan was for me to sit in the audience and get a reading from the psychics. After that I was to move up to the stage and be the skeptic. The show started and was quite interesting as one of the guests had racked up a \$17,000 phone bill on one of these psychic hotlines, and the other two guests were on the verge of breaking up, as a psychic had told the female that her boyfriend was cheating on her. The three psychics then started fielding questions from the audience. After a few questions, it was my turn and I asked about a promotion at work. The psychics told me I was ill and needed to see a doctor, and that I needed glasses. With that Maury introduced me as a police detective and skeptic. I then took my spot on the stage and was able to get out a few remarks. As the show progressed, I listened as the psychics gave "answers" to the various questions asked. As it progressed, I was squirming in my seat, and not being able to stand much more, I joined in and gave a reading to a woman. It cracked up the audience big time. One of the psychics even agreed with my reading. The psychics were up to par, by giving opposing answers to [each] question asked, and even arguing with each other. The audience seemed pretty skeptical for the most part, but there was no shortage of questions. They did boo the psychics a couple times (much to my delight) when they came out with some stupid bits of advice. The show wrapped up and afterwards I chatted briefly with the psychics. They all told me that they admired me for my work, and wished me well, although my "psychic" abilities told me they were not exactly sincere with their words.

Gypsy Predicts Future

In November, PACC Board of Directors [member] Dave Bieniasz and myself assisted the producers and staff of 48 Hours in gathering information on a segment on Gypsy Fortune Telling scams. The show aired on February 3, and netted a couple interesting stories worth passing on. On the afternoon of February 3, prior to the show airing, CBS ran a promo here in Chicago about the show. It showed a local fortune teller and myself. Within 10 minutes of that promo, I received a phone call from a male Gypsy involved in the Chicago area fortune telling establishment. I had met this particular Gypsy about a month before in an unrelated matter. He went on to explain to me that this show was going to be very bad for business, and that he expected many people to come forward and complain that they have been scammed by the local fortune tellers. I replied, "So." He then related that if I should hear of any such beefs that I should have the investigating officers contact him personally so he could take care of them and get their money back. It appears this Gypsy must have been using one of the fortune teller's crystal balls, as Dave Bieniasz called me within 20 minutes of the show airing, explaining that his department had already received several calls from people who got scammed by the fortune teller exposed on the show. The fortune teller featured (via undercover camera) resides and operated within Dave's jurisdiction, Lombard. I predict Dave will be busy with numerous complaints in the near future regarding fortune telling scams.

(This article originally appeared in the 4th PACC Bulletin of 1993.)

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Well, for a change, it looks like the good news outweighs the bad for the past couple months, assuming that we overlook the weekly dose of pro-paranormal bias we get from such shows as Unsolved Mysteries and Sightings, of course. UFOs, Pro and Con

The biggest news was likely the March 7th Parade article written by Carl Sagan on alien abductions and possible psychological and social causes for the alleged experiences. He correctly points out, among other facts, that there is little

or no physical evidence of these experiences, as there should be if they were true abductions, if only due simply to the large number of them. The article is quite long, and any interested reader should probably check out your local library, since there simply isn't room here to go into great detail.

It is likely that this article was timed to try to offset the hype of the Fire in the Sky movie supposedly based on Travis Walton's alien abduction years ago. The fact that Klass cast quite a lot of doubt on the story in several of his books doesn't seem to have made it to the movie version, for some reason. Apparently, it didn't matter much, as the movie lasted only a few weeks in major theaters, and was nowhere to be found in Springfield after only a couple months. Even many UFO proponents on several computer networks panned the movie.

Miracles?

Other paranormal events in the national media include a cover story about bleeding crosses and crying statues in the March 29, 1993 issue of U.S. News & World Report. It seems there was a priest in a relatively small parish who was having doubts about his faith, when, suddenly, statues all around him started crying and he started bleeding in the locations where Christ was wounded.

The story seemed to lean both ways at once. They gave most of the article to discuss the priest and the statues, but also talked about several skeptics/magicians who were easily able to duplicate the crying statues and bleeding through a variety of methods. As usual in these cases, it is unlikely that there will be any true scientific investigation of whether or not statues near the priest start crying without his doing anything. So the story leaves it up to the reader to decide to take it on faith, or ask for more evidence.

As a sidebar, they did discuss James Randi's exposure of "faith healers" who were using less than godly means of doing business.

Cynical Tele-Psychics

Also on the national scene, ABC's Primetime Live recently did a good expose of the psychic hotline industry. By going undercover, they were able to show that people who didn't even claim to have psychic powers were able to obtain jobs giving out readings over the phones. The bosses were shown to be cynical about not only the callers ("The [welfare] checks are in the mail, we're gonna get a bunch of calls tonight") but also their own employees ("Most of these people's personal lives, people who work for us, are just a total shambles. How they could even give this stuff out is incredible"). It is estimated that these operations do approximately a \$100 million-a-year business.

Creationism on Prime Time

The NBC cop/lawyer show Reasonable Doubts had its season finale on the 27th, and they dealt in large part with one of the main character's case involving Creationism in the schools. The writers apparently did their homework, because they showed the opposing lawyer (the one representing the family who didn't want science taught, but rather their religion) using the same arguments often actually made by Creationists, which also happen to be the same arguments deftly rebutted by Ransie Traxler in his article last issue. I wonder how many letters of protest NBC will receive for daring to allow a serious subject such as this be portrayed the way it should be.

Alternatives Again

It seems that it is becoming a REALLity Check tradition to have some story dealing with "alternative medicine". This time, the story appeared in the March issue of the AARP Bulletin. The story was neither an investigation, like NBC did several months ago, nor was it a feel-good endorsement such as the one done by the Chicago Tribune Magazine. Instead, it is more a general discussion about why people seek these treatments, leaning towards the skeptical and towards scientific investigation to separate those treatments which might actually have something to them from those which are just useless nonsense. They give a very good piece of advice to health-care consumers: "Read as much as you can and inquire what evidence or research has been conducted."

Skeptics Locally

Locally, people associated with REALL made the news twice. Doug Pokorski, of the State Journal-Register, interviewed Detective Walstad previous to his appearance at the REALL meeting and wrote it up for a good April 26th story. The article discussed a variety of cons and the use of psychics by detectives, highlighting the fact that psychics

have never been able to actually demonstrate any paranormal ability.

REALL's David Bloomberg (yeah, I know that's me, but I'm trying to act more professional and not refer to myself in the first person when writing) was interviewed about REALL and paranormal beliefs by Liz Willis of WYMG radio for the weekly half-hour show, Talkline. The interview, interspersed with a couple songs (such as "Space Cowboy" when UFOs were being discussed), aired at 6:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning last month, so I'm sure everybody heard it, right? I'd like to thank Jake Rendelman Jr., Bob Ladendorf, Skeptical Briefs, and the Tampa Bay Skeptics Report for various articles and pieces of information used herein.

Book Capsule -- The Faith Healers

by Bob Ladendorf

[The Faith Healers, by James "The Amazing" Randi, Prometheus Books, New York, 318 pages.]

Uncovers the tricks and methods used by certain "faith healers" to con unwitting victims into parting with their money. Under the leadership of magician and skeptic Randi, a group of researchers goes undercover to reveal some of the tricks of the trade, including Peter Popov's alleged use of employees as audience plants to glean information from victims, which is then transmitted to him via radio by his wife during his "faith healing" meetings. An eye-opening expose' that again and again illustrates H. L. Mencken's dictum that nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people.

Predictions for Future Issues

Paranormal Beliefs in Medieval Times

The End of the World

Psychic Detectives

Survey Results

Vampires

Skeptics Online

If you have a computer and a modem, you owe it to yourself to participate in the skeptic message areas on the computer BBS networks. Here in Springfield, call The Temples of Syrinx at (217) 787-9101. David Bloomberg operates this BBS, which carries the FidoNet SKEPTIC and UFO conferences, internationally distributed message areas for discussing topics of interest to skeptics. He is also carrying ParaNet conferences, all dedicated to UFO and paranormal topics. You can also find a wide variety of skeptic text files.

The Temples of Syrinx -- (217) 787-9101

BOARD ELECTIONS!

May 17

The next REALL meeting will include the elections of the group's Board members. All members are encouraged to attend. The meeting will be held at 7:00 PM at Sangamon State University in room E of the Public Affairs Center (PAC).

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Regular membership includes The REALL News and all of the benefits of membership. A subscription to The REALL News, without membership, is available. Full-time students can join at the discounted rate. A patron membership includes all of the benefits of a regular membership, plus a listing in The REALL News and our eternal gratitude (where "eternal" is defined as "one year").

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, ZIP: _____

Phone: _____

Interests: _____

- Regular Membership (\$20/Year)
- Student Membership (\$15/Year)
- Patron Membership (\$50 or more/Year)
- Subscription Only (\$12/Year)
- Trial or Gift Subscription (\$3 for 3 issues)

Bring to a meeting or mail to: REALL, P.O.
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