

What's Smoo?

by Martin Kottmeyer

Certainly not this case. It was written up more than a decade ago in the CUFOS Associate Newsletter [Center for UFO Studies] – the April-May 1984 issue to be precise. The incident goes back even further, to the summer of 1953 and was set in Medford, Oregon. Though we are not given any names, there are said to be three witnesses: a husband, a wife, and their 12-year-old daughter.

smoo.gif (3103 bytes)

As they are returning home at 10 in the evening, three "creatures" appear in their headlight beams off to the side of the road, about 6 feet away. They were white with "very smooth satiny fur" and were shaped like Smoos in the old Lil' Abner comic strip, but bigger – about 4 feet high – and with longer necks. They lacked any features like arms, legs, wings, or beaks. They glided, in a sideways motion at first, then straight away from them till they disappeared into a wooded area. The last of the three was slightly smaller than the other two.

The following day they looked the area over for clues and asked neighbors if they had seen anything. This only succeeded in frightening people, so they kept it to themselves from then on. The wife of the group finally contacted CUFOS confessing she "always wondered who or what they were, and from where?" She also exclaimed, "I assure you, we are very normal people!!!"

CUFOS, quite accurately, termed the case a unique entity sighting. Though no UFO was seen, the unusual nature of the report was felt to maybe provide "a piece of the puzzle." They couldn't explain it offhand and didn't plan to do a follow-up, presumably because of the very late date of the case. There might be an issue of relevance here. With no UFO around, why should CUFOS be involved? Still, where should one turn ask what's going on here? They are too furry to be ghosts. They are too footless to be bigfoots. Aliens are probably as good a guess as any.

The article included a drawing and the image lodged in my memory, presumably because it was so different and vaguely amusing. Being of a later generation than the witness, I thought it resembled Gloop and Gleep of the old Herculoids TV cartoon series. They were amorphous aliens on a distant world with a lot of exotic zoology. I doubt the case impressed anyone. It has never been recounted anywhere else in the UFO literature that I am aware of. It was just one more story one reads and never hears about again.

It is a nice little puzzler if you stop to think about it, though. Gliding above the ground as they do, they clearly seem outside normal reality. The description resembles nothing known in nature. If there are three witnesses as claimed, the idea of hallucination seems barred. How does one explain it? Optically distorted snowmen? Not in summer and not with a sideways motion. Polar bears in Oregon half illuminated? Not too likely. The witnesses considered geese and eliminated them because of an absence of wings and beak. The size and presence of fur doesn't make it too likely either. My guess is most skeptics would opt for hoax at that point and think no more about it. The brevity of the account seems confusing, however. Why opt for a shape like smoos? Why not throw in a UFO while one is at it, to justify contacting CUFOS? Yet what is the alternative?

Last November, the solution to this case leapt into view. I was driving down the lane leading from my home and four deer jumped out of a neighbor's cornfield across the road. They ran across 80 acres of open field towards a forest following a curved arc. As I watched, the viewing angle gradually changed so that I was seeing them directly from the rear. Two of the deer had white haunches and white tails which were short and sticking straight up. The light brown portion of the hide, including the legs, blended into the color of the open field and suddenly I was observing a pair of white blobby smoos gliding sideways across the landscape. The smoos even tilted off the vertical as in the drawing. This was because of the curved nature of their path across the field and their leaning into the curve as they ran. What seemed

so unexpected was how the haunches did not bounce up and down, but simply glided. Everything fit: the shape, the color, the motion, the size, the satiny fur, the direction to a wooded area, and the brevity of the experience. Only two things were different. The Medford witnesses were closer. The deer were over a hundred yards away when I recognized the smoo shape. But their encounter was also at night, where mine was during the day. Presumably the darkness would have been conducive to such an illusion at closer quarters.

I've seen deer a fair number of times over the years and had never considered them before as an explanatory possibility in this or any other entity case. The illusion was dependent on a combination of factors like field color, lighting conditions, and unbroken viewing, and a favorable trajectory which I would guess few people, outside of deer-hunters, would encounter in the course of a lifetime. There is no reason to expect any UFO investigator or skeptic to hit upon an explanation like this a priori. One simply has to have experienced it oneself to get the right answer.

I vacillated on whether to bother writing up this discovery. The solution will likely never reach the witnesses, coming so long after the write-up. The case is a minor one and one people who read about it will have long forgotten, if indeed they barely noticed it at all. It's a dozen years too late to be newsworthy. The involvement of three witnesses in an entity case is better than average and it is potentially instructive to demonstrate that an animate illusion can stump this many people and investigators for sound reasons having nothing to do with competence. Yet that isn't a particularly new lesson.

I don't know if this case ended up in any UFO databases, but I doubt this would catch up to anyone who would want to remove it. This particular solution will almost certainly be useful in generalizing to other cases simply because the smoo description was unique. One could certainly spend the time writing about more important stuff. That convinced me not to for a time, but here it is anyway. Why? A deer's rear got mistook for an alien. Sensitivities be damned, that's funny.

## Real Miracles

by David Bloomberg

Last month, I witnessed a miracle.

Indeed, this is a good part of the reason we have combined the March and April issues. The miracle has been taking up a great deal of my thoughts, even keeping me up at night.

No, this isn't a belated April Fools article, and I won't be leaving REALL to follow those who see visions of the Virgin Mary after staring into the sun for a little too long. I know the explanation behind the miracle I witnessed, but that doesn't make it any less miraculous in my opinion.

I should clarify now that I'm not talking about a miracle as one would be defined by Hume — an event that cannot be explained by the laws of nature. Indeed, the miracle I witnessed might be described as a miracle of nature — an example of how wondrous the real world can be.

This reminded me of something Professor Charles Schweighauser said in his recent presentation to REALL. He talked about how people seek out wondrous claims of pseudoscience but often ignore the wonder of science itself. Can pseudoscience put a man on the moon? Can pseudoscience allow me to tap small pieces of plastic and have my thoughts appear on a screen in front of me? Can pseudoscience heal the sick, or allow the death of one to give life to another through transplants? No. Pseudoscience can, and does, make claims related to all of these things (UFOs, ESP, faith healing, life after death, etc.), but those claims are empty — there is no evidence to back them up, hence their proper label of "pseudoscience" instead of "science."

Yet pseudoscience gets far more media exposure than science. Science is often portrayed as boring, scientists as nerds or geeks. But science can be exciting — much more exciting than the pseudoscientific claims one will often see on television. Can one really compare the moon landing with a \$4/minute call to a "psychic" and come away favoring the phone call? Can we look at a heart transplant and not be more excited than watching a rich grandstander pretending to heal those who desperately need help? Can we watch a child being born and not be amazed by our own evolution that

brought us to that point?

I don't know about anybody else, but I cannot help but be amazed at all of these "miracles." Every day now I look down and see echoes of the miracle I originally witnessed in early April; his name is Andrew Steven Bloomberg, and he is my newborn son of Shari and David.

From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

Don't read any further — if you haven't read David Bloomberg's article on "Miracles." For those of you who have read his piece, go ahead and read on....

Congratulations to David and his wife, Sharri, for having their first child (and future skeptic?) Having had two sons with my wife, Jean, I know how a baby plays havoc with your professional and free time!

This month, besides David's article, we feature a light-hearted feature article by our regular contributor, Martin Kottmeyer. Is an old "creatures" sighting solved? Martin thinks so and certainly stands behind his explanation. Check it out.

David again sharpens his skewer as he takes on the media in "REALLity Check." Another extensive piece.

Coming soon — A revised newsletter look with more articles of news and sources, as well as more graphics to illustrate them. As always, we also continue to work to provide you with in-depth articles on a range of paranormal/pseudoscientific topics. Any suggestions or comments are welcome anytime.

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

For the first time in REALL's history, I find myself in the position of apologizing for missing an issue of the newsletter. The past couple months have blown by me (for part of an explanation, see my article on "miracles"). So, we have combined the March and April issues of the newsletter, and will follow shortly with a May issue. Everybody will have their subscriptions or memberships extended one month to account for the combined newsletter.

If you want to help us make sure it won't happen again, remember that we are always looking for newsletter articles. If we don't have anything to print, we can't easily put together a newsletter!

Anyway, now that we're back on track, we have not one but two exciting speakers to tell you about.

The first is actually speaking at a meeting of Gateway Skeptics – the St. Louis area local group. Phil Klass, Crown Prince of UFO Skeptics, will be speaking there on this Friday, May 17. Bob Ladendorf and I will be going down, so if you're interested, give Bob a call!

On the very next Thursday, May 23, REALL will be having a special speaker of our own. Dr. Gerhard Eggert will be flying in from Germany just to speak to us! (OK, he'll be in Urbana for a symposium, but he did specifically seek us out.) Dr. Eggert recently had an article about the "Battery of Baghdad" in the Skeptical Inquirer, and he will be giving us a presentation on that very subject. Because this is a special occasion (and because the library was booked), we have rented a meeting room at the Ramada on Dirksen Parkway specially for this meeting, 7 p.m. on Thursday, May 23. We'd like to encourage as many people as possible to attend and give a good showing for our friend who has traveled so many miles to speak to us! I hope to see you there!

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg  
Borderline Nonsense

Okay, I admit it, I once had a little respect for Jonathan Frakes, who played Commander William Riker on Star Trek: The Next Generation. How little I knew.

Frakes started eroding this respect when he hosted the alien autopsy show for Fox. Apparently, he also hosted a show about psychic detectives (how could I possibly have missed that one?). Now, any respect I might have had, for whatever reason I had it, is gone.

Frakes is the host of the new United Paramount Network (UPN) show, The Paranormal Borderline, and is quoted as saying, "I am the current paranormal spokesperson." While those of us here in Springfield won't get a chance to see this awesome spectacle, perhaps those of you reading this outside our area might just have a chance to see yet another Unsolved Mysteries/Sightings/Encounters clone.

I admit, I'm writing about the show without having seen it. If I'm lucky, it'll go off the air before I ever have a chance to see it, but I don't believe in luck. Anyway, I'm basing my statements here on two articles from the Chicago Tribune (a frequent purveyor of nonsense themselves), one is an overall review and the second is a short blurb from the day it was to air.

According to the Tribune story, Frakes will introduce six stories about people who claim to have had supernatural experiences each week. The topics, as if we couldn't already psychically predict them, range from alien abductions to vampires to psychic detectives tackling open police cases (I wonder if they'll ever note the number of misses).

The producers of this show claim they are not "big believers" in any of this stuff. However, one says that he is amazed because so many people have "unusual stories that defy what we know about the world." Unfortunately, he seems to have never picked up a Skeptical Inquirer, or any other skeptical publication, which often features articles debunking those very stories.

The Tribune talks about a story featured in the first show. A woman claims to have been repeatedly abducted by aliens, but when she came forward with her story, she lost her job, her boyfriend, and most of her family. Apparently, these losses convinced the producers that she must be the real thing, as they say, "She has everything to lose and nothing to gain by coming forward." Apparently, they subscribe to the belief that if somebody is believable, what they say must be true.

The second Tribune mention of the show (by Steve Johnson) deserves to be quoted almost in its entirety:

"I'm holding in my hand a videocassette copy of this new series from the UPN startup network and I'm getting a very definite vibration about it. It's a magazine series, in that it tells a number of different stories and treats them in a manner that purports to be reportage. It's got a host, a man — yes, I can see him now — a large bearded man, perhaps a man who has appeared on 'Babylon 5' — no, wait, it's 'Star Trek: The Next Generation.' It's Jonathan Frakes, and he's beaming. He's very, very proud! Or perhaps that is a grimace of pain. Was he, by chance, abducted by the producers and forced to participate in this cruel experiment? No, it can't be, because I'm getting an image of him at a bank cashing a large check. There's more. ... Aha! It's about putatively inexplicable things: alien abductions, livestock mutilations, psychic detectives and the like. I'm sensing lurid re-enactments with those embryo-looking aliens and lots of dry ice for atmosphere. My goodness, the tape is bending in my hand. It has to be a sign. I'm going to take this immediately to my crop circle."

My only question about this is why it was listed under "Best Bet," since the reviewer obviously didn't think it was all that great.

Still More TV Nonsense

While UPN is just getting into the paranormal nonsense genre, NBC is making an art (certainly not a science) of it. On February 25, they showed a horrible program called, The Mysterious Origins of Man, hosted by Charlton Heston. Later

in the week, they showed Ancient Prophecies 3 (at least I think that was the title). Frankly, I saw 1 and 2, and have no reason to believe 3 would be any better, so I skipped it. It was apparently Trash Week on NBC.

In many ways, the Mysterious Origins show was much worse than the Prophecies show could have been, in that it purported to put forth science, while only putting forth creationist rubbish (I'm using the thesaurus feature to try to find other appropriate adjectives besides "nonsense" for the rest of this article). Indeed, it was so bad that it even got a half-page story in Science, one of the top scientific journals in the world.

How bad was the show? Well, they even put forth stuff that most creationists have agreed is bunk! The Paluxy River tracks (tracks purported to be those of humans walking at the same time period as dinosaurs) were brought out as the main proof that humans have been around much longer than the horrible scientific establishment has been telling us. But even the leaders of the Institute for Creation Research have admitted, in what may be one of the only times they've let the facts interfere with their beliefs, that the tracks are not human footprints (they are actually partial dinosaur prints) and should not be used to support creationist "theories."

Also cited was the "Burdick Print," so called because it was first publicized by creationist Clifford Burdick, which is almost universally agreed to be a fake, carved by somebody in the 1930's.

But none of these facts stopped the show's creators. Indeed, the show claimed to present good evidence from "a new breed of scientific investigators." Baloney. All we saw was old garbage presented by debunked creationists, like Carl Baugh (I don't have room to go into everything I know or have even forgotten about Baugh, but if you're interested, contact me and I can dig through my files and send out copies of articles which debunk his claims, his supposed evidence, etc.). As one paleontologist told Science, "this is just reviving stuff that has already been debunked."

Several of the scientists interviewed by Science have been trying, unsuccessfully, to get a response from NBC. Science contacted NBC's entertainment division (which is always the division that puts out these pseudo-documentaries that purport to be true), and a spokesperson said they had no statement because, as far as they knew, there haven't been any complaints! A second spokesperson said the show was shown as an "alternative scenario" and not as fact. Uh huh. Sure. And that was made abundantly clear in the show, right? Wrong.

National Center for Science Education Executive Director Eugenie Scott said NBC's decision to air this show "illustrates that the position of evolution is very spongy in the population outside of the academy" and noted that she has received numerous calls for help from teachers dealing with students who saw this drivel and believed it (hey, certainly NBC wouldn't show it if it weren't true, right?).

One scientist found the situation ironic. He noted, "I'm sure in a few months Tom Brokaw will have a special on the deplorable state of science knowledge among American school children." Indeed, I have noted the difference between the news division's repeated attacks on balderdash, mostly via Dateline NBC, and the entertainment division, which airs whatever absurdity they think will make them some more money. Here's an idea: Maybe we can get Dateline to do an expose the entertainment division!

Let's Fire the Politicians Who Voted for This Instead

Tennessee has recently made news by apparently trying to out-do Alabama in the quest to be the worst. As you may recall, Alabama is doing all they can to keep science out of the science classroom, because the politicians there can't seem to understand the theory of evolution. Tennessee has tried to make a bigger mess of their educational system, but luckily failed, at least for now.

The State Journal-Register (AP story) reported early in March that the Tennessee Senate was considering a law that would allow schools to fire any teacher who presented evolution as fact. The state attorney general was of the opinion that this law would violate the First Amendment, but that little point seemed to be lost on many Tennessee lawmakers. The sponsor of this bill, Sen. Tommy Burks, said he was introducing the legislation because constituents had told him the school was teaching evolution as fact — but Burks wouldn't say where this was occurring. As usual with this sort of case, the bill would not have banned teaching evolution as "theory," but I have a sneaking suspicion that Sen. Burks doesn't know the difference between teaching something as a scientific theory and a fact. Perhaps to point this out, the

bill's original lone opponent in the education committee proposed a satirical amendment that would also prohibit teachers from presenting the "heliocentric theory of planetary rotation" as fact (Science, 3/15).

Given the wide range of possible interpretations of a bill claiming teaching evolution as "theory" was okay, but as "fact" was not, it was feared that many teachers would just stay away from the subject to avoid any possible repercussions.

Well, later in March, the State Journal-Register (again with an AP story) reported that the bill was killed by the Senate. In that story, Sen. Burks was quoted as claiming his bill was just an attempt to clear up confusion because some overzealous teachers present evolution as more than a theory. He went on to say, "Do you believe that you descended from a lower species? I don't." Well, it's that type of convincing scientific evidence that we need to have in our classrooms, Senator! The senators who voted against the bill said they had not heard the complaints alleged by Sen. Burks and that science curriculum should be determined by scientists, not the legislature.

Science and rationality won this time, but if experience tells us anything, it's that people like Sen. Burks won't give up so easily...

### Freeing Yourself From Science

The Illinois Times published an oh-so-helpful article in their special "Home Smart" (how ironic) supplement about how you can free yourself from the boundaries of rationality. Well, that isn't exactly what they said, but they might as well have. The article was about "feng shui" (pronounced "fung schway"), of which the author says in the secondary headline, "If your home, health, or love life are in disharmony, feng shui can put them in order."

So, what is feng shui anyway? If it can do that much for you, it must be some sort of special therapy, right? No, don't be silly — that might make sense! Feng shui essentially means rearranging your furniture.

Yep, that's all there is to it. According to this article, "Are you chronically broke? The cure may be as simple as relocating your toilet." Sure. Then again, it may not, but heaven forbid something skeptical or rational like that should be mentioned in this article.

So how does this work? (For it is obvious that there is no doubt that it does, indeed, work.) Well, "Good feng shui enhances the flow of energy, or ch'i, while bad feng shui blocks or speeds up the loss of ch'i." Of course, they explain what this "ch'i" is, right? "Ch'i is human spirit or energy that unites human beings and their surroundings. There is ch'i in the atmosphere, in the earth, and within people." You'd think with all this energy flying around, somebody would have gotten around to scientifically measuring it. Alas, this article doesn't bother with such technicalities, but I sure don't remember hearing about it in any of my physics classes!

But obviously this stuff is powerful. Feng shui instructor Carol Bridges says you can do things that seem absurd (seem?), like tying red string on things, but, beware, "Those are the most powerful. You shouldn't play with them." So if you have any red string lying around the house, please BEWARE! You don't know what you might be doing to your ch'i!

According to this particular brand of pseudoscience, there are eight different "areas" in your house: wealth, fame, marriage, family (ancestors), children, knowledge, career, and benefactors. You're supposed to superimpose a grid over your house or room floor plans to see how to arrange furniture to unblock your ch'i. Getting back to the problem of chronic money problems — according to this article, "If your toilet is in the wealth corner of your house, you may be flushing your wealth down the toilet." Ah. Is that the way it works? And here I thought it had to do with not spending more than you earn. Silly me. But, that isn't the only cause of problems, nor the only cure. The article lists all sorts of silliness about how to improve your ch'i flow. Apparently, the reason pet fish die often is that they "absorb negativity, then they die" so you just get new fish to keep the negativity absorption going. Oh, and if you don't want to move your toilet (which I imagine might cost a pretty penny — a difficult thing to justify if you're chronically broke), eight red fish and one black fish are claimed as a cure for a lack of wealth.

I could go on, but you get the idea. And if you want to learn more, you can go to one of Ms. Bridges' workshops — they only cost \$180 for two afternoons. I wonder if they'll guarantee that, by moving your toilet, you'll get that \$180 back?

## Masthead Information Electronic Version

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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.

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