

The Exeter File
Part 1

by Martin Kottmeyer

In the early morning of September 3, 1965, a teenage hitchhiker named Norman Muscarello encountered a UFO with brilliant red lights. It was barely a hundred feet up, and at one point he jumped into a ditch to keep from being hit. He caught a ride to the Exeter police station and reported the encounter to Patrolman Eugene F. Bertrand. Together they returned to the scene of the encounter, and Bertrand was soon witnessing the same object. It came so close he started to draw his gun but then decided that might not be wise. He radioed Patrolman David Hunt, who arrived a few minutes later in time to see the object a half mile away and moving off to the southeast, still at an altitude of about one hundred feet.

The case is a classic. John Fuller wrote a book centered on the case titled Incident at Exeter. It was a best-seller and continues to be reprinted. Ron Story ranked it among the top ten UFO cases of all time based in part on a survey of ufologists. Raymond Fowler prides himself on remarking as soon as it happened, "This one will go down in UFO history." That is most assuredly did. It was featured in the April 5, 1966, Congressional hearing that led to the Condon investigation. The involvement of two police officers gave it an official character that made it a bit harder than usual to dismiss. Attempts to explain it by invoking twinkling stars and planets, ad planes, or military operations were difficult to jive with descriptions given. Fuller insisted this constituted "convincing evidence" that UFOs were real and extraterrestrial. Other ufologists would agree, including Hilary Evans in an early work.

That there might be problems with such an interpretation seems to have troubled none of the proponents of this solution. I offer here several:

Why Exeter? Can anybody think of a good reason for aliens to visit such an out of the way spot as New Hampshire? There is no obvious strategic interest, economic resource, geological or geographic attractions, or biogenetic import to the place.

Muscarello, in his statement, observed, "The lights then moved out over a large field and acted at times like a floating leaf." Fuller's book expanded the description. A brilliant red roundish object rose slowly from behind two pines. It moved toward Muscarello and Bertrand "like a leaf fluttering from a tree, wobbling and yawing as it moved." The entire area was bathed in a brilliant red light. It was 100 feet above them and a football field's distance away. It was rocking back and forth on its axis, "still absolutely silent." It hovered for several minutes then slowly moved away. Its movement was erratic, defying all aerodynamic patterns. "It darted...it could turn on a dime, then it would slow down." Hunt added, "I could see that fluttering movement. It was going left to right between the tops of the two trees." It had a "creepy type of look. Airplanes don't do this."

Indeed no, but nobody stops to ask if extraterrestrial craft ought to be doing this either. If it possesses any sort of mass at all, inertia alone would damp out any sort of fluttering behavior. If it is a result of mechanical vibration, why is the object so silent? Note other UFO reports exist from which noises like hums are heard. If UFOs are some sort of reconnaissance vehicle as Fuller and many others used to argue, such fluttering would surely impede the usefulness of the craft. What does it say for the erstwhile technological superiority of these interstellar visitors that they cannot stabilize their crafts?

Witnesses agree there were five lights, but they flashed one at a time and in the pattern of 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1. They were "extremely bright." Bertrand had been in the Air Force for four years, knew military aircraft, participated in refueling operations, and insists this wasn't like anything he had seen before. Okay, but shouldn't ufologists be saying the same thing? Where are there any prior reports of UFOs exhibiting and identical pattern of flashing lights? Even

subsequent to Exeter, I know of only one other case which refers to this 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1 flashing pattern and that is the Bill Herrmann abduction case. Curiously it involves lights inside the craft and causes feelings of relaxation, something rather opposite of the fear seen in the Exeter case. (UFO Contact from Reticulum, Wendelle Stevens, 1981, pp. 148, 226, 319.)

Can anyone think of a practical use for such a pattern of flashing lights and having them shine with extreme brilliance? My initial assumption would be that it is meant to attract attention. Yet aliens purportedly want to do things furtively and in secret. If they do want to attract attention, why are they doing this in a rural area in the early morning hours? It's a paradox.

"The lights were in a line at about a sixty degree angle... They always moved in the same sixty degree angle," said Muscarello in his report to the Air Force (The Hynek UFO Report, Dell, 1977, p. 158). Bertrand said the same in his report to the Air Force: "The lights were always in line at about a sixty-degree angle. When the object moved, the lower lights were always forward of the others." For those UFO buffs who are wondering if their memories are on the fritz, you probably aren't suffering from amnesia. Fuller omitted this detail in his book and, as all later accounts based themselves on Fuller, you won't find it anywhere else in the literature but the Blue Book file copied by Hynek. Why are the lights as a group canted at this high angle? This is a definite violation of standard behavior. UFOs are usually drawn with the lights running horizontal and parallel to the horizon. They may tilt temporarily; they may wobble a bit off-plumb. If there are any other cases where a UFO or its lights move continually canted like this for periods of minutes, I haven't found it. Does this mean it isn't a real UFO? Presumably the only way to interpret this in terms of the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH) is, "Hey, aliens are weird and will do whatever they darn well want to do." It doesn't really make sense.

At no point in the case does the object travel very far from the ground. When it moves away, it simply disappears into the distance. It doesn't thrust itself skyward. It doesn't show any great speed even in the horizontal direction. True, it darts and turns on a dime, but hummingbirds and dragonflies manage to do this without being extraterrestrial.

"When it seemed as if it was going to hit him, he dove down on the shallow shoulder of the road. Then the object appeared to back off slowly... Finally it backed off far enough for Muscarello to make a run for the house. He pounded on the door, screaming." Officer Bertrand apparently also got the impression the object was behaving aggressively. He wrote in his police report, "I got out of the cruiser and went out into the field and all of a sudden this thing came at me at about 100 feet off the ground with red lights going back and forth. He drew his gun, but reholstered it after a moment's thought.

Aliens travel the vast distance to Earth and have nothing better to do than hang about and toy around with humans? This gives the appearance of nothing more profound than mischief-making.

These six points ought to be sufficient to make proponents of the ETH worry that something is very wrong with this case. As it happens, they are also clues to an alternate solution. Anybody care to guess what the answer to this puzzler is? Look for my guess in part two.

[All quotes from Incident at Exeter except where indicated otherwise.]

The Editorial Board encourages readers to try to figure out the answer to this puzzler. Please send your solutions to us at the REALL P.O. Box (they may be printed). Anybody who figures out where Martin is going with this, or who comes up with at least as good a solution, will have a free newsletter issue added to his/her subscription.

From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

Our two prolific writers again grace these pages. This time with a twist, though.

Martin Kottmeyer, who frequently writes for The REALL News about connections between real and reel lives, has

written a two-parter on the classic UFO incident at Exeter years ago. At the end of Part 1 in this issue, he challenges you to come up with some alternative explanations. REALL is offering free issues for the reader who tells us what explanation Martin will give in Part 2. (For more details, see the article, which starts on page 1.)

Our other prolific writer -- our chairman, David Bloomberg -- offers an extended "REALLity Check" this month. Check it out starting on page 3.

With these and other long articles we've printed in past issues, we have had to delay the introduction of other features. We thus have much more to include in future issues, including a special issue on multimedia reviews.

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

In this issue, you will find REALL's first "contest." Since Martin Kottmeyer has been writing articles for us from the first issue, it seems only fitting that this stems from something he has written. If you jumped directly to this column without reading the front page -- highly unlikely, I'm sure -- then you can go back and see Part 1 of his article on a UFO account at Exeter. In this first part, he details that account for us. In the second part, next month, he will present his solution. If you read the first part and have a guess at the solution, by all means send it in! Anybody who successfully guesses Kottmeyer's solution or comes up with a better (or funnier) one will get a three-month extension to his or her membership and newsletter subscription. Let's hear from you!

Our next meeting, on Oct. 1 (7 p.m., Lincoln Library), will feature another Skeptics Society video. This one is titled "Quantum Quackery" and looks to be very interesting. I've often heard paranormal supporters misusing quantum physics to say their claims have merit, and I expect this video to address such topics, as well as others. I hope to see you there!

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

While scientists debate whether or not life has existed on Mars, creationists are still arguing against life evolving here on Earth. It's enough to drive a guy to write a column or something!
Martian Science

By now, NASA's announcement that they have found what they think is evidence of life having existed on Mars is old news. But I expect that most people reading this column had already heard and read everything they could find about this even before our August issue came out. What I have to say here is less about the facts of the case than it is about the way the media is handling it.

So far, surprisingly, I think they've done a fairly good job. Usually, the general media (as opposed to the scientific media, like Science News) has a hard time with scientific issues. They like a definitive "yes" or "no," not "maybe, we'll have to study it more to be sure." So you often see headlines like, "Study proves X causes cancer" only to be followed a few months later with "Study shows X is safe." Details are often lost in the translation.

In this case, however, I have seen the media generally put forth the proper disclaimers about the scientific method. Probably, this is because the scientists involved have been extremely careful not to overstate their case and explain that further study is necessary. (Cold fusion still haunts the memories of many scientists.)

The best example I've seen so far was in a Chicago Tribune article (8/22/96), although the headline still leaves a bit to be desired. The article, "Scientists second-guessing claim of life on Mars rock," notes that "Both groups [the NASA scientists making the original claim about the rock containing evidence of early life and another group of scientists disagreeing with those results] agreed on at least one thing: Dissension is a normal part of science, and scientists frequently arrive at different hypotheses to explain their data." I wish this statement had been boldfaced and explained a

bit more, but just having it in the article is one step more than we usually see.

Of course, the only problem with this true statement is that creationists often use language such as this to mask their intentions and to try to counter scientific arguments that destroy their claims. They ignore the fact that there is an abundance of evidence that convinces any real scientist, while scientists are only in the very beginning stages of examining the evidence for the Martian life theory. If there is ever as much evidence for Martian life as there is for evolution, I doubt any reasonable scientist will doubt it. Of course, if that ever happens, it will be very interesting indeed to see how creationists handle it. After all, a literal creationist interpretation doesn't leave much room for life on Mars. Speaking of Creationists...

You may have been wondering why I was bringing up creationists in a seemingly unrelated piece about the Martian meteor. It was a clever segue-way into this next piece. Yes, creationists are back in the news again (or is it "still"?). This time, they've attracted the Chicago Tribune's attention (luckily in the news and editorial sections, not the Tempo section) and the Tribune came out forcefully on the side of rationality.

First the Tribune ran an article (8/15) detailing "a renewed campaign by religious creationists around the country to expunge the theory of evolution from the classroom." The article notes a fairly recent change in tactics on the part of creationists: "Instead of demanding equal time for their doctrines, they are demanding that schools present evolution as a 'controversial theory' with serious weaknesses."

The article also goes into one point that always grates on my nerves -- the often-used creationist statement that evolution is "just a theory." As an evolutionary biologist interviewed for the piece said, "Scientists use the word 'theory' to refer to a body of knowledge, but in common language it's a statement of uncertainty." The author notes, "Many biologists say the 150-year-old theory [of evolution] is as well established as Copernicus' 450-year-old 'theory' that the Earth goes around the sun." Indeed, I've often wondered why creationists don't demand that the atomic theory, quantum theory, and the theory of relativity also have the "just a theory" disclaimer -- certainly if they were honestly just trying to portray science correctly, they'd demand such labels on all theories. Of course, we know that isn't at all what they're trying to do...

The Tribune went further a few days later and published an editorial severely criticizing creationists for their anti-science agenda. Way to go, Tribune!

The journal Science also noted the new trends in anti-evolution attacks. Its article (7/26) focused on these new strategies of trying to attack evolution and act more scientific to hide the religious nature of their viewpoints. They have been forced to adopt this new stealth attack because the courts repeatedly shot down their creationist claims:

"In 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Epperson v. Arkansas* that states could not ban the teaching of evolution simply because it conflicted with a particular religious doctrine. In response, anti-evolutionists reframed their position as 'creation science.' Then in 1982 a federal district court ruled in *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education* that 'creation science' was in fact religion. In 1987 the Supreme Court reaffirmed that decision in *Edwards v. Aguillard*, ruling that 'creation science' could not be taught in public schools."

So the creationists have been trying to appear scientific and say they should be able to present evidence against evolution. Fine. Of course a good teacher will present scientific evidence both for and against a theory, presuming such evidence exists. The emphasis, however, must be on the word "scientific." So far, the creationists' "scientific" evidence just isn't. But that doesn't stop them from trying -- and from cloaking their attempts in scientific-sounding lingo such as "abrupt appearance theory" and "intelligent design theory."

The creationists are playing on, and causing, a common misunderstanding, "that there is a serious debate among scientists about whether evolution is a fact." Paleontologist David Schwimmer (no, not the one on Friends) said of this, "The nontechnical population believes this, and we have to get over that misunderstanding."

Creationists seem intent on pushing this misunderstanding at every school board, state legislature, or wherever they can get their foot in the door. Therefore, the best way scientists can make a difference is by being active in those areas

(especially school boards), and by keeping our ears to the ground to listen for any creationist rumblings before they can flood the public with misinformation that we have to counter.

More Misinformation

Unfortunately, creationism is not the only area where misinformation flies freely. The disease AIDS has been the seed for a number of strange ideas to sprout from. Some people claim cures so they can make money; others claim vast conspiracies against one group or another. Perhaps the worst, however, are the claims of once-respected virologist Peter Duesberg, who claims that HIV does not cause AIDS, but rather bad living does.

In general, Duesberg's claims have been debunked and then rightfully ignored by the scientific community (especially the journal *Nature*, which has refused to print Duesberg's letters). However, Duesberg uses this to claim a conspiracy against him (and *The Truth*) and has managed to convince at least one reporter that he is right. That reporter, Mark Anderson, wrote an article for the *Springfield Advocate* in Massachusetts, which was reprinted by *Springfield, Illinois'* very own *Illinois Times*. Unfortunately, the *Times* seems to think that anything on AlterNet must be good to print.

For those of you unfamiliar with Duesberg, his claims in a nutshell, and in his own words, are: "Most simply stated, AIDS is not an infectious disease, as most people think it is. Instead it is a disease caused by long-term recreational drug use and by some of the very drugs that were developed as anti-HIV drugs like AZT and ddI and all these chemicals that are given as AIDS prophylaxis." I'd love to see his explanation of Ryan White, the young hemophiliac boy who contracted AIDS and received national attention a few years ago, among numerous other similar cases.

The article is long, and debunking every claim would take even longer. The best place to go for a good explanation of Duesberg's claims and his errors is the mid-1995 issue of *Skeptic* magazine, which had a lengthy article by Steven Harris, M.D. Indeed, the reporter, Anderson, even apparently read the article and mentions for all of one paragraph. He then steadfastly ignores everything Harris had to say. That said, however, here are a few points:

The author refers to *Nature's* refusal to print Duesberg's letters and asks, "what is so dangerous about Duesberg's ideas that they must be prevented from appearing in the very forums where they belong?" The problem is that this is like asking, "what is so dangerous about Bloomberg's physical prowess that he must be prevented from appearing in the Olympics?" Just as I can't make the cut for the Olympics, Duesberg's claims have not made the cut for a respected peer-reviewed scientific journal. I'm sorry, but not all ideas are created equally, and certainly a scientific journal has the right to reject unscientific claims rather than publishing them.

Later, the author says, "Duesberg's scientific credentials are superlative." That is an appeal to authority and rather unscientific. His credentials were, indeed, superlative before he embraced this anti-science stance. But that doesn't mean he's right. The author compounds this error by saying Duesberg's "fellow skeptics ... number more than 200 Ph.D.s and M.D.s, including three Nobel Prize winners." Okay. So what? Again, this is an appeal to authority rather than an appeal to facts. Even if we were to use this as some sort of support for Duesberg, we need to ask back, "How many Ph.D.s, M.D.s, and Nobel Prize winners don't support Duesberg?" Rest assured, the number is far greater than 200. Oh, and who are the three Nobel Prize winners who agree with Duesberg? One won the award for chemistry, not medicine or biology or any other related field, and the other two are not mentioned.

So why do so many scientists disagree with Duesberg? Well, that's nicely explained by a big conspiracy, don't you know. Duesberg says, "Look at all my peers in AIDS research. They're all virologists or retrovirologists like me. They're either on the boards of biotechnology firms developing vaccines, developing anti-viral drugs, developing AIDS-test kits, selling them, marketing them, owning the companies. They're millionaires." Amazing. I didn't realize that every scientist and doctor researching AIDS and HIV was a millionaire who is only out to make money. Oh, sorry, every scientist and doctor except 200.

Several times in the article, the author says things like, "if Peter Duesberg and his fellow doubters are right,..." and "If Duesberg and his colleagues are even partly right,..." and "if Mullis and Duesberg are even partly correct,..." The problem is that he is making unwarranted assumptions. First, they must prove that they are correct, then we will worry about the "if"s.

The article ends by claiming the scientific community is the one acting unscientific. The author calls Duesberg's claims "heresy," thus comparing science to religious doctrine because those evil nasty scientists won't listen to Duesberg's nonsense. He says that Deusberg's claims will be readily debunked in "a true scientific debate" if they are, indeed, "working from such weak foundations," implying that such a debate hasn't taken place. Well, the facts of the matter are that the debate has taken place. The debate continues taking place in that if Duesberg ever does come up with actual scientific evidence, it will be addressed. But until then, these statements are no different than the ones used by creationists, and they are equally invalid.

The Illinois Times did a great disservice to its readers by publishing this discredited hypothesis. As AIDS spreads, do they really want to spread the myth that it's not communicable? Did they even think about what they were doing when they printed this? If they did, I have to wonder what was going through their minds...

Legendary

As briefly mentioned in last month's Chairman's column, Kathy Rem interviewed me for a story on urban legends in the State Journal-Register. (8/25) I was only quoted a couple of times, but then so was Jan Brunvand -- probably the world's leading expert on urban legends. The bulk of the article just listed interesting legends, though I would have chosen different, more well-known ones (for example, the Blue Star LSD tale that was recounted as fact by Channel 20 news not too long ago).

Also, while the article was generally good, her sidebar on ghost stories confused the issue a bit by calling those stories "urban legends" as well. Urban legends are generally the "friend of a friend" stories ("This really happened to my dentist's brother's best friend's niece..."). The ghost stories she recounted, however, were told first person. Perhaps a minor detail, but then again, perhaps not. Ms. Rem did give me the opportunity to discuss ghost stories, but I am not familiar with any Springfield hauntings, so I could not say much except for generalities about how no "ghost story" has ever been shown to be due to supernatural causes. As with the main story, this side article mostly contained descriptions of local stories, so my comments were not used.

As a side note, I did have a chance to talk to Ms. Rem about an article she wrote a few months ago on handwriting analysis (the unscientific kind where an analyst claims to be able to tell the personality using handwriting samples). I told her about my criticisms of the article, and she accepted them gracefully, agreeing on most major points. She said that she didn't know we covered such things (most people don't associate handwriting analysis with the paranormal), but would check with us in the future if related topics came up. Indeed, she did call to get my opinion on another recent article, although this one fell mostly outside REALL's area. As always, REALL is here to give information to the media and general public, so if you see something that you feel deserves a reply (or even a chat with an author or reporter), please let me know!

Masthead Information

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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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