

Exeter File - Part Two
The Exeter Terrestrial Hypothesis

by Martin Kottmeyer

Before he grew up to be the master theorist who brought a stunning order to our understanding of the heavens, Isaac Newton first brought chaos. As a kid he liked to make and experiment with kites. At some point he invented a crumpled paper lantern, attached it to the tail of a kite, and started flying it at night. History records this "wonderfully affrighted all the neighboring inhabitants for some time, and caused not a little discourse on market days, among country people, when over their mugs of ale." As this took place in the mid-1600s, speculation included the concern that these lights were comets. Muses one historian, "By good fortune, Grantham was not burned to the ground."

This idea, indeed, doesn't seem like an especially smart thing to do, and it should surprise nobody that kids a good deal dumber than Newton have been doing the same thing over the years. A colleague showed me a reprint of an 1929 kid's manual called *The American Boys Handy Book*, which had chapters on how to make kites of several varieties. One version was called, "The Moving Star," so named for the paper lantern attached to the tail. To prevent setting the kite afire, the author recommends a small light wood and wire hoop frame covered by red tissue paper. A drawing is helpfully provided. The author adds in comment, "This lantern fastened to the tail of a large kite that is sent up on a dark night will go bobbing around in a most eccentric and apparently unaccountable manner, striking with wonder all observers not in on the secret." (pp. 21-2)

Needless to say, this same thing goes on to the present day. One popular guide to kites remarks that besides Chinese firecracker kites, "Lighted kites are also legendary. Japanese lanterns or small battery-powered flashlights can be put aloft." If you have a night with enough wind. (Wyatt Brummit, *Kites*, Golden, 1971, p. 97) Though unmentioned, flares are another option for modern pranksters. A really inventive fellow might even come up with something else.

My hypothesis is that the Exeter case is an instance of an upscale moving-star kite. Five strobe flashers linked to a sequencer are hung along the kite-line rather than a tail. They are powered from the ground by a small portable power supply like a motorcycle battery strapped to the body. A large box kite would probably work best since the double-wing surface would enable it to carry the weight of the lights more easily than other types. Meteorologists used to use them to haul up all sorts of recording equipment.

With this idea in mind, let's go back to our 6 points from Part 1:

Why Exeter? The prankster probably lived there.

Why did the Exeter object flutter like a leaf? Because it was made of cloth and light wood. It was silent because kites are silent. It was defying most aerodynamic patters, but not those of kites.

The practical use of the flashing pattern and the extreme brilliance was to get the victim's attention and scare the hell out of him. Additionally, it was, as the handbook said, an effort to strike wonder into all observers. The rural setting insured enough darkness to not give the trick away and to have the room to pull it off without a lot of bystanders who might see the prankster and squeal on him.

The 60-degree angle is due to the lights being on the kiteline. The prankster probably had no intent to mimic the behavior of a flying saucer. He just wanted something really strange. This explains why the lower lights were always forward of the others. One usually is pulling the line back against the wind. I should perhaps add here that Air Force records confirm there was a wind out of the West that evening. Some reader of Fuller is inevitably going to point out that his book says "There was no wind..." that evening. I don't know what he based it on, but it appears to be wrong.

The reason it doesn't travel far from the ground is because it is a kite, not a spaceship.

Kitefliers can make their kites dive and have been known to scare drivers off nearby roads by a sudden stunt maneuver. Someone mischievous enough to hang strobe lights on a kite likely has the disposition to panic his victims with low passes. It was not too bright to do this to a cop, however, and one can well understand why the prankster would not come forward to claim credit for his spectacle.

With no confession or statements from accomplices or acquaintances, it will likely be said this solution is unproven. Perhaps, but I have to say that the extraterrestrial solution is pretty much dis-proven and rendered foolish. Why opt for a solution that makes no sense when you have one that does?

And another classic bites it.

Crash-Retrieval at Gatchellville

by Martin Kottmeyer

The historian's warning that Newton was fortunate not to have started a fire with his kite lantern can be underscored by pointing to another modern UFO case. On March 8, 1977, a red ball of light was seen over Gatchellville, Pennsylvania, by 11 witnesses in 6 separate groups. All witnesses agreed it drifted against the wind in a left to right wobbling motion for 2 to 5 minutes. Triangulation of observations indicated it was only a few hundred feet above the ground. It dropped to earth and started a grass fire. Fortunately it burned itself out before the fire department arrived, but it left a burned area 100 feet by 30 feet in size. As this was March, it was a fair bet the grass had not yet greened up from the winterkill and was tinder dry at the time. Investigators noted the soil was burned down to a depth of three inches, which sounds consistent with root length.

No hydrocarbon residues were found; therefore the fire was not assisted by gasoline. Grass outside the patch, investigators noted, was not combustible and one is left to wonder if something had dried the grass. The fallacy, however, is blatant. Since the fire was not put out, it obviously stopped where it ran out of fuel.

The case was written up in the International UFO Reporter and was rated by Allan Hendry as a good CEII [Close Encounter of the Second Kind] in The UFO Handbook, i.e., it was a good example of a UFO case with physical traces that proved seemingly the reality of UFOs. Unasked: where is the crashed UFO?

John Harney picked the Gatchellville case as one of three reports in the UFO literature which seemed of real good quality, yet still remained unexplained as of his writing ("In Search of Real UFOs," Magonia, June, 1994). While he didn't think it was extraterrestrial, he wondered if ball lightning might have been involved because of the large amount of energy released when the object hit the lawn.

Hendry's Handbook and Harney's hurrah forget to mention there was a retrieval in the case. In a short article in the International UFO Reporter entitled "Case Wrap-Up: Close Out on the Gatchellville, PA II" it was revealed that analysis was done on some foil-like strips that investigators retrieved from a tree across the road from the burned patch. They turned out to be Mylar. Since Mylar does not release much energy when it burns, investigators concluded, "It is likely they were unrelated."

Guess again. Mylar is a common material used in kites. Kites have a bad habit of running into trees. As for the red light, it was likely either a flare or a lantern surrounded by red crepe paper.

From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

In this issue, Martin Kottmeyer, our regular contributor, details his explanation for the alleged sighting of a UFO at

Exeter. I think you may find it rather convincing that it was basically a hoax. Unfortunately, prosaic explanations for phenomena seem to bounce off the UFO fanatics. Kottmeyer's analysis should also remind readers that even past alleged sightings can be investigated if one is diligent and patient in researching them.

You can now reach us at new Internet e-mail addresses listed below. Don't forget to check out our official Web site, which is also listed below.

As we head into a busy holiday season, I just wanted to wish the best to our readers and to let you know that we have a lot more in store for you as we approach the new year.

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

Editor Bob and I attended Penn & Teller's show on the 18th of this month, and a good time was had by all! You can always count on these guys to entertain and also to throw in a good bit of skepticism while they're at it. New this tour are tricks which mention a certain Israeli "psychic" who claims to bend spoons with his mind, and, even better, an entire trick designed around Houdini's skepticism. In the latter, Penn sings about how ghosts and other paranormal events only seem to happen in the darkness, where they can hide, while Teller (supposedly tied to a chair and unable to move) acts as the spirit hidden behind a curtain, trying to justify his hiding. It was quite a nice sight for skeptics who too often see entertainment figures promoting nonsense rather than fighting it.

On a newsletter note, unfortunately, REALL's first "contest" was less than a stellar success. As I write this, we've received exactly zero responses. Hopefully, this simply means it was too difficult to figure out; indeed, nobody I've talked to has had a clue as to what the Exeter UFO could have been. I suspect many of you, like myself, will read Kottmeyer's Part II and think, "Yeah, that does explain it!"

Speaking of UFOs, our next meeting (November 5 -- election day -- 7 p.m., Lincoln Library) will feature an A&E broadcast about UFOs. From what I've heard, it is at least partly skeptical.

In trying to liven things up a bit, we are always looking for speakers for our meetings. On this note, I plan to call a man who was featured in a recent State Journal-Register article as being a "real-life ghostbuster." Yes, he believes in ghosts and thinks he can detect them. If I am able to get him to speak for us (he apparently just spoke at the Lincoln Library not too long ago), it will be a departure for us, as we have only dealt with skeptical speakers in the past. However, sometimes we talk and write about people who believe in paranormal phenomena, and we may never get to actually meet them. I'd certainly like readers' input on what you think about this or if you have any other suggestions. Please feel free to call or write to me! (You can even use my new e-mail address!)

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

The scariest time of the year is here again -- yes, that's right, elections! I'm sure you're probably as sick as I am of seeing campaign commercials, so you're lucky -- REALL, of course, is not a political organization and doesn't espouse any particular political views. However, I will report when a politician, like anybody else, makes ridiculous unscientific (or, like creationists, anti-scientific) statements. Thankfully, this year I have encountered only one such piece of silliness so far.

Hopping Mad

The Natural Law Party held a press conference on October 22 to show off their "Yogic flying." Anybody who has actually seen these people "fly" know that they are doing no such thing -- they're hopping around on a mat with their legs crossed (WICS, Channel 20, had video of candidates doing exactly that -- I almost fell off the couch laughing; the State Journal-Register had a front-page photo the next day).

So what is the Natural Law Party? They are disciples of the Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi and practice Transcendental Meditation. In a nutshell (no pun intended), they believe they can solve all the country's problems by meditating. That's not necessarily what they tell people right off the bat, mind you. Usually, when questioned about their goals, the candidates from the Natural Law Party will say they have scientifically proven methods to reduce crime/lower the deficit/whatever. For example, Senate candidate Jim Davis said the party would "cut costs through preventive methods to eliminate the need for programs," according to the State Journal-Register. What does that mean? Well, perhaps a more revealing quote can be found in an older article about the party's presidential candidate, John Hagelin (Chicago Tribune, 8/5/92): "Hagelin suggested that the nation's \$800 billion in annual health care expenditures could be reduced by half if meditation techniques were used on a preventative basis. 'We could reduce the deficit and cut taxes,' he said."

Yes, that's right. If we all meditate, we can reduce the deficit. Not to mention what we could do to crime. This is the same group who asked various city governments for millions of dollars to prove they could reduce crime. They were going to set up groups of meditators around the city and essentially use good vibes to stop crime. When they first asked for this money, I suggested they first prove it works, for example by setting up shop in the worst areas of Chicago ("REALLity Check" Vol. 1, #1).

Anyway, perhaps the worst claims these guys make is that their methods are scientifically proven. They even call their hopping and meditating "scientific technology of consciousness" that "reduces collective tension and stress [and] increases collective harmony and coherence." (SJR) In the Tribune article, Hagelin said, "The Natural Law party was founded ... to bring the light of science into politics. ... That means to use the extensive scientific knowledge of natural law that exists today to create programs that can solve the nation's pressing problems."

Just the thought of these guys hopping around on crossed legs claiming that they are using science makes my skin crawl worse than any Halloween ghost story. But it gets even worse when they try to use scientific-sounding language to obscure what they're doing. The State Journal-Register's "Statehouse Insider" column (10/27) reported that one of the hoppers claims he asked a theoretical physicist how "yogic flying" could lead to people floating out of the room: "He explained simply that the unified field is prior to space-time geometry, and it curves. If you can effect the curvature of space-time geometry in a localized way, and therefore not violate the gravitational field, but use it in its more subtler level, and you can only do this if you are acting from the unified field..." Uh huh.

On one final note, in case you were wondering, no, nobody in the press conference managed to actually fly, as followers of the Mahareshi claim they can do. When asked why they were just hopping, not floating, one responded that they had not yet graduated to that next consciousness level. Oh. Of course. Funny how nobody outside of this group has ever seen anybody do anything more than hopping around.

I'll make them a deal: When I actually see them float, I'll consider voting for them. After all, I wouldn't want to support somebody who hasn't yet reached the proper level of consciousness.
HMOs Endorsing Quackery?

The Associated Press (via Chicago Tribune, 10/7) and columnist Joan Beck (also Chicago Tribune, 10/10) had short columns about HMOs looking into allowing alternative medicine treatments like acupuncture, naturopathy, etc.

Apparently, the reasoning behind allowing such treatments has nothing to do with them actually doing anything for the patient – which is rather strange since many of these HMOs don't allow "experimental" techniques based on real medicine. Instead, it seems to be more a case of HMO customers wanting to have these expenses covered, and of these "treatments" being somewhat cheaper than real medicine. In other words, if John Doe gets a headache and goes to his homeopath, who gives him a little bottle of worthless pills for \$10, it's cheaper for the HMO than if he goes to his doctor, who orders tests to try to find out why Mr. Doe's head hurts.

As Beck notes in her column, the "treatments" being allowed "have not been subjected to the rigorous scientific testing required by mainstream medicine and are considered by many physicians to be quackery. Certainly, they raise questions about whether the HMO's first priority is to provide the best health care -- or the cheapest."

She further notes that HMOs claim to work hard to provide the best quality of care around. "But alternative medicine,"

she adds, "by its very definition, does not meet the standards of care HMOs purport to be offering."

What is perhaps most interesting about at least one HMO is that they will not allow a patient to go directly to a real medical specialist, such as a cardiologist or an oncologist, without first going through their primary-care physician. Heck, my wife couldn't even go directly to her obstetrician when she got pregnant until she got a referral from her primary-care doctor. However, they will be allowing those same patients to go directly to an acupuncturist or a naturopath.

Beck's final paragraph sums up quite well the dangers involved: "The real danger comes if HMOs are tempted to allow - or even encourage -- patients to use alternative medicine not just as an adjunct to mainstream medicine, but as a substitute. Herbal remedies or dietary supplements are a lot cheaper than treating cancer patients with expensive chemotherapy drugs, for example. And if they die sooner than they might otherwise, so much the better for the HMO's bottom line.

Indeed, William Jarvis, president of the National Council Against Health Fraud, is quoted by AP as saying, "One HMO frankly admitted they were referring AIDS patients to this quack clinic where they were giving them dietary supplements. They said it's cheaper than AZT, and the patient won't be around as long to collect."

Yet another true story that is scarier than any Halloween tale.
Governments Funding Quackery?

Not only HMOs are going for alternative medicine -- governments are doing it too. The German health minister spoke at the 200th anniversary celebration of the invention of homeopathy and said the success of homeopathy "cannot fundamentally be denied, even though this has often been attempted." (Nature, 9/26)

Well, this would have been great if he had actual scientific evidence to back up his claim, but, well, you know the drill by now.

However, a pilot study organized and funded by the European Commission at the request of the European Parliament (as part of the European Union) found that there is no valid reason to exempt homeopathy from normal scientific rules. It seems that homeopaths have been claiming that their methods cannot be tested through conventional medical tests (such as placebo-controlled, double-blind clinical trials). Note that this is a frequent claim made by promoters of pseudo-science. However, this study, carried out by 16 experts -- half skeptics and half proponents of homeopathy, found that claim to be in error.

The group analyzed more than 150 published results of clinical trials for homeopathy, but found them all to be of such low quality that they could not draw any conclusions. Now they must decide whether to start clinical trials, which are opposed in pharmacological and medical circles because they would be, as one European official said, "a waste of money."

Homeopathy is actually a point of contention in the European Union. It is quite popular in some countries, and virtually unheard of in others. In Germany, insurance companies will pay for homeopathic treatment, ignoring opposition by the medical community. A professor of pharmacology in Germany pointed out that they may be swayed by the cheap costs of such treatment. Hmmm. Now where have I heard that before?

Lest we think the American government is any better, Science (10/11) reported that Congress has increased the budget of the Office of Alternative Medicine within the National Institutes of Health from \$7.4 million to \$11.1 million! Within this increase is a directive for the NIH to "establish a center on chiropractic health care and manipulation methods." As before, Senators Orrin Hatch (the father-in-law of a chiropractor) and Tom Harkin (a frequent advocate of pseudoscientific "medicine") pushed the increase and chiropractic center through.

Exaggerated Testimony and the Indian Rope Trick

There was an interesting letter in Nature (9/13) regarding an investigation into how reliable personal testimony is when the claims are extraordinary.

In particular, the authors investigated the old (late nineteenth century) Indian rope trick, which generally is described as follows: A magician throws one end of a rope into the air; the rope remains rigid; a boy climbs up the rope and disappears at the top; the magician orders the boy to return, but he will not; the magician climbs up the rope with a knife and also disappears; the boy's dismembered body parts fall to the ground and are then covered by the returning magician; when he removes the cover, the boy is magically restored. If this trick were ever done, it would, indeed, be quite extraordinary!

However, when people searched for magicians who could do the trick -- sometimes offering great sums of money -- nobody could be found. It was frequently suggested that witnesses had seen a simple street magic trick and then exaggerated it over time. The authors of this letter decided to see if that suggestion could be proven.

What they found was that there is, indeed, a correlation between the length of time between the observation of the trick and the complexity of the description of the trick. In other words, if a person saw the trick only a few years ago, he described it as being somewhat simpler (for example: boy climbs up rope; boy seems to disappear; boy reappears on rope) while somebody who saw it 30 years earlier had a much more complex memory of the trick, similar to what I described earlier.

Indeed, even those who had seen the trick only two years earlier exaggerated to some extent, as was proven when a witness showed a photograph to an investigator, who pointed out that it was not a rope at all, but a bamboo stick with a boy balancing on top of it.

It may seem a little silly to investigate a trick that was done last century, but I think it does have definite bearing on the reliability of witnesses when dealing with extraordinary claims. Simply put: extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof -- witness statements simply will not do. And this investigation shows one very good reason why this is so.
Papal Science

In a move that is sure to draw fire from creationists, the Pope issued a statement that the theory of evolution is compatible with Christian faith and that it is supported by scientific studies and data (Chicago Tribune, 10/25).

As we have said before, REALL takes no position on religious matters unless there are claims involved that can be scientifically investigated. Creation/evolution is, of course, one such issue. This is why I get so tired of hearing creationists use the tired, logically invalid, argument that anybody who supports evolution (or "evil-lution") must be an atheist and is against creationism for that reason rather than the simple reason of scientific evidence. So it should be interesting to see how they respond to the Pope's statement.

It really is difficult for me to understand how people can continue to stare the evidence in the face and ignore it, but I guess that could be said about almost every aspect of the fringe science and paranormal claims we discuss in these pages.

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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.

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