

Does "Psychic" Reading  
Lead Police to Missing Body?  
A&E Network to feature case, including skeptical scenario

by Gary P. Posner, Tampa Bay Skeptics

On April 5 the Associated Press reported that, as per the story's headline in the St. Petersburg Times, "Psychic tip leads to missing man's body." The tipster was none other than Orlando "psychic detective" Noreen Reiner, who claims a history of great success in assisting police investigations into unsolved homicides and missing person cases, and whose assistance in this case is being touted by police and Navy personnel.

Seventy-six-year-old Norman Lewis, along with his Chevy S-10 truck, had been missing for two years from the tiny Florida town of Williston, located just southwest of Gainesville. According to contemporaneous newspaper accounts, on March 24, 1994, Lewis had driven off for a brief jaunt, leaving behind his wallet and respiratory inhaler, and was never seen again. In its April 11, 1994, edition, the Ocala Star-Banner quoted Williston Police Chief Olin Slaughter as observing, "It's like he fell off the edge of the earth." [Wink, wink. Hint, hint.]

After more than a year, with the Williston police following-up on "hundreds" of leads and conducting numerous aerial searches, all to no avail, the Lewis family suggested that a "psychic" be called in. Investigator Brian Hewitt, having previously been impressed by a Renier retroactive-crime-solving demonstration, and aware of her other credentials, passed along her name to the Lewis family, which reportedly provided the \$650 fee for her services (the police department did not have the funds).

Approximately three weeks after Hewitt called Renier to set up the appointment at her home, Renier performed her "psychic" reading. According to published accounts, it included a number of specific "clues" to help lead the police to Lewis' body (Renier is refusing to allow the public to see the videotape). The Williston Pioneer (on April 4 and June 27, 1996) quotes Chief Slaughter as saying that Renier said Lewis had traveled "east from his home to an area where there is ... water in something like a pit." (Emphasis added.) The Chiefland Citizen (April 11, 1996) quotes Slaughter: "She could see he was surrounded by metal.... She could see a cliff wall, and loose bricks, a railroad track, and a bridge." The numbers "45" and "21" were also offered as helpful clues.

A subsequent look into several bodies of water proved as fruitless as the earlier searches. But because of Renier's reading, the police called in a team of Navy divers from Jacksonville to search one particular limestone quarry. Although about eight months elapsed before the divers could arrive, on this past April 3, with the assistance of a \$70,000 detection device, they did indeed locate the missing truck, containing Lewis' skeletal remains, submerged in 20 feet of murky water.

Almost immediately after the Williston police announced that the case had been solved, largely as a result of Renier's "psychic" clues, the story quite naturally captured the attention of the media. In addition to newspapers and local TV, national radio icon Paul Harvey reported upon it, and the TV show Sightings will open its new fall season with this case. It may even have inspired what sounds suspiciously like a copy-cat "psychic" prediction that has persuaded authorities in Graniteville, Missouri, to drain a 3-million-gallon quarry in search of a girl missing from that town for seven years.

My involvement in the case began on May 7, when I received a telephone call from Maria Zone, a researcher for Towers Productions, based in Chicago. Towers is producing a series of one-hour documentaries for the A&E Network, tentatively called Unexplained. I was advised that one of the programs, presently scheduled for airing this January, will be devoted to several "renowned psychic detectives," including Renier, and that this case will be featured. I was then invited to prepare a response for what is promised by John McCarthy, the series' senior producer, to be a balanced, if not downright skeptical, presentation.

On June 27, a Towers producer, Judy Cole, with TV camera crew in tow, arrived in Williston (she would interview Renier in Orlando the following day). After first visiting with the police, she interviewed me (this was my second trip to the area, accompanied both times by TBS member Glenn Thompson, who recorded the action on videotape for TBS's archives). By then, thanks in part to materials provided by Zone and by TBS member and Williston resident Warren Gammel, I had accumulated a number of relevant newspaper articles and maps and, based upon the material available to me, had come to a provocative conclusion: Norman Lewis' remains had been found not because the police had the Navy divers search the body of water best fitting Renier's "psychic" clues, but because they had the Navy search the wrong watery pit!

Staring at the 1994 Bowden Custom Maps roadmap of Williston, the most immediately striking feature is the blue body of water just a few degrees south of due east and less than one mile away from Mr. Lewis' home. This limestone quarry, when approached from the west, is located adjacent to the intersection of U.S. 41 and state route 121. Flipping the map over, one can see that U.S. 41 is also known in Williston as state route 45. In other words, if Mr. Lewis had indeed traveled east from his home to a watery pit, as Chief Slaughter says Renier had seen in her "psychic" vision, he would have encountered such a quarry just east of the junction of state routes 45 and 121. Renier's two numerical clues were reportedly "45" and "21" -- had she offered "45" and "121," someone might have cynically accused her of having used the approximately three weeks available to her to research the case and consult a map!

Perusing the U.S. Geological Survey's "Williston Quadrangle" map, one may observe this clearly marked "Quarry" area in more detail. Of note is the Seaboard Coast Line's north/south railroad track 3/4 of a mile east of the quarry's eastern circumference, with a branch directed westward into the heart of the quarry area. One of Renier's clues was "railroad track."

Neither map reveals a "bridge" in the area, or any other "metal" structure, as Renier predicted. But where there is water, it is logical to assume that a bridge, if only a footbridge, may be nearby. And it had been widely reported (and probably directly told to Renier) that Mr. Lewis had disappeared in his "metal" truck. It is also logical to assume the presence of a "cliff wall" and "bricks" at a quarry, two more of Renier's clues.

As I told Judy Cole on camera, I cannot know if Renier's clues, intended to help locate Mr. Lewis, were the result of "psychic" power, or of some other, more prosaic, process. But, as I said to her, if I were desirous of having others believe, mistakenly, that I possessed psychic power, and if I had been approached by the police to assist in this case, I might have provided them with the very same clues. I added, "They're all right here," pointing to my smattering of newspaper articles and maps.

I elaborated: Forget about "psychic" detectives for a moment. Let's just employ "ordinary" detective-style reasoning and common sense. Considering the fact that the intensive ground and aerial search had turned up nothing, if Mr. Lewis and his truck were somewhere within the potential reach of the Williston authorities, where could they possibly be? In the middle of an extremely densely wooded area? In an abandoned building? (Either, perhaps if only a body was missing. But a truck?) Only one possibility even comes to mind -- submerged under water.

Chief Slaughter, it seems, had had the right idea all along, even if he was not consciously aware of it. It appeared, indeed, "like [Lewis] fell off the edge of the earth" -- and into a bottomless, or at least murky, pit. A quick glance at the Williston roadmap revealed an obvious potential site, and the U.S.G.S. map confirmed that this was just the sort of pit/quarry that fit the bill.

One minor problem. The "logical" site -- the one that Renier's "psychic" clues seemed tailored to -- the limestone quarry less than a mile east of Lewis' home, at the junction of state routes 45 and 121, serviced by a railroad track -- was not where Mr. Lewis' truck and remains were ultimately found! Rather, with the Navy's assistance, the truck containing the remains was located in a different limestone pit, just a few degrees east of due north from Lewis' home, and more than twice as far away! The recovery site, known as the Whitehurst pit, is also located adjacent to state route 45, but not route 121.

Renier's "21" clue, in fact, played no beneficial role whatsoever in assisting in the location of Mr. Lewis' body. Yet, this

clue has been hailed by the authorities as perhaps her most eerily precise of all. Why? Because, after Mr. Lewis' body had been recovered, it was realized that he had been found "2.1" miles from his home!

Nor was her "railroad track" clue of any value in deciding which quarry to search. Although the U.S.G.S. map clearly shows an "abandoned" track traversing the Whitehurst quarry east/west, the police did not become aware of its presence until a portion of the buried track was unearthed after the divers had already been called in.

Nor did her "bridge" clue offer any assistance in targeting this particular pit, or in helping narrow down the search area within the 30-acre quarry. But, as reporter Dave Monsees explained on a WTVT-TV 13 (Tampa) newscast of April 19, "Another clue that amazed [Chief] Slaughter was that the psychic saw a bridge nearby. Turned out he'd passed it countless times and never saw it -- on the access road to the quarry, an old, wooden truck scale that smacks for all the world of a bridge, if you take the time to stare at it."

If ever there was a case in which simple common sense and "retrofitting" -- transforming ubiquitous clues into valuable "hits" after the fact -- seemed to account for the miraculous success of a piece of "psychic" detective work, this appears to be one for the books.

Renier had apparently proven herself to the police and family not merely with her clues, but with her knowledge of details about Lewis' life (for instance, that he was retired from the military). But such information appeared in newspaper accounts during the search period, which are available to anyone interested enough to seek them out.

Judy Cole, after interviewing the police, informed me that Renier had sketched several lines for them representing a "quadrant" that appeared to encompass both the northern and eastern quarries. Cole also said that when some bricks were spotted at the northern pit, the police apparently decided to zero in on that one. Perhaps the A&E program will better explain why the divers were asked to search only that one quarry. Had they instead searched the one that seems a better match to Renier's clues, Mr. Lewis would have never been found, and Paul Harvey would have found something else to talk about. But perhaps the Graniteville, Missouri, authorities, and the family of that missing girl, might have been spared a lot of unnecessary hard work and heartache.

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## Carl Sagan Dies at 62

As most of you probably already know, astronomer, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and skeptic Carl Sagan has died after a two-year battle with a rare blood disorder and leukemia. He will be missed by the entire skeptics community.

Editor's Note: I want to share with you James Randi's eloquent remembrance of Sagan:

Randi: We've lost Carl Sagan, and I can't quite adjust to the fact. When Asimov went, it was bad enough, but now that both these bright lights have gone out, I'm desolated.

Up until the end, he was confident, cheery, optimistic. Despite the ravages of his illness and the obvious, visible effects of the therapy he was undergoing, he made every public appearance he could. He was brave in the face of his demise, and went like the warrior he was.

I urge you, if you have not yet read *The Demon-Haunted World*, his last book, please do so.

Many months ago, I received a bound galley of that book, with a cautionary note not to prepare a review based closely upon it, since there were many planned changes due. When I eventually received the final version, I noted many instances where Carl had strengthened his language, upgraded and fortified his adjectives, and in general hardened his language. I had the chilling thought that perhaps he felt this might be his last statement about the pseudoscience, crackpots, frauds, and quacks that he so resented. I feel his loss acutely. He had the ability to captivate with his words, spoken or written. His students at Cornell worshiped him, and though his colleagues were often pedantically annoyed at his high public profile and expressed opinions that he should return to astronomy, he ignored that pressure -- happily for

us -- and continued to be the great teacher of critical thinking that the world came to know and respect. A giant has fallen. We can only celebrate his life and continue to listen to him through his writings.

## Ongoing and Upcoming

The James Randi Educational Foundation continues to expand its efforts to gather materials. Here's an update from Randi:

Construction of the Foundation Auditorium will start in January. Our video facility is now substantially expanded, and we can not only make up to eight copies of videos at one time, but we can dub in and out of any format. That includes NTSC, PAL, SECAM, and VHS, U-MATIC, 8-mm. Stills of startling resolution and color are possible, and we are beginning to archive -- digitally -- many old tapes of "psychics" being caught at their thing. Also, shows prophesying events that never happened, and various classic "cold readings" that serve as excellent examples for analysis. The book library is up to 1,860 volumes, plus all the French, Spanish and German books, and hundreds of skeptical journals.

If any of you still have books, videos or journals that you could contribute to the JREF, please send them along to:

James Randi Educational Foundation  
201 S.E. Davie Boulevard  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316-1815

From the Editor

Bob Ladendorf

We were all shocked to learn about the loss of Carl Sagan in December. (See a tribute to him on page 3.) I had read his *Demon-Haunted World* and was impressed with his comprehensive survey of paranormal and pseudoscientific beliefs and activities. His criticism of Velikovsky's ideas opened my eyes about skepticism and critical thinking nearly 20 years ago. In a sense, his thinking stimulated me into eventually helping to found REALL and to edit this newsletter.

The lead article on a "psychic detective" case by Gary Posner of the Tampa Bay Skeptics can serve as an example on how to investigate claims of the paranormal.

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Corrupted computer files knocked this newsletter off schedule. I had to redesign the newsletter from scratch. (Being the graphic designer and typesetter stretches the ability [and patience!] of this long-time editor.) For those interested, The REALL News is produced on a Macintosh Performa 6300CD using Clarisworks 4.0 software, with text set in 10-point Palatino and headlines in Benguiat Frisky. The original is printed on a Hewlett-Packard DeskJet 855C ink-jet printer, and final copies are produced at Kinko's.

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

The lead article you will find in this issue comes to us courtesy of the Tampa Bay Skeptics (TBS). I think it shows a classic case of a "psychic" taking credit where none is due and the media and others doing everything they can to give her free publicity. Another reason we are reprinting it is that I was called by Maria Zone, one of the producers of A&E's *Unexplained*, and was told I'd also be on this show to discuss Greta Alexander and/or Dorothy Allison (the shoving psychic from my appearance on the Morton Downey Jr. show). Unfortunately, after her first call expressing a great deal of interest, I never heard from them again. In discussing this with Gary Posner, the author of these articles and founder of TBS, he said he felt he had been dealt with honestly by Zone and others dealing with the show, so I'll withhold judgment on my treatment until I see the show and find out if Alexander and/or Allison are featured and what other skeptics might appear. (This episode is scheduled to appear on January 9.)

REALL actually owes quite a debt of gratitude to the Tampa Bay Skeptics and Gary Posner. Some five years ago I wrote my first skeptical article for a newsletter -- the TBS Report. I had been hopping around computer bulletin boards and found one containing back issues of TBS Report. In one of them I saw an article about a "breast hypnotist" -- a guy who claimed he could hypnotize women and make them grow larger breasts. As it happened, this guy was traveling around the country and was stopping to do a radio show on WYMG here in Springfield! I called Posner and he immediately sent me a great deal of information to use. I also called Don Murphy of WMYG and we worked out a deal where I would call in and be able to use that information on the air while the guy was in the studio. As it happened, he never showed, but Don let me read what I had anyway, so even more skeptical information was put forward. I guess the hypnotist had some friends in town who heard the show and relayed it to him, and I guess he wasn't very happy about it. Good. This was the article I wrote up for the TBS Report.

But the point of this story is that this incident, perhaps more than any other, spurred my interest in forming a local skeptics group in Central Illinois. Thus, after contacting Bob Ladendorf ("Editor Bob") and Wally Hartshorn ("Webmaster Wally" -- okay, so I just made that one up), REALL was born.

So, thank you, Gary, for these articles. And I'd like to extend greater thanks for your help, five years ago, in getting me information about the "breast hypnotist."

Letter to the Editor

Editor's Note: The following letter is a combined version of two e-mail letters.

Dear Editor:

Armchair observations and commentary are all very well and fine. Without same, I'd be virtually out of a job myself! Still, the armchair can only be rocked so far before it arrives, creaky and decrepit, somewhat short of its original intended destination. Specifically, I refer to Martin Kottmeyer's two-part "explanation" of the Exeter, New Hampshire, UFO case, which recently appeared in The REALL News (September and October issues) and which attributes same to a human hoax -- something along the lines of a Boy Scout-launched balloon or kite.

Snicker, snicker, my, aren't we superior!

The problem with such a facile dismissal of the case is pointed out in the two paragraphs which follow (originally addressed to Mr. Kottmeyer in person):

Exeter as a neighborhood balloon or kite? Mayhaps. But if a ground-controller were in charge of things, wouldn't the 60-degree angle change dramatically on at least those occasions when the kite was being purposefully and actively maneuvered from below? Release tension on the top of the tail, in other words, and the whole would tend to go upright or perpendicular, wouldn't it? Similarly, jerk on the top, and wouldn't the whole tend to go parallel with the horizon? You can't have it both ways.

Either the slant was constant or it wasn't. If constant, then that doesn't sound like a balloon or kite jerking about in the wind to me, unless you (or Isaac Newton) can come up with some way to configure a constant 60-degree angle kite tail. (In fact, this is a theory you could have easily tried out in your own back yard before floating it in print.)

Alternatively, are you also seriously suggesting that someone ran two copper wires from a battery on the ground to the kite in order to power the onboard lights? Then how long would such wires have had to have been for the whole to disappear out of sight? (For that matter, wouldn't two such wires occasionally twist in the wind and short out?) I know from personal experience (a Yamaha 750) that even motorcycle batteries are inordinately heavy for their size, as in lead balloon/kite, which is why you postulate a ground-based battery yourself. Maybe you should shoot for four AAs? But if light bulbs were involved, then highway flares probably weren't -- unless you know some way to make flares (and/or candles) go on and off in sequence? On the other hand, if mere light bulbs were employed, then how explain the illumination that allegedly lit up the ground and caused the poor hoaxes (read: ignorant fools) to dive for cover? Pretty

bright bulbs, even at a hundred feet in height! You'd think hoaxers everywhere would be using them by now, almost on a nightly basis, that Edmund Scientific would be carrying them as UFO Hoax Lights -- Cheaper by the Dozen!

Close, but no Cuban cigar. Note that I don't claim that Exeter was de facto extraterrestrial in nature. My remarks are simply addressed to Mr. Kottmeyer's own equally implausible solution. Obviously, I don't mind him noting that the Exeter object behaved erratically on one hand (i.e., bobbing about like a balloon or kite); what I object to is Mr. Kottmeyer wanting to have his cake and eat it, too, specifically by citing the 60-degree angle consistency in his favor. So which is it, Martin? Was the reported object consistent in flight or not? You can't argue it both ways simultaneously. Unless your armchair is bigger than mine -- and I live in Texas, where Suburbans are the state car.

One other thing .... As anyone knows who's ever flown a kite, they aren't necessarily silent at all. In fact, depending on factors like construction, wind speed, and of course proximity, kites can make all sorts of flapping and ruffling noises. Some can be particularly different to control, too, no doubt more so by night.

Sincerely,  
Dennis Stacy  
Editor  
MUFON UFO Journal  
dstacy@texas.net

Martin Kottmeyer responds:

I agree that the angle of the kite-line would alter during maneuvers. Are we sure it didn't? In saying the lights were always at a 60-degree angle, the witnesses need not have meant literally every second of the encounter. I could easily envisage myself in the same situation, saying the same thing, but failing to clarify that it changed angle when it dropped down towards me.

Their official statements were fairly brief and this could have been a way of emphasizing the difference between what they saw and explanations they had to parry like airplanes. I wouldn't expect every detail to be put in the statement; only those thought relevant.

I hadn't assumed bare wires. I have an old, used Kawasaki motorcycle gathering dust which I drove for a time in the Seventies. The battery is no heavier than a three-cell flashlight. The main reason I assume it to be ground level is that kites will crash and those batteries are not cheap to replace. Strobes are not mere light bulbs and are not cheap either. My guess is that the prankster had easy access to strobes and was around them so much that the idea to use them could come on impulse. Maybe he was connected to the Sylvania Miniature Lighting facility in Hillsboro, NH, some 50 miles away; maybe a science teacher at the nearby Philips Exeter Academy was into high speed photography experimentation and a student borrowed the strobes; maybe the guy was into photography himself. Doubtless there are many possibilities.

I'm open to alternatives; I work with the knowledge I have and there are always limits and gaps. If anyone else confronted with this same puzzle can come up with a better answer, I am waiting to see it. My current feeling is that the sequencing lights pretty much rule out any natural phenomena. The silence rules out anything motor-driven. The fluttering says it can't be massive. Balloons don't strike me as maneuverable enough. If not kites, what is left? Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPVs)? Lights on RPVs defeat their intent, as they are basically spy devices, and what around Exeter is there to use it on? Nothing else matches and that includes anything in the UFO literature. Unless I'm missing some vital clue, I don't see where else the facts could lead. I'll take best guess over no guess on principle.

David Bloomberg also responds:

Being the Chairman and a member of the Editorial Board, I get to see these letters before anybody else. I have a few of my own comments to add.

Nowhere in Martin's articles does he even hint that the Exeter sighting might have been a balloon. Yet Mr. Stacy

mentions it several times as if he had. I fail to understand why he could not simply discuss the points Martin actually had made, rather than making up his own straw men to knock down.

Mr. Stacy does this elsewhere in discussing the lights and making the presumption that "hoaxers everywhere would be using them by now, almost on a nightly basis." Why? He is essentially saying that if one person created a hoax UFO, hundreds would follow. Of course, since they aren't, he presumes himself correct. This is another straw man argument.

Finally, Mr. Stacy says that the idea of a hoaxer is as "equally implausible" as an extraterrestrial craft? Did Mr. Stacy really mean to say that the idea of a person flying a kite with lights on it is as implausible as a ship piloted by alien beings flying vast distances in order to scare a few people in a remote town? Come now, Mr. Stacy.

Editor's Note:

At one point in the original article (Part II), the date of publication for The American Boys Handy Book was incorrectly given. That date was actually 1892, which shows how long this sort of thing has been going on.

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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.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

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