

Update

TBS Receives Official Police File on Williston Missing-person Case

by Gary P. Posner, Tampa Bay Skeptics (TBS)

The lead story [in last month's issue of The REALL News from a reprinted article in the Tampa Bay Skeptics (TBS) Report] dealt with Orlando "psychic" Noreen Renier's involvement in a missing-person case, the credit she has received from the Williston, Florida, police for directing them to the murky, limestone quarry/pit where the 76-year-old man's body was found, and the subsequent media publicity surrounding the case. (That publicity includes an A&E Network program, The Unexplained, in the "Psychic Detectives" episode aired in early January, which contained skeptical input from me).

A Tampa law firm (which would just as soon remain unnamed) made a Public Records Request of the police department to provide a copy of its entire file on the case. TBS has been forwarded a copy of the records provided to the firm by the Williston police.

Of particular note are two items among the mound of paperwork: a May 12, 1995, report filed by Investigator Brian Hewitt (Renier's main contact with the department), and the notes jotted down by Hewitt regarding Renier's July 17, 1995, "psychic" reading. (Both, as well as relevant maps, are available from TBS for a self-addressed return envelope and \$1.00 for copying costs: TBS, 1113 Normandy Trace Rd., Tampa, FL 33602-5771).

In his two-page May 12 report (containing spelling and grammatical errors that I will correct as best I can in the otherwise exact quotes below), Hewitt notes that a "handyman ... had recently told [name withheld by me] that [Norman Lewis, the missing person] had told him that if [Lewis] were not able to take care of himself because of illness, he would find a river or pit rather than the [retired] sailors home. ... Four days before his disappearance, [Lewis] told [handyman's name withheld by me] that if his health were failing, he would never be cared for by relatives or submit to the sailors home, that there were too many pits and canals to met [meet?] with. ... [The handyman later] arrived at the police station ... and he related [to Hewitt] the last conversation he had with Norman Lewis ... indicating it [actually] took place approx. three weeks before his disappearance. He stated Norman seemed agitated and dissatisfied with ... his life [including having] problems at the house with his girlfriend, relating she did not make him feel needed. ... Told [handyman] not to get old, and made some reference to knowing every rock pit in the county. ..."

At the time I wrote the above article, I had no idea that, as a result of his failing health and other personal problems, Lewis had threatened to commit suicide in a "river" or a "rock pit," or that such information had begun to spread throughout his tiny community and become known to the police prior to their session with Renier. I had therefore speculated in my article (as I did for the A&E program) that, based upon information in contemporaneous newspaper accounts, the previous unsuccessful land and air searches, and the prominence of limestone pits in the area (as noted on maps), simple deductive reasoning rather than "psychic" power might have led Renier to her conclusion.

We now have another plausible explanation for Renier's remarkable success in locating the missing man, and one that requires less "reasoning" than "parroting" back information possibly already made available to her by her police contact in a well-intentioned effort to assist her. As noted in our last issue, Judy Cole, the A&E producer, had visited with the police just before her interview with me. She gave me no indication that the police had mentioned knowing of Lewis' "river or rock pit" suicide plan before they consulted a "psychic."

Since it had previously been publicized that Renier's reading had been video and audiotaped, the law firm had made an effort to obtain these tapes, which would reveal the extent to which Renier received the "feedback" that she requires while performing her "Twenty Questions" or "Hot and Cold" parlor-game-style "psychic" readings. The police informed the law firm that the Lewis family had paid for the session with Renier and owned the videotape. The police did acknowledge possession of an audiotape and, after some initial hesitancy, provided what Hewitt calls "a copy of the

field audio tape [which] contains portions of the session with Noreen Renier . . . "

To my dismay, upon playing the tape, it is evident that there is a cut/edit after nearly every sentence spoken by Renier (and often in mid-sentence or mid-word). Further, the entire tape runs for a mere five minutes and forty-three seconds. Yet, there are some utterances worth discussing:

"A lot of rocks" -- Did she know about the "rock pit" suicide threat? Or consult a map, as I did (see above article)?

"We have a lot of things that go straight down. No one really knows what's down there because it's so hazardous and dangerous and people don't go down there." -- Ditto.

"Let me have a starting place.... We want to get you in the quadrant from 9 to 12 . . . into that pie-shaped area." And from Hewitt's notes: "Where do you want me to start? At his house." -- Starting from Lewis' house, his body was found in the 12 to 3 quadrant, not 9 to 12.

"There's a railroad track that goes through there." -- See above article about the RR tracks on the map.

"There's a very famous river." -- Did she know about the "river/pit" suicide plan?

"Remember I wanted to go towards the river. For some reason, the river is down below." -- A hedged, hybrid "river/pit" clue?

"Speedometer is zero in front of the house.... Maybe 4, maybe 5. If it's 45 miles, if it's 4.5 miles. I want to go to my left. I want to go to 9. . . . I feel 45. 45x. You know how they have that little baby circle up there? ... Looking for H and 45." -- Lewis was found 2.1 miles from his home. The "45" was credited as a "hit" because he was found near U.S. 41, also known as State Route 45 (confirmed on a roadmap, although no such signs are posted in Williston).

"Swallowed up [down there in the water] but there's hardness higher up." -- Obvious if she was directing them to a "rock pit."

"Must be still somehow in the vehicle. I feel the metal very, very strongly." -- It was widely publicized that both Lewis and his truck had been missing for two years.

"We're not too far from an old bridge. Either it's been decayed or it's broken or it's not used.... It's called the old bridge or is an old bridge." -- She was credited with a "hit" because there is an old truck scale nearby (but no bridge).

"One point, or one-one point two. I see two-two-I [the letter "I"]. I believe a very strong H, 'Ha'-sounding or an H in it." From Hewitt's notes: "221 22 21 2I H EML E 11.2" -- Renier was credited with an eerily accurate "hit" because Lewis was found 2.1 miles from his home!!! But what about the "45" or "4.5" miles???

Among the pages in the police file is a map of Williston with a 90 degree (L-shaped) area from 11:00 to 2:00 drawn on it marked "Noreen's quadrant." The point of convergence of the two lines is correctly marked "Norman's House," and the quadrant, which was drawn with a ruler, includes the northern pit where the body was found (at about 1:00) but not the eastern pit that I suggested last issue her clues more closely fit (at about 3:30-4:00). This "quadrant" impresses me as having been drawn with care sometime after Noreen's session rather than by Noreen during it.

But did Noreen specify a 1:00 to 4:00 quadrant? Not according to the edited tape and Hewitt's notes (see above quotes). The unedited audiotape of Renier's "psychic" reading should reveal a great deal more about what she actually did and did not say, as well as what clues the police may have given her. And the videotape, if we ever have an opportunity to view it, ought to clarify what "quadrant" she may have sketched out for the police. Needless to say, we will continue to follow this story.

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

I've got articles, papers, and snippets all over my desk here, so it must be time for another column. There have also been several TV shows of interest, but I won't address them here. One, the John Stossel report on junk science, will be shown at our February meeting; another, The Unexplained episode on "psychic detectives" is covered partially by Gary Posner's articles of this issue and last, and an additional portion will be covered in greater detail in a future article by me.

### Science in the Courtroom

A federal judge in Oregon made a ruling that, if upheld, could reverberate throughout the country. According to Science (1/3), he ruled last month that evidence linking autoimmune disorders to silicone breast implants is too weak to be presented in front of a jury.

The method Judge Robert E. Jones used to decide whether or not to exclude the evidence could (hopefully) be used as a model for other cases involving scientific evidence. Since Jones knew it was likely that both the plaintiff and defense would call a number of "experts" to make scientific claims to the jury, he put together an independent panel to sift through the evidence before the trial began. He cited the 1993 Daubert v. Merrell Dow Supreme Court decision calling on judges to be "gatekeepers" to screen out testimony based on faulty science. The panel was made up of four scientists with no previous connection to breast implant cases, and included an epidemiologist, a rheumatologist, an immunotoxicologist, and a polymer chemist. He instructed the panel to determine whether the "experts'" opinions were supported by good scientific data and acceptable scientific methods.

The result was that Jones excluded "any expert testimony concerning a general causal link between silicone-gel breast implants" and systemic illness. He noted that an epidemiologist who has testified numerous times in support of breast implant plaintiffs was presenting claims that were not peer-reviewed. He called one of the claims of the plaintiffs -- that they suffer from a new disease called "atypical connective tissue disease" -- "at best an untested hypothesis."

I should note that Jones is not finalizing his decision until another scientific panel investigating similar cases (appointed by Alabama Chief Judge Sam C. Pointer) concludes their investigation; however, he has said he is "unlikely" to change his mind. If he doesn't change his mind, the plaintiffs' lawyer have already indicated that they will appeal, saying, "His role is not to judge whether the experts are right." Well then who should? If not an independent panel assigned by the judge, should a possibly scientifically illiterate jury decide which claims are backed by science and which are baloney? I think our jury system is great, but should they decide matters that are best left to the scientific method? Not in my opinion.

### Anderson's Psychic Fixation

Columnist Jack Anderson seems to be completely hung up on "psychics." He wrote three columns (12/23, 12/30, 1/8 -- all appearing in the State Journal-Register) addressing the claims of the \$20 million debacle paid for by our taxes (see also "REALLity Check," Vol. 3, #10).

While Anderson at least admits there were failures in these columns, he mostly ignores them and tries to sing praises about the alleged successes. The first may be the best, and actually almost led me to believe he was recanting his earlier support for such nonsense. He made statements like, "The CIA has said that psychic spies never proved to be of any use, but the log reveals that the CIA was the unit's second biggest employer," and "It was the Secret Service that begged the unit for help in thwarting a perceived threat from the elusive Carlos the Jackal, who was usually employed by Libya or other hostile Middle Eastern countries. ... the unit failed to locate Carlos."

His second column in the series, however, looked almost like he hadn't read the first, let alone written it! He discussed a case of a kidnapped U.S. Army general and the use of "psychics" to help find him. He says that three "psychics" were consulted, and one supposedly gave almost exactly correct information (he ignores the other two), but, alas, the information was not sent up the line quickly enough and the information was only verified after the general was released. Why do I suspect there is more to this story? It sounds suspiciously like the "psychic detectives" who use 20/20 hindsight to claim their predictions were correct after a body has been discovered.

He gives similar information about the unit's use during the Iran hostage crisis. He says the "psychics" gave some information that later turned out to be true. What was this information? One piece was that one of the hostages was in a poor mental state. How is that psychic? Did they expect all the hostages to be cheerful and upbeat? More importantly, how is it helpful? It isn't. There are several other examples of such nonsense, in which Anderson makes the obvious look as if they are great successes.

But even here, we see some amount of Anderson being of two minds. After citing this as a supposedly great success, and claiming that the "psychic spy" unit had several "hits," he notes that "the information never led to the recovery of a single missing person." So what is his point? I'm honestly not sure. Why harp on the few supposed hits and ignore the misses while, at the same time, admitting even those "hits" were useless?

The third column details a "psychic" supposedly foreseeing the 1987 bombing of a U.S. Navy frigate in the Persian Gulf by an Iraqi plane. Again, Anderson admits that "most -- if not all -- of the spy unit's work turned out to be a complete failure," but again he goes into a case that is purported to be a "eerily accurate."

This particular "psychic" had tried four times previously to predict the future -- all were failures. The report does seem to discuss what could be a missile hitting a warship. But there are numerous questions here. The first is about whether we can rely on the date of the report. There have been cases of "psychics" back-dating their "predictions" and certainly we cannot rule this out without further investigation (which Anderson, of course, does not provide). Beyond that, even if he and his superiors were absolutely honest, so what? In order to accurately rate this prediction, we have to look at the whole picture, not just this little piece. We know that he had failed to accurately predict the future in four previous tries. What had he said then? Did he predict horrible accidents then as well? What about all the other "psychics" in this unit? Why didn't they predict this event?

All in all, Anderson has again ignored or glossed over many facts in singling out supposed successes to write about. This project went on from 1978 to 1995. They made thousands of predictions which turned out to be false. I wonder, if I got a group of random people together over a 17-year time period and told them to make predictions about various things, how many they would get right just by chance. If I say here that I foresee an airplane crash, and one occurs somewhere in the world in the next week or two, does that make me psychic? If I told Jack Anderson, I bet he'd write a column about it...

Scientologist Buys Anti-Cult Network

In an ironic twist caused by the nation's court system, the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) has been bought by one of the groups that they fought the most (Chicago Sun-Times, San Jose Mercury News).

CAN, headquartered in Barrington, Illinois, ran the best-known hotline about cults for worried family members. But as CAN became more influential, its foes started to fight back. Scientologists fought CAN with a number of lawsuits because of CAN's claims that Scientology is a cult. When one of those suits succeeded and won \$1.8 million, CAN had to file for bankruptcy.

As part of the filing, CAN's logo, post office box, and telephone number were all sold to the highest bidder, who just happens to be a Scientologist. The buyer said he is working with people "united in their distaste for CAN" and plans to reopen the group so it "disseminates the truth about all religions."

As an attorney who had represented CAN notes, "People will still pick up the CAN name in a library book and call saying, 'My daughter has joined the Church of Scientology.' And your friendly CAN receptionist is someone who works for Scientology."

Even worse, the next item that could be auctioned off are 270 boxes of CAN files stuffed with confidential information about current and former cult members, efforts to get them out of the cults, etc. Another lawyer who has frequently represented Scientologists is trying to purchase these files.

A former Scientologist who was a church spokesman for 20 years, before he quit and became a critic of the group, said, "Scientology will pay anything to get their hands on those files. We always figured that CAN was the nexus for all the

rest of the problems [Scientology had]. So the idea of getting the files is similar to the KGB being able to buy the files of the CIA."

Free Speech or Fraud?

Alsip, Illinois, is the latest Chicago suburb to ban fortune-telling. Other suburbs with such bans include Des Plaines, Schaumburg, and Waukegan, where they say the bans shield against fraud (Chicago Tribune, 12/12)

Such bans pit the idea of public protection against free speech arguments, though none has been challenged to a high enough court to get a precedent-setting ruling. Dorothy Oja, chairwoman of the Los Angeles-based Association for Astrological Networking, claims that the cities "always lose" in court, and wrote a letter to the Alsip village attorney, citing a "string of victories" and a case currently pending in California. She went on to say, "Just because you fear something or don't like something personally doesn't mean it doesn't have a right to exist. The law protects all kinds of speech."

Anybody who knows me at all knows that it would be hard to find a stauncher defender of the First Amendment. However, I must take issue with Ms. Oja's claim that about the law protecting "all kinds of speech." The law, or rather, the First Amendment, does not protect fraud. And, unless "psychics" can come up with some evidence to back their claims, taking money and claiming to tell the future is just that -- fraud. An ACLU spokesperson said, "Telling fortunes is lawful." If somebody could actually tell a fortune, I'd agree. If they can't, it's just a bad con game. Last time I checked, con games were not legal.

Indeed, the Supreme Court ruled in May (in a case about beer and liquor prices) that the government generally cannot ban the truthful promotion of legal products. That's fine with me and I agree completely with that ruling. So, my opinion is that when "psychics" can prove that their claims are truthful promotions, then they should be regarded as being the same as any other business. But as long as they peddle products that cannot stand up to scrutiny, they should not be able to hide behind the First Amendment as a shield for their fraudulent nonsense.

Letter to the Editor

Recent discussions of kites as part of an explanation of lights in the night sky (September, October, and December by Kottmeyer, Stacy, and Bloomberg) would make good kite material -- they are paper-thin. People with knowledge of balloons, kites, other lifting systems, batteries, and electronics ought to be consulted.

Such knowledge is not esoteric; for instance, I just brought up 100 entries from an AltaVista worldwide web search on: kite\* AND (parafoil OR kytoon OR "kite balloon"). Powerful, stable parafoils were sold at retail by Jalbert (see <http://www.wamnet.net/~wind/>). Kytoons ([http://shiva.earth.monash.edu.au/docs/s\\_kytoon.jpg](http://shiva.earth.monash.edu.au/docs/s_kytoon.jpg)) were available from Dewey and Almy, which (at least in 1973) was a division of W.R. Grace Co. I don't recall that either was a new product in the early 1970's. Kite balloons of various sorts were used in the First World War.

The wind at night, a trickier subject, is part of a field of study known as boundary layer meteorology. The first step in researching such a case would be to study local surface weather observations and data from the closest pairs of 12-hour radiosonde launches spanning the time of the incident, data that may still be available from the National Climate Data Center in Asheville, N.C.

Now let's get down to specifics regarding Mr. Kottmeyer's idea: What inventive kid at Phillips Exeter Academy in 1965 had a father or big brother at nearby MIT?

Ron Larkin  
Vice Chairperson, REALL

From the Editor

Following a successful and interesting talk by Ron Larkin at our January meeting, we feature a video on "junk science" in February followed by an eagerly anticipated revisit in March by Detective Bruce Walstad, an expert on street scams,

a magician and a funny prankster.

This month, we feature an update by Gary Posner on his own article in last month's newsletter. He casts doubt about the claims by the psychic in the disappearance case. His research demonstrates how effective a skeptics' group and its members can be in investigating paranormal or pseudoscientific claims. Posner also discussed this case for the recent "Psychic Detectives" episode on A&E's *The Unexplained*. If you haven't seen the program, don't despair, we'll probably show it at one of our future meetings.

From the Chairman

I'd like to start my first column of our fifth volume by thanking REALL's Vice-Chairman Ron Larkin for his great presentation at this month's meeting! It drew a great crowd and there was some very good discussion afterwards. I had to drag people out when the library closed.

And I'd like to follow this by announcing a speaker for our March meeting: Detective Bruce Walstad! Many of our longtime members already know Detective Walstad from his articles here or from the first time he came and spoke to our group and a criminology class at the University of Illinois in Springfield (UIS, then Sangamon State). He also was the driving force behind my appearing (with him) on the Morton Downey Jr. show to debate (and get pushed by) "psychics." He has appeared on numerous such shows, is the President of Professionals Against Confidence Crime, an expert on fortune telling scams and other "psychic" nonsense, and just an all-around great guy. He will be speaking to REALL and a UIS group on Tuesday, March 4, with the specific time and place to be determined (it will either be at the Lincoln Library or at UIS). He is one speaker you don't want to miss! We'll have more information in our February newsletter.

As far as the February meeting, while we don't have a speaker, we do have an interesting TV show to watch. John Stossel, of ABC News, had a good show about junk science on this month, and we'll be watching and discussing it on Tuesday, February 4, at 7 pm in the Lincoln Library.

In other news, normally, we publish The REALL News subject and author indices in the January issue of the newsletter. However, after four years of articles, it's gotten a bit big. We're still working on it, but we will probably publish a separate index to send out, perhaps along with a later newsletter issue.

Speaking of the newsletter, next month will be our Fourth Anniversary Special and will, as usual, feature a 12-page issue with extra articles for your enjoyment. Until then, I hope to see you at the meeting!

In Case You Missed It...

by Bob Ladendorf

Recent news and sources of interest, with brief summaries and a rating of the content: 1 = Pro-skeptical; 2 = Leaning skeptical; 3 = Neutral, presenting sides equally; 4 = Leaning paranormal/pseudoscientific; 5 = Pro-paranormal.

"Can Faith Heal?" Bob Condor, *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 4, 1996, *Tempo* -- Sec. 2, p. 1 -- Explores positive connections between religious beliefs and physical health. Cites studies supporting assertions that believers get healthier more than nonbelievers. Selected quote: " 'Perhaps we are even wired for God as a survival mechanism to counter the angst,' [Dr. Herbert] Benson [author of *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*] said." Rating: 4

News Reports — Weeping painting and Virgin Mary sighting. Channel 20 News, Springfield, Illinois, Dec. 24, 1996. Report on a Bethlehem church painting that has "tears." The report indicated that the city was broke, and this sighting was bringing in tourists. The other report showed a crowd in another country looking at a reflection in a building that resembled the Virgin Mary, according to some witnesses. Rating: 3

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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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