

## The Shamans of Suburbia

by Richard Petraitis

A student approached me in the classroom the other day and related to me a bizarre tale of a man who claimed he was an actual shaman! As this account went, the man had met the student at a restaurant and proceeded to tell the student and his girlfriend that he was an actual shaman who had received his training in India. (India is not exactly a hotbed of shamanism. Webster's dictionary defines a shaman as "a person who acts as intermediary between the natural and supernatural worlds, using magic to cure illness, foretell the future, control spiritual forces, etc." Shamanism is Northern Asian in origin, where it is still practiced among some of the indigenous people of Siberia.) I requested that my student, if he encountered the "shaman" again, inquire how this shaman received his training in the predominantly Hindu and Sikh country of India, known for yogis and holy men, not shamans!

However, going away from my usual attack on those who claim paranormal powers, with questions targeted on how these powers defy known scientific laws, I will let American history provide the examples that disprove the claims any "modern day" American shamans have to magical powers. History has shown that shamans had no magic powers, even when practiced by those who genuinely held those beliefs in our own past — the Native Americans. Please trust me when I tell you that the Native Americans had every reason to use their best sorcery against an invading enemy, the Europeans. Starting with Columbus, Cortes, and Pizarro, and ending in the last Indian battles for the Americas, like the tragic stand at Wounded Knee in the Dakotas, history records that one shaman after another used his best incantations and spells to fight the European invaders and to protect his tribe's warriors, but to no avail. Superior weapons, devastating diseases, and a continuing colonial land grab, despite the fierce, desperate fighting by the Native Americans, overwhelmed the original people of the Americas. Let's closely study the specific accounts of shamanism being used to fight the European enemy during the Indian Wars, fought over a period of four hundred years. Magic was attempted by Native American shamans, unsuccessfully, to stop European invaders of the various Native American nations.

After the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, European exploration and colonization of the Americas accelerated at a rapid pace. The people of the Americas would become forcefully awakened to a newly arisen and aggressive culture, that of Western Europe. The Aztec emperor, Montezuma, head of a militaristic empire and a believer in the power of sorcerers, had a number of these shamans present in his court. When the Spanish adventurer, Hernando Cortes, landed with his small army near present-day Veracruz, Mexico, Montezuma sent his best sorcerers to bewitch the conquistadors with powerful spells. The spells didn't work and the magicians attributed the impotency of their magical arts to the conquistadors' "hardskins," a possible reference to the armor they wore as protection against Aztec weapons. Unable to thwart the army of Cortes with magic, the Aztec empire would also be unable to prevent an advance on its capital of Tenochitlan. The Spanish arrival at the capitol city of the Aztecs would be the beginning of the end for Montezuma and his people. The land of Mexica changed rulers, despite Aztec resistance by physical and magical means. As one example, during a siege of the Aztec capital, in 1521, Aztec priests performed ceremonies, including human sacrifices, and promised the beleaguered population that Cortes and his Indian allies would be delivered by their god of war into Aztec hands in eight days. Unfortunately, the situation failed to change militarily, and the population became completely demoralized. They had already been disillusioned when Cortes didn't turn out to be their returning god, Quetzalcoatl!

Native American shamans, usually men because of the male hierarchy of most Indian tribes, claimed to have the ability to foretell the future using divination and vision quests. Despite the numerous shamans and medicine men among the five hundred Native American nations prior to 1492, none of these men of magic used their special powers to foresee and to prepare their people to repel the future European invasion. The Incan emperor, Atahualpa, in 1532, was caught completely by surprise with the news of white men disembarking from ships on the Peruvian coast. Incan diviners and augurs also had no previous clue to the impending invasion, despite their repore with the spirit world. (However, one coastal chieftain, who brought news of the Spaniards' arrival to Atahualpa, did give the Incan emperor sage advice to silence the Spanish cannon -- pour Incan beer down the barrel to appease the thunder god inside of it.) The coastal

Atlantic Native Americans were similarly surprised by the first arrivals of Europeans to their shores, despite the tribal shamans and seers in their midst. Why didn't the Native Americans have any warning regarding their ultimate conquest by enemy nations with all the supernatural wonder-working talent on their side? Why no visions of sailing ships coming to their shores, laden with military adventurers, colonists, and slavers?

During the War of 1812, intense fighting raged across North America. Various Indian peoples were in the process of losing their ancestral homes, east of the Mississippi River, to the advancing American colonists. In 1811, an Indian confederacy was being forged by the Shawnee chief, Tecumseh, to combat the troops of the United States, which was then approaching war with England. Tecumseh's brother, Tenskwatana, "The Prophet," claimed special powers after he manipulated knowledge of an eclipse gained from British officers to awe potential allies into joining his brother's confederacy. While Tecumseh was away on a recruitment campaign, "The Prophet" decided to attack an American army encamped nearby. Tenskwatana convinced hundreds of Shawnee warriors and their allies that his magic would cause the bullets of U.S. soldiers to melt like water. Unfortunately, just like paranormalists of today, Tenskwatana failed to deliver. November 6, 1811, spelled disaster for Tecumseh's plans at the battle of Tippecanoe, and a loss in his prestige among the Indian tribes because of his brother's claim to perform magic. A ferocious assault by Indian warriors was beaten back by American volleys of gunfire, and the Indian army at Prophetstown was dispersed before the forces of a future president, William Harrison, then the governor of Indiana. Prophetstown was burned to the ground and Tecumseh's dream of a giant Indian confederacy became a casualty of magical thinking. (Tecumseh almost killed his brother while enraged over the fiasco.)

In 1814, a "Tecumseh-inspired" uprising by the Creek Indian nation, the "Red Stick" war, was led by a number of "divinely-inspired" prophets who claimed special powers for use against any enemy, especially the white man. After the Red Stick destruction of Ft. Mims, three American armies launched a retaliatory invasion of the Creek lands. A Creek Indian village, named Red Eagle's Town, also known as the "Holy Ground," was allegedly protected by these Creek prophets. They claimed to have cast an invisible barrier around the village which would destroy any white soldier crossing it. On December 23, 1814, American troops stormed the town at bayonet-point, with only one American casualty away from the village, forcing the Creek warriors to beat a hasty retreat after suffering much heavier casualties of their own. It can be safely said that the credibility of the Creek prophets among their people probably fell a little that day. (A similar situation occurred when Zuni priests had attempted to stop the advance of conquistadors during the sixteenth century by drawing a line with sacred corn, which was immediately breached by a Spanish cavalry charge.) Yet another defeat for those claiming supernatural powers found in the history books!

How about another example of shamanic failure in aiding a people caught in a life and death struggle for survival? By the late nineteenth century, the tribes of North America had fought a long and losing battle against the encroaching settlers of America. The United States had managed to confine the remaining tribes to a number of reservations by the use of military force. There would be one more drama of resistance played out in the West, that of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. A Paiute Indian named Wovoka started a religious movement called the Ghost Dance, which anticipated a return of lands to the Indians. Many of his followers were Sioux Indians, a once proud Plains people who had resisted the white man by successful adoption of horses and firearms.

Wovoka claimed supernatural powers; he claimed the dead would come back and restore the land to the Indians. Wovoka told his followers that they would be protected from the bullets of the United States cavalry by the wearing of "Ghost shirts." The movement grew for two years and reached its zenith with an armed confrontation, on December 21, 1890, at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The confrontation started over an attempt to disband a large number of Sioux Indians, as the U.S. army moved to arrest the leaders of the Ghost Dance movement. While some Sioux warriors were surrendering their weapons, a firefight broke out between the two sides. Two Hotchkiss guns, early machine guns, raked the Sioux band, leaving nearly three hundred dead men, women, and children. Native American magic had lent, via Ghost shirts and magical thinking, a false sense of invincibility. It was a tragic ending to a brave, warrior nation.

What are we to make of the growing number of people in America who are advocates of a return to shamanistic thinking (currently disguised as New Age thinking), which often had tragic consequences for many cultures around the world against the aggressive European powers and their technologically advanced armies? From suburban shamans, urban witches, and spirit mediums to a belief in the power of crystals, can we in the nation of America be laying the foundation for a future tragedy?

The claim to perform magic by tapping into a spirit world has failed not only historical tests, but scientific tests also. All pseudoscience, magical powers included, vanish before the scientific method and the test of history. So, if anyone ever walks up to you in a restaurant and claims he or she is a shaman, please ask that person why the Native American nations, top-heavy culturally with medicine men and shamans, failed to repel the European invasion of their continent, or to save their people from the ravages of new diseases introduced by the Europeans. Only in the twentieth century have the Native American populations started to recover their lost numbers, after a rude awakening from their supernatural world-view. Let none of us embrace pseudoscience as a pathway to manipulating the physical universe around us. History offers countless examples of tragedy linked to such an outlook. Through an ignorance of history, as a famous man once stated, you may be doomed to repeat it.

Richard Petraitis teaches at Riverside Brookfield, Illinois, High School. This summer, he is teaching an enrichment class on pseudoscience and the debunking of the paranormal.

## REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg  
Alternative to Health

A lot of "alternative medicine" articles have been flying around the media lately. Thankfully, many of these have been on the scientific side and have been warning against using unproven and potentially dangerous "dietary supplements" (the term used to get around FDA regulations).

One such supplement, chaparral, has previously been linked to causing liver damage (see "REALLity Check," Vol. 3, #2) and the FDA warned some two years ago against taking it. Apparently, this hasn't stopped some believers in alternative medicine, many of whom have little use for anything the FDA recommends. A May 13 Reuters story notes that chaparral has been linked to at least 18 cases of liver damage, including 13 cases of liver poisoning, four of which developed into cirrhosis of the liver, and two of which required life-saving liver transplants. Chaparral is supposed to treat cancer, liver ailments (rather ironic), skin disorders, and other problems; of course, none of this has been proven, while its potential to cause liver damage has. Indeed, one of the main active ingredients of chaparral, nordihydroguaiaretic acid, has been used as a food preservative until 1968, when the FDA removed it from the "generally recognized as safe" list after animal toxicity testing.

Similarly, Reuters reported earlier (April 11) that researchers noted that Ginkgo bilboa extract, a common "alternative" medicine herbal extract, apparently caused bleeding within the eye in at least one patient. The doctors wrote to the New England Journal of Medicine about such a case, and also noted that there were previous incidents of Ginkgo bilboa-induced bleeding reported in 1987 and 1996. The main problem seems to be that it contains a potent anticlotting agent which can encourage bleeding, especially when combined with other blood thinners like aspirin (as the man in this case was doing). Of course, being a virtually unregulated "supplement," that warning doesn't appear (the closest it gets is that it is generally marketed as being good for circulation).

And in an April 10 report, CNN reported that the National Institute on Aging (a division of the National Institutes of Health) warned consumers about taking hormones that claim to slow the aging process. Such hormones, like melatonin and DHEA, make great promises but none have actually been shown to prevent aging. Indeed, they note that DHEA may cause liver damage in high doses and may also be linked to an increased risk for breast and prostate cancers.

The FDA noted that too many people mistakenly believe that if a product says it is "natural," that means it is safe. I think this is one of the ploys that manufacturers of such "supplements" count on to boost sales. Too bad they seem to be more intent on counting their money rather than protecting their customers.

Alternative 2

And in an unrelated story, UPI reported that mainstream cancer researchers are not exactly thrilled about the large number of "alternative" cancer treatments (4/14).

During the annual meeting of the American Association of Cancer Research, scientists said that they cannot simply embrace "alternatives" that claim they are "safe gifts from Mother Nature." Donald Coffey, the president-elect, emphasized the need for double-blind trials to prove the effectiveness of any cancer treatment. "It's called research, not just search. We need to learn, but we can't do it if it is too hocus-pocus," he said.

I think that more doctors and scientists need to speak up like this. People need to know that doctors don't think this nonsense works.

### Alternative 3

The main less-than-skeptical article on alternative medicine that I saw this month was in U.S. News & World Report (there was apparently one on some alternative medicine guru in Time, but I missed reading it). Actually, it wasn't too terrible, but it sure could have used a good dose of the information I just relayed above.

This article on "Nature's remedies" (5/19) mostly discussed the way herbal "supplements" are labeled. It discusses the way such products got exempted from stricter FDA regulations because they knew they couldn't live up to the same standards as real medicine (okay, that's not what it says, but that's what they should have said). This is why we see "supplements" in the stores with vague statements about what they are supposed to be able to do. Of course, if some of these products were put to the same tests required of real drugs, perhaps some of the dangerous side effects I discussed above would have been discovered (not to mention whether or not the herbs can actually do what they claim to do). Unfortunately, the manufacturers apparently aren't interested in that type of research.

### Amalgamated Nonsense

Again in the realm of alternative medicine, Dateline NBC (5/13) did a story that is essentially a corrective to a story done by 60 Minutes back in December 1990. In that story, 60 Minutes cited supposed cases in which people with multiple sclerosis and other diseases reported having been cured after their dental amalgam had been removed; they suggested that the mercury in the fillings could be poisoning the public. That report went a long way towards scaring people -- some of whom went to get all of their silver fillings pulled! Unfortunately, the one missing element was scientific evidence for the claims.

Robert Bazell, a Dateline reporter, interviewed one of the main proponents of the mercury poisoning claims Dr. Hal Huggins, as well as numerous other dentists, and came firmly down on the side of science. Bazell asked Huggins, "Do you think people should have their mercury [amalgams] taken out as a preventative measure?" Huggins responded, "Only those people who are interested in their health." Bazell then related the story of Diane Bailey, who went to Huggins in 1991 for that "preventative measure." He removed nine fillings and four more treated teeth. She later went to a different dentist, Dr. Carol Brown, complaining that her bridges were breaking. Dr. Brown couldn't find any bridges, though, only temporaries, and unwittingly sent her back to Huggins to "complete" what looked like unfinished treatment. Bailey ended up back in Brown's office when Huggins refused to do anything further, and they all ended up in court when Bailey sued him for malpractice and won.

Bazell continued the interview with Huggins, asking if the mercury contained in amalgams could be responsible for almost any known disease. Huggins replied that if it had anything to do with the immune system, the answer was yes. Bazell said, "It turns out that many major health organizations have investigated this issue. While they continue to search for any evidence of a possible hazard, so far they have found none." He then cited a report from the U.S. Public Health Service (January 1993) which he said, "concluded that there are no data to compel a change in the current use of dental amalgam." So, he asked, "Have there been any studies of a population showing that people who have mercury in their mouths have more of any disease than people who don't?" Huggins replied, "This is not a fair question because mercury does not create the same disease in each person." Bazell noted, "It's a simple, scientific question, though." The best Huggins could do was say, "It's a very clever question, too." When Bazell kept pushing for an answer, Huggins just said, "The proof is in the patient."

Bazell then went on to tell viewers that while Huggins "claims he cured people of a variety of ailments simply by removing their fillings," Huggins failed to supply any scientific evidence to support his claims, even when he was in front of a Colorado administrative law judge recommending that Huggins' license to practice be revoked! (It was, indeed, revoked.)

The Dateline report ended by noting that the "ADA [American Dental Association] says it's improper and unethical to recommend that patients have their fillings taken out solely for the purpose of removing toxic substances from the body." They added that if a dentist suggests this, the viewer should "hold on to your wallet and go to another dentist."

Further information on the Dateline NBC web site linked this type of dental quackery to "holistic dentistry," in which dentists may claim to adjust jaw joints, provide "nutrition counseling" and sell dietary supplements, use acupuncture, armootherapy, homeopathy, iridology, etc. They note that all of these areas fall outside proper dentistry, so if a densist proposes to treat a medical, but non-dental, condition, you should "write him off." They continue, "If he proposes to do so with one of the unscientific methods mentioned above, leave the office at once and never return."

Dateline has always been one of the most skeptical and scientific of the TV newsmagazines, and it's good to see that trend continuing, especially with such strong language against common "alternative" methods. (We usually don't see any media outlets state outright that homeopathy and related "alternatives" are "unscientific.") This is the type of reporting that we need to encourage whenever we see it!

Facts Be Damned!

And on the flip side, we have Art Bell and the type of reporting that shouldn't even exist. Richard Hoagland, a man who has gotten a reputation for being on the less-than-skeptical side of life, is at it again with Bell's help. For those of you who don't know him, he has claimed the "face on Mars" is a genuine alien artifact, as well as pyramids, cities, glass domes on the moon, and who knows what else he might see up there. He's written at least one book on the subject, lectures, and stirs up those who believe that UFOs are alien spacecraft. Unfortunately, one thing he tends to miss are the facts.

This was brought into focus by his most recent attacks on NASA (he seems to think they are covering up all sorts of things), as reported by the AP in the State Journal-Register (5/17). This time, he's focused on the Hale-Bopp comet.

Hoagland was interviewed by Art Bell on his syndicated radio show (some of you may remember Art Bell as being the one who first publicized the non-existent "object" following the comet -- the one that the Heaven's Gate cult killed themselves to hop a ride on). There he claimed that NASA was somehow covering up by not using the Hubble Telescope to photograph the comet. Here's where those pesky facts come in. You see, as quoted in a NASA letter sent to Art Bell, "Hubble has been used to observe Hale-Bopp a number of times since 1995, and the images have been widely available on the Internet, and have been in the news." AP notes that the two NASA Hale-Bopp computer sites had 4500 images in mid-April! While not all are from Hubble, that certainly sounds like a strange way to stage a cover-up! Not only that, but the chief Hubble scientist noted to Bell that most of the major discoveries about the comet were made with non-Hubble telescopes because Hubble's spectrograph was not yet operational and because the angle of viewing put Hubble in danger of being blinded and ruined by the sun.

Hoagland would have none of that, though. Facts be damned, he said, "A simple set of superb, high-resolution Hale-Bopp images from Hubble ... would have been a profound legacy for 20th century science. Instead, we have excuses." Hello? Anybody home? Did he even bother to listen to what was said in the letters? Does he understand that there are already a large number of such images available? Apparently, the conspiracy angle is more interesting than the facts.

From the Editor

In mid-May, I attended the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) regional workshop in Chicago on "Secrets of the Supernatural" with my son Scott (and squeezed in a couple Cubs-Giants games, too!) In a future issue or meeting, I plan to tell you about the workshop.

At that conference, I talked with Richard Petraitis, our lead article writer for this issue on modern-day and historical shamans. This summer, he is teaching a summer enrichment class at the Riverside Brookfield High School from a skeptical viewpoint. The class is called, "Pseudoscience & the Debunking of the Paranormal with Critical Thinking Skills & the Scientific Method."

Another class on science and pseudoscience will be taught this fall by Prof. Alex Casella at the University of Illinois (UIS) at Springfield. More information about that class is available from UIS and in a future issue of this newsletter.

It is good to see such support for critical thinking at educational institutions. If you know of any other such classes at other schools or universities, please contact us at REALL.

From the Chairman

For those of you who missed Michael Shermer's talk this month, well, what can I say except that you missed a great one. Shermer discussed his new book, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, and talked about his experiences both as the director of the Skeptics Society and before. One of the most interesting things he discussed was the transition he made from believer to skeptic. It's probable that most of those reading this newsletter have made similar transitions (for example, at the very first REALL meeting, a number of us admitted having believed in Chariots of the Gods when we were younger).

Sometimes people ask me how I became a skeptic, as one person did at Shermer's talk. I generally have to answer that I don't know exactly when it happened. Yes, I believed the Von Daniken claims about aliens (because I was young and hadn't seen any contrary information, and was naive enough to believe it because it was published in a book), I was interested in UFOs, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, ghosts, and many related topics. But somewhere along the line, I stopped just believing the claims that were made without evidence. I wish I could point to a given incident and say, "That is what made me a skeptic," but I cannot. All I know is that I started questioning the claims, learning about science, and taking critical looks at extraordinary suggestions.

So I'd like to thank Shermer for coming to Springfield to talk about his book, and for reminding us that we aren't born as skeptics; it's something we have to grow into.

We've been very lucky as far as getting speakers this year. So far, we've had four speakers in five months! That's the best batting average we've had since our inception. As I've mentioned before, it's not easy getting knowledgeable lecturers in this area, but we're always trying. In June, however, we're going to take a breather. The Lincoln Library will be having their annual book sale (which, incidentally, is a great place to get non-skeptical books cheap if you want to see what "the other side" claims), and they need the room we usually use. But we'll be meeting again in July (July 1, to be exact), though the speaker and topic are still up in the air. One suggestion I've heard is to have several REALL members each speak for maybe 20 minutes to a half hour on a topic they are familiar with. I already have two people lined up to do one meeting, but I need one more (probably for either July or August). If you're interested, please let me know!

Speaking of REALL members presenting things, this issue features an article written one of our newest members, Richard Petraitis. In taking a historical look at claims of shamanism, he has made some very good points and written a very interesting article. I don't know how many of you have encountered people making these sorts of claims about the power of shamanism, but I have and I plan to use his article as ammunition in further discussions with those people.

Next month we'll also be visiting history in a way, as Martin Kottmeyer takes a stab at solving one of the classic UFO sightings. I won't say anything more right now, so you'll just have to watch for the June issue.

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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