

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense."

-- James Randi

October 1999

Facing Silliness in Springfield

by David Bloomberg

10:00 P.M., September 1, 1999: I'm sitting down to watch the news on WICS Channel 20. One of their top stories is that some people have seen what appears to be a baby's face in a tree that is about to be cut down. They even send out a reporter, who comes back with words like "mystery" (used several times) to describe it. I don't see much of a mystery -- it is a knothole that, yeah, looks a bit like a baby's face when viewed the proper way. Even the reporter acknowledged that you can't really see it during the day -- you have to wait until night and look from a certain angle. But it was still a big "mystery" to him. More

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I was happy to see the next day that the State Journal-Register hadn't reported on the "story."

September 3, however, brought a new issue of the paper, with a front-page story on the face in the tree. Some said it was just a knothole. Silly them! Others made leaps and bounds of illogic. One older woman proclaimed, "It's the Lord." God on a tree? Why?

Others claimed a baby had been hung in the tree by a man who thought his wife had been impregnated by a black man. Therefore, the "logic" went, the face was obviously that of the baby. Of course.

Alas, the article pointed out that a search of the archives found no evidence that such a murder ever occurred. Bah! Who needs evidence? We have a face in the tree!

There were a few skeptics mingling about the tree as well, and they were also quoted. One pointed out that "if you want to see something hard enough, you will." And, indeed, many did.

I thought the story ended there. Nope. Sarah Antonacci, one of the reporters who wrote the previous article, contacted me for comment. I couldn't believe they were actually doing a follow-up! But she told me that the owner had cut the tree down, and they knew people were going to be upset.

So I discussed some information that I had gotten from the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal's executive director. They have two bulging files of clippings related to this sort of thing -- one for "faces" and another just for "faces of Jesus."

I noted that the human mind often finds patterns in everyday items. The article gave my statements several column

inches of space, quoting me as saying: "That accounts for why people see Mother Teresa in cinnamon buns, Jesus on a tortilla, Elvis in a pizza, and Kermit the Frog on Mars." I further discussed how just because something appears somewhere, that doesn't mean there is a supernatural force behind it.

Antonacci had some great lines in her article. The headline itself, "Tree believers lose face," made me laugh. Then she began: "Had it been a movie, it could have been called 'Silence of the Limbs.'" And continued: "On Friday, the saga of the face in the 'miracle tree' ended when the tree ... was turned into miracle mulch."

Later, she wrote that some called the State Journal-Register and asked, "What are you going to do about it?" She noted: "The answer: Nothing."

This second article brought another story, that a man who lived next door had supposedly killed four of his neighbor's kids because they were bothering him. This one had as much evidence behind it as the previous story (which was also still circulating). Going even further, Antonacci talked to the head librarian of the Sangamon Valley Collection, who couldn't find any evidence for either tale.

Strangely, some people even called the NAACP and said the baby on the tree was "an African-American child and [they] wanted the NAACP to take a stand on it." They didn't.

The best was yet to come, though. Sunday's paper brought an editorial cartoon by Chris Britt. It shows a crowd gathered around a tree, with one man pointing and yelling, "The tree is sending us a message!!!" The message on the tree? "Get a life you fools!"

And so ended the saga of the baby-faced tree: a strange local occurrence not of mass hysteria, but of mass silliness. Back to business as usual until somebody finds an eggplant shaped like Princess Di.