



National Capital Area SKEPTICAL EYE

1993

Vol. 7, No. 3

Scientific Literacy Isn't Enough!

By Steve Shore

A few days ago, I gave a series of talks at a local university. They were nothing unusual, just the average kinds of discussions that anyone in the business would deliver to a semi-popular audience. Some were about the Hubble Space Telescope, a topic that is much on people's minds whenever an astronomer walks into the room. But one dealt with the late stages of stellar evolution. It was to an astronomy class. The audience had been studying the subject for the past semester and it was now nearly the end of the lectures. There were no questions after this talk, which was unusual, but I could see that there was a strange reaction to some of the material I was covering. In particular, I mentioned timescales of millions of years as being very short, and that the particular phenomenon I was discussing, nova explosions, was best studied in the nearest galaxy to the Milky Way, a mere 160,000 light years away.

I'd seen this reaction once before, I thought. Many years ago for a lectureship run by the American Astronomical Society I'd visited another Michigan college, one run by a fundamentalist sect, and given a talk, at their suggestion, about the search for extraterrestrial life. Yes, I'd seen this reaction before. It was when I mentioned evolution in an offhand way as a simple fact. At that moment, it clicked. I was talking this time at another fundamentalist university. And these students, who had been taking astronomy in a physics department for the last semester, had been listening with that same detachment as soon as the wrong timescale or process was mentioned. They had been taking tests and writing papers and some will probably even get degrees in science. Yet they did not have a clue about this area, nor would they even spend the time to consider it.

After getting home, I looked carefully at the course catalog. It was all there, all of the standard courses of the American physics curriculum. But something missing. This university does not offer a geology course! The description of the introductory survey course for biology was standard enough, but evolution wasn't even mentioned (in any other college course description I've seen it is almost always prominently mentioned along with

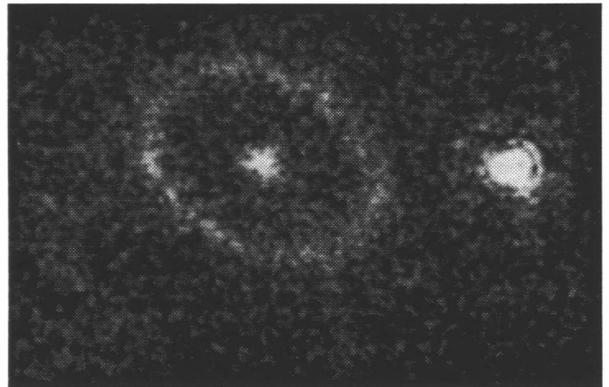


Photo taken in August, 1990 by the Hubble Space Telescope of Supernova 1987a, the first observed supernova occurrence since the days of Johannes Kepler. Its light began in the Larger Magellanic Cloud some 160,000 years before Genesis.

other general areas like ecology and physiology). Instead, there is a mandatory course on "philosophical biology" that mentions Darwinism, a euphemism for evolution, and a philosophy course in the religious studies department (there is no separate philosophy department) that discusses Marxism, Darwinism, and the origins of "relativism" in the 20th century.

This was surprising, of course, but after all, I thought, this is a sectarian institution. Then came the shocker. This place is accredited by North Central, the accrediting body for universities in the Midwest and West and the same one that oversees my institution. This is the same organization that has mandated curriculum changes in the humanities and social sciences, that requires assessment procedures that address very specific guidelines, and that has specified programs in diversity on all of its constituent campuses. Yet this body appears to have no care at all that a student can emerge from an undergraduate education from one of its member universities thinking, as a result of

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NCAS encourages critical and scientific thinking

NCAS serves as an information resource on extraordinary claims

NCAS provides extraordinary evidence that skeptics are cool

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recycled paper

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To the Editor:

My reaction to Mr.[Penn] Jillette's reprinted article (*Skeptical Eye*, (1993), vol.7 #2, p.17) was mixed.

On the positive side, Mr. Jillette, within a short space, wrote a critique which plants a seed of doubt--or at least, will make some people think twice about claims concerning

hidden codes. In addition, he gave people tools they can apply to similar claims in the future.

However, I did not like the abuse Mr. Jillette continuously heaped on the claimant and others associated with the claim. A few examples of this abuse from his article are "dumb-as-a-post," "jerk," "bottom feeder," "numbskull," and "fool." This abuse took up space which could have been used to further critique the claim in a more objective and scientific way.

NCAS as one of its goals "encourages critical and scientific thinking." Part of the article by Mr. Jillette accomplished this. However, Mr. Jillette, when abusing the claimant, used uncritical and subjective thinking. The abusive tone may have discouraged some people from taking his skeptical message seriously. Skepticism encourages critical and scientific thinking, especially when debunking a claim we emotionally dislike. I think Mr. Jillette's article would have more effectively encouraged critical and scientific thinking if the subjective abuse had been replaced with objective arguments.

Kevin Tucker
 Wheaton, MD

Thank you for your feedback. Penn Jillette responds:

Yeah, but sometimes "subjective thinking" is funny.

Penn Jillette

Randi Legal Fund Update:

Contributions to the James Randi Fund, formerly run from El Cerrito, California, should now be sent to:

The James Randi Fund
 142 West 49th Street, Suite 12H
 New York City, NY 10019

The fund is still badly needed to assist in covering legal costs incurred by Randi in fighting the suits brought by Uri Geller and others.

Communicating Skepticism

The 2nd annual NCAS weekend workshop

February 19-20, 1994

Cliffside Inn

Harpers Ferry, West Virginia

From lunchtime conversations to calls from the press, skeptics are challenged to communicate science and rational thinking without sounding like cynical humbugs. Whether you are a teacher or a student, a public speaker or a private letter writer, the 2nd NCAS workshop will help you hone your communication skills.

We will have a mix of presentations and group discussions on topics such as:

- Skeptics and the media
- Skeptical thinking for young people
- Effective scoffing
- "But what about...?"

Program participants will include:

Chip Denman, Statistics Laboratory, University of Maryland College Park

Randy Lockwood, Humane Society of the U.S.

Seán O'Neill, counselor and registered hypnotherapist

Elena Watson, editor, *Skeptical Eye*

We are returning to the Cliffside Inn in Harpers Ferry: \$58/night double room, \$52/night single room. The hotel has an indoor pool, restaurant and bar. The historic Harpers Ferry National Park is nearby. **Please call the hotel directly at 1-800-782-9437 and mention the NCAS program to make room reservations.**

Harpers Ferry is less than a 90 minute drive from the Washington area. If you need or can offer a ride, please let us know. We will try to put people in touch.

Sessions will begin on Saturday morning, and Saturday evening there will be an optional dinner at a nearby restaurant. Last year many braved the snow for an informal get-together on Friday evening.

comments from last year's group:

"I hoped to be refreshed by hearing intelligent ideas and humor and meet interesting people and get away for a mini-vacation and have fun...and I did!"

"I enjoyed making a weekend of it and getting away."

"Very enjoyable and helpful"

"All the speakers were excellent."

"I was impressed with the personal knowledge of the group."

"Entertaining in a way most people wouldn't expect."

"As a non-member I found the workshop very helpful...this kind of thing runs the risk of being dry and boring. That certainly was not the case here. I enjoyed it very much."

Workshop registration is \$35 for members, \$40 non-members, \$20 full-time students. After February 1, all registrations are \$50. Registration fee is non-refundable. Please make checks payable to NCAS and mail to 8006 Valley Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

Sci Literacy, from page 1

course lectures, that the world is less than 10,000 years old and that life was specially created and saved by Noah from a universal Deluge.

Which brings me to the essential point of this essay. What these students illustrate is something that sits at the core of the national debate about science literacy. Some of the students in that audience were physics majors, one was even studying general relativity. No doubt they were proficient in calculations and even of the principles in many areas of modern physics. They can work with the Schroedinger equation. They have taken statistical mechanics. Yet the same physics they have studied in quantum mechanics, or in nuclear physics, requires that uranium decays on timescales of several million years and that radioactive decay sequences can serve as absolute clocks for the determination of the age of the planet and the solar system. When they look at the Orion nebula, they are looking at newly emerged stars. Yet they are taught that this is only a matter of opinion.

These students are “scientifically literate.” They can speak about matters that most people regard with some measure of awe, at least at cocktail parties. But it is my contention that the most important ingredient of science, its ability to form a self-consistent picture of the world, is completely lacking. They might as well be memorizing items for “Trivial Pursuit,” because that’s how they have been taught to see the facts. The fact that the speed of light is finite and that this renders the light travel time to even the center of the Galaxy longer than the age of the Earth since the Flood simply doesn’t occur to them! The same physics governs the transfer of energy in the Sun and the motion of the plates on the Earth’s crust. The same Doppler effect that they measure in the laboratory reveals the distance to the quasars. The thermodynamics that governs steam engines produces the temperature of the cosmic background radiation. They never make these connections, nor have they ever been exposed to them. And this is an accredited university, one that has received the stamp of approval granted to every major university in the Midwest. What is wrong here?

I don’t mean to single out any sect for its individual beliefs; these are private matters and, in my opinion, not our business as skeptics. Rather, I want to call attention to what this tells us about the problem with the system, and what we are avoiding in the national debate about education in this country.

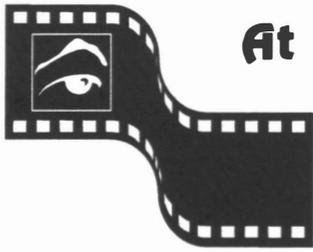
Let’s face it, science is hard. It is hard not because the material is obscure, but because so much of it flies in the face of naive intuition, usually called common sense. It’s hard because it perpetually requires us to reconsider the very axioms of our view of the world. It permits you to transcend your individual experience. But it is not without a price. You come to learn that some things are

simply impossible, not just mathematically but physically. And as you see how things fit together, you see that other things, perhaps long-cherished beliefs, don’t. In fact, you even come to understand that there are deep questions lying at the base of the scientific edifice, questions of methodology and interpretation that must periodically be excavated and re-examined. You see the mutability of certainty. Some recoil at this, but it is what scientific inquiry is all about. This is why we have it as a required component in the education of students, not just to produce knowledgeable consumers and “right-thinking” voters! Science is animated philosophy, not just a toolbox for constructing technologies.

This is, I think, a point that has been lost in the debate on science education in the United States. The world is not a multiple choice test with all of the answers exposed. It is not simply facts, although these are, in the words of Firesign Theater, the “rich compost” that nourishes the flower of understanding. Science is a process. If you demand only parroting of the facts, you will produce only compartmentalized people. Maybe this is all that the administrators want. After all, it is easy to test for and quantitative assessments are the basis for budget requests. But a student who still believes that Peter Pan can fly after taking a course on human physiology and introductory physics has missed the point. The person who has taken a chemistry course and believes that crystals can heal may have learned the difference between acids and bases but hasn’t understood it. We have a system that seems very successful at turning out people who have been educated far past their ability to understand. And the very agencies that are supposed to insure that this doesn’t happen are ignoring it.

Skeptics can play an important role here. We mustn’t simply call for more material on critical thinking. It is too easily co-opted by those who say that they are promoting free debate of the issues, so that students can make up their own minds. We need to be aware of the intrinsic ability of humans to separate into categories things that science struggles to juxtapose, and whenever possible to talk and write on these issues. You all know that the real world, the physical world, is the ultimate arbiter in all disputes. Keep sounding this theme.

At the risk of sounding like a “thought policeman,” I ask that you look carefully at the science curriculum in your local schools and at your universities, and to help bring it up to standards. When you have a chance to, read some of the textbooks that are used in your districts. Those of you who are teachers, structure your courses so that students don’t come out thinking that a fact is enough. And, most of all, don’t think that you can sit this out. Enter into the debate, because common sense is just that and will always prevail if left unchallenged. ☒



At the Movies

Sitting in the Dark

By Chip Denman

Hands are joined as the lights go out. The sitters drop their voices and wait anxiously for images to appear. A faint strain of music floats through the air. People sit as if their feet are glued to the floor. A modern seance...Yup, a Friday night at the movies.

Anxious audiences have been sitting in the dark waiting for ghostly visions to appear long before the first popcorn was spilled. Very few of us have attended a “real” spiritualist seance, yet thanks to the movies, we have a clear image of what such a seance might look like. Seances and mediums have been featured in films since the earliest days of celluloid, sometimes spookily, sometimes skeptically, and often farcical. Many depictions have grossly exaggerated the mechanical trickery and effects. Spiritualist themes have been stirred into a great stew of spooks, demons, and haunted castles. From *Hamlet* to *Ghostbusters*, disembodied spirits have haunted the cinema, but usually not in the fashion conjured by the Spiritualists.

Ghost stories seem to have been with us always. But the religious, scientific—and above all else, populist—movement called Spiritualism can be dated precisely. On the chilly evening of March 31, 1848, little Kate and Maggie Fox called their god-fearing mother into the dark bedroom of their frame house in Hydesville, New York. A bumping sound would not let them sleep. As Katie snapped her fingers, the sound seemed to respond. Soon a breathless family was conversing with a spirit who told of his murder when, as a peddler, he had called upon the house many years before.

First the neighbors and then visitors from all over flocked to the little house to marvel at the young girls’ ability to summon the spirit at will. The crowds disrupted life in rural Hydesville, and eventually Maggie was sent to live with elder sister Leah in Rochester. Oddly, the spirited spirit traveled with her. Soon Leah persuaded her little sister to seat people around a table for a visit with the spirits—for a small fee. On November 14, 1849, the sisters, reunited with Katie, rented the largest hall in Rochester, the Corinthian, and charged the handsome sum of \$1 a head for the chance to hear the girls summon messages from the realm of Summerland.

It did not take others long to discover their own psychic gifts. With a few years messages from beyond the vale were rapped, knocked, thumped, scrawled in chalk, and spoken in hushed tones in parlors across North America, England, and Europe. The U. S. Senate in

1854 was presented with a petition signed by 15,000 persons demanding an official investigation of these phenomena.

Many from the growing ranks of mediums took pains to emphasize the religious nature of their revelations—here was physical proof of the hereafter. Seances began as serious—and tedious—affairs. Like a mystic telegraph, messages arrived as a coded series of rapping sounds as people sat quietly together. As the spirits became more theatrical, the seance rooms got darker and darker and darker. Rapping noises gave way to messages on slates. Bells and trumpets and even mediums seemed to float. By the 1870s, mediums such as Florence Cook were materializing not just spirit *apports* such as flowers, but full walking figures—provided that the chamber was dark enough and the medium was guaranteed sufficient protection from disturbance.

Through numerous exposures of frauds and changing tastes of the public, Spiritualism as an organized movement went through various waxings and wanings through the Victorian era and into the 1920s. By the 1925 media circus surrounding Harry Houdini’s investigations of the Boston medium “Margery” (Mina Crandon), Spiritualism’s era as a growth industry was over. Seance evolution was nearly complete and the public image was set.

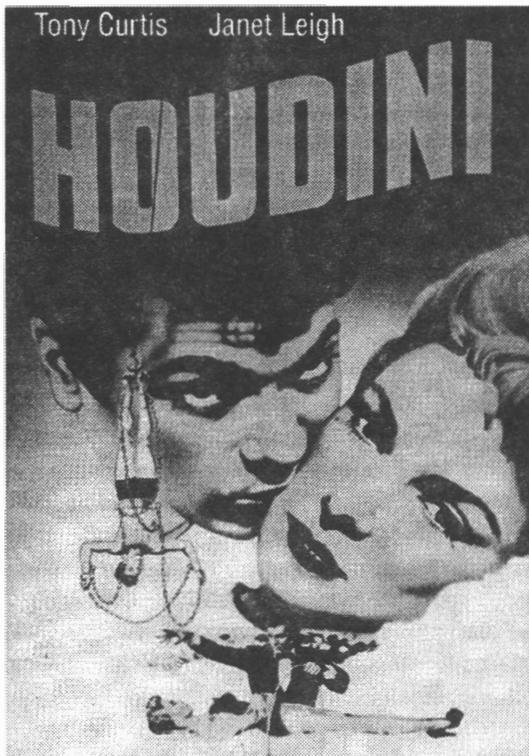
The movie industry, itself only a little younger than Spiritualism, shares a common history of evolution of special effects. The Fox sisters themselves were barely in the grave when George Méliès, pioneer of the narrative film, drew upon his background as a magician to create film fantasies. In his short films he literally invented trick photography such as stopping and restarting the camera as a means of showing impossible appearances and disappearances. Beginning in 1900 Méliès produced shorts which are the earliest attempts to simulate seance effects on film: *Spiritisme Abracadabrant* (1900), *Le Portrait Spirite* (The Spirit Photographer) (1903?), *A Spiritualistic Meeting* (1906). I have never seen these films, but if they are in keeping with Méliès’s other fantastic work, they no doubt portray miracles far beyond even the claims of the most outrageous Spiritualist.

Other early French film entrepreneurs followed Méliès lead. Charles Pathé’s film company produced several films exploiting spiritualist themes. In *Spiritualist Seance* (1908) a scientist confers with the spirits, thus echoing the history of leading physical scientists such as Sir William Crookes who were drawn into psychical investigations. A skeptic is plagued by spirits in another Pathé short in 1911. Leon Gaumont, another French innovator, produced a more skeptical—perhaps cynical—*Seance de Spiritisme* (1910) in which a man hiding under a table does the dirty work of fooling sitters at a seance. *Spiritualism Exposed* (1913), directed by Charles Raymond, suggests a skeptical treatment by its title. *The Medium’s Nemesis* (1913) tells the tale of a man who is



Charlie Chan consults a crystal ball in *Meeting at Midnight*.

Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh as Harry and Bess.



confronted by the “spirit” of the victim whom he believes he has murdered.

These shorts, all but the last under 10 minutes, were little more than excuses for camera tricks. They were creations to delight audiences accustomed to magic lantern shows and the live spook illusions such as “Pepper’s Ghost.” As film making matured and stories became more sophisticated, spiritualistic themes must have seemed for a while too thin. Even Houdini in his attempts at film making stayed away from overt spiritualism, while exploiting other just as fantastic themes. His nearly unwatchable *The Man From Beyond* (1921), for instance, cast himself as a man implausibly brought back to life after years frozen in a block of ice.

The many public exposures and fraud trials had a lasting effect. In the 30s and 40s if seances appeared in the movies at all, they were typically depicted as outright scams and relegated to B- movies with lurid or tongue-in-

cheek stories. The Charlie Chan series, over 40 films in all, featured at least three with seance-related plots: *Charlie Chan’s Secret* (1936), *Charlie Chan at Treasure Island* (1939) in which a magician played by Cesar Romero assists Chan’s exposure of a phony psychic, and *Charlie Chan and Black Magic* [aka *Meeting at Midnight*] (1944). In the last, murder ensues at a seance conducted by a medium using two confederates and an absurd assortment of technological tricks that no real phony would ever have needed! *The Phantom Thief* (1946), from the Boston Blackie series, starts with a stabbing at a phony seance. The amazingly titled *The Amazing Mr. X* [aka *The Spiritualist*] (1948) featured Turhan Bey as a phony medium in cahoots with a husband who wants to convince his wife of his death. Even the Bowery Boys got into the act of exposing fake mediums with *Ghost Chasers* (1951).

In 1947 *Nightmare Alley* paired Tyrone Power and Joan Blondell in a film which never quite found its niche. Darker and more cynical than typical A-movie fare, it is distinctly more than a B-movie cheapie. Power plays Stanton Carlisle, a carnival barker who learns a mind-reading act from Blondell and eventually finds mere showbiz success too unsatisfying. He uses his Kreskin-like tricks to set himself up as the mediumistic head of his own religious movement. True to Hollywood, if not reality, he cannot get away with playing god for long before being utterly broken. The film is particularly interesting to skeptics for its relatively accurate portrayal of mind-reading tricks and universal cold-readings.

The Medium (1951) is another kind of an outlier. A film adaptation of an English-language opera by Gian-Carlo Menotti, it tells the story of a phony spiritualist who finds her life touched by an unknown force. Menotti also directs.

Tony Curtis plays the title role in *Houdini* (1953), barely a biography. The film does introduce Houdini’s real-life obsession for ghostbusting; here he tears apart a seance complete with a cheesy ghost in drag and a hidden phonograph. The “ghost” seems absurdly over-the-top Hollywood silly, but it compares favorably with the cheese-cloth-shrouded figures captured in pictures taken in “real” seances from the Victorian era through the 1920s. In other respects, the film is less than accurate. In a liberty that—if anything could—would bring Houdini back to haunt the film makers, the psychic call of his dead mother saves Houdini from certain doom. And inexplicably, the film ignores the truly theatrical circumstances of Houdini’s death on Halloween 1926 and substitutes a totally fictitious demise in a failed escape attempt.

Bogus mediums in film were generally portrayed without much sympathy. *Seance on a Wet Afternoon* (1964) took a different take on the subject. Kim Stanley plays a sadly deranged would-be medium who pulls her hapless husband, played by Richard Attenborough, into a kidnaping plot. Attenborough finds it easier to commit a terrible crime than to confront his wife’s delusions. Several scenes portray typical modern seances in which the

imaginings of the attendees are more important than any physical phenomena. This is a rare cinematic study which accurately depicts sincere, yet thoroughly non-supernatural, spiritualism.

Hitchcock's final film *Family Plot* (1976) goes more for humor rather than chills, but manages to have a ring of truth. Barbara Harris plays a modern—and quite phony—medium who relies on Bruce Dern's amateur detective work to impress her clients.

A recent moneymaker which involved a medium as a supporting character was *Ghost* (1990). Whoopie Goldberg plays a storefront medium who knows what a sham she is. Her version of a seance, with its shortage of physical phenomena, would never have played in the Victorian heyday. The ghost effects created for Patrick Swayze's character are the best looking part of the film. Advertising hype suggested "You will believe!" I don't think so.

Other films, from *La Dolce Vita* to *Roshomon* to the shock-o-rama films of William Castle have touched upon spirit themes. Even *The Exorcist* (1973) uses a familiar Spiritualist tool, a Ouija board, although it soon becomes clear that a demon from hell rather than a kindly spirit from Summerland is calling the shots. And speaking of friendly spirits, Rocky and Bulwinkle's immortal incantation "Eenie meanie, chili beanie...the spirits are about to speak!" will forever be part of my seance lexicon.

The countless movie ghosts and hauntings in horror films have little to do with Spiritualism as it flourished at the turn of the century. Spiritualism offered itself as an optimistic religion with affirmation of the hereafter. Even the films which overtly draw upon the Spiritualist bag of tricks mostly overlook the fact that in its day many serious minded intellectuals and scientists took it quite seriously. But Spiritualism was already in decline by the time that the movie industry was hitting its stride. The movies were there to mostly reflect public skepticism and cynicism. It is all too tempting to look at these movies and smugly congratulate ourselves on how we would never be so silly.

Don't believe it for a moment.

References

In addition to many bleary-eyed hours of movie watching, two sources proved to be particularly useful for specific film listings:

Microsoft Cinemania Interactive Movie Guide on CDROM, 1992 edition.

Horror and Science Fiction Films: A Checklist by Donald C. Wills, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ, 1972.

Much has been written on the history of Spiritualism. Consider the following as a starting point:

The Spiritualists by Ruth Brandon, Prometheus Books, 1984.

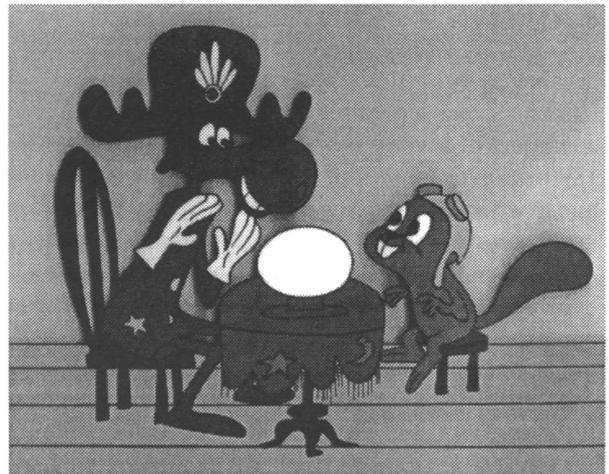
A Magician Among the Spirits by Harry Houdini, reprinted 1972 by Arno Press Inc.

The History of Spiritualism Vols 1 & 2 by Sir Author Conan Doyle, reprinted 1975 by Arno Press Inc.

Further Viewing

Readers who would like to see how Hollywood conjures a ghost are advised to look into the following films:

Blithe Spirit, *The Haunting*, *The Uninvited*, *Thirteen Ghosts*, *The Legend of Hell House* and for you Ed Wood Jr. fans, the worst seance ever committed to celluloid: *Night of the Ghouls*. ☹



Friendly spirits advise Bulwinkle and Rocky.

Turhan Bey called on not-so-friendly spirits as *The Amazing Mr. X*.



Skeptic at Heart, Believer in Spirit

By Mike Epstein

“This is indeed a mystery” remarked Watson. “What do you imagine that it means?”

“I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

— Sherlock Holmes, *A Scandal in Bohemia*

If a character more suitable than Sherlock Holmes to symbolize the principles of critical thinking ever grew from an author's fertile imagination, it has escaped my purview. How ironic then, that the Baker Street detective was the creation of Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle (1859-1930), the noted British author whose later years were characterized by an overwhelming belief in Spiritualism and the paranormal.

Doyle grew up in the Roman Catholic faith, but later became an agnostic through his readings of Darwin and Huxley during his training to become a doctor. Living in conditions of poverty, he practiced medicine from 1882 until 1890 in Southsea, until his literary accomplishments allowed him to write full-time. His interest in Spiritualism did not, as many assume, begin with his son Kingsley's death shortly after the end of World War I. Doyle had first conducted experiments in telepathy in 1887, showing “beyond any doubt that I could convey my thoughts without words,” as he wrote in his memoirs. He became interested in Theosophy and Spiritualism, joined the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1892, and participated in numerous table-turning seances. He was knighted for his literary accomplishments in 1902, along with his soon-to-be close contemporary Sir Oliver Lodge, spiritualist, SPR president, and author of *Raymond*, a book describing the alleged communications through the medium Mrs. Leonard with his dead son, who like Kingsley had been a casualty of the war.

Doyle was also, surprisingly, a friend of Harry Houdini, arch enemy of spiritualism, although perhaps their friendship was tested often, as revealed in Houdini's *A Magician Among the Spirits*. Doyle, in his last book, *The Edge of the Unknown*, described the deceased Houdini in glowing terms. “Who was the greatest medium-baiter of modern times? Undoubtedly Houdini. Who was the greatest physical medium of modern times? There are some who would be inclined to give the same answer.”

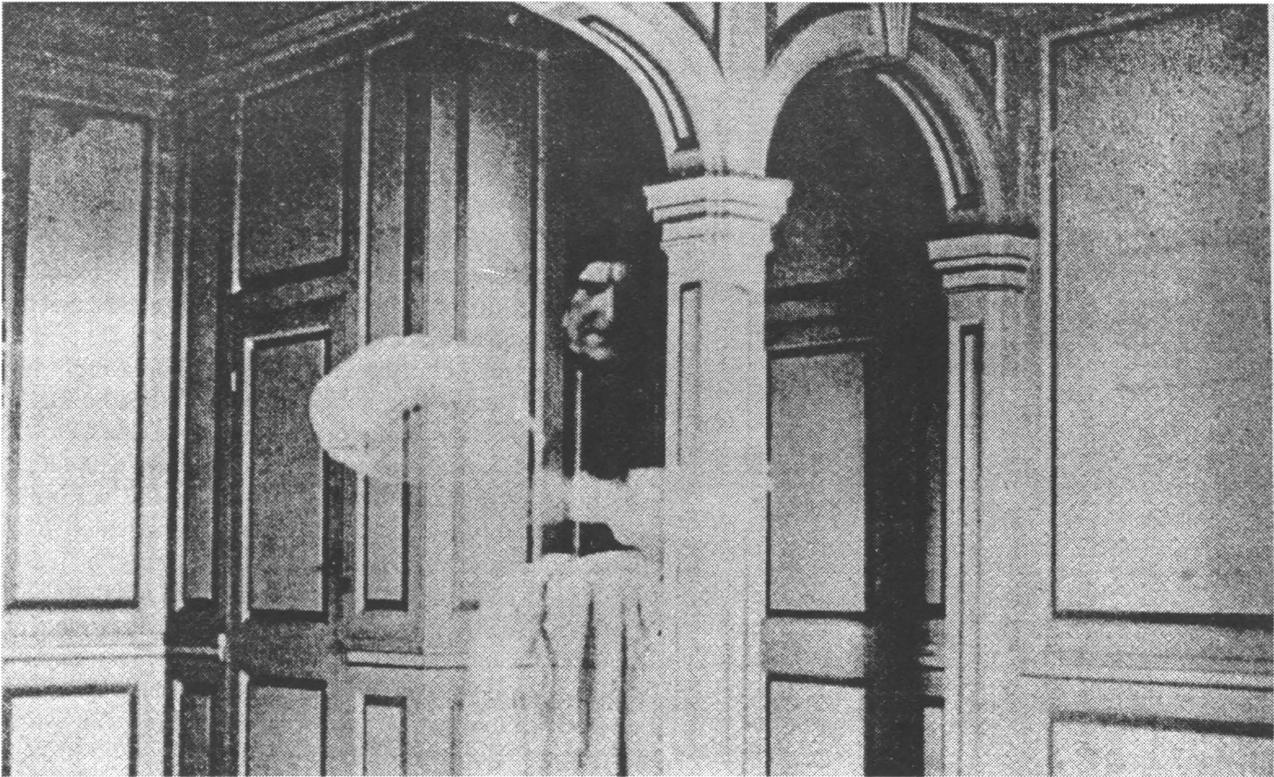
After the war, the tragedy of the loss of his son and many friends moved him to devote full time to assuring himself and others of the reality of survival after death. He used his “superb reasoning faculties ... in building elaborate, well-wrought cases for the psychic upon the most unreliable foundations of physical mediumship,” and endorsed the physical phenomena of almost every medium of his time, from the Fox sisters onward. He became president of the London Spiritualist Alliance, the British College of Psychic Science, and the Spiritualist Community, and refined his beliefs to a Darwinian theory of the evolution of the spiritual

life of mankind in the afterlife. He suffered the disapproval of the clergy, who objected to communications with the dead that were explicitly forbidden in the Bible, and because his theories ran counter to the Christian idea that the dead sleep until resurrection. He was mocked by the scientific writers of his time, but continued to struggle to “get the facts home to the people.” Near the end of his life, his wife developed mediumistic powers and revealed through an Arabian spirit (Pheneas) that he must prepare the world for a great calamity. He died at the age of 71, secure in the belief that he was only beginning his journey in the next life.

There are two incidents in the life of Arthur Conan-Doyle that reveal the picture of a man so caught up in his beliefs that he sees only what he wants to see. The first is the case of the Cottingley Fairies, aptly described by James Randi in *Flim-Flam*. In 1917, a sixteen year-old girl and her ten year-old cousin took several pictures of fairies and gnomes that come to the attention of Doyle. Despite obvious evidence of fakery, including the two-dimensional appearance of the fairies, the employment of the older girl in a photography shop, and the opinion of the Kodak Company that the pictures could have been produced by natural means, Doyle enthusiastically accepted them as evidence that “matter as we have known it is not really the limit of our universe.” Perhaps Doyle's motives are clearest when he expresses his view in a 1920 letter to Edward Gardner, a theosophical advocate: “Fairies cannot be destroyed by antediluvian tests, and when once fairies are admitted, other psychic phenomena will find a more ready acceptance.” Perhaps Doyle should have listened to his alter ego Sherlock.

In the early seventies a detailed examination of the pictures for the BBC revealed a number of photographic inconsistencies. The foremost being that the fairies, captured in motion, did not blur, unlike other movement caught in the same photographs. It was also discovered that the fairies of one photo were strangely like those illustrated in a popular children's book of the time. In 1980, computer enhancement technology further indicated a two-dimensional nature for the fairies, and in 1985, the now elderly perpetrators of the hoax admitted that the pictures were faked. And yet I found on a bookstore shelf a recent reprint of Gardner's book *Fairies* with the following overleaf advertisement: “Since that time [1920] many scientific experts have tried to prove that the photographs were not legitimate ... all this was tested and probed to the limits possible. To this day the photographs have never been discredited. No flaw, no fraud, no deceit has ever been discovered in spite of intense scrutiny.” *Caveat emptor!*

The second incident is not as well known, yet is similarly revealing. In Peter Haining's *Ghosts: The Illustrated History*, the picture at the left is described as “a photograph of a phantom monk in Bristol” that was investigated by ghost-hunter Elliott O'Donnell in the 1930s. This report is corroborated by D. Scott Rogo in *The Haunted House Handbook*, which shows the same photograph, described as “being taken in a haunted house in England in the 1930's.” Yet quite a different view of the same picture is described by



The Brockley Manor "Ghost"

Ian Wilson in *The After Death Experience*. Apparently, for many years Doyle carried this photograph that was supposedly one of the best-ever photographs of a ghost, taken on the night of July 27, 1909, by a group of Bristol University students at Brockley Manor, a few miles south of Bristol. The picture showed the figure of a monk, transparent against the Manor's paneling. Unfortunately for Doyle, the photograph was revealed to him in 1929 as a simple double exposure by a dental student at Bristol who had dressed in monk's garb. Caveat emptor!

In the book *In Search of the Dead*, Jeffrey Iverson denotes the seriousness with which we should take reports of ectoplasmic activity: "The writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a spiritualist and a man not easily deceived, judged by his creation Sherlock Holmes, wrote at a seance ... he saw ectoplasm in a good light." Caveat emptor!

And yet, as an Holmes devotee from early childhood, I would quote from Christopher Morley's preface to the 1930 memorial edition of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. "There was no stage of the life, from the poor student doing without lunch to buy books to the famous author enduring painful hostility for his psychic faith, which did not reflect the courage, the chivalry, the sagacity ... of the creator of Holmes. Certainly it was characteristic of that student of mysteries to attack the greatest one we know. Those of us who in earliest boyhood [and girlhood, too,] gave our hearts to Conan Doyle ... find our affection unshakable." I quite agree.

"The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes."

— Sherlock Holmes, *Hound of the Baskervilles*

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Book Reviews



Possessed: The True Story of an Exorcism, by Thomas B. Allen. New York: Doubleday, 1993. 259 pages.

I remember being excited about first seeing *The Exorcist*. As you recall, the movie details the trials of a girl obsessed by a Satanic force; conventional medicine and psychotherapy could not help her, and she was finally saved only by the suicidal sacrifice of a young priest. My friends and I were prepared to be scared out of our wits, and looking forward to several points of interest that we had heard about: a spine-cracking head spin, lots of green vomit and the violently auto-erotic masturbation scene. We were not disappointed. The film's real horror, though, was more subtle and preconscious. A nice D.C. kid, going about her business, was transported into a paroxysm of terror without warning—her life abruptly became a nightmare with no hope of awakening. It was as though she were drying some well worn pans after dinner and discovered that when a previously benign teapot was rubbed, a sadistic genie was released; out of the ordinary came the great evil.

Today's teakettle is Thomas B. Allen's new book, *Possessed*, which informs that *The Exorcist* was not fiction, but based on the actual case of a 13 year-old Mt. Ranier, Maryland boy who was exorcised in 1949.

Allen, a contributing editor to *National Geographic* magazine, has previously authored sixteen books spanning biography, history and fiction. This offering, coded as non-fiction, is written in the style of a suspense novel; this makes Allen's careful use of citations seem a bit disingenuous. For example, he writes that referring to the boy's afflictions as "psychological forces" uses a "...feeble designation for the overwhelming horror..." and notes a "...vast, worldwide literature about events like (poltergeist phenomena)...bizarre, inexplicable happenings that people experience and attempt to describe". Such provocative phrasing works well in a Stephen King novel where readers are prepared to engage in what English teachers call a suspension of disbelief; in a purportedly factual account it is jarring and less than effective.

The alleged facts are these: Robbie Mannheim (a pseudonym), 13, began to play with a Ouija board, taught by his Spiritualist aunt. Soon, rapping and scratching were heard about the house and, upon the aunt's death, traditional poltergeist (noisy ghost) activities such as

furniture moving about were manifested. These were taken by the family to be due to ESP (misdefined by Allen to include psychokinesis instead of telepathy/precognition), and when Robbie began to be thrown about and cry out in pain, the family consulted a minister with a taste for parapsychology. Mark well that there is no evidence that this boy was *ever* treated by reputable medical or psychological practitioners, although there are anecdotes that he was examined now and then.

From this point the tale becomes increasingly bizarre. The family's neighbors became so hostile that a move was necessary, and a hospitalization at Georgetown University Hospital was arranged, apparently without an admitting physician. Robbie's writhing and suffering lead Allen to conclude that "...at times (he) appeared to be in need of psychiatric treatment". Well, to say the least. During this hospitalization an exorcism was attempted by a Father Hughes, who got only a seriously wounded shoulder for his trouble. After this assault, you may be surprised to learn that Robbie was discharged from the hospital without further intervention. Indeed, the entire affair was "hushed up" by the hospital!

Robbie was by this time suffering some very exotic symptoms, such as words being spelled out in scratches on his body. In fact, questions could be put to him and would be answered in this manner, rather like a living Ouija board. At one point "no school" appeared on his chest; the family sensibly responded by allowing him to stay home from classes thereafter, surely what we all would do in such a circumstance.

Robbie was next exorcised by Jesuit priests in St. Louis, one of whom apparently kept a record of the proceedings. During the day the boy seemed normal enough, but at night he would urinate, spit, bark and curse. He was admitted several times to a St. Louis religious hospital where a group of priests worked on him; alternatively, he stayed at a church. Although amnesic regarding his nocturnal behavior, it is still curious that he apparently never questioned why he was sleeping in a rectory, being held down by priests and subjected to regular visitations of Latin ritual. Robbie did fearfully tell his father that he was "going crazy"; no one listened, of course, because they were busy throwing cold water in his face and binding his arms with tape. The Exorcist, Father William Bowdern, himself appeared pale and weak, had lost weight, had sties and "pus oozing boils on many parts of his body". Naturally, he didn't get any medical treatment, either.

Ultimately, the Jesuit priests prevailed and the demon was exorcised. Notes purportedly taken by one of the priests eventually fell in Allen's hands and became the basis of the book, as did interviews with a few of the people involved, notably excluding Robbie, who declined to be interviewed; he reportedly is doing fine and does not remember his experience.

An interesting facet of the book is Allen's accurate rendition of the Rite of Exorcism and his explanation of the stages of demon harassment: infestation (demons

haunting a place, such as a house), obsession (torment of a conscious individual) and possession, in which the victim loses consciousness and is taken over by the demon's personality. One also appreciates the careful scholarship and attempt at balance in this presentation; aside from his dramatic style, Allen does try to stick to the facts as he was presented them. But it was impossible for me to read this book without returning to a constant and compelling point: the unconscionable treatment of this obviously disturbed boy amounts to nothing less than child neglect, if not abuse. Indeed, even some of the priests doubted that Robbie was truly possessed, and Allen is thorough enough to list some possible diagnoses: multiple personality disorder, Tourette's syndrome, childhood schizophrenia or serupulscity, a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. I would quibble with the likelihood of some of these and add temporal lobe epilepsy and conversion/dissociative disorder to the list, but the point is that 1949 was not in the Dark Ages and we could expect at least some attempt at treatment instead of a descent into superstition at this poor boy's expense.

Although this book is not likely to frighten a skeptic, it will be an informative and interesting source of carefully researched material on demonology and exorcism. But for those who believe that ordinary lamps can contain evil genies, *Possessed* will be the whiff of a nightmare on a warm summer breeze.

—Seán O'Neíll

The Baby Train and Other Lusty Urban Legends. By Jan Harold Brunvand. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993. 367pages. \$20.95.

Back when I was a child growing up in suburban Maryland it was a well known fact that an escaped maniac with a prosthetic hook hand had once stalked our local lovers' lane. It was also a well known fact that one boy, after driving his girlfriend home, had found something shocking when he went to help her out of the car. It was a bloody hook hand, dangling from the car door handle. It's all true. This really happened, a friend told me so. It happened to a friend of hers. Or maybe it was a friend of her friend's...

What, the almost exact same thing happened in your hometown when you were a kid? Really? Who knew there were so many hook-handed homicidal maniacs lurking around back then. Could this be a coincidence?

Well, no doubt by now you know I am talking about that delightful form of modern folklore known as the urban legend. Yes, you know them, you love them, and yes, sometimes even skeptics can fall for them.

They are those funny little stories that sound so good, so plausible, so true. And the teller of the story knows they are true because, after all a friend told them so, and that friend witnessed it. Or did s/he?

Enter Jan Harold Brunvand, a mild-mannered professor of folklore at the University of Utah, the man

Smithsonian magazine tagged "Mr. Urban Legend" (November, 1992). *The Baby Train* is his fifth and most recent book on the subject. And as in his previous book, *Curses! Broiled Again!* (1989), the stories are revised versions from his now defunct newspaper column, "Urban Legends." The twice weekly column was syndicated by United Feature Syndicate, and lasted from January 1987 until June 1992.

What separates urban legends from other folklore, like myths, fairy tales and rumors, is that they are current, rooted in every day reality, and unlike rumors have plots. Urban legends are always believed to be true, and more often than not, attributed to a friend of a friend, or in folklorist's terminology, a FOAF. The FOAF, however is a very elusive creature, and is usually impossible to find. The story or legend itself often carries some sort of moral or lesson. In the case of my childhood example, "The Hook," the lesson was clearly a puritanical warning against going to lovers' lane to make out. Likewise societal anxieties over new technologies are manifested in stories such as the one about a woman who microwaves her pet in an attempt to dry it off after a bath.

This new collection of urban legends contains some entertainingly gruesome stories that should please fans of the "Hook," and other scary classics. But, there are also a number of stories that should especially interest skeptics. As a rule, most urban legends, as far-fetched as they may be, don't involve the supernatural. There are some notable exceptions to this, such as "The Vanishing Hitchhiker," which is perhaps the most famous of all urban legends. This story, which Brunvand named his first urban legend book after, concerns the young woman who is given a ride one evening by a man who lends her his jacket. She vanishes from his car. And when he goes to her home address he learns she died on that very same day, but many years before. He usually finds his jacket on her gravestone. This story, which has also been widely filmed, has many variations. In *Baby Train* we encounter the paranormal again, via Mothman, Lizard Man, the Jersey Devil and the "ghost" in the videotape of *Three Men and a Baby*. Other familiar stories are "The Well to Hell," and that sure fire house-seller, St. Joseph.

The title story is categorized as a "Sex and Scandal" legend. It concerns apartment buildings that are near train tracks, and the widely held belief that such buildings have higher birthrates than average because of the early morning trains. The 4:30 a.m. train allegedly wakes people up too early to get up, and too late to go back to sleep. Brunvand found many variations of this story, including one that goes back to a small English village circa 1900!

Two of the most disgusting stories from the same category would have to be "The Butcher's Prank" and "The Infamous Toothbrush Story." In the first, a practical joking butcher puts a wiener in his pants and leaves a bit dangling out of his fly. When a friend discreetly alerts him to examine his fly, the butcher says, "Is that darn thing sticking out again?" He seizes a meat cleaver to remedy

the situation. In the second legend, of which there are multiple versions, a young couple on vacation has their hotel room robbed of everything except for their camera and toothbrushes. Not anxious to return home, they replace the other items and continue vacationing. Later, when they get their film developed they discover the thieves photographed themselves ransacking the room. The very last picture features one of them mooning the camera, using the toothbrushes in a decidedly unsanitary manner.

The new book also features the useful Type-Index of urban legends in the back. Stories are divided into categories, such as "Legends about cars," and then sub-categorized, as in "Automobile horror stories." They are then coded and indexed as to which of the five Brunvand books the full story can be found in.

In the Preface of the book Brunvand has written some amusing but useful advice about how to politely tell someone that the story he just told you is not really true, but an urban legend. He has written it in the style of the always polite Miss Manners, and as such, explains that the proper way to handle such a situation is "Polite Persistent Questioning." PPQ comes down to innocently questioning the story's details, such as in the case of "The Hook: "Goodness! Why would they give a dangerous maniac a hook? Wouldn't that simply provide him with a powerful weapon?" Come to think of it, maybe this technique could be useful in dealing with other unverified claims.

But perhaps the biggest thing a skeptic can learn from this book is the lesson that people believe urban legends because they want to believe. This is especially true when an urban legend fits one's personal belief system. We want to believe the story because it is just so appealing; the appeal being that it somehow makes sense of the world. And it is because these stories are so pleasing, so useful, that they keep coming back. There may be new forms and variations, but essentially they are the same stories.

Further Reading

The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings (1981).

The Choking Doberman and other "New" Urban Legends (1984).

The Mexican Pet: More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites (1986).

Curses! Broiled Again! The Hottest Urban Legends Going (1989).

All of the above, by Jan Harold Brunvand, and currently available in paperback only, are published by W.W. Norton & Co.

—Elena Watson

JP Update, or Fun with Cloning, part II

Like the Energizer Bunny, those cloned dinosaurs just kept going, as *Jurassic Park* continued to pull in the money for Universal Studios this fall. By November the popular dino-thriller was still at the top of the European box office. The studio estimated that it had taken in about \$800 million in grosses, world wide. This beats the previous world wide box office record held by *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, which took in \$704 million.

Meanwhile, just as the dino-DNA hype started to fade out state-side, a new cloning crisis emerged, only this time it struck closer to home. In mid-October the *New York Times* declared, "Scientist Clones Human Embryos" (*Virginian-Pilot*, October 24, 1993). The media went wild. Debates over the ethical implications mushroomed. All but lost in the frenzy were the researchers responsible for the experiment, Jerry Hall and Robert Stillman, both of George Washington University's in-vitro fertilization program.

The experiment itself had little to do with the fantasy type of DNA cloning done in *Jurassic Park*, nor did it involve genetic engineering, in which DNA strands are cut and spliced. The Hall-Stillman cells were copied with genes intact, similar to the way agriculturists have been cloning cattle embryos for years. The purpose being to increase the odds of success for in-vitro fertilization. As it is each embryo produced has only about a 10 or 20% chance of resulting in a pregnancy. For couples having trouble producing more than one embryo, cloning would be a way to increase those odds.

The embryos used by Hall and Stillman were abnormal, and would not have survived anyway. This, however, did not save them from becoming the center of a media controversy that rated a six page cover story in *Time* magazine ("Cloning Humans: Where do we draw the line?" November 8, 1993).

But the most bizarre relic of this season's clone-mania could be the front page story in the *George Washington Hatchet* (November 11, 1993) in which it was reported that the Vatican supports cloning, a contradiction of the Church's public condemnation of human embryo research. The source for this startling revelation is one "Dr. Avi Ben-Abraham" a leader "in the field of life extension who is touted as one of the smartest men in the world." Ben-Abraham further said that many Church officials hope that cloning could be used to reproduce Jesus from DNA fibers found on the Shroud of Turin.

Gee, all that's missing is a reprint of *In His Image: The Cloning of a Man* (Lippincott, 1978), the "true" (as in hoax) story of a rich man who had himself successfully cloned. ☒

(Thanks to Walter Rowe for the item from the *GW Hatchet*.—ed.)

E Rex?

By the time Elvis Presley was starring in films like *Girl Happy* there were already those who suspected that he had become a Rock and Roll dinosaur. By the time he resurfaced a few years later as a jump-suited headliner in Las Vegas it was obvious. But dinosaurs are pretty popular these days, as is the late King, making a combination of the two irresistible.

Now we have just that: Elvis the dinosaur, a genuine inhabitant of the Jurassic period. The unique skull of this theropod was found in Antarctica during a 1991 expedition by paleontologist William R. Hammer of Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. What makes this specimen special is its distinctive head crest, which sweeps upward, in a style not unlike a pompadour, the hairstyle favored by Presley. That is what prompted Hammer to nickname his yet-unnamed discovery "The Elvis Presley of the Jurassic" (*Science News*, October 23, 1993).

Hammer presented his findings, which include the first dinosaurs found on the Antarctic mainland, to the Society for Vertebrate Paleontology in Albuquerque, N.M., at their annual meeting last October. He says the bony head crest probably served as a display, similar to the tail of the male peacock. A carnivorous, bipedal dinosaur, this Elvis look-a-like was approximately eight meters in length, and lived during the early Jurassic period, sometime between 200 million and 175 million years ago, which makes him more than eligible for a part in the next *Jurassic Park* movie. But even better, should the Post Office decide to issue him his own stamp, the recovery of his skull guarantees that this Elvis really is dead. ☒

Pacific Monsters

Stamp collectors know that whatever the subject, some country, somewhere, has immortalized it on a stamp. Recently, prehistoric creatures and legendary monsters have been grippingly illustrated on a stamp series from the western Pacific island of Palau, part of the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific. The 25-stamp series blithely mingles pterosaurs, plesiosaurs, and the giant nautilus with legendary creatures like the Giant Crab, Lake Serpent, and Kraken. The artist likewise blissfully disregarded relative chronology. The top row of the sheet shows a native craft with two sailors. A pterosaur soars down on the boat from behind, while a plesiosaur rears terrifyingly out of the sea just ahead. The sailors themselves seem unconcerned—perhaps, unlike the artist, they know that pterosaurs and plesiosaurs died out millions of years before humans appeared on the scene. And does Palau really think this is going to help tourism? ☒

—L.A.S.



Yo!

Check the date printed on the mailing label on this issue. If you are looking into a past-life, then it must be time to renew your membership in NCAS.



Past Life Reporting

Quacking Up

On 18 September, Byron Tart of the Food and Drug Administration met with NCAS at the Tysons Pimmett Regional Library to discuss how the FDA treats fraudulent medical claims and, specifically, fraudulent medical devices.

The stated purpose of the FDA is “to protect the public.” To accomplish this, they are organized into five major Centers: Food (and vitamins), Drugs, Biologics (blood products and vaccines, Veterinary Medicine, and Devices (including medical). Mr. Tart is the Director of the Promotion and Advertising Policy Staff in the Office of Compliance of the Center for Devices. The primary purpose of this office is the prevent false advertising. A manufacturer may legally claim for his device only those uses for which the device has been approved, and this approval can only be obtained through verified clinical tests. The first example that Mr. Tart gave was hearing aids. It may be legally claimed that hearing aids amplify and filter sound because, in fact, they do exactly that. However, there have been no clinical tests showing that they improve comprehension, especially in noisy environments, and any such claims would be forbidden.

There is, unfortunately, a large loophole in the law. Any device which was on the market before May 28, 1976, is automatically “grandfathered” and may continue to make whatever claims it made before that time. In addition, any device which is “substantially equivalent” to a grandfathered device is exempt from the law and may

make the same claims. This no doubt explains many of the patent medicine ads which we have all come to know and love.

The FDA has the authority to remove a product from the market or have it recalled, and to seek criminal penalties against the manufacturer. They recognize, however, that the line between unauthorized use of a device and fraudulent claims for the device is often blurred. The former involves merely extending the claims for uses of the device into non-approved areas (i.e. uses for which no clinical tests have been presented). Depending on the situation, such claims may or may not warrant action. However, if claims for the devices pose a risk to health, or if they keep a patient from seeking proper medical care, or if they are “really outlandish” then the claims are fraudulent and the FDA will take action.

Several widely-advertised devices have been found to be fraudulent because they have made outlandish claims and/or because they have not provided clinical data to back up their claims:

- Copper bracelets to cure arthritis
- Permanent magnets in belts or shoes, or in mattresses to cure a variety of diseases and discomforts
- Germanium headbands to relieve pain (very popular in Japan)
- Self-applied acupuncture (or acupressure) devices such as earclips to lose weight or wristbands to relieve morning sickness or motion sickness

Tea Leaves and Entrails

...don't help much. But the future is clear for these upcoming NCAS meeting dates:

January 21	James Alcock and James Randi/NIH Masur Auditorium
January 22	Alcock and Randi encore for members and guests/Bethesda Library
February 19-20	<i>Communicating Skepticism</i> NCAS workshop weekend in Harpers Ferry
March 26	Bethesda Library

Program topics and speakers are still being considered. Special events—like the ever-popular NCAS Movie Nites—will also be happening from time to time.

Are there events, topics, and/or speakers that you would like to see? Would you like to help plan an event or host a Movie Nite? Let us know! Call Joe Himes (703-280-2503, evenings) or leave a message on the NCAS line (301-587-3827) at any time.

- Radioactive pillows

Mr. Tart also noted that the advertisers of crystals and pyramids cannot legally make any medical claims for them. However, the resources of the FDA are spread thin and since the devices do not seem to have caused any significant harm, they have not been prosecuted.

He closed by saying that the FDA reads all the letters that it gets and takes some sort of action in every case, although the form and intensity of the response was not specified. ☒

—Herb Federhen

“Illusion, Delusion and Data”

October 16, 1993 NCAS meeting

Chip Denman, one of the founders and former president of NCAS, gave a talk on visual statistics — how we represent data and how we can be fooled by its presentation. Our preconceived ideas of what we should see influence what we do see. As a statistician, Chip sees himself as a “professional skeptic” and spends much of his time looking at data and trying to understand the information that it contains.

Jumping to conclusions is not necessarily bad. As a survival instinct our eyes and mind need to process information and reach reasonable conclusions — whether it is to get out of the way of a charging elephant or charging taxicab. People usually do fairly well at such conclusions, but they do tend to make mistakes.

The talk consisted of many examples of how we are fooled by the information presented to us. Some of the items presented included:

(1) In the late 1880’s, Italian astronomer Schiaparelli observed channels on Mars and very carefully drew pictures of what he thought he saw. While he was very careful to not put value judgment in his observations, the Italian word for “channel” is “canali,” and thus was mistakenly translated into English as “canal,” a term that conveys intelligent design. Thus was born the continuing controversy of life on Mars.

Atmospheric interference prevented clear photographs of Mars up through the 1950’s, so no objective confirmation of the Martian *canali* could be obtained until the first Mars fly-by photography in 1965. These pictures showed no indication of channels, canals or any structures which were the basis of the channels that Schiaparelli, and later the American Astronomer Lowell, thought they saw. Here seemed to be a clear case of “wishful thinking,” much like the French N-rays of the early 1900’s, another topic often discussed in this newsletter.

(2) Context often has much to do with what we see. The string:

A B C

if read quickly might be seen as the letters A-B-C. But in another context:

12
13
14

the middle glyph appears quite different.

In another example from a recent issue of *Science* a headline read:

The AIDS epidemic continues to focus on the the established risk group.

The double “the” is hard to see since that is not the way we perceive English as being written.

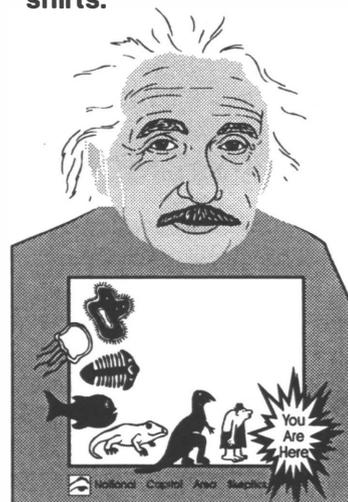
(3) Graphs in publications are sometimes spectacularly poor in presenting information. Several examples were given. In two cases (a newspaper account of automobile gas mileage and a local parent group lobbying for greater school funds) the size of the objects presented were out of proportion to the value of those objects, thus giving a mistaken impression as to the importance of those numbers. In other examples, pie charts were generally shown to be poor representations; bar charts convey the same and more information more effectively. People tend to be poorer estimators of area than of line length. The book *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, by Edward Tufte, provides a good overview of how to produce reliable graphics.

Chip ended his talk with the observation that “illusions are mistakes in our perceptual system; delusions are beliefs not supported by data. We must take care that we don’t go from one to the other.” ☒

—Marv Zelkowitz

Smart dresser.

Orders are now being taken for new editions of NCAS shirts. Choose from two designs printed on top quality shirts:



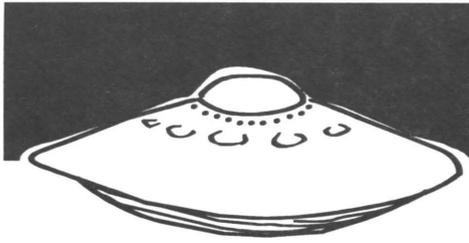
**"You Are Here"
(shown here)**

or

**"I'm so skeptical...
I can hardly believe it."**

Both designs may be ordered on either sweatshirts (\$25) or t-shirts (\$15), plus S&H.

Leave a message on the NCAS line (301-587-3827).



UFO NEWS

UFO Sanity

A study published in the November issue of the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* made media headlines this fall by declaring that people who report seeing UFOs or space aliens are just as normal as any one else. This widely publicized study was done at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, as a masters thesis by graduate student Patricia Cross. Co-author psychologist Nicholas Spanos was quoted by the Associated Press (November 1, 1993) as saying, "...these people are not necessarily abnormal."

The researchers found that the UFO witnesses scored no differently from the control group in terms of intelligence, psychological health, and fantasy-proneness. The subjects consisted of 49 adults who said they had seen UFOs, 39 members of the general public and 74 introductory psychology students. Eighteen of the UFO witnesses had merely seen something unknown in the sky, the other 31 having had varying degrees of close encounters, including two claiming UFO abduction.

For these 31 subjects, 60% of their experiences were associated with sleep, indicating to the researchers that sleep could be involved. The subjects who reported intense experiences while awake had higher tendencies toward fantasy than others in the UFO group, although it was still within normal range. The only significant difference between the UFO sighters and the others was that the UFO witnesses had a previously held belief in the existence of aliens and UFOs.

This would seem to support the advice given by UFO skeptic and NCAS member Philip Klass in his book *UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game* (Prometheus Books, 1988): the only sure way to avoid UFO abduction is to be a skeptic!

Mission Mars

In late August NASA suffered yet another disappointment, this time by losing communication with the eagerly awaited Mars Observer. It was just 68 hours before the Observer was to fire rockets that would slow it down enough to be captured by Mars's gravity, when flight controllers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory saw the first indications of trouble (*Newsweek*, September 6, 1993). On-board transmitters, which shut down during propulsion maneuvers, did not power back up; commands to activate a backup transmitter also failed. Likewise, the probe failed to phone home later in the week, as it had been programmed to do in the event of not hearing from JPL in five days.

Well, if nature abhors a vacuum, then so do enquiring minds. Not knowing the fate of the Mars probe led many to concoct their own theories. Such as the UFO conspiracy buffs who began picketing JPL immediately, convinced that NASA was lying, and just pretending the Observer was lost. Why would NASA do such a thing? To hide the discovery of Martians, of course! *The Weekly World News*, meanwhile, indicated that it was someone inside NASA who pulled the plug on the Observer, to conceal the truth about the Mars Face and the ancient city on Mars. Later the Associated Press (September 25, 1993) reported that approximately 250 people, who were attending the National New Age, Alien Agenda and Cosmic Conspiracies Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, attempted to contact the Observer via psychic energy. Maybe they would have had more luck if they had tried to contact the Martians. ☒





Where the Flakes Come From

By Lys Ann Shore

Battle Creek, Michigan, is a city built on cereal. On a Sunday drive through the deserted downtown, you pass Kellogg Park, Kellogg Arena, the gleaming block-long headquarters of the Kellogg Foundation, the world headquarters of the Kellogg Company--well, you get the idea. In fact, Battle Creek has thrived for nearly a century on a diet of breakfast cereal: Post as well as Kellogg got its start here, and both still operate factories in the city. How the industry began involves an interesting, if somewhat flaky, combination of religious fervor, food faddery, and industrial expansion.

The first ingredient in the mix was religion, in the form of the fundamentalist Seventh-Day Adventist sect. Basing themselves on the biblical text (Genesis 1:29) in which God tells the newly created man and woman, "Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed...to you it shall be for meat," the Adventists practiced and advocated a vegetarian diet. The sect was formally organized in Battle Creek on May 21, 1863, and kept its headquarters there for half a century. The group's founder and prophet, Ellen White, received divine instruction on matters of health and diet, which she then wrote out and circulated among members. The Adventists are still ardent advocates of vegetarianism and "wholesome" diet.

Even before the founding of the Adventists, Battle Creek was known as a midwestern center for health quackery. The town seems to have been full of practitioners, from mesmerists to phrenologists to "water therapists." Quackery was moving west right along with the American population, from upstate New York to Michigan--I guess that makes corn flakes a descendant of the Fox sisters.

In 1866 the Adventists established a "health reform institute" in Battle Creek. It's not clear from the sources I've found exactly what kinds of treatment were offered, but five to seven dollars a week paid for room, meals, nursing care, "treatments," and medical care.

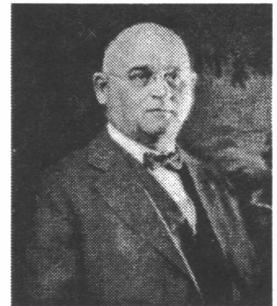
Ten years later came the second ingredient in the mix: a young doctor, John Harvey Kellogg, son of a prominent Adventist family. J. H. Kellogg joined the staff of the Western Health Reform Institute, which soon changed its name to the Battle Creek Sanitarium. Fascinated with food, Kellogg began experimenting with the creation of new and healthful foods. One of his early recipes mixed burned bread crusts with bran, molasses, and corn to make "Caramel Cereal Coffee."

Kellogg was a naturopath, a healer who relied on nature for healing. "Naturopathy" is an umbrella term that included hundreds of different therapies. One of these is "water therapy," or hydrotherapy. Kellogg believed in this to the extent of writing a 1,200-page volume, *Rational Hydrotherapy*, expounding its virtues.

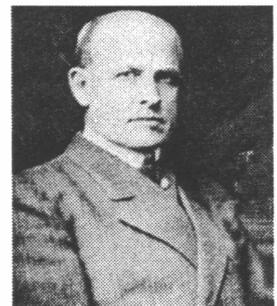
Under Kellogg, diet became the mainstay of the sanitarium's health regime, and his passion for inventing new foods was partly an attempt to liven up the institution's bland (no spices) vegetarian meals. He invented a breakfast cereal that he first called "Granula," until he was sued by a New York state doctor who was already marketing a cereal by that name. Kellogg began



Dr. John Harvey Kellogg



W. K. Kellogg



C. W. Post



The Battle Creek Sanitarium in its heyday, ca. 1929.

calling his cereal “Granola” instead. He appears to have lost interest in cereal soon after, turning his attention to other foods, such as nut butters (yes, Battle Creek just missed becoming the peanut butter capital of the world, as well as the cereal capital). Enthusiastic over the qualities of nuts, Kellogg published a paper with the inimitable title, “Nuts May Save the Race.”

As early as 1877, the sanitarium’s bakery produced a variety of health food products, including cereals, both for patients and also for sale to former patients by mail order. In 1898 the operation was incorporated as the Battle Creek Sanitarium Health Food Company.

A meeting in 1893 with the developer of shredded wheat caused Kellogg to turn back to breakfast cereals and conduct new culinary experiments. Two years later he developed wheat flakes, which failed to gain widespread popularity. (This part of the story reminds me of the failed inventor who complained about how he had just missed becoming rich and famous: his specialty was soft drinks, and he invented “One-Up, Two-Up, Three-Up,…” but quit after “Six-Up.” Poor guy. Kellogg was either more fortunate or more creative.) In 1902 he had the brilliant idea of substituting corn for wheat in the flakes.

The new cereal was so successful that the sanitarium couldn’t keep up with the demand for it. Enter the third ingredient in the Battle Creek mix: J. H. Kellogg’s younger brother, Will Keith Kellogg. W. K. Kellogg had been an administrator at the sanitarium for some years. Reputedly eager to go into business for himself, he remained at the sanitarium out of loyalty, helping the institution to rebuild after a disastrous fire in 1902. Among his other duties, he

managed the Sanitas Nut Food Company, a job for which he apparently accepted only token payment. Founded in 1899, Sanitas manufactured a variety of health foods, nut butter, and the newly invented “Sanitas” corn flakes. In 1908 the company merged with Battle Creek Sanitarium Health Food Company to become the Kellogg Food Company.

J. H. Kellogg regarded the food business as a way of funding worthy causes. W. K. shared his altruistic view, but he also saw the commercial possibilities. Indeed, he could scarcely help but see them, since right before his eyes was the towering example of multimillionaire cereal manufacturer Charles W. Post. Post had made his first several millions before the turn of the century, thanks largely to his use of creative advertising. As the Battle Creek *Daily Moon* said in 1902, “Mr. Post has gone from a day laborer to a man of many millions in a very few years and there is just one solution for his wonderful success: Advertising. Scarcely a newspaper or magazine is to be found in which his preparations are not exploited.”

Post had first come to Battle Creek in 1891 as a patient at the sanitarium. Although he “took the cure,” he wasn’t cured, and he left the sanitarium after ten months under Dr. Kellogg’s care. He soon found the cure he was seeking, however, by visiting a Christian Science practitioner who told him to eat whatever he wanted. A well man once again, Post turned his energy to business. In 1895 he introduced Postum, a coffee substitute similar to Kellogg’s “Caramel Cereal Coffee.” In 1898 he brought out Grape Nuts, another variation on the Granula/Granola formula arrived at separately by Kellogg and Dr. James C. Jackson of New York state.

By 1909 W. K. Kellogg had left the sanitarium to run the Kellogg Toasted Corn Flake Company, manufacturing corn flakes. W. K. Kellogg wasn’t the only businessman to cast an admiring eye at Post’s achievement and advertising acumen. Entrepreneurs flocked to Battle Creek hoping to cash in on the breakfast cereal boom. And here we arrive at the fourth ingredient in the Battle Creek mix: industrial expansion. At the turn of the twentieth century, American industry was growing toward what seemed limitless horizons. Success seemed within the reach of any clever and enterprising man, and Battle Creek must have seemed like an especially promising location. For one thing, the city had workers who knew the secrets of cereal manufacturing. As early as 1902, employees of the Sanitas Nut Food Company had to sign agreements preventing them from sharing technical knowledge with competitors.

Such nondisclosure agreements couldn’t have been very effective, however, because between the 1890s and the 1920s more than 100 cereal manufacturing companies started up business in Battle Creek. Among them were the American Hulled Bean Company and the American Pure Food company, many firms whose names began with “Battle Creek,” Cero-Fruto Company (Cero-Fruto was wheat flakes sprayed with apple jelly), Coffayette Com-

pany, Flak-Ota Company, Horn-O-Plenty, the Hygienic Food Company, Moko Health Drink Company, Multifarious Food Company, Neutravena Company, Dr. Price Cereal Food Company (manufacturer of "Try-A-Bita" wheat flakes flavored with pepsin and celery), and the World's Fare Food Company. The favored products appear to have been mainly cereal beverages and flaked cereals.

Dr. Kellogg's sanitarium continued to flourish throughout the 1910s and '20s. In 1931 an impressive sixteen-story tower was completed. That was the institution's last moment of glory. Less than two years later, it was in receivership, a casualty of the Great Depression. The enormous building was purchased by the federal government in 1942 and served first as an army hospital, then as U.S. Civil Defense headquarters. Today, the tower and its three multistory wings are the Battle Creek Federal Center, housing various federal government offices. Set a bit apart from downtown Battle Creek, the former sanitarium still dominates the city skyline. It's no less impressive up close: in its heyday the San, as it was called, must have harbored hundreds of patients at a time.

Walking up to the main entrance for a closer look, we found it easy to imagine patients being helped from carriages and cars under the lofty pillared portico, then being guided or perhaps wheeled across the spacious lobby before being checked in and shown to their rooms to begin "the cure." Curious to learn more about the San, we stopped at a local bookstore, expecting to find an entire section of books on health fads, histories of the cereal industry, perhaps even a history of the San itself. We found nothing of the sort, not even a postcard of the building. We did find a few local histories, mostly of the booster type (see box, "Sources"), but that was all.

And probably that's all we should have expected. Although its wealth and fame are based on the freaks of health faddery, Battle Creek and the cereal industry have long put that fact behind them. Today, no one as far as I know believes that eating corn flakes is the key to perfect health and longevity (Kellogg's own views were much loopier even than this). But the headquarters of the Kellogg Company and the Kellogg Foundation (one of the nation's wealthiest) are solid realities, buttressing Battle Creek's economy and public image.

Sources

I'm especially indebted to two accounts of the Battle Creek breakfast-cereal industry: first, Harold McGee's "Nuts May Save the Race": The Story of Breakfast Cereals," in his magisterial study, *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* (New York: Scribner's, 1984), pp. 246-49; and second, the fascinating article by Garth "Duff" Stoltz, "A Taste of Cereal," *Heritage Battle Creek: A Journal of Local History 2*

(Spring 1992): 46-57. Stoltz compiled the list of 101 early cereal companies in Battle Creek.

I have also referred to Robert B. Miller's popular history of Battle Creek, *Our Town, Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Battle Creek: Albert L. and Louise B. Miller Foundation, 1986).

For further reading on early twentieth-century health quackery, try James Harvey Young, *The Medical Messiahs: A Social History of Health Quackery in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967). See also Martin Gardner, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (New York: Dover, 1957). ☒

Editor's note: For another view of health quackery and the Battle Creek story, see John Money, The Destroying Angel: Sex, Fitness and Food in the Legacy of Degeneracy Theory, Graham Crackers, Kellogg's Corn Flakes, and American Health History. (Prometheus, 1985.)

Humming Along

The researchers investigating the hum being heard by residents of Taos, New Mexico, found no source for it, according to the Associated Press (AP, August 24, 1993). Horace Poteet of Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque said, "We're all very disappointed. We hoped we could help these people." Poteet himself is a hum-hearer, one of many in the area. Taos residents have been complaining about the hum since 1991, and AP reports that the city of Albuquerque, about 100 miles south of Taos, conducted its own investigation of hum complaints in 1989. When the Taos investigation was publicized (by, among others, the NCAS "Remote Viewing" column, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1993), the investigators received similar complaints from Taiwan, several western states, Wisconsin, Michigan, Vermont, Massachusetts, New York, and Maryland. The team's next step will be to test the Taos hum-hearers, on the theory that if there's no identifiable external source, the hum might be produced in the human ear itself. "It's possible that something in the environment is causing people's ears to emit sounds they can then hear," said the investigators' report. ☒

—L.A.S



A Skeptic's Response

This feature of the *Skeptical Eye* is designed to provide brief, logical answers to questions that may arise in conversation. In our last issue we described a public demonstration at the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, Maryland, of something called "QiGong." Titled "A Hands off Healing" by the *Washington Post*, QiGong was identified as an ancient Chinese art. The following quick overview is an attempt to place QiGong into an historical perspective. It is by no means complete.

What is QiGong?

By Elena M. Watson

QiGong (pronounced *chee-gung*) literally means the manipulation of vital energy, and is simply one part of ancient or "Traditional" Chinese folk medicine, which dates back to over 2000 years ago.

Like all traditional Chinese medicine it is based on maintaining, or restoring the balance of one's vital energy, or Qi. Illness or disease is thought to be the result of imbalances in the Qi flow through the human body. To restore health one must restore this balance between the yin and yang forces. The body itself is said to have channels or "meridians" through which the Qi flows. Various points along these meridians are said to correspond to the different organs, each organ with a different function. But because the early Chinese never dissected human bodies for study, this system does not correlate to what is now known about human anatomy.

The folk belief behind traditional medicine is itself an out-growth of primitive animism. Based on the balancing of the two opposing forces of nature, yin and yang, yin is represented as feminine and yang as masculine. Together these components make up Qi (or Chi), the vital energy force that inhabits all things.

The meridian system itself is very complex. Diagnosis is based upon symptoms and an elaborate method of pulse taking, in which each wrist is thought to have six pulses and 25 qualities. The restoring of the proper Qi can be accomplished through several means, acupuncture, the use of herbs, or QiGong. Acupuncture, which became popular in the seventies, uses fine needles to control the Qi flow along the various meridian points. Internal QiGong also controls the flow of Qi, from within. The patient does this himself, through deep breathing, concentration and relaxation exercises. Similar to this is Tai Chi, a martial art that is performed regularly as gentle exercise. External QiGong, however, involves moving one's Qi to heal another, with no physical contact. The premise being that once a person is adept enough at moving his own Qi flow, he can then emit this vital energy.

Although it is common for the Chinese to mix several religious or philosophical doctrines, much of what is said about Qi stems from ancient Taoist religious beliefs. These beliefs, in turn, were corrupted from early Taoist philosophy. The word Tao means "way," and so the doctrines of Taoist philosophy are primarily concerned with the way one should live one's life. The most important of these doctrines being "action in harmony with nature." If one were to live a tranquil

life, in complete harmony with nature, it was thought one's life span could extend several hundred years.

By the Ch'in Dynasty, 221-207 B.C., Taoist religious priest-magicians had emerged. Many of them practiced alchemy, concocting elixirs to insure immortality. They were also spirit mediums, practiced breath control and were said to levitate. Many different sects of Taoist religion arose, but the Heavenly Master sect of the 2nd Century A.D., specialists in faith healing, eventually absorbed the others, and remained the most popular sect of the 20th Century.

Today, the best known form of traditional Chinese medicine is acupuncture, due to former President Nixon's visit to the People's Republic of China in 1972. At that time acupuncture was in favor with the Chinese government, and so the visiting Americans were treated to amazing demonstrations of the effectiveness of acupuncture as an anesthesia for major surgery. Unfortunately these events were staged, and not as sensational as they appeared. The patients had been carefully selected, and most had been given a tranquilizer, local anesthetic and/or painkiller prior to the surgery. In fact, acupuncture is not widely used in China as an anesthetic, only in about 5 to 10 percent of the cases.

The reasoning behind the deceptive demonstrations was political. For years, starting in the late 19th century, the government had tried to forbid the use of acupuncture. The Chinese Nationalists had also tried to outlaw acupuncture in the 1930s and 1940s, with little success. But by the 1970s Chairman Mao realized China did not have enough Western-trained doctors to care adequately for the whole country. As a result, practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine were recruited to help fulfill the medical needs of the nation.

Modern China still maintains a mix of traditional and Western medicine. And somewhat ironically, since 1979, when the public was allowed greater freedom of thought, belief in the paranormal has mushroomed. This includes an increase in the use of QiGong, as reported in the *Skeptical Inquirer* in 1988. It was during a two week visit to China in the spring of 1988 that five members of CSICOP were allowed to scientifically test the powers of Chinese psychics and QiGong masters. The results were recorded by videotape, audiotape and still cameras. Without exception, all of the preliminary testing done in China, including that done on external QiGong, produced negative results.

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Alternative Healing Grants Announced by the NIH

In October the Office of Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, created by Congress two years ago, announced the initial list of research grants that it would be awarding. These thirty grants of roughly \$30,000 each were selected from more than 800 applicants. Speaking at the NIH on October 5, Dr. Joseph Jacobs, director of the Office, said that these grants would fund preliminary studies and information gathering to identify areas deserving of further, more carefully controlled research.

- QiGong as a treatment for reflex sympathetic dystrophy. Wen-hsien Wu, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.
- Visualization exercises and muscle relaxation as immune system boosters. Mary Banks Jasnoski, George Washington University.
- Prayer and recovery from drug abuse. Scott Walker, University of New Mexico.
- Yogic breathing and obsessive compulsive disorder. David Shannahoff-Khalsa, Khalsa Foundation for Medical Science, Delmar, California.
- In vitro study of antioxidant vitamins to enhance anti-cancer drugs. Kedar Prasad, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.
- Acupuncture as a treatment for severe depression in women. John J. Allen, University of Arizona.
- Hypnosis as a treatment for chronic back pain, and its effect on the pain perception regions of the brain. Helen Joan Crawford, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
- In vitro study of Chinese-style direct "electrochemical" stimulation to shrink tumors and boost the immune system. C. K. Chou, City of Hope National Medical Center, Duarte, California.
- Biofeedback and control of chronic pain. Richard A. Sherman, Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center, Aurora, Colorado.
- Hypnosis to accelerate healing of ankle bone fractures. Carol Ginades, McLean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts.
- Biofeedback-assisted relaxation to cur-
- tail insulin dependence in type I diabetes. Angela V. McCrady, Medical College of Ohio, Toledo.
- Visual imagery/relaxation for women completing breast cancer treatment. D. Blair Justice, University of Texas Health Sciences Center.
- Guided imagery for asthma patients. James P. Halper, Lenox Hill Hospital, New York.
- An attempt to measure the forces involved in chiropractic manipulations. Martin H. Krag, University of Vermont.
- Massage therapy to improve immune function in combination with antiviral drug treatment for AIDS. Thomas J. Birk, Morse Physical Health Research Center, Toledo, Ohio.
- Massage therapy to reduce anxiety and depression for bone marrow transplant patients. Denise Matt Tope, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.
- Therapeutic touch to reduce stress-induced immune suppression in nursing and medical students. Melodie Olson, Medical University of South Carolina.
- Acupuncture as a treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children. Neil A. Sonenklar, Virginia Commonwealth University.
- Dance and movement therapy for adults with cystic fibrosis. Sharon W. Goodill, Hahnemann University, Philadelphia.
- "Energetic therapy" as a supplement to conventional treatment for basal cell carcinoma. Steven L. Fahrion, Menniger Clinic, Topeka, Kansas.
- Homeopathy effectiveness and patient belief/personality type. Michael S. Goldstein, University of California at Los Angeles.
- Hypnotic guided imagery and immune function in breast cancer patients. Patricia Francesca Newton, Good Samaritan Hospital and Medical Center, Portland, Oregon.
- Ayurvedic medicine and general health. David B. Simon, Sharp Healthcare, San Diego, California.
- Ayurvedic herbal bean derivative and Parkinson's disease model in rats. Bala V. Manyam, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine.
- Macrobiotic diet and cancer treatment. Lawrence J. Kushi, University of Minnesota.
- T'ai Chi exercises and mild balance disorders. Timothy Carl Hain, Northwestern University.
- Music therapy to improve social adjustment and mood associated with brain injury. Paul J. Eslinger, Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine.
- Daily 15-minute massage to improve development and immune function in preterm newborns with HIV positive mothers. Frank A. Scafidi, University of Miami.
- Yoga as a adjunct to methadone maintenance treatment for drug addiction. Howard Shaffer, North Charles International Health Research and Training Foundation, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Massage therapy for women who have had uterine cancer surgery. Douglas E. DeGood, University of Virginia.

The Electric Skeptic

occasional articles about skepticism
on the electronic frontier

NCAS Electronic Mail Project

By Gary Stone (grstone@delphi.com)

Starting in November members listed in the NCAS E-MAIL Directory began to receive occasional email about local events and news items of skeptical interest, such as the recent Creation/Evolution debate between Dr. Gish and Dr. Weber at George Mason University, and referral to an article that had just been published in the weekly *Washington City Paper* about an acupuncture clinic requesting D.C. funding. We are also experimenting with emailing advance copies of the monthly *Shadow of a Doubt*.

This project grew out of the increasing use of e-mail by the NCAS Board. For example, a flurry of e-mail among board members facilitated timely reaction to a Chinese Qi-Gong medicine demonstration at NIH featuring dubious feats of action at a distance. By acting quickly the Board was able to schedule an NCAS program at the very same, heavily booked NIH Masur auditorium, featuring James Randi and James Alcock, on January 21 to offer a skeptical perspective on Qi-Gong.

To sign-up for the NCAS E-mail Project, send an email request to grstone@delphi.com.

Use the same address to contribute timely information which may be of skeptical interest to NCAS members.

If you need an e-mail account, you can get one free; read on.

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Your CapAccess account can also be used to participate in the Global SKEPTIC E-mail Discussion Group featured in a previous Electric Skeptic column (*Skeptical Eye*, Vol.7, No.2, 1993, page 22). ☒

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Would you like to be included in a future NCAS electronic directory? Send e-mail to Gary Stone.



The Last Word

A Supermarket Tabloid Ate My Brain

By Elena M. Watson

I confess I had hoped to break my *Weekly World News* addiction and complete this issue without mentioning a single tabloid, but that was before I looked at the October issue of *Smithsonian* magazine. Inside I discovered the most informative article about the tabloids I have ever seen (Hubbell, 1993), and I learned more than I ever expected.

The most amazing revelation is that the people who write for the *Weekly World News* not only come from good schools, like Harvard, but many also come with experience from reputable papers, like the *New York Times*. And these writers get paid good money, up to \$75,000 a year, to write about weird stuff like demon possessed toilets and big game hunters from Mars. Editor Eddie Clontz explains this by admitting "We have to pay them a lot because we are, in effect, asking them to end their careers..."

Clontz, of course, is the man who made the *WWN* the household name that it is today; the most lurid of the tabloids. But actually, Clontz' paper is a relative newcomer, as the *WWN* wasn't started until 1979 by the *National Enquirer*. Eddie didn't come aboard until 1981, but he moved up to managing editor in 1982, and editor in 1989. To make his publication stand out from the others Clontz deliberately studied the tabloids of the past. And although he admittedly admires famed yellow journalist William Randolph Hearst, it is another publisher baron of history who seems to guide the editorial spirit of today's *Weekly World News*, Bernarr Macfadden.

Macfadden, who died in 1955 at the age of 87, was more than a publisher, he was a food faddist, "physical culturist" and promoter of naturopathy. He also widely endorsed the Dr. Bates System for seeing without glasses. His magazines included *True Story* and *Physical Culture*. In 1924 he started a tabloid, called the *New York Evening Graphic*, which introduced the composograph, a photograph that was enhanced, altered and/or posed. During a much publicized divorce case

continued on next page

In Search of:

NCAS would like to find possible facilities for future events. Can you suggest locations? Rooms of different sizes are sought which could accommodate 75-500. Metro accessibility, parking, audiovisual equipment, and weekend availability are all factors which need to be considered. Please phone Joe Himes at 703-280-2503.

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Send your articles, letters, and original artwork for future publication in the *Skeptical Eye*. Contributions should be short (500-1000 words maximum, or two to four double-spaced pages) and typed, not handwritten. If you use a computer, please send hard copy along with your floppy disk (5.25" or 3.5", WordPerfect or ASCII). Please be sure to include your name, address, and telephone number. Send all contributions to *Skeptical Eye*, 8006 Valley Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

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Last Word, from page 23

in 1927, involving a wealthy older man and his teenage wife, the *Graphic* ran a composograph of the couple playing “doggies” (?) in their bedroom. The accompanying headline read, “WOOF, WOOF, I’M A GOOF.” The *Graphic* shut down publication in 1932.

But no discussion of tabloids is complete without mention of this man, Generoso Pope Jr., “The Father of the Supermarket Tabloid.” Born in 1927, Pope was also influenced by Macfadden. After working for family and saving his money, Pope bought the *New York Enquirer*, a declining weekly. He filled it with big headlines and stories of sex, gore, and violence. Circulation rose. In 1957 he changed the name to the *National Enquirer*. By the late 1960s, however, Pope wanted more exposure, and more sales. He thought he could get this through the grocery stores. The supermarket chains refused to sell his publication, however, on the basis that the *Enquirer* was too sleazy. Pope cleaned it up, moved to Lantana, Florida, and wormed his way into the supermarkets of America.

By the early 1970s, the *Enquirer* was successful enough to attract the attention of publishing mogul Rupert Murdoch, who tried to buy it from Pope. Since Pope wasn’t selling, Murdoch responded by creating the *Star*, in color. Pope then upgraded the *Enquirer* to color. It was then, that the old black and white press was given over to the newly created *Weekly World News*.

And now we’re back to where we started, Eddie Clontz and the *Weekly World News*!

The *Weekly World News* is really only one of the six tabloids currently available at your local Food Lion. They are, in descending order of sales: *National Enquirer*, *Star*, *Globe*, *National Examiner*, *Weekly World News*, and *Sun*. But it is the low selling *WWN* that has attracted what Clontz and managing editor Sal Ivone call a cult readership among intellectuals. Well, gee, I guess that puts me in good company, anyway.

In that same company we also find S. Elizabeth Bird, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Minnesota.

She became fascinated by the tabloids when she discovered that many of the articles read like repetitions of old folk stories. For example, a 1992 headline from the *WWN* exclaiming “X-RAY SHOWS LIVE SNAKE TRAPPED IN MAN’S STOMACH,” echoes a 17th century story about Mary Dudson, who swallowed a small snake, which grew in her stomach and killed her. Likewise, Bird’s book, *For Enquiring Minds*, a study of the tabloids as folklore, notes the preoccupation tabloids have for certain eternal themes, like the hero who doesn’t die, which recalls the recent Elvis phenomena.

This sounds a lot like urban legends to me, so maybe Bird is on to something. But, then again, urban legends develop naturally, via word of mouth; a product of humans at their most fallible. They aren’t written by over-paid, over-educated tabloid reporters.

And what of the allegation that at least some of what the *Weekly World News* prints is “fiendishly clever political satire?” Sal Ivone, for one denies this, but his eyes did brighten at the suggestion of it, and he did confess to *Smithsonian* that he is a fan of National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered.”

Meanwhile, I’m still pondering the implications of “EARTH’S WATER SUPPLY CAME FROM DINOSAUR WEE-WEE.” (*WWN*, November 23, 1993)

For Further Reading:

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For more about Macfadden:

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