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A&E's "The Unexplained" to debut with Renier/Williston case

On the first Thursday in January, the A&E Network's new weekly series, "The Unexplained," is scheduled to debut at 10:00 p.m. Eastern time. The first hour-long program is slated to be the one on "Psychic Detectives" featuring Noreen Renier and the Williston case (see our lead story below) along with a few additional sleuths. [TBS's Gary Posner appears in the Renier segment](#) to counter the notion that "psychic" power must have been responsible for Renier's success in assisting the police in finding Norman Lewis' body. Watch for our coverage of that program, and of the recent Sightings episode dealing with this case, in our next issue.

TBS receives official police file on Williston missing-person case

by Gary P. Posner

The lead story in our last issue dealt with Orlando "psychic" Noreen Renier's involvement in a missing-person case, the credit she has received from the Williston, Florida, police for directing them to the murky, limestone quarry/pit where the 76-year-old man's body was found, and the subsequent media publicity surrounding the case (including an upcoming A&E Network program which will contain skeptical input from me).

As we reported in a "last-minute" note, a Tampa law firm (which would just as soon remain unnamed) had made a Public Records Request of the police department to provide a copy of its entire file on the case. TBS has since been forwarded a copy of the records provided to the firm by the Williston police.

Of particular note are two items among the mound of paperwork: a May 12, 1995, report (supplemented on June 15) filed by Investigator Brian Hewitt (Renier's main contact with the

department), and the notes jotted down by Hewitt regarding Renier's July 17, 1995, "psychic" reading (both, as well as relevant maps, are available from TBS for a self-addressed return envelope and \$1.00 for copying costs).

In his two-page [May 12 / June 15 report](#) (containing spelling and grammatical errors that I will correct as best I can in the otherwise exact quotes below), Hewitt notes that a

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

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

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

Since it had previously been publicized that Renier's reading had been video and audiotaped, the law firm had made an effort to obtain these tapes, which would reveal the extent to which Renier received the "feedback" that she requires while performing her "Twenty Questions" or "Hot and Cold" parlor-game-style "psychic" readings (see the lead story in our Summer '96 issue). The police informed the law firm that the Lewis family had paid for the session with Renier and owned the videotape. The police did acknowledge possession of an audiotape and, after some initial hesitancy, provided what Hewitt calls "a copy of the field audio tape [which] contains portions of the session with Noreen Renier . . ."

To my dismay, upon playing the tape, it is evident that there is a cut/edit after nearly every sentence spoken by Renier (and often in mid-sentence or mid-word). Further, the entire tape runs for a mere

five minutes and forty-three seconds. Yet, there are some utterances worth discussing:

- "A lot of rocks" [-- Did she know about the "rock pit" suicide threat? Or consult a map, as I did (see last issue)?]
- "We have a lot of things that go straight down. No one really knows what's down there because it's so hazardous and dangerous and people don't go down there." [-- Ditto.]
- "Let me have a starting place. . . . We want to get you in the quadrant from 9 to 12 . . . into that pie-shaped area." [And from Hewitt's notes:] "Where do you want me to start? At his house." [- - Starting from Lewis' house, his body was found in the 12 to 3 quadrant, not 9 to 12.]
- "There's a railroad track that goes through there." [-- See last issue's article about the RR tracks on the map.]
- "There's a very famous river." [-- Did she know about the "river/pit" suicide plan?]
- "Remember I wanted to go towards the river. For some reason, the river is down below." [-- A hedged, hybrid "river/pit" clue?]
- "Speedometer is zero in front of the house. . . . Maybe 4, maybe 5. If it's 45 miles, if it's 4.5 miles. I want to go to my left. I want to go to 9. . . . I feel 45. 45x. You know how they have that little baby circle up there? . . . Looking for H and 45." [-- Lewis was found 2.1 miles from his home. The "45" was credited as a "hit" because he was found near U.S. 41, also known as State Route 45 (confirmed on a roadmap, although no such signs are posted in Williston).]
- "Swallowed up [down there in the water] but there's hardness higher up." [-- Obvious if she was directing them to a "rock pit."]
- "Must be still somehow in the vehicle. I feel the metal very, very strongly." [-- It was widely publicized that both Lewis and his truck had been missing for two years.]
- "We're not too far from an old bridge. Either it's been decayed or it's broken or it's not used. . . . It's called the old bridge or is an old bridge." [-- She was credited with a "hit" because there is an old truck scale nearby (but no bridge).]
- "One point, or one-one point two. I see two-two-I [the letter "I"]. I believe a very strong H, 'Ha'-sounding or an H in it." [-- From Hewitt's notes:
"221 22 21 2I H EML E 11.2"
Renier was credited with an eerily accurate "hit" because Lewis was found 2.1 miles from his home!!! But what about the "45" or "4.5" miles???]

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

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

Florida councilwoman tells of 'UFO cure' on Maury Povich Show

by Gary P. Posner

Volusia County Council member Lynne Plaskett, running for reelection, appeared on the September 11 Maury Povich Show with a panel of compatriots. But the controversial topic of discussion was not school prayer or the teaching of evolution. Rather, the show's theme was "Are We Alone?: Alien Abductions."

Sharing the stage with five fellow abductees and Budd Hopkins, UFO-abduction guru and author, Plaskett explained that in 1975 she was diagnosed with metastatic T-cell lymphoma and "given three months to live" by her doctors. At the time, she says, only three known cases of this rare cancer had ever been seen in the United States, all in newborns, and the doctors "didn't know how to treat it." Further, by the time she was diagnosed, her disease had already spread throughout her body, including her "liver, lungs, kidneys, and bone marrow."

Although her doctors gave her no hope for a cure, Plaskett says that she was referred to New York Children's Hospital to undergo chemotherapy. But rather than be admitted immediately, she asked to be allowed to go home until the next day, in order to make preparations for the care of her three-year-old son.

While in her bed that night, she says she

". . . heard an electrical-type . . . buzzing noise that sounded like it was emanating through the wall behind [my bed]. The room filled up with a fog, I was levitated off my bed . . . and I could not move. A disc-like object came in through the open window, it hovered over me, and had little square windows, and it gyrated. It went from my head to my feet, back and forth three times, never actually touching me. It was about probably eight inches -- ten inches -- in diameter. . . . I felt as if it was examining me even though it never touched me. Then it left the room and the fog dissipated. I was lowered back down to the bed. When I woke up the next morning I knew I was going to be all right. I knew I wasn't going to die. I knew that it wasn't God. I knew it was another [energy] form. . . . Within four months I was in complete remission. I'm in the medical journal. They could not explain it, and I guess they listed me under "miracles" or whatever they put people in my situation under."

Plaskett went on to say that it was years later before she made the connection between her healing and UFOs. While watching a TV show during which a recording from a "mother ship" was played, she

recognized the "buzzing" as being the same sound she had heard that night.

Her doctors, she says, attribute 99% of her cure to her "mental attitude." I suspect that her subsequent "two years of chemotherapy," including a total of "22 different kinds of drugs," may have played some role as well.

Later coverage of Plaskett's reelection bid indicated that her opponent elected not to use this issue against her. Nevertheless, Plaskett has now lost her council seat.

CHAIRMAN'S CORNER

by Terry A. Smiljanich

The more things change . . .

We skeptics are familiar with the story. A renowned magician has spent his most recent years exposing psychic fraud. He and a respected scientific publication have an open offer of a substantial monetary prize for the verifiable proof of psychic phenomena. This magician has put on elaborate entertainments to demonstrate to audiences the ease with which they can be fooled by chicanery. As a reward for his efforts, he has been hounded in the courts with frivolous lawsuits and vilified in the pseudoscientific community.

James Randi, right? No. His career would fit the bill, but I am talking about another magician and another time. A hundred years ago, Erich Weiss devoted a substantial part of his time to exposing spiritualists and mediums. This most famous magician of all time was better known by his stage name -- Harry Houdini.

The turn of the century in America was a time rife with claims of psychic phenomena, seances, and visitations by "aliens" (known as "fairies" at the time). Houdini, who had spent his career creating incredible illusions and "impossible" escapes for his audiences, was angry at the crude magic being offered to the public, not to entertain but to defraud. Houdini counterattacked by exposing these frauds in public and by demonstrating how easily duplicated were their psychic claims. He joined with the magazine *Scientific American* in offering thousands of dollars to anyone who could prove their fantastic claims of talking with the dead. Needless to say, no payment was ever required, although *Scientific American* was almost fooled once (a spiritualist almost succeeded in packing an "unbiased" committee with his supporters). Houdini was sued for libel and slander by the victims of his exposures, and was forced to spend handsomely to defend himself -- successfully, of course.

Even these events were not new stories at the time, however. Years earlier, in the 1870s, the greatest scientist of the nineteenth century found himself immersed in pseudoscientific controversy. Charles Darwin came to the aid of a friend, Edwin Ray Lankester, who had exposed a spiritualist named "Dr." Henry Slade, who claimed to receive messages from the dead on writing slates. Lankester and Slade engaged in a courtroom battle over the reality of Slade's claims, with Charles Darwin aligned on one side and his co-founder of evolution, Alfred Russel Wallace, on the other. Lankester offered the services of a magician who could duplicate all of Slade's tricks with chalk and slates. The Court

would have nothing to do with magic acts in the courtroom, but the magician (John Neville Maskelyne) was able to slip in a few tricks for the judge. Ultimately, the Court ruled that he must decide "according to the well-known course of nature," and the decision went against Slade. (This entire story can be read in the October 1996 Scientific American article, "Charles Darwin and Associates, Ghostbusters.")

All of this was during the last century and the turn of this century. We are now approaching the turn of a new century -- indeed, a millennium. Have we progressed in our battles against pseudoscientific nonsense? Hardly. Mediums and fairies have been replaced by channellers and alien abductions. Scores of television hours, watched by tens of millions, are spent each week on psychic stuff and nonsense. I doubt that a poll of beliefs in psychic phenomena would differ greatly from one taken in 1896. As the French saying goes: "plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose" (the more things change, the more they remain the same).

This is why we must never assume that the battle that we fight for reason is one with victory as its reward. The next century will probably be filled with an equal measure of nonsense. Still, if we do not do battle, we abdicate the war.

Spontaneous Human Combustion case remains open in St. Pete.

The case of St. Petersburg resident Mary Reeser, who burned to death in her home 45 years ago, was revisited on November 9 during a WFLA-TV 8 newscast. All that was left of Mrs. Reeser was a pile of ash, one intact foot, and what is still referred to as her "shrunken skull." As little else in the room besides Reeser was consumed by the inferno, except for her stuffed chair and an adjacent end table, her gruesome death seemed at the time to be mysterious and, to some, downright paranormal. Hence, the Reeser case has become legendary in the lore of "SHC," or Spontaneous Human Combustion.

As we pointed out five years ago in response to a St. Petersburg Times article ([see article in TBS Report, Fall 1991](#)), CSICOP's Joe Nickell (with John Fischer) closed the book on this case some years earlier. In their Summer 1987 *Skeptical Inquirer* article, they reported that the obese, elderly Reeser had apparently taken a sleeping pill and then fallen asleep with a lighted cigarette. "What probably happened," concluded Nickell and Fischer, "was that the chair's stuffing burned slowly, fueled by the melted body fat and aided by partially opened windows." Although there certainly was human (and non-human) combustion, there is no reason to conclude that the fire's origin was "spontaneous."

Appearing on the recent Ch. 8 newscast, Reeser's son and daughter-in-law expressed general agreement with the Nickell/Fischer scenario, though continuing to refer to the "shrunken skull." But no matter how hot a fire is, a skull simply cannot "shrink." Nickell and Fischer: "As a forensic anthropologist (David Wolf) theorized at our request, Mrs. Reeser's skull probably burst in the fire and was destroyed, and the roundish object could have been merely 'a globular lump that can result from the musculature of the neck where it attaches to the base of the skull.'"

The impetus for Ch. 8's report appears to have been the new book by Larry E. Arnold called *Ablaze: The Mysterious Fires of Spontaneous Human Combustion*, in which the scientific mechanism of SHC

is supposedly revealed. As the author explained on the TV report, what really happened to Reeser was that a "very, very small subatomic particle that zipped through her body . . . impacted directly with an atom within her body, setting off an atomic chain reaction that literally fried or burned her from within."

Remarkably, the St. Petersburg Police Department has yet to close the Reeser file. And, if I follow the "logic" of Officer Lilla Davis, they have no plans to do so until Arnold's book, or some other source, establishes with finality the validity of SHC. Speaking on the TV report, Davis offered the following gloomy prognosis: "Unless there's some scientific proof that spontaneous combustion actually exists in human beings, I really don't think we'll ever find a conclusion."

Snippets

If the program lived up to its subtitle, the third annual Tampa UFO Conference "Pav[ed] the Path to Expanded Awareness." Featured speakers included author/abductionist Budd Hopkins (see lead story in Spring '96 TBS Report), podiatrist Roger Leir (who surgically excises "alien implants" from abductees' feet), and Prof. Courtney Brown (see last two "Snippets" in our last issue). That guest list is enough to turn the "Grays" green.

(*St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 4)

What do Dionne Warwick's "psychics" say about O.J.?

On the October 24 installment of the tabloid TV show *American Journal*, Dionne Warwick was described as one of O.J. Simpson's "closest" as well as one of his "few remaining" friends. Said Warwick, who is godmother to Simpson's older daughter Arnelle, "I believe in his innocence." Unaddressed was whether or not Warwick's belief is based upon information provided by any members of her "Psychic Friends Network" of seers.

If it is, why has not even one of her staple of "psychics" been able to identify the "real" killer?

If her belief is not based upon "psychic" information, does this mean that her "psychics" believe O.J. to be guilty, but that Warwick does not trust in their powers?

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