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Commission clobbers "Cleo" and Company; Florida settles similar suit



"I'm no psychic," said Howard Beales, director of the Federal Trade Commission's consumer protection bureau. "But I can foresee this: If you make deceptive claims, there is an FTC action in your future."

With those words, on November 14 the federal government declared victory in its nine-month battle with Steven Feder and Peter Stolz, owners of the two "psychic hotline" companies fronted by "Miss Cleo."

Without admitting guilt, Access Resource Services and Psychic Readers Network, both based in Fort Lauderdale, have agreed to cancel \$500-million in charges billed to callers, equaling half of their total billings during their three years of operations. During that time, the FTC received 3,000 consumer complaints nationally.

While consumers will not receive a refund under this federal agreement, all bills uncollected to date will be forgiven and all undeposited checks returned.

Florida victims may fare even better. On November 25, the Florida attorney general's office unveiled its own settlement with the hotline's owners, one that provides for cash refunds to any Florida callers who can provide a canceled check or other proof of payment. The state, however, has not dropped its case against "Miss Cleo" herself, who stands accused of her own deceptive advertising practices.

Allegedly a Jamaican mystic, "Miss Cleo" actually turned out to be Youree Dell Harris, whose Jamaican accent was determined to be as *inauthentic* as her birth certificate *is* authentic -- and which establishes that she was born in Los Angeles to American parents.

"Psychic medium" Sylvia Browne coming to central Florida

[Sylvia Browne](#), one of television's most famous "psychics," will be paying a visit to central Florida on May 21, 2003, at the Lakeland Center, from 7-9 p.m. (doors will open at 5:00).

A frequent guest on the Montel Williams and Larry King (see above photo) programs, Browne claims not only the ability to tell you all about your own future, but that she can also put you in contact with your deceased loved ones.

As for why the doors will be open for two hours prior to the lecture/seminar, might her confederates (or hidden microphones) be listening for the names of the dearly departed whom Brown will be miraculously contacting later in the evening? Works for her cohorts.

But lest you be concerned about any such chicanery, Browne's website assures visitors that Sylvia "is a member of a national consumer protection agency, and donates a lot of time to charitable organizations and working with police."

The following, by James Randi, is excerpted from the [James Randi Educational Foundation](#) website:

On September 3, 2001, Sylvia Browne agreed on the protocol for a definitive test for the JREF million-dollar challenge, on *Larry King Live*. . . . After six months of no contact with Sylvia we tried e-mail, fax, postal mail, phone calls [to no avail].

If I'm perceived as rather confident of testing Ms. Browne and not having to pay the million to her, I offer these three predictions that she made on TV, her confidence very evident:

On another show, she predicted that there would be a serious hurricane in a particular month, coming in to the west coast of Florida. . . . She was very sure of it. . . . That particular month came. Not a drop of a hurricane. Not the next month, either. Then she predicted Democrat Bill Bradley would win the election [in 2000], and she also placed Gore in the White House. A perfect record, right?

Snippets



According to a recent Roper Poll commissioned by the Sci-Fi Channel, 2.9-million Americans say they have experienced symptoms associated with UFO abductions. Turns out your humble editor is an abductee, since I've found a small scar on my body that I can't explain. Other telltale signs can include awakening paralyzed and sensing a strange presence, seeing unusual lights in a room, feeling like you are floating/flying with no explanation, or an hour or more of "missing time" that you cannot account for.

(*St. Pete. Times*, Nov. 22)

The winning number in the New York Lottery on 9/11 of this year was "911." Not last year -- the day the towers fell -- but this year. Since there are 1,000 possible three-digit numbers, was this just a 1:1,000 chance occurrence? Not according to St. Petersburg "psychic and medium" Bob Linn. And he ought to know, having studied metaphysics and parapsychology for more than 20 years. Says Linn, "911 was a confirmation, telling us mortals that there is a more divine wisdom. . . . It was saying the terrorists didn't plan the event for 9/11, per se. . . . 9/11 was the date the universe decreed these things should happen." Your humble editor had read that the terrorists had indeed planned the attack for 9/11 precisely because of what "911" means in this country. But who am I to question a "psychic and medium"?

(*St. Pete. Times*, Sept. 24)

It was back in our Spring 1990 issue that we first reported on [Chuck Harder](#), host of the Florida-based *For the People* radio program. That was when Harder decided that "UFOs are real and are indeed from another world" and included five UFO-related articles in his program's companion magazine. Later that year we first reported about his program's science advisor at the time, [Richard Hoagland](#), who is best known for his "Face on Mars" claims. Though carried by more than 350 stations and available via the Web and short-wave radio, *For the People* hasn't been carried by a Tampa Bay radio station since 1996. But Harder, largely confined to a wheelchair since injuring his legs in 1999, is hoping for a return to this market.

(*St. Pete. Times*, Nov. 19)

Clearwater's "Virgin Mary" apparition remains vivid, but attraction wanes

by Gary P. Posner

We don't suspect a connection to the Catholic church's sex-abuse scandals. Nor would we ever suggest that her beauty is fading with age. Yet, [as reported](#) in some editions of the Sept. 28 *St. Petersburg Times* with the following headline and sub-head, "Image of Mary beckons few now: What looks like the Virgin Mary on a building at [the N.E. corner of U.S. 19 and Drew St.] once attracted thousands; now just a few faithful still come."



In her heyday, a half-million faithful from around the world, including many in search of a miraculous medical cure, had come to pray before the rainbow-hued "apparition." A pedestrian crossing had been hastily created, and local police had to direct traffic through the area.



[As we reported](#) in our Spring 1997 issue, and as the recent *Times* article states, the image is the result of a chemical reaction and corrosion in the glass window. But the shimmering stain's resemblance to the hooded Virgin Mary (some say to the Grim Reaper except for the colors) is not sheer coincidence. Largely forgotten is the fact that the image was not appreciated until

December of 1996, shortly after a 30-foot palm tree -- almost exactly "Mary's" height -- was removed from in front of that window. Within a few days of the story breaking, the *Times* published this 1994 Florida Dept. of Transportation photograph showing the image to be present even then -- partially obscured by the tree (see red arrow).

We also noted in our original article (a version of which appeared in the Spring 1997 issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine) that similar iridescent stains could be found behind much of the shrubbery growing adjacent to the building's reflective glass exterior. Along the low hedges, the stains appeared to hover just above their tops. And where the palms grew high, the stains followed. One such stain (see right), still obscured by the squat palm tree whose oil helped create it, seemed to more closely resemble the Buddha than Mary.



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