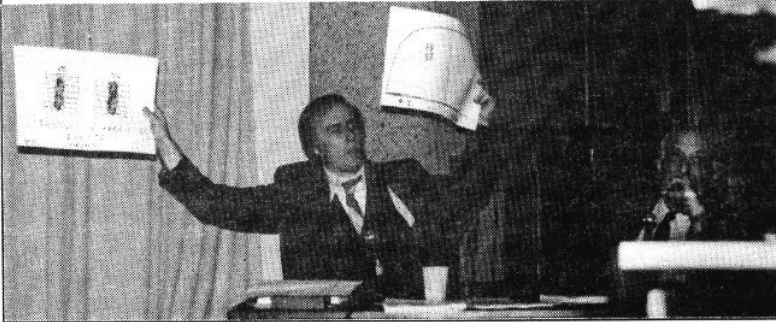


# Newsletter of the National Capital Area Skeptics, Inc.

Volume One  
Number Two

September 1987

UFOlogist Maccabee, holding documents, refused to discuss saucer abductions. NCAS's Klass is on right.



## June Meeting: TV Cameras Roll as Panel Discusses—or Avoids—UFO Abductions

By Julie Stern

As a film crew from local television station WTTG looked on, a panel of experts discussed the latest controversy concerning UFOs—alleged abductions—or, in one case, changed the subject. Close to 200 people attended NCAS's first general meeting, held on June 7 at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, and the Channel 5 news report that night gave the fledgling organization a welcome kickoff.

The event—billed as a lively discussion on “UFO Abductions: Fact or Fantasy?”—started with a review of the history of such claims by moderator James H. Sharp, director of the Albert Einstein Planetarium at the National Air & Space Museum. He started with the 1961 Barney and Betty Hill case and concluded with several claims made in the 1970s, shortly after a movie based on the Hill incident was rerun on television.

Sharp then asked, “What have the aliens done for us lately?” He cited two recent bestsellers—Whitley Streiber's *Communion* and Budd Hopkins's *Intruders*—that claim that extraterrestrials have abducted and experimented on humans. “Are these historic claims of UFO abductions fact or fantasy?” asked Sharp of the afternoon's speakers, Philip J. Klass, a founding member of CSICOP who has been investigating famous UFO cases for more than 20 years and written several books on the subject, and Bruce S. Maccabee, a research physicist employed by the Navy and chair of the Fund for UFO Research, who has also been investigating UFO cases for nearly two decades and has published widely on the topic.

Klass began by reviewing Hopkins's claim that hundreds or even thousands of people are probably unknowing victims of UFO abductions. He asked members of the audience whether they have ever experienced some of the three key “Hopkins criteria” for evidence of abduction. “Have you ever experienced missing time (discovered that it was either later or earlier than you thought)? Have you ever had a nightmare in which you dreamed you saw strange-looking

(UFOs, continued on page 3)

## Board Thanks WTTG For Coverage, Notes Error

NCAS Interim President Stanley Bigman has thanked local television station WTTG—channel 5—for its coverage of our first general meeting, on UFOs (*see related story*). Stan praised the station, saying “it has become apparent that WTTG is the area's leading television station in reporting on topics, organizations, and events of local interest.”

Stan did note, however, that reporter Katherine DeLaski was in error when she said that NCAS “rejects the notion” that “maybe there is life out there.”

“Although I haven't taken a poll of our membership, I believe that in fact the contrary is true: most skeptics do accept the possibility of other life forms in the universe....The issue for skeptics is not the possibility of other life forms, but whether or not reported sightings of lights and other objects are in fact extra-terrestrial visitors, as often claimed by UFO proponents.”

## NCAS Praises CBS For Quackery Feature

“Let me relay our organization's highest compliments for the fine piece of work you did concerning medical quackery and AIDS victims,” Interim President Stanley Bigman wrote the producers of the CBS network show *West 57th Street*, broadcast April 27.

The interim board asked Stan to send the letter because instances of responsible reporting on pseudoscience need to be lauded to encourage similar efforts.

## National Capital Area Skeptics, Inc.

### Statement of Purpose

NCAS attempts to encourage the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public.

NCAS does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but rather examines them objectively and carefully.

Signed articles represent the opinions of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NCAS. Unsigned articles are the responsibility of the NCAS Newsletter Committee. Only articles clearly marked as such represent positions of the NCAS Board of Directors.

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## Predicting the Future of Publishing

By Randall Lockwood and Julie Stern

In the preface to his 1982 book *Flim Flam!* James Randi remarks: "The harsh fact is that the market for books promoting belief in the paranormal is possibly the single greatest money-maker in publishing today, and this cannot be ignored by those who assign priorities in the publishing houses."

Unfortunately, that statement is still true today. This was made clear during our visit to the 1987 Convention of the American Booksellers Association at the Washington Convention Center on May 24. This is the nation's largest publishing exposition, featuring displays by all the major houses and a wide variety of smaller companies.

Armed with several shopping bags, we visited nearly all of the booths filling both levels of the center, collecting catalogs and samples and chatting with publishers' representatives. Occult and "New Age" publishers are alive and well—more than 50 were represented. Their exhibits were often lavish, offering a wide variety of gimmicks such as free astrological calendars. The display for Bridge Publications, publishers of much of L. Ron Hubbard's science fiction and self-help pseudopsychology, featured Hollywood-style sets and actors dressed as characters from several of Hubbard's books. Conventioneers lined up to get free photos of themselves standing with this assortment of aliens, sexy space maidens, and cowboys. Self-described "Master Astrologer" Noel Tyl was available for consultations at two booths throughout the convention.

Here is a brief overview of some of the titles we have to look forward to:

Valley of the Sun Publishers will offer a series of self-help cassettes for \$9.95, ranging from such down-to-earth titles as *Lower Your Cholesterol* to handy guidance on *Spiritual Protection from Psychic Attack*, *Astral Projection*, and *Telepathic Animal Communication*.

The oldest publisher of New Age books, Llewellyn New Times, will be offering *Psionics 101* (\$7.95), which will provide instructions for constructing simple electrical devices that "enable you to enter others' dreams" and "stop psychic attack." (This seems to be a popular concern!) This publisher will also be offering *The Complete Crystal Guidebook to Healing* and several other books on crystal phenomena.

From Falcon Press we can look forward to the "Timothy Leary Future History Series" as well as the "New Age Mutation Series," which includes *Channeling: A Study in Mystical Revelation*.

Ariel Press provides an intriguing collection called the "From Heaven to Earth Series," which features book-length channeled interviews with such deceased celebrities as Ben Franklin, Abe Lincoln, Shakespeare, and Lenin, and obvious candidates such as Arthur Ford, Edgar Cayce, and H.P. Blavatsky.

We were surprised to find that, despite the popularity of such books as *Intruders*, *Communion*, and *Light Years*, there does not seem to be evidence of a stampede toward the occult or pseudoscience on the part of the major publishing houses. Holt will release *Nostradamus 2: Into the Twenty-First Century*, which will allegedly "answer the critics of Nostradamus" and interpret the writings for the next 100 years. In November, St. Martin's will release *Channeling* by Jon Kimo, which purportedly asks the question "Is channeling a gift or a pathology?"

An encouraging sign was the proliferation of "hard science" titles dealing with physics, astronomy, and evolutionary biology. The popularity of such authors as Lewis Thomas, Stephen Jay Gould, and Carl Sagan has demonstrated that a growing market exists for well-written, scientifically accurate material. Many new books of this nature will be released this fall, including quite a few aimed at younger readers.

(Publishing, continued on page 5)

creatures, or in which you dreamed strange things happened to you? And have you ever looked at the night sky and seen a light that you could not immediately identify?" asked Klass. Tongue in cheek, he announced that the many members of the audience who responded "yes" to all of these questions had probably been abducted by aliens, and that, based on this sample, the numbers of abductees is probably much higher than even Hopkins claims.

Klass went on to provide some insights into Hopkins's methods in investigating abduction claims, describing assumptions based on the hesitant statements and dreams of troubled people, the further assumption that a story must be true because it is similar to a story told by another person, and the failure to search for evidence that would verify these stories. Klass continued with a description of the "Kathy Davis" case, which Hopkins considers "one of the most important UFO abduction cases because of the physical evidence." Klass, however, failed to see any such evidence, and presented down-to-earth explanations for many of the phenomena and experiences described by Davis.

Maccabee began by stating that he too is a skeptic. He has long been skeptical of UFO reports, he said, but he is also skeptical of explanations and is bothered by one-sided skepticism. He admitted that we have at hand no hard physical evidence, and that there certainly have been some hoaxes. But he dismissed the opinion that there are no unexplained reports of UFOs, saying that in fact there have been many unexplained sightings.

Maccabee then surprised many listeners by stating: "This discussion is concerned with abduction reports. However, I do not intend to use my time discussing such reports. Sorry about that. Instead, I want to provide a background for understanding." Saying that Klass's discussion of Hopkins's work had been brief and trivialized, he went on to state that listeners could not understand Klass's account and its importance without a background in the subject. "You cannot understand where the phenomenon of abduction reports fits into the UFO picture without understanding a general history of UFO reports," he continued. "I would like to emphasize the point that if there were no unexplained 'plain-vanilla type sightings' I wouldn't be here today, because abductions themselves are not particularly interesting to me unless they're tied in to something else."

Maccabee spent the remainder of his time describing several UFO incidents, beginning with the 1947 Kenneth Arnold sighting and concluding with the November 1986 Japanese Airlines sighting, which he argued have never been explained. He expressed the view that, while scientists have tried to explain these events, they have not been skeptical enough, and have accepted explanations that do not even match the descriptions of eye witnesses.

Klass, who looked surprised through much of the talk, began his response by apologizing to the audience for Maccabee's failure to address the agreed-upon topic. He countered Maccabee's argument that the JAL sighting is unexplainable with a brief description of his present convictions about what the 747 crew saw: the planet Jupiter and a reflection of the full moon off clouds of ice crystals.

A lively question-and-answer session followed. When Maccabee's responses to several questions evolved into lengthy responses to some of Klass's comments, Klass interrupted to ask Maccabee if he was giving a second lecture, and both Klass and Sharp cautioned him to restrict himself to answering the questions asked. Klass, in turn, was chastised by a questioner for his "uncharitable behavior to other speakers and UFOlogists."

Interim President Bigman closed the meeting by reminding members of the audience that they could meet with committee representatives after the meeting, which many did.

## President's Message

*By Stanley K. Bigman*

This issue of the *Newsletter* contains reports from several of our special interest groups and committees. As you will see, we are beginning to develop a variety of plans and projects for the coming months.

Keep in mind, as you read and think about these, one important fact: NCAS is an organization of volunteers. We operate with volunteer officers and a volunteer board. The SIG and committee members are all volunteers, and they are chaired by volunteers.

We therefore need the volunteer help of many members. Together we have a wide range and variety of skills and abilities—and NCAS needs all of them. As Ambrose Bierce observed: "What's worth doing is worth the trouble of asking somebody to do it." Indeed, our job is worth doing; that's why we're asking you to share in it.

Though the work doesn't pay financially, it's rewarding in other ways. You'll get a chance to meet fellow skeptics, share your ideas and theirs, learn a little in areas of our concern, and have some impact on our largely over-credulous environment.

So: find a SIG or committee that you'd like to be involved in. Phone numbers are listed on the masthead. In particular:

- lend your accounting or other financial expertise to our Finance Committee (phone me at (301) 654-7362);
- help the Archives Committee translating from any of several languages;
- tell us about other things we should be doing—and offer your help; and
- contribute material to the *Newsletter* (phone Steve Dujack at (202) 338-4045).

The fact that NCAS is dedicated to playing an active role in society shouldn't deter us from taking an opportunity for reflection. I found such an occasion recently when a trip took my  
*(Message, continued on p. 4)*



## Message, from page 3

wife past the one-time home of Joseph Priestley near Sunbury, Pennsylvania. He's one of my personal heroes, whom I commend to you as one of our intellectual forebears as skeptics.

You may know of Priestley solely for his discovery of oxygen. The breadth of his significance is suggested by this summary of his life: "No man more typifies the revolutionary spirit [of the 18th century] than Joseph Priestley....His experiments with air laid the groundwork for much of modern chemistry. His political writings were such that Robespierre's National Convention made him a French citizen, along with Paine, Bentham, and Washington. His political and religious writings...created such a furor in England that he was forced to emigrate to America." Among those who acknowledged being influenced by his ideas were Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. He was an early and outspoken opponent of the slave trade.

The Sunbury house has been turned into a small museum, where a lecture, wall displays, pamphlets, and a short tour provide information and food for thought—and perhaps inspiration. A thought from one of Priestley's books:

On no occasion have I declined, but on the contrary I have rather courted, and provoked, opposition; because I am sensitive it is the only method of discovering truth.

## Ohio BBS Has Skepticism SIG

The Cleveland Free-Net, a computer bulletin board system—or BBS—sponsored by Case Western Reserve University, Ohio Bell, the University Hospitals, and AT&T, has a skepticism special interest group that can be accessed for the cost of a toll call. The SIG is managed by the South Shore Skeptics.

Interested telecommunicators in the National Capital area can access the board at (216) 368-3888. The South Shore Skeptics encourage all local groups to become active in the SIG.

## Parapsychology Interest Group Haunts A Local House

By Jim Mc Clenon

As convener of the NCAS Parapsychology Special Interest Group, I have been following up on an ongoing investigation of a haunting case in Warrenton, Virginia, that first came to public attention four years ago.

The residents of the house at that time appeared quite sincere in claiming that their rented home was haunted. They reported hearing heavy footsteps, pounding on the walls, and apparitional voices on numerous occasions. They frequently heard a rocking chair rolling on the hardwood floor upstairs and an old Victrola playing below; neither was present in the house. One unusual aspect of the case was related to the electrical system of the house. Lights would turn on and off by themselves and voices and music were heard on the telephone. Friends who called the house when no one was home were greeted by the irritated voice of an old woman, who informed people that no one was home and that she did not wish to be bothered.

The renters heard that a previous occupant of the house, an elderly, senile relative of the previous owner, wished to stay on after the owner's death. The man who inherited the property had forcibly placed her in a retirement home, creating a classic story for a haunting. Now that the woman was dead, it seemed to the tenants that she was attempting to return to her old home.

Like most people experiencing severe haunting incidents, the residents attempted to conceal their experiences from friends and co-workers, but the old woman's voice on the telephone made this difficult. They found the experiences terrifying and moved out in 1983. Beyond the gathering of reports of incidents, no true haunting investigation was conducted.

This July, my wife and I decided to follow up on this case to determine if the house's new residents had any experiences to report. The previous owner was said to have been unwilling to cooperate with investigators, perhaps out of a concern that it would affect the house's value. The new owner was less hesitant.

After moving into the home, he reported, he found that a country-music radio station across the street affected his telephone reception, and CB radio transmissions could be heard during phone conversations. Fortunately, he was able to install equipment that ended these problems. Although he had heard the haunting stories, neither he nor any member of his family had any paranormal experiences to report while living in the house.

This case contains elements similar to those uncovered in other haunting investigations I have conducted. Generally, those reporting such experiences appear sincere. The nature of most of the experiences they report seem psychological rather than effects that might be produced by a prankster. It seems possible that the original "anomalous" events surrounding the telephone in the house unconsciously triggered further apparitional experiences. The story regarding the old woman would be expected to contribute to this unconscious phenomenon. Even though the residents may have tried to conceal their experiences, their friends (who may have been aware of the earlier haunting reports) shared experiences which became part of the collective phenomena.

Skeptics should not regard this case and similar ones as fully "solved." Accusing people who are deeply troubled by their own personal experiences of being "liars" is a poor method of therapy and should be considered unethical within professional sociological or psychological practice. It would be more proper to rate these cases as situations falling within the sociological study of collective behavior and consequently amenable to investigation through the methods of social science.

*(Haunted House, continued on page 5)*

## Haunted House, from page 4

The mechanism by which “triggering incidents” produce riots, rumors, collective delusions, panics, and other forms of collective behavior is not fully understood. Hauntings might be thought of as equivalent to rumors; they may be a reaction to ambiguous incidents, coupled with interest in stories related to death. These episodes occur more frequently than might be assumed. A recent national poll found that 42 percent of Americans feel that they have had a “contact with the dead” experience at least once.

I will be leaving the Washington area to begin teaching in North Carolina in the fall. NCAS members should feel free to contact me regarding interesting cases that might come up in the future. As in the past, I plan to keep track of spontaneously occurring claims of the paranormal occurring anywhere in the mid-Atlantic region. My future address is Department of Social Sciences, Elizabeth City State University, Elizabeth City, North Carolina 27909.

## Supreme Court Voids Creationism Law

By Randall Lockwood

On June 20, the Supreme Court voted 7 to 2 to strike down as unconstitutional a Louisiana law that required public schools to teach “creation science” whenever they taught the theory of evolution. This action was widely described as a major defeat for religious fundamentalists.

The 1981 law mandated that both evolution and creationism be taught as theory rather than fact. When initially enacted, the law was immediately challenged by a group of parents and teachers as a violation of the Establishment Clause, which since the 1960s has been interpreted by the court to forbid the fostering of religion in schools. The law was struck down by a federal district judge and was then appealed by Louisiana to the U.S. Court of Appeals, which affirmed the initial decision. The case was then appealed to the Supreme Court.

CSICOP and the Southern California Skeptics played a major role in battling the law. The groups organized an *amicus curiae* or “friend of the court” brief that was signed by representatives of 24 scientific organizations and by 72 Nobel Prize winners. The brief argued that creation science embodies beliefs of a specific religion, and also pointed out the distinctions between scientific fact and theory.

The court’s statement is very explicit in its condemnation of the Louisiana law in particular and the general concept of “equal treatment” promoted by creationists. It states:

Forbidding the teaching of evolution when creation science is not also taught undermines the provision of a comprehensive education....The contention that the act furthers a ‘basic concept of fairness’ by requiring the teaching of all evidence on the subject is without merit.

The act impermissibly endorses religion by advancing the religious belief that a supernatural being created mankind. The legislative history demonstrates that the term ‘creation science,’ as contemplated by the state legislature, embraces this religious teaching.

This court action will not bring an end to the creation science debate, nor will it prevent individual schools or teachers from attempting to promote religious concepts in the science classroom. We will have to continue to monitor this issue for a long time to come.

NOTE: The complete text of the Supreme Court decision in this case (*Edwards et al. v. Aguillard et al.*, No. 85-1513) may be obtained free of charge by calling the Public Information Office of the Supreme Court at (202) 479-3211.

## Publishing, from page 2

What about the future of skeptical writings? As usual, the only real skeptical beacon was the exhibit of Prometheus Books, which was manned by CSICOP’s Paul Kurtz and his son Jonathan. Kurtz lamented the proliferation of New Age material, and the lack of books of a specifically skeptical nature from any other publishers.

As part of its promotion, Prometheus held a press conference on May 25 at which James Randi briefly described the investigations detailed in his latest book, *The Faith Healers* (to be released this September). The audience was relatively small, but several members of the press expressed gratitude for Randi’s efforts and encouraged him to keep up the good work. In all, this preview of things to come was neither deeply disturbing nor particularly encouraging from a skeptic’s perspective. It served to demonstrate that skepticism and credulity will continue to coexist on bookshelves in the coming year, with the scales still tipped in favor of the latter.

## Board Cites Facts On Charlatan In Letter to Senator

“Scientific and other informed opinion is nearly unanimous in its belief that [Uri] Geller is no more than a clever magician who uses simple conjuring tricks to fake psychic abilities,” NCAS wrote in a letter to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Claiborne Pell [D-RI] in June. Pell and House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Dante Fascell [D-FL] had met with the spoon-bending magician to discuss psychical research in a special lead-shielded room in the Capitol (*News-letter, May*).

The letter went on to cite additional facts about Geller. It concluded with an offer “to meet with you at your convenience to discuss the overwhelming evidence of Geller’s trickery.” There has been no reply from the senator’s office.

## News of NCAS Committees, Groups, and Activities

### Creationism SIG Meets, Organizes, Sets Projects

NCAS's special interest group in Science and Creationism has established an ambitious agenda. "In the course of our first three meetings, we have begun to get to know one another, outlined the goals of the group and discussed several specific projects we hope to undertake," reports convener Randall Lockwood.

"We have agreed upon several basic aims and interests: "To educate ourselves about the creationism/evolution controversy, including the major arguments used by creationists and the scientific evidence against them. We will be preparing annotated bibliographies on the issue to share with NCAS members and other interested parties.

"This educational effort will also include shared discussions of relevant books, articles or other media. At our August 2 meeting, for example, we viewed and discussed a recent episode of the *Headlines on Trial* television show featuring a debate on the teaching of creationism in public schools.

"To establish links with local

scientific and educational organizations that are also concerned about the quality of science instruction. We have made preliminary contacts with the National Academy of Science and National Science Teachers Association and hope to be able to get representatives from such groups to speak to the committee or the entire NCAS membership.

"To evaluate the current status of creationism/evolution teaching in area schools. Committee members are currently looking into the procedures used to select science texts in the public schools in our local communities, and to get an overview of the quality of the books currently in use.

"To monitor the presentation of creationist ideas in the local media. We will be sharing examples of local media coverage with one another, and with the NCAS Archives Committee.

"We seem to be off to a good start and we welcome the help and suggestions of other NCAS members! For more information about this group, please contact me at (703) 237-8591."

### Archives Committee Needs Help In Creating 'Library Without Walls'

Read any good books about the paranormal or fringe science lately? Taped any good shows? Have an original copy of the prophecies of Nostradamus? If you're willing to let other NCAS members inspect, copy, or borrow published or unpublished works, the Archives Committee would like to know. The archivists are assembling a "reference library without walls," a data base of the shoe boxes and bookshelves of the NCAS organization and its members.

The idea is to list a work's author, title, publisher/producer, date, and synopsis on a floppy disk or in a catalog. Also listed with each work will be the owner's name, address, and lending criteria (inspection at the owner's home or office, overnight loan for copying, or longer-term loan). We have designed the data base; we now need to know what old and new items are on your shelves. We've developed a survey form suitable for books, articles, audio tapes, and videotapes. If you need a survey form or have any questions, contact Bob Zich at (202) 966-4816 or Dan Knauf at (202) 328-8634 (both are evening numbers).

The committee has written to all the other local skeptics groups to ensure data compatibility and avoid duplication of effort.

### We Are 268 Strong After Membership Appeal

Some 268 readers of the *Skeptical Inquirer* have paid dues to become members of NCAS in response to our June mailing and other appeals, NCAS Treasurer Grace Denman has announced.

After *Newsletter* and other expenses, the organization has more than \$4,000 in its bank account for further expenses in its first year. The Interim Board seeks to raise membership to more than 300. Members are encouraged to sign up friends and colleagues.

**VOLUNTEER  
AND  
CONTRIBUTE!**

### UFO Group Organizes for Local Action

The NCAS UFO Special Interest Group has organized under the temporary direction of Pete Lins. The members include astronomers, a computer-imaging specialist, and noted debunker Phil Klass.

The SIG held its first meeting on June 23, and three persons were assigned to cover the Mutual UFO Net-

work convention at American University later that month. A report on that meeting appears elsewhere in the *Newsletter*.

The group planned several tentative projects to help counter the recent resurgence of interest in UFOs. Interested members should call Pete at (301) 744-7334.



## Contributors Needed For Media Data Base

The Archives Committee is developing a data base listing articles about paranormal phenomena and fringe science appearing in local and federal publications. The data will be available for use by other NCAS committees and CSICOP. Among its feature will be keyword and keyname searches.

The latter feature proves especially valuable in instances where an immediate response to some news item is warranted. Any information about individuals, events, or subject areas will be extremely useful in forming a response. We need full-time subscribers to local and federal publications who are willing to read every issue thoroughly (and skeptically), clip articles of interest, and forward the articles to the Archives Committee.

Successful applicants will have keen minds and scissors. If you subscribe to one or more such publications, you may qualify! These articles will be added to the archives database and may be digested for the "Media Watch" column in this *Newsletter*. Suggestions on keywords/names to be added would also be appreciated. For further information, contact Dan Knauf (202) 328-8634 (evenings).

## Astrology Committee Organizes, Creates Local Agenda

The NCAS Astrology Special Interest Group held its first meeting on June 23. Those attending agreed to postpone selection of officers, as a number of interested members were unable to attend. We have, however, begun several activities.

A principal function of this group, and of the other NCAS special interest groups, is education. While astrology is often viewed as one of the most innocuous of pseudosciences, it is also one of the most widespread, and thus provides a readily accessible framework for teaching the general principles of skeptical thought. Our basic responsibility will be to become relative experts in order to serve as a reliable source of information for the members of NCAS and for the Washington area in general.

A number of members have expressed interest in examining astrology in the broad context of its historical roots, its different forms and uses in other countries, and how it manifests the basic appeal of pseudoscientific explanations. We would like to arrange for discussions with historians, psychologists, etc., who share these interests.

Although most of those present would like to do something about the

ever-present newspaper astrology columns, it was felt that the failure of past attempts to eliminate them or add disclaimers warrants a different approach. Because astrology columns represent an unhappy blurring of the distinction between the entertainment and information functions of the newspaper, they would seem to be a professional issue for journalists comparable to that concerning "docudramas" on television. We propose to raise this issue through letters to the professional journals of the news media. We are also planning to approach local editors with polite questions about their justifications for running such columns.

One area of particular concern to our members is the use of astrology by businesses, particularly for justifying personnel actions. We have begun a search for documentation on this subject, and would appreciate information (even anecdotal) from other NCAS members.

For further information about the Astrology SIG, call Lee Rickard at 767-2495 (office).

## Halloween Seance To 'Scare,' 'Educate'

NCAS is planning a week-long series of seances in a theatrical setting to educate members and the public about the reality behind spiritualism during an enjoyable evening's entertainment. At present, the plan is to give nightly shows for 30-40 people each during a period in late October close to Halloween.

The program is being planned by NCAS Vice President Chip Denman and member Jamie Swis, a professional magician. Both hope the event will generate media coverage while raising funds for our organization. Persons who would like to volunteer to help build sets, sell tickets, serve as ushers, etc., should contact Chip at 585-4093 (home).

## Library Gift Program Suggested

NCAS Interim President Stan Bigman is developing a program to donate collections of books on skepticism to local libraries. The idea for this came from his inability to obtain any of a number of such books from local libraries with well-stocked shelves of pseudoscience. Bigman has discussed with Paul Kurtz of CSICOP and Prometheus Press a plan under which Kurtz will designate a group of appropriate titles. These will be made available at a special discount for the group. Donors will then be invited to purchase sets to be offered to libraries in our area. Titles and prices are still

under discussion. Bigman and Phil Klass each indicated a willingness to underwrite the cost of one set.

A fund may also be established to permit persons not wishing to contribute a whole set to make smaller contributions. These would then be pooled to finance complete sets.

Prometheus Press has expressed interest in the possibility of extending such a program through other local skeptics groups, should we be able to demonstrate its feasibility.

For information, write Stan at 4515 Willard Avenue, #2204S, Chevy Chase, MD (phone (301) 654-7362).

## **DC Hosts National UFO Convention**

*By Greg Summers*

"Someday, someone will dare to say, 'Look, the emperor has no clothes!'" commented Bruce Maccabee in a reference to inevitable recognition of the "truth" about UFOs. As he opened the 1987 Mutual UFO Network held at American University last June, he said that science will immediately respond with a smug, "Oh, we knew that all along." But for now, the members of MUFON and other UFO believers will have to wait a short while longer for the scientific community to accept the obvious, Maccabee assured the crowd of some 450 attendees. *(An article about the noted UFO proponent's participation in the first NCAS general meeting appears elsewhere in this issue.)*

The conference constituted a gathering of numerous speakers presenting the current major issues in the UFO field. Several themes ran throughout the first day of the presentations. The principal one was the validity of the extraterrestrial hypothesis—perhaps "fact" would more clearly express the view at the meeting—as witnessed by the numerous sightings, landings, and abductions. A prevalent view is that skeptics are out to destroy the ET hypothesis and will accept any conventional explanation as long as it meets the criterion of invalidating the truth about UFOs. But the most prominent and nearly universally held opinion is that the U.S. government is conducting an ongoing cover-up of proof of UFO contacts with humans.

Barry Greenwood, an author and speaker representing a group called Citizens Against UFO Secrecy, typified the attitude. The government is hiding actual hard-core evidence of UFOs, according to Greenwood, who said the matter is no longer in dispute. Only the reasons for the cover-up are a subject for speculation. Of course, if this is true, our government, unable to hide Watergate or the Iran-contra scandal for even the duration of a single presidential term, has been able to conceal every shred of UFO proof for more

than 40 years. But Greenwood gives the government no credit for this amazing feat. Rather, he claims that the attempt to conceal the cover-up has been thoroughly botched. That is, while the cover-up itself has held solid, the cover-up of the cover-up has been blown. As evidence of this, Greenwood cited the acquisition of "7000 pages of files" from government sources. It was not clear from his presentation, however, exactly what irrefutable evidence of a cover-up these files contain.

It is not only the United States that has been involved in withholding the truth. A fair number of foreign countries have been operating their own cover-ups. Speakers from Chile, Argentina, Great Britain, and Canada informed the attendees that the Americans were not alone. No government seems to trust its people with even a shred of the evidence it holds.

Another speaker, Stan Friedman, an American who now lives in Canada, launched a bold attack on the well-known Harvard astronomer and skeptic Donald Menzel. The late Dr. Menzel, to whom Friedman referred as "the skeptic's skeptic...for who there was never a sighting he couldn't find an explanation for," might have been a front to protect the government's initial effort to hide UFOs. Friedman's theory is that Menzel had a "double life" where UFOs were concerned. On the one side, he barnstormed the country explaining every UFO sighting he could find. On the other, according to Friedman, he "always" adjusted his data to fit his explanation—not to mention belittling those who believe in the existence of UFOs. "You can't be a scientist and believe in UFOs," Friedman said Menzel once told him in private.

In his secret life, Friedman claims, Menzel might have been a member of a select government group—referred to as the MJ-12, which he said is classified more highly than fusion-bomb technology—that cloistered the real data about such positive evidence as the 1947 crash landing of a UFO near Roswell, New Mexico. The reason for Menzel's "explanations," which always rejected the ET hypothesis, said Friedman, was to lull the public into disbelief to protect the cover-up. Friedman concluded that Menzel was so successful in his double identity and sham explanations that the bogus story has held up even to the present. "Someone in the government owes this man a great debt," Friedman said.

The abductions of average citizens by UFO-nauts are without doubt the most dramatic claim of UFOlogy. At this conference, abductions were held to be real, ongoing, and numerous. Although detailed discussions were not presented, it was a common point among nearly all the speakers. One speaker, however, Hilary Evans of Great Britain, noted that the United States seems to have a near monopoly of abduction cases. This is probably due to Budd Hopkins,

*(UFO Convention, continued on page 9.)*

## **Education Group Sets Plans**

The NCAS Education in Skepticism Special Interest Group, convened by temporary chairman Walter Rowe, is examining several avenues of action in local schools and colleges.

These include the development of a special one-shot program debunking pseudoscience to tour local educational institutions; creation of a debunking course to counter the occult/pseudoscience emphasis of the Learning Annex and Open University curricula; development of a course in critical thinking for children; examination of catalogs of local colleges and universities for courses uncritically promoting pseudosciences; preparation of a manual or guide to debunking for high school newspaper staffs; and maintenance of a watch on public school teaching practices.

Interested members should contact Walter at (703) 494-2916.





### **CSICOP'S Paul Kurtz Briefs NCAS Board**

*CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz (right) briefs the NCAS interim board during a meeting at the Foreign Service Club last June. Seated next to him is NCAS Interim President Stanley Bigman. Kurtz outlined CSICOP public-relations efforts and encouraged the activities of local groups while urging accuracy and caution in their efforts.*

### **UFO Convention, from page 8**

author of *Intruders*, who has uncovered a number of abductions with the aid of hypnosis. David Jacobs, a historian of UFOlogy, credited Hopkins with an "abduction breakthrough," since he was the first to realize many common factors in testimony from hypnotized victims. That virtually no one can seem to remember an abduction until hypnotized seemed to pose no difficulty for his thesis.

During a break in the proceedings, an attendee was asked why the UFOnuts would so successfully erase the conscious memory of the abduction but not the unconscious. He claimed that the ETs—who in reality care deeply for humans, pointing them (for instance) in the right direction concerning high-temperature superconductivity—do not want to affect such a precious part of the mind even if it means their own exposure. This left open the question of why they rape women, violently probe bodies, and even steal babies. "But that's only physical," said the participant.

Another attendee might have lent some light concerning the reasons for the government cover-up of the truth about UFOs. Relating the time he queried a government agent, this man claimed the agent told him that the cover-up existed because the government thought the public would panic if it found out the real situation. The participant rejected this explanation and probed further. "We're afraid that the American people will have more allegiance to them than they will to the U.S. government," the agent supposedly responded.

## **Senator Pell Attends MUFON 'Cover-Up' Session**

Senator Claiborne Pell [D-RI], chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, briefly attended the Mutual UFO Network Conference at American University last June. NCAS UFO Special Interest Group member Phil Klass has reported.

The senator, who has professed an interest in the alleged psychic powers of Uri Geller (*see related story*), heard a presentation charging the government with a 40-year cover-up of a saucer crash in New Mexico and another on UFO abductions.

## **The Brown Mountain Lights**

*By Alexander White*

The Brown Mountain Lights of North Carolina have long been a mystery. It can be solved by people who really want to know the explanation.

Brown Mountain is about 12 miles northwest of Morganton in western North Carolina. At one time, a National Forest Service sign on Highway 181, a few miles northwest of Brown Mountain, stated that "people have observed weird, wavering lights rise above this mountain, then dwindle and fade away."

It was in October 1913 that D. B. Sterrett of the United States Geological Survey was sent to investigate the unexplained phenomena at the request of a congressman. After a few days of research, Sterrett concluded that headlights of westbound Southern Railway locomotives could be seen over the mountain from Loven's Hotel at Cold Spring. This simple explanation didn't please people who were looking for supernatural, or unusual causes. Then, when lights were seen after the great flood of 1916, while no trains were running in the vicinity, this explanation was abandoned.

Six years later, the state's two senators asked the USGS to make a more thorough investigation. Geologist G.R. Mansfield spent two weeks near the mountain in March and April 1922. For seven nights, he used a plane table and alidade to conduct observations at three locations: Loven's Hotel at Cold Spring (3,550 feet above sea level) on Highway 181, northwest of Brown Mountain; the east slope of Gingercake Mountain (4,000 feet); and Blowing Rock (3,700 feet). Brown Mountain itself is only 2,600 feet tall. Locomotive headlights were seen over the mountain and were in agreement with train schedules. Mansfield identified the 23 lights he saw through the alidade as auto headlights being seen in pairs. Nearly as many other lights were unidentified. Some of these were not visible long enough for the telescope to be trained on them and a line drawn on the map. All the lights were at low angles; thus their visibility

*(Brown Mtn, continued on page 10)*

## **Brown Mtn, from page 9**

could be affected by fog and air density. Due to haze, photographs were not satisfactory. Mansfield's work was reported in Geological Survey Circular 646, Origin of the Brown Mountain Light in North Carolina.

I made trips to the Brown Mountain area in August 1972 and in June and November 1975, conducting observations on six nights. I used 7x50 binoculars and took photographs at four different locations: the sign at Jonas Ridge on Highway 181—closest of the locations to Brown Mountain; Gingercake Mountain; Wiseman's View on Linville Mountain; and Lost Cove Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway. From the first two locations, I could see stationary Catawba Valley lights over the mountain near the right end. Another time, at the sign, I observed a rotating beacon. Two or three dozen unidentified lights were visible from all but the Wisemen's View location, most of them at the sign. They were generally seen singly and only after carefully watching the mountain. Most were visible only for about a second, too short a time for alidade measurements. Some may have been vehicle or train lights. They were not seen in pairs with the 7x50 binoculars, but their distance was much greater than usual. The photographs show only stationary valley lights.

More work is needed to fully explain the unidentified lights. There have been many descriptions and proposed explanations. In addition to the sources mentioned there are many possible other ones, such as: motorcycles, bicycles, vehicle spotlights, lanterns, flashlights, fireflies, stars and planets not recognized because of fog, and the lights of campers, still operators, and buildings.

I believe interest in the lights has been largely due to unusual geography and failure to realize that the observing positions are slightly higher than Brown Mountain. A small distant area of the Catawba Valley is exposed to view over the long flat top of the mountain. People are usually not aware of this exposure and believe they are looking at a sky background. They would otherwise understand why valley lights are visible at night. But the lights will continue to be a mystery until their explanation is made readily available.

## **Fact and Fancy in Sixth Senses**

*By Lee J. Rickard*

It is amusing to speculate how our concept of the world might have been different had we perceived it differently. Suppose our eyes had been sensitive to ultraviolet light, like bees, or to infrared, like snakes. Suppose we could sense ultrasonic echoes, like bats, or electric fields, like fish, or the polarization of sky light, like birds. Would our physics be different?

In a sense, we can see the process happening in astronomy. As new parts of the spectrum become accessible, new phenomena—wildly unexpected—capture our attention. The newly perceived universe seems to require different explanations for traditional problems, explanations more appropriate to the new viewpoint. Thus, as x-ray and gamma-ray astronomers are more and more preoccupied by violent events (such as supernovæ), those events take on significant roles in interpreting all problems—supernova-induced star formation, supernova-induced galactic spiral structure, supernova-induced dinosaur extinction, supernova-induced Sumerian civilizations, etc.

Prematurity is part of the scientific gamble. We are always betting on the sufficiency of our data; surprise is an occupational hazard. We were, for example, a bit premature in dismissing the possibility of humans' seeing polarized light. If you stare into a clear twilight sky for a while, you will notice a yellowish dumbbell sandwiched between two blue pillows, about four degrees long and pointing toward the sun. The image, dubbed Haidinger's Brush, is direct perception of the polarization of sky light.

A lot of recent work in biophysics has been devoted to uncovering and elucidating unsuspected sensitivities like these. Much effort has been expended on magnetotaxis, the tendency of a wide variety of animals to orient themselves according to the earth's magnetic field. The discipline is not without its scandals, such as the "magnetic" termites that turned out to have less interest in magnetic fields than high-school football players. But over the past decade, magnetic senses have been firmly established in bees, birds, beetles, elasmobranch fish (sharks and rays), and even simple bacteria.

Every year, billions of birds migrate over distances of thousands of miles to well-established nesting areas. The accuracy of these flights demands sophisticated means of navigation. Many have been suggested. These include celestial navigation (by sun, moon, and stars); monitoring of the geographical cues by infra-sounds, odors, and patterns of temperature, pressure, and wind; and awareness of the contours of the earth's gravitational and magnetic fields. In fact, the basic problem confronting researchers is that most of these ideas are true. Birds have backup systems in depth; when one method doesn't work, they rely on a completely different one, and usually foul up the experiment.

The geomagnetic hypothesis was one of the earliest suggested. But the failure of Henry Yeagley in the 1940s to verify a modern version of the theory, and the fact that hypothesized magnetic sensing organs seemed too insensitive to detect the earth's field, stifled the idea for several decades. It was revived by a variety of experiments that combined magnetic confusion, obtained by putting magnets or Helmholtz coils on the birds' heads, with disorientation of the other mechanisms achieved through releasing the birds in unfamiliar locations under cloudy skies. But the problem of the nature of the sensing device remained.

The solution was actually found first in bacteria. In a variety of magnetotactic bacteria—found near Woods Hole, Massachusetts, by Richard Blakemore—a magnetism expert at Massachusetts Institute of Technology named Richard Frankel found chains of magnetic particles. Each was large enough to maintain its properties against thermal agitation, yet small enough to remain a single magnetic domain and thus avoid scrambling its own ordered field. The whole

*(Sixth Senses, continued on page 11)*

## Sixth Senses, from page 10

chain was strong enough to orient the bacteria against Brownian motion, and enable them to follow the vertical component of the earth's field down toward food-rich sediments.

Given that clue, and some extremely careful dissecting work, David Presti and John Pettigrew have recently been able to isolate the probable organ of magnetic sense in birds. They found diffuse patches of permanently magnetic material, probably the mineral magnetite, organized in single-domain particles in the neck muscles of pigeons and migratory sparrows. They suggest that, as the birds fly through the geomagnetic field, the torque exerted on the magnetite tries to twist the muscle fibers, evoking a response from the associated nerves. They also note that such a mechanism in humans could explain certain types of dowsing.

There are few things as depressing as watching someone follow a bright new idea off a cliff. Presti and Pettigrew seemed quite pleased by the dowsing connection, even choosing to introduce it with the same phrase ("It has not escaped our notice...") with which Watson and Crick connected the double helix and heredity. Suffice it to say that it doesn't seem worth the effort. Dowsers claim the ability to find water, precious metals, dead bodies, etc., through interpreting twitches in crooked sticks or mystical plumb bobs. Unfortunately, they can never do so under controlled test conditions, so there seems to be little reason to believe them. Furthermore, it's hard to see the magnetic stimulus to be found in either a subterranean river or a misplaced corpse.

There have been some laboratory investigations into human sensitivity to magnetic fields. One Z. V. Harvalik claimed to have isolated the magnetic organs of dowsers—within their kidneys. But it seems that the more careful the test, the more negative the result. For example, Robert Tucker and Otto Schmitt made a series of tests for perception of 60-Hz, 10-gauss fields. In their early, loose experiments, they "quickly learned that some individuals are incredibly skillful at sensing auxiliary non-magnetic clues, such as coil hum associated with field, so that some 'super perceivers' were found who seemed to sense the field with a statistical probability as much as 10-30 against happening by chance." As their techniques became more sophisticated, and their

controls more rigorous, the success rate dropped to chance.

Some of the subjects reported "magnetic headaches," suggestive of the Eastern European literature on the physiological and psychological effects of electromagnetic fields. The subject remains controversial, especially since the experimental data are rather far removed from the subtle claimed effects (malaise, irritability, etc.), and the economic aspects are rather significant. Questions about electromagnetic pollution could affect leakage allowances for microwave ovens, placement of power lines, installation of television broadcasting towers and airport radars, and even the operation of subways. (Complaints about the electromagnetic smog surrounding San Francisco's BART and D.C.'s Metro systems have appeared in local newspapers.) Clearly, some of the effects are unrelated to the radiation itself, as many of the magnetic migraines in the Tucker and Schmitt study occurred during placebo tests.

There's nothing particularly mysterious about being sensitive to electromagnetic radiation. After all, we do see, we do get suntans; we do synchronize our circadian rhythms with the day-night cycle. But all those effects involve radiation with a lot of energy per photon. The problematical microwave effects involve photons whose energies seem to be too low to do more than mildly heat the body. This combination of theoretical incompatibility with a confusion of experimental data tends to keep people from committing much time to the question.

There is also a certain unsavoriness to the subject because of its historical association with the pseudosciences. Psychic phenomena have often been interpreted as low-frequency electromagnetic perceptions. For example, Upton Sinclair called his book on telepathy *Mental Radio*. One of the major recent proponents of this idea was John Taylor, of King's College, London. Already well-known for a lurid book on black holes, Taylor was attracted to ESP research by the notorious Uri Geller. In the laboratory, Taylor was as-

(*Sixth Senses*, continued on page 12)

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tounded to discover that ordinary children had the power to bend silverware with their minds—provided that one didn't watch them to make sure they weren't cheating.

He wrote a big book on the subject, called *Superminds*, in which he argued that only electromagnetism could explain ESP. He was immediately upbraided for this loose experimental work, mostly by magicians. In *The Magic of Uri Geller*, James Randi describes how Taylor was completely flummoxed in a reproduction of the Geller effect that was accomplished through fairly crude conjuring methods. In the face of so much negative evidence, Taylor began to have second thoughts. Curiously, he expressed them by reporting a test for electromagnetic phenomena associated with ESP. Finding none, and having already decided that only electromagnetism could explain ESP, he concluded that ESP must not be real. It was not a graceful retreat.

There is one area of investigation into electromagnetic sensitivity that is not only respectable, but even potentially profitable. Curiously, the entry point into this field is the observed ability of animals to regenerate lost limbs.

If you cut a flatworm in half, it will grow a complete replacement half. Cells that have lain around the body, not specialized to any particular organ or function, rush to the site of injury and begin specializing into whatever kinds of cells are needed. At the same time, an electrical change, called the current of injury, develops at the injured point. Although this current was first noted in the late 1700s, it was only in the late 1950s that Robert Becker constructed a theoretical link between it and the regeneration. Becker's theory, that the cells respond to a constant electric current maintained by the nervous system, stimulated some remarkably successful attempts to regenerate limbs in animals that cannot ordinarily do so, via applied electric fields. The resulting techniques have also proven useful in encouraging human bones to mend.

More recent work suggests that it is the skin, rather than the underlying nerves, that generates the current of injury. The currents themselves seem to be flows of sodium ions, absorbed by healthy skin from the outside world. The prospect of using artificially imposed currents to speed healing, perhaps even to regenerate lost human limbs, is

understandably exciting.

One curious sidelight that it brings to mind is the old idea that the skin could serve as a substitute visual system. There was some discussion in the 1960s, by both Soviet and American researchers, of people who seemed to be able to read with their fingertips, even though securely blindfolded. Similar instances of so-called dermo-optical perception were reported by the French novelist Jules Romains after World War I. Alas, the key to this mystery turns out to be mundane. Magicians will tell you that it is virtually impossible to secure a blindfold completely. Minute chinks will always remain, sufficient to allow reading, playing ping-pong, and even, in the case of one spectacular magician, driving a horse-drawn carriage through Paris. When properly blinded (as by putting a box over the head), the finger-readers become illiterate.

While dermo-optical perception does not seem to hold any promise for the handicapped, there is a new perceptual channel that does seem to be present in a small minority of blind people. Lawrence Weiskrantz, of Oxford University, has found that some people, whose visual impairments originated in brain cortex damage, have a kind of "blindsight." Shown some event, they do not see it; but when asked to guess what it was, they guess correctly nine times out of ten! Apparently, there is a neural path from eye to brain that goes through the midbrain rather than the cortex. The resulting sensation is not of an image, but rather a feeling of something happening. Extreme peripheral vision in sighted people seems to be an analogous phenomenon. Weiskrantz has shown that the accuracy of blindsight could be improved in both human and ape subjects through special training.

The blindsight phenomenon involves cases where the damage is not to the sensory organ, the eye, but to the cortex, which organizes the visual stimuli into a coherent image. Apparently, we do only see those things that are permissible within the reducing framework of the brain. We seem to have returned to the idea that evolution has produced a physical structure adapted to perceiving the important patterns of objective reality. And that some of these structures, these brains, are more sensitive to the pattern of the monetary system, while others are more attuned to sex.