



National Capital Area

# SKEPTICAL EYE

Summer 1988

Vol. 2, No. 3

## The Media and the Astrology Flap

By Lee J. Rickard

I looked up from my Sunday paper as the Governor of California, George Deukmejian, astounded Sam Donaldson and George Will by saying that his astrologer had advised him against answering their question. It was, of course, a joke. But Sam still asked whether the governor consulted the same astrologer as Nancy Reagan, and dutifully reported the denial on the evening news. And so it goes with the affair of the president's horoscopes. Nobody seems to know whether to take it as a joke or to deal with it seriously.

Part of the problem may be the lack of perspective that follows from not having a catchy name. "Astrogate" is already used by NASA (as a verb), "Stargate" has been the property of science-fiction writers for decades, and "Heavengate" has been co-opted by both the film and the televangelism industries. It's hard to get a controversy to jell without a snappy label.

Some observers have found it impossible to believe that the Reagans were really in the thrall of San Francisco socialite and astrologist Joan Quigley. The British science magazine *Nature* chided American reporters for accepting the story at face value. Clearly, they said, Reagan was using this excuse to reject Don Regan's suggestions without having to disagree with him openly. Similarly, Garry Wills, reviewing Regan's book for the *New York Review of Books*, speculated that the first lady's interference with the president's schedule was more likely based on a pragmatic analysis of the public furor and her husband's difficulties with hostile questions than on superstition.

On the other hand, journalists who have followed Reagan's acting career as well as his political one have reported a fascination with astrology that predates his meeting with the former Nancy Davis, and has figured in such scheduling decisions as when he and his first wife (Jane Wyman) were divorced, when he and Nancy were married, and when he was inaugurated as California's governor. Edward Helin of the Carroll Righter Institute in Los Angeles has said that Reagan had a professional and personal relationship with Hollywood astrologer Carroll Righter for over 40 years. These stories make the president's claim that all he does is read the horoscope—along with the funnies—seem disingenuous.

### A Balanced Press?

While all the papers played the basic story straight, clear differences appeared in sidebars and editorials. Surprisingly, given its past credulous treatment of the subject, the *Washington Post* carried the best skeptical review of astrology, a feature by Curt Suplee in the May 8 Sunday "Outlook" section that cited many of the debunking studies that have appeared in the *Skeptical Inquirer* over the years. On May 5, the *Journal* newspapers ran a similarly thorough, and somewhat complementary, review written by C. Eugene Emery, Jr., of the *Providence*

(Continued on page 4.)

## Bylaws Approved by Wide Margin

Nearly two-thirds of NCAS's members returned the ballots sent out with the new bylaws last month. Of those responding, 181 voted to accept the bylaws, eight voted against accepting them, and four returned ballots without votes. The 181 "yes" votes represent not only a majority of the votes returned, but also an absolute majority of the total membership in support of the new bylaws.

## Pentagon Peace Shield?

By D.W. "Chip" Denman

On March 23, the *Washington Post* "Metro" section ran an article about a club of Pentagon employees who are endeavoring to construct a "spiritual peace shield" around the planet through meditation. The article, rather than offering a critical examination of the club's claims, presented its statements about "auras" and "psychic energy" as established fact. NCAS has responded in protest to the *Washington Post* Ombudsman Richard Harwood.

The original article, by staff writer Barbara Carton, featured a photograph of a device sold by the club for \$65. The accompanying caption stated that this "peace shield gauge" will "measure a person's aura." The article also noted that the club sells \$70 home meditation kits for aura enhancement to individuals too embarrassed to attend club meetings. An illustrated box with the article offered detailed step-by-step instructions for successful meditation. Nowhere did Carton question the scientific validity of such a device, much less the existence of an aura.

A few weeks later, the tabloid *National Examiner* (in an issue dated April  
(Continued on page 4.)

### Inside...

- ❑ "A Top American Scientist" ends up in the *National Enquirer*, page 3.
- ❑ A Skeptic's Response to questions about astrology, page 6.
- ❑ Some Arguments Against Astrology. More ammunition, page 8.
- ❑ News from Other Skeptics Groups. What other groups are up to, page 11.
- ❑ Naptha Speaks! More from the skeptic tank, page 12.

## National Capital Area Skeptics

### 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.

### Interim Board

D.W. "Chip" Denman, *President*  
Joe Himes, *Secretary*  
Susan Wells, *Corresponding Secretary*  
Grace Denman, *Treasurer*

### Newsletter

Julie Stern, *Editor*  
289-3338 (office), 237-8591(home)  
Nelson Davis, Mike Hoffman, and  
Lee Rickard, *Editorial Board*  
William J. Jones, *Production Editor*  
Susan Wells, *Production Assistant*

### Committees

*Astrology*: Lee J. Rickard,  
767-2495 (office)  
*Creationism*: Randall Lockwood,  
237-8591 (home), 452-1100 (o)  
*Education in Skepticism*:  
Walter F. Rowe,  
(703) 494-2916 (h), 994-1469 (o)  
*Fringe Medicine*: Zev Remba,  
522-3468 (h)  
*UFOs*: Phil Klass, 554-5901 (h)

### Address NCAS Correspondence to:

D. W. Denman  
8006 Valley St.  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

### Newsletter address:

2214 Tulip Drive  
Falls Church, VA 22046

### Membership address:

Grace Denman  
8006 Valley St.  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

© 1988 NCAS

## Nominees for Board of Directors

In accordance with Article VI of the NCAS Bylaws, the interim board announces a slate of nominees to run for the 16 directors who will be elected by mail ballot in the upcoming election. This slate consists of all NCAS members who have thus far expressed their willingness to serve on the board, and consists of:

Alfred Baer	Herb Lansdell	Sean O'Neill
Peter Boyce	Jack Lass	Eugene Ossa
D. W. "Chip" Denman	Peter Lins	Zev Remba
Grace Denman	Larry Littig	Lee Rickard
Herb Federhen	Randy Lockwood	Walter Rowe
Jim Glanville	Mary Majewski	Andrew Semprebon
Karen Gray	Alan McConnell	Gary Stone
Joe Himes	Douglas McNeil	Jamy Ian Swiss
Phil Klass	David Morrison	

Additional names will be added to the slate before the ballots are mailed, provided that a petition containing the signatures of 30 members is received by the interim board by August 20. As stated in the bylaws, members who would like to receive a copy of the current NCAS membership directory may request one from the secretary, Joe Himes, at 3731 Prosperity Ave., Fairfax, VA 22031.

The procedures for all NCAS nominations and elections are described in the bylaws. If you have any questions about these, or need clarification, please contact any of the interim directors. □

## Editor's Notes

By Julie D. Stern

All of us on the newsletter committee are pleased to present the fifth issue of NCAS's newsletter, and the first to be published under its new name, *The National Capital Area Skeptical Eye*. This title was selected by the newsletter committee and the interim board of directors from the 26 titles submitted to our "Name-the-Newsletter" contest. We'd like to thank all of you who entered the contest, especially the winner (who wishes to remain anonymous), who submitted not only the title, but also the logo appearing with it.

For the past year, the newsletter committee has been meeting (fairly) regularly, writing articles, book reviews, and reports on NCAS activities, and discussing what kinds of material should appear in this publication. Now we'd like you to let us know what *you'd* like to read about in these pages. After all, this is *your* newsletter. We appreciate the feedback we've already received from several NCAS members, and would like to hear from more of you. Please tell us what you like, and what you don't like, about the newsletter. Do you want to see more investigative reports and exposes? More book reviews? More news about what NCAS special interest groups are doing? Let us know!

We also welcome your submissions. If you've written something with a skeptical bent that you think may interest other NCAS members, send it in. If you're interested in researching or writing about a certain subject but aren't sure what angle to take, give one of us a call: we'll be glad to help you. Even if you're not a writer, we're still eager to have your help, and would especially appreciate hearing from anyone interested in working on research, graphics, cartoons, photography, or word processing.

Send any and all suggestions and potential newsletter material to me, or call me, at the address and telephone number listed to the left. And you're welcome to attend the next newsletter committee meeting, which will be held at 8 p.m. on Monday, August 22, at 2214 Tulip Drive in Falls Church, VA. An agenda and notice will be sent to all committee members before the meeting. □

## From the Files of "a Top American Scientist"

By Lee J. Rickard

Some people are born to celebrity; some attain it; and some leave their legs sticking out in the aisle and accidentally trip celebrity as it passes by. It is into that last category that I would file my only appearance in the *National Enquirer*.

It was the summer of 1979. I was on the scientific staff of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, working at its headquarters in Charlottesville, Virginia. Returning to my office after dinner, I found a brief phone message to the effect that someone named Pablo had called, on the recommendation of Pat Palmer. Palmer had been my thesis advisor at the University of Chicago, so I assumed that this was a scientific query. However, the call-back number was a toll-free long-distance exchange, which was unusual. Also, the receptionist had checked the box on the message form marked "You are destined to return the call."

I got through to Pablo the next morning. I found that he represented America's most popular newspaper (by its own admission), the *National Enquirer*. Pablo was working on a story about an article in the astronomical journal *Icarus* that he had not actually read, but seen referred to in a Russian magazine. Lacking a copy in his own library, he was networking his scientific contacts. He had interviewed Palmer some months before on the subject of SETI (searches for extra-terrestrial intelligence). The new topic, "orbiting meteors," was unfamiliar to Pat, but he thought I might have something about it in my files, and so steered Pablo my way. By this devious circuit, it was my happy chance to have the opportunity to appear in grocery store check-out lines across the nation.

Like most scientists, I'd heard stories of how particular legitimate discoveries had been reported in the tabloids in forms so distorted and sensationalized as to be unrecognizable to the researchers involved. So I was not eager to get involved with the *Enquirer*. On the other hand, I didn't want to unduly irritate Pablo either, fearing that he might vent his spleen by tossing my name into something even worse. ("Dr. Rickard did not comment on allegations linking him to the CIA plot to clone Margaret Trudeau....") I resolved to be responsive, but to carefully rephrase all statements to be sure that I was being quoted accurately.

The *Icarus* article was written by John Bagby, who then worked in the Research and Development Division of Hughes Aircraft. (It may be that he still does, but I haven't seen him in print for some time.) The subject was the possible existence of natural Earth satellites other than the Moon.

The idea is not intrinsically crazy. It is generally believed that gravitational interactions with the Moon have thoroughly swept from near space whatever primordial gravel may have been left after the formation of the Earth-Moon system. But recent arrivals are not unimaginable. In 1958, R. M. L. Baker, Jr., showed that meteors on a "near-miss" trajectory could be slowed by atmospheric drag, temporarily becoming "orbiting meteors" (hence the key phrase that Pablo was tracking down). The probabilities are low; Baker estimated that only 0.2% of all stony meteors would even have a chance of orbiting, and his calculation ignored all debilitating effects other than vaporization by heating. Furthermore, the altitudes of the likely orbits would be too low to resist further atmospheric drag, so that their final fall to Earth would only be temporarily postponed.

There is supporting evidence that some meteors do come to Earth on nearly horizontal trajectories. An analysis of the Campo del Cielo meteorite field in South America suggests an origin in a grazing impact, according to W. A. Cassidy and friends. Bagby often cites the case of the Great Meteoric Procession of 1913, which was a 3 to 5 minute train of several groups of fireballs that appeared to travel a 5,000-mile path from western Saskatchewan to Brazil. Some researchers, most notably C. A. Chant, believed that this must have been the break-up of an orbiting meteor. But others disagree. C.C. Wylie, in particular,

(Continued on page 5.)

## President's Message

By D.W. "Chip" Denman

After a year in office, Stanley Bigman has stepped down as NCAS's interim president. As many of you will remember, Stan is one the group's original founders and organizers and has played an important role in its evolution. Stan started with an idea and the name—borrowed from a letter to the *Washington Post* signed by Sean O'Neill—and was among the first to write to CSICOP expressing his willingness to organize a local group in the Capital area. Since that time NCAS has grown from five founders, to the 120 people who attended the first meeting outside the Edmund Burke School, to the more than 320 members who receive this newsletter. This phenomenal growth is testimony that Stan's vision of a local skeptics group was timely. Stan deserves much thanks for his hard work spent bringing NCAS into being, and for the time he invested in the corporate duties of president.

At the request of the interim board, I will be acting as president until our first election. As such, I am pleased to announce the NCAS membership's formal adoption of the new bylaws. These bylaws establish procedures for the election of a 16-member board of directors. Election proceedings have already begun; a slate of members who have expressed a willingness to serve on the board appears on page 2. Additional names may be added by petition. Mail ballots will be sent to all members late this summer, and we expect to announce the newly elected board in the October issue of this newsletter.

Other exciting plans are in the offing. Keeping up with current events, NCAS's Astrology Special Interest Group hopes to offer a public forum on astrology featuring a prominent speaker. Other Special Interest Groups will be organizing different events. If you are looking for a way to become more involved as an active skeptic, consider joining a SIG; for more information, contact one of the SIG/committee chairmen listed on page 2.

CSICOP's 1988 Annual Meeting will be held this November in Chicago. I  
(Continued on page 7.)

## Media's Astrology Flap, from p. 1

*Journal*. (Some of this information is reviewed elsewhere in this newsletter.)

But, in a stunning reversal of its usual sober coverage, the *New York Times* carried a string of features with little or no skeptical viewpoint. These included a story on Russian interest in the paranormal, highlighting psychic healer Dzhuna Davitashvili (May 14, page A1), reactions from local astrologers (May 16, "Metro" section), a rebuttal to astrology's critics from Jeane Dixon (May 17, "Op-Ed" page), and a long review of the use of astrology by businesses (May 15, Sunday "Business" section).

CSICOP was mentioned prominently in stories syndicated by the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the Gannett News Service, and the Associated Press. The news service stories were published in more than 300 U.S. newspapers and in an as-yet-uncounted number of publications overseas.

### TV Coverage

Television news opted for the traditional appearance of balance. Thus, *Nightline* pitted Richard Berendzen (astronomer, president of American University, and member of CSICOP's board) against Caroline Casey (Washington astrologer); the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* set Jeremy Stone (Federation of American Scientists) against Darrell Martinie (Boston astrologer and host of the show, *The Cosmic Muffin*); and Oprah Winfrey matched Roger Culver (Tucson astronomer and CSICOP representative) against a group dedicated to better living through astrology. The only direct expression of editorial opinion was Andy Rooney's commentary on *60 Minutes* (anti-astrology, as it happens).

### Side-Stepping the Issue

The amount of commentary from active professional scientists, especially professional astronomers, was quite small. Those at federal laboratories found that statements critical of astrology were liable to interpretation as being critical of the president, their nominal boss, and thus unacceptable to their public affairs offices. A chilling effect also apparently inhibited university researchers. Robert Englemann, a reporter for the Scripps-Howard chain, told me that many of the scientists he'd interviewed were unwilling to be quoted for fear of jeopardizing their federally funded research.

In fact, stepping gingerly around the implications of the story seemed to be the order of the day. When the president was asked directly on May 17 whether he believed in astrology, he answered: "I've not tied my life by it, but I won't answer the question the other way because I don't know enough about it to say, is there something to it or not." No one asked whether this gap in his scientific background might affect his ability to assess other scientific questions—like the feasibility of SDI, to pick a random example.

### A Hint of Optimism

Still, my basic impression of the month's media coverage was positive. After all, the mere fact that the "First Family's" belief in astrology was overwhelmingly viewed as a scan-

dal—even if not a serious one—shows that skeptics are not as much a minority as we often fear. The empirical studies and basic theoretical arguments that support the skeptical view of astrology are actually reaching the popular press, and the media have begun to identify skeptical representatives other than Carl Sagan.

Finally, CSICOP has reminded us of a very telling fact. As far as can be determined, no astrologer seems to have predicted the Reagan/Regan astrology flap. As a poet commented long ago, "O coecos coeli spectatores!" ("Oh blind watchers of the sky!") □

## CSICOP Invitation to Quigley

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) has invited newly famous astrologer Joan Quigley to participate in a scientific test of astrology.

Quigley was identified as the astrological consultant to Nancy Reagan profiled in Don Regan's recent White House memoirs. In an interview with the Associated Press on May 9, she described herself as "a serious scientific astrologer." Noting that characterization, CSICOP Executive Director Mark Plummer invited Quigley to participate in a scientifically controlled double-blind test of her skills.

In the invitation, dated May 19, Plummer noted that CSICOP is the world's leading scientific organization investigating astrology. He added: "As a scientist, we feel sure you will cooperate to prove your claims in a scientific manner." □

## Peace Shield? from p. 1

19) carried the banner headline "Washington Post's startling disclosure: PENTAGON PSYCHICS BUILDING PEACE SHIELD AROUND AMERICA." Inside the tabloid, between articles on animal ESP and two-headed babies, the original *Post* article was minimally paraphrased together with an endorsement of the Pentagon club's efforts from the *Examiner's* in-house psychic.

NCAS responded to the original article with a letter to the *Post's* ombudsman expressing the group's concern at Carton's failure to represent the established scientific facts regarding alleged personal auras. NCAS also criticized the uncritical reporting of the expensive peace shield gauge for encouraging consumer gullibility. A second letter was sent to bring the *Examiner* coverage to the attention of the *Post*.

On June 10, the ombudsman replied. In a brief letter addressed to "Mr. Denman and other skeptics," Harwood stated, "I agree with your comments on the Carton story on the Pentagon meditation club. It has been the subject of an internal memorandum by me. Ms. Carton, coincidentally, has left the paper."

In both of its letters, NCAS offered its resources to the *Post* for future coverage of such questionable claims. NCAS hopes to serve the media and the public as a consumer advocate in matters pseudoscientific. □



### "Top American Scientist," from p. 3

has argued very persuasively that the various observers reporting parts of the Procession were actually seeing different meteors in a typical meteor shower, none travelling more than 100 miles, none moving on a particularly horizontal path.

In any case, Bagby's article was not about the possibility of orbiting meteors, but rather about his claims that there actually exist right now some dozens of such objects! He has sent a number of letters to various astronomical journals reporting visual observations of mysterious lights in the sky, with positions and apparent angular velocities and his interpretation that these are true natural satellites of the Earth. Some of these reports were immediately attributed by other observers to known bright stars; other reports have gone unchallenged, in part because large errors (or unquoted errors) made them too difficult to follow up. As further support, he has cited some apparent glitches in the reported positions of artificial satellites, presumably due to gravitational interactions with his mystery moons.

Unfortunately for Bagby, one of his articles drew the attention of Jean Meeus, a Belgian geophysicist and CSICOP fellow, perhaps best known for his tireless debunking of the "Jupiter Effect." Meeus wrote several articles discrediting the mini-moons on grounds both general and particular. From the former: Bagby's own observations and calculated orbits always seem to put these things near apogee; they should thus be much brighter at closest approach to the Earth, and indeed should outshine the brightest stars. Every night that billions of people look up at the sky and don't say "Hey! What's that?" is a refutation of Bagby's claims. From the latter: the mysterious glitches in the tabulated orbits of artificial satellites are typographical errors.

As an additional note, I should point out that Bagby's most dramatic claim is that one of his objects broke up on or about December 18, 1955. It should have been easily visible beforehand. Yet, at the same time Bagby was making his observations, astronomer Clyde Tombaugh (the discoverer of Pluto) was conducting a systematic search specifically looking for natural satellites of the Earth, and saw nothing.

Of course, I didn't have all this information on hand at the time of my fateful interview, but I had enough to be pretty discouraging. Pablo was polite, but I thought I sensed in him such disappointment at these devastating criticisms that he was inclined to drop the whole thing.

I should have been so lucky.

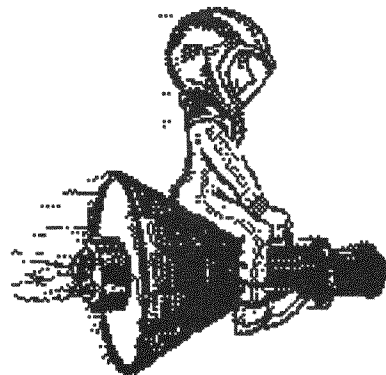
Several weeks later, the July 17 issue of the *National Enquirer* hit the stands. I first saw it in a drugstore. The cover story was "WORLD EXCLUSIVE—TOP SCIENTISTS DISCOVER... CRIPPLED UFO ORBITING EARTH." I turned to page 33, where I saw a familiar name in the text. Mine.

I had never asked Pablo about the Russian article that had stimulated his interest in the story of Bagby's orbiting meteors. But that was the real subject of his interview. It was a claim by one Sergei Petrovich Bozhich (identified as an

astrophysicist, though nobody I talked to had ever heard of him) that Bagby's reported break-up of a satellite in December 1955 was actually the explosion of an alien spacecraft. Why wasn't the meteoric interpretation tenable? Well, the *Enquirer* had checked with "a top American scientist" who clearly ruled out the existence of orbiting meteors. Ergo, the object in question must be a spaceship.

There was small comfort to be found in the fact that, where I had been quoted, I was quoted with complete accuracy. The pleasure of being referred to in print as "a top American scientist" was vitiated somewhat by my sharing the company of Aleksandr Kazantsev, "a noted Russian astrophysics researcher" (who believes that Bible stories are misinterpreted records of visits by ancient astronauts), and Aleksei Zolotov, "a top Soviet explosion expert" (who believes in faith healing and auras, and thinks that the Tunguska explosion was another spacecraft accident). I am told that about 18 million people read the *Enquirer*, and that, on the average, each individual story is read by half these readers. Considering that this was a cover story, it is reasonable to assume that some 10 million people had read my quotes and inferred that I believe in little green persons. (Well, not necessarily little; Zolotov said the aliens could be as much as nine feet tall.)

There was surprisingly little fallout, though. James Oberg wrote a concise review of the story for the Winter 1979-1980 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and kindly avoided mentioning me by name. I got a follow-up call from a stringer for NBC, which at the time was running a number of pseudo-documentaries on the paranormal. I received only a few letters from readers of the *Enquirer* article. Five people wrote asking if the story was true and, if so, didn't it make the Air Force look stupid? One person wrote just to tell me that he was himself an extraterrestrial, and did I have any ideas how he could get home? (Even after all this time, that is still the strangest letter I have ever received.) And I got a call from a drunk in a bar in Danville, Florida, who said his friend had a piece of a flying saucer and wanted to send it to me. □



## A Skeptic's Response

By Lee J. Rickard

*This is the first of what we hope will be a regular feature in this newsletter: basic skeptical arguments in response to questions about common pseudoscientific beliefs. It is designed to provide skeptics who are questioned about their disbelief in the pseudosciences with brief, logical answers to these questions, and with sources for more detailed information. Has someone—a friend, a co-worker, or a family member—ever raised a question of this sort that you found yourself hard-pressed to answer? If so, send the question to this column, and we'll attempt to provide a "skeptical response."—Editor*

### Is disbelief in astrology actually based on scientific tests?

Astrology encompasses a wide variety of beliefs, some easier to evaluate than others. Also, because most scientists consider it a dead issue, there is little encouragement to spend time and effort debunking it. Still, a number of empirical studies have been reported in the last decade.

The first basic reference is the 1977 book by G. Dean and A. Mather, *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology*, which collects and reviews a wide variety of studies since 1900. Their principal finding is that the sun sign, generally considered the dominant factor in personality, does not correlate with independent personality measures. R. Culver and P. Ianna, in *The Gemini Syndrome* (1984), summarize studies that find no sun sign correlations with choice of occupation, physical attributes, or medical disorders, again contradicting common astrological claims. Other recent studies by H. J. Eysenck and D. K. B. Nias (in their 1982 book *Astrology: Science or Superstition?*) and by S. Carlson (in the 5 December 1985 issue of the journal *Nature*) also demonstrate that astrologers cannot assess personality characteristics on the basis of horoscopes alone.

### Could hostile scientists be manipulating the results to get the "right" answers?

First of all, some of the researchers mentioned above are by no means hostile. Dean was a student of astrology for more than 15 years before concluding that it lacked experimental justification. Eysenck was also originally favorably disposed towards the astrological hypothesis.

Furthermore, the notion that orthodox scientists purge heretical ideas really doesn't fit the history of science. Rather, real status in science often comes from being able to prove that everyone else was wrong. The more outrageous the result, the greater the glory—provided you can prove your case.

In any event, some of the best negative results have been obtained with the active assistance of professional astrologers. Carlson's study was designed in part by members of the

National Council for Geocosmic Research. Most recently, P. Niehenke reported a detailed study conducted entirely by German astrologers, who attempted to match horoscopes to personality evaluations and failed to do better than chance.

### But isn't there evidence for celestial influences on terrestrial life?

Well, there's sunlight, there's the gravitational pull of the moon (as manifested in ocean tides), and there's the occasional meteoric impact. Beyond those, though, scientists neither expect nor observe such influences. If you consider the known physical forces (gravity, electricity, magnetism, and so forth), it can be shown that planetary influences are always much smaller than local ones. For example, at the time of birth, a baby feels stronger tides from the attending obstetrician than from the moon (by a factor of about one million!).

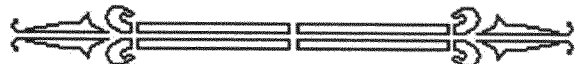
### Not even the full moon?

Although many people believe that the full moon affects human behavior (that more crimes, more accidents, and so forth occur during a full moon), careful studies show no such effect. In fact, as this is now a fairly easy hypothesis to test, with the existence of extensive computer databases filled with information from police departments, hospitals, and so forth, this is one of the most popular areas for debunking activity. A collection of such studies was published by J. Rotton and I. W. Kelly in a 1984 issue of *Psychological Bulletin*.

### Then why do people still believe in astrology?

Well, remember that when people evaluate whether astrology works for them, they generally do so on a more personal basis. They often look not for new insights but for confirmation of personality interpretations that they already hold, or for explanations of events where the existence of an explanation is more important than its correctness. Several psychological effects tend to encourage belief: for example, people tend to accept vague and general statements as being specific to themselves. This is called the Barnum effect; for further details, see D. H. Dickson and I. W. Kelly, in *Psychological Reports*, Vol. 57, p. 367 (1985). Geoffrey Dean reviewed a host of reasons of this variety for the continuing belief in astrology, both by its patrons and its practitioners, in the Spring 1987 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*. □

*Note: For even more information on this subject, see Doug McNeil's article, "Some Arguments Against Astrology," on page 8.—Editor*



## Creationism Update

By Randy Lockwood

The May 1988 issue of *Current Anthropology* reports on a survey of over 2,100 college students on 40 campuses who responded to a 72-question survey on attitudes and understanding of evolution. The results are consistent with other surveys documenting the low level of scientific knowledge in American students:

Thirty-eight percent of the students surveyed believed that human life originated in the Garden of Eden. There were regional differences, with 52% of the students in the Southwest holding to the Biblical account of creation, compared to only 15% of those in Eastern schools. In addition, 49% of rural students believed that fossils are the remains of animals that died during the flood described in the story of Noah. Finally, 45% of those surveyed believed that some human races are "more evolved" than others.

These results show a better acceptance of evolutionary ideas among students than among the general population. A 1985 survey by the Public Opinion Laboratory at Northern Illinois University found that 46% of all adults sampled disagreed with the statement, "Human beings as we know them today developed from earlier species of animals." In this survey, education had a distinct effect on acceptance of

evolutionary ideas: 63% of those with college degrees and 71% of those with graduate educations agreed with the statement.

In other news, it is clear that last summer's Supreme Court ruling on Louisiana's "equal treatment" law will only lead to new strategies on the part of creationists. According to the February 1988 issue of *Church and State*, Citizens for Fairness in Education (CFE), a small but influential group, has announced plans for a new assault on the study of evolution in public schools by pushing for adoption of a "uniform origins policy" by school boards. The statement attempts to avoid conflict by avoiding use of the words "creation" or "evolution," instead calling for objective scientific study of origins. If you'd like a copy of the complete CFE statement, call me at (703) 237-8591. □

## More of Majestic-12

The Majestic-12 hoax, in which supposed secret documents purport to reveal the cover-up of a UFO crash in 1947, is back in the news. As reported in the *Skeptical Inquirer* and in this newsletter, NCAS member Phil Klass made a variety of investigations into the Majestic-12 documents, concluding that they were fakes. His exposure of the hoax was covered by many major U.S. papers.

Unfortunately, the news does not seem to have reached England yet. The May 1 issue of *The People* reported the story of the 1947 crash and cover-up in its unbunked original form. The information was reported to have been communicated to the paper's political editor by an anonymous source in the House of Lords. In a recursive nightmare, the British story has since been picked up by the American tabloid press, and so here we go again!

It looks like Majestic-12 is making a bid to join Millard Fillmore's bathtub in the Hall of Unkillable Hoaxes. Watch this space for further updates!—Lee J. Rickard □

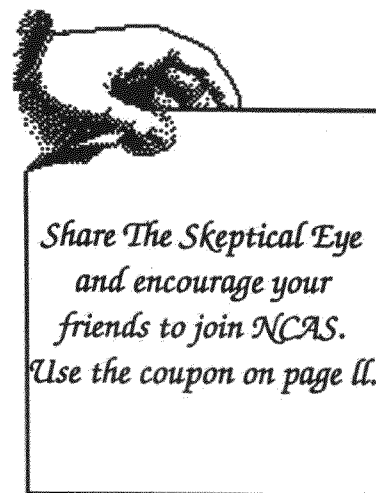
## President's Message, from p. 3

attended last year's meeting in Pasadena, and found that not only were the scheduled talks thought provoking, but the meeting itself was a great opportunity to meet critical thinkers—scientists, magicians, and others—from around the world. Some of you have already contacted me with an interest in attending this year's meeting. If enough people are interested—at least 20 members and guests—we may be able to arrange for a group rate on air travel to Chicago. We must make arrangements in advance, so if you are interested, please call me at (301) 585-4093.

The world of Spiderman and Marvel Comics may seem an unlikely place to find skeptical issues discussed, but a recent issue of *Web of Spiderman* (Number 41, August 1988) devotes a full four pages to a debunking of psychic surgery. The folks at Marvel deserve a tip of the hat for the nonsense expose. Their readership probably exceeds that of the *Skeptical Inquirer* and all local group newsletters combined, especially among the under-20 crowd.

Have you spotted our favorite spoon-bender lately? Not promoting a book, or even dowsing for buried minerals, Uri Geller can now be seen in a TV commercial for Edy's Grand Ice Cream. "I bend spoons with my mind," he mugs to the camera, "really." He extols the virtues of Edy's ice cream while spooning it into his mouth. By the end of the spot—after a camera cut—he holds up a spoon bent double. "Unbelievable," reads the screen. Really!

If any of you feel moved to respond, write to Edy's Grand Ice Cream, 5929 College Avenue, Oakland, CA 94618. □



## Some Arguments Against Astrology

By Douglas E. McNeil

*A touchstone to determine the actual worth of an "intellectual"—find out how he feels about astrology.*

—Robert A. Heinlein

With the recent revelations of Nancy Reagan's interest in astrology, we have seen a wave of renewed interest in and discussion of this subject. The following are arguments against some of the points commonly made in favor of astrology. My aim is not so much to convince the reader that astrology is untrue as it is to supply ammunition to those who wish to argue against astrology.

Astrology is often claimed to be a science—sometimes the oldest science. Such claims, however, reflect ignorance of scientific methodology. Astrology lacks two requirements of any science: predictive power and mechanism.

### No Predictive Power

Predictive power is the essential characteristic of any science. Predictions in the scientific sense do not necessarily refer to what will happen in the future, but are statements about the results of observations that have not yet been made.

When astrologers forecast the outcome of an election, they are making a prediction, but when they describe someone's personality or character, they are also making a prediction in the scientific sense. If astrology could make accurate predictions, these should be verified when tested scientifically. Yet study after study has failed to substantiate any ability of astrologers to predict either personality or events beyond chance levels. One study showed, for example, that marriages between people with "compatible" astrological signs last no longer than marriages between those with "incompatible" signs. An eight-year study of Marine Corps recruits showed that similar personalities are not associated with similar signs. And a third study concluded that astrologers are unable to match birth dates and personality profiles at any better than chance level.

Such findings provide evidence that astrology is false, not just unproven, as astrologers often claim. If astrology were valid at all, it should be able to pass at least some of these tests. That it does not is evidence that the correlations astrologers believe connect the stars and human affairs do not exist.

Furthermore, although astrologers sometimes say that "the stars impel, they do not compel," if the stars had even a small effect, the tests could detect it. Or, if only a small percentage of astrologers could make accurate predictions, the tests are sensitive enough to detect that as well.

### No Plausible Explanation

Astrology also lacks a second requirement of science: it must provide a plausible explanation for how it could work. For example, despite very strong evidence from geography, geology, and paleontology, the theory of continental drift (now called the theory of plate tectonics) was not accepted

by the scientific community for several decades because it lacked a plausible mechanism. How could the continents plow through the ocean floor? The concept of sea-floor spreading, and its later verification, removed this difficulty—the continents are mounted on plates that move along with the sea floor as it spreads, and the theory became almost universally accepted.

Astrology, on the other hand, does not provide any plausible explanation for why it should work. Ancient astrologers thought that it was due to heat and light, and modern astrologers would add gravitational and electromagnetic fields, but these effects of the stars are, of course, extremely small when compared to terrestrial sources. To date, no one has proposed a plausible mechanism for astrology that is consistent with the laws of physics.

### Ancient Wisdom?

Many astrologers skirt the issue of the lack of scientific validity by claiming that astrology is not a science but rather "ancient wisdom." They claim that the positions of the planets reflect human affairs, rather than causing them, because of a general "connectedness" of the universe; that cycles in the sky are correlated with human behavior. But the orbits of the planets, although constrained by the laws of physics, are basically accidental. Astrologers have never presented any reliable evidence that the correlations they speak of actually exist.

Furthermore, ancient wisdom is not necessarily as good as modern wisdom. Modern chemistry, for example, is a much better way of analyzing substances than ancient alchemy, with its earth, air, fire, and water system. But astrology still uses earth, air, fire, and water; we hear of earth signs or water signs, for example. Is such an outmoded way of looking at the world likely to be true? I think we should conclude that astrology is not wisdom, but an ancient superstition with no foundation in fact.

### The Dangers of Belief

In sum, people should not believe in astrology because it is not true, it does not work, and its claims are not supported by any reliable evidence. To those who say that astrology is harmless, I would respond that widespread ignorance and superstition are never harmless. Friends, mates, and careers have been chosen on the basis of the positions of the stars and planets. People have been hired, fired, and promoted on the basis of this pseudoscience. People have been swindled out of large sums of money by fortune-tellers who use astrology. And those who lack the critical sense to see that astrology is ridiculous may fall prey to other, more dangerous pseudoscientific beliefs. From unhealthy fad diets to cyanide poisoning by Laetrile overdoses to the racist pseudoanthropology that helped make Nazism seem scientific and legitimate, pseudosciences form a continuum from less to more dangerous. But all interfere with our ability to deal realistically with the world and appropriately with each other. □



Come to Chicago for the  
**1988 CSICOP Conference**  
Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, November 4-6  
at the  
**Hyatt Regency O'Hare**  
(at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport)

*Cosponsored by the Department of Behavioral Sciences, University of Chicago, and the Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago. Hosted by the Midwest Committee for Rational Inquiry.*

## The New Age: A Scientific Evaluation

### FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4

International Ballroom

- 8:00- 9:00 A.M.: Registration
- 9:00- 9:30 A.M.: Welcoming Remarks
- 9:30-12:30 P.M.: **The New Age: An Overview**  
*Moderator:* Paul Kurtz, CSICOP Chairman,  
Professor of Philosophy, SUNY, Buffalo  
Maureen O'Hara, Professor of Women's Studies,  
San Diego State Univ.  
J. Gordon Melton, Director, Inst. for Study of  
Religion, U.C.-Santa Barbara  
Jay Rosen, Assistant Professor of Journalism,  
NYU  
Robert Basil, editor of *Not Necessarily the New  
Age*
- 12:30-2:30 P.M.: LUNCH BREAK
- 2:30-5:00 P.M.: Two concurrent sessions (choose one)
- Session 1: **Channeling**  
James Alcock, Professor of Psychology, York  
Univ., Toronto  
Graham Reed, Professor of Psychology, Glendon  
College, Toronto  
Sarah Thomason, Professor of Linguistics, Univ.  
of Pittsburgh
- Session 2: **Crystal Healing**  
George Lawrence, Senior Research Associate,  
Univ. of Colorado
- New Age Experiences**  
Ted Schultz, journalist, editor of *Fringes of  
Reason*
- The New Age and Business**  
Béla Scheiber, Chairman, Rocky Mountain  
Skeptics
- The Shirley MacLaine Phenomenon**  
Henry Gordon, magician, author, broadcaster,  
Toronto
- 5:00- 8:00 P.M.: DINNER BREAK
- 8:00-10:30 P.M.: **Keynote Address** — Rosemont Ballroom  
**Douglas Hofstadter**, Professor of  
Psychology, Univ. of Michigan  
"Musings on the Elusive Nature of Common  
Sense and Evidence"

### SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5

Rosemont and United Rooms

- 8:00- 9:00 A.M.: Registration
- 9:00-12 NOON: Three concurrent sessions (choose one)
- Session 1: **Cryptozoology**  
*Moderator:* Lee Nisbet, Associate Professor of  
Philosophy, Medaille College  
J. Richard Greenwell, Secretary, Int'l Society for  
Cryptozoology  
Frank Poirier, Professor of Anthropology, Ohio  
State University, Columbus  
Roy P. Mackal, University of Chicago  
Charles Cazeau, geologist, Tempe, Ariz.
- Session 2: **Graphology**  
*Moderator:* Barry Beyerstein, Professor of  
Psychology, Simon Fraser Univ., Burnaby,  
British Columbia, Canada  
Rose Matousek, President, Amer. Assn. of  
Handwriting Analysts  
Richard J. Klimoski, Professor of Psychology,  
Ohio State University  
Edward Karnes, Professor of Psychology,  
Metropolitan State College, Denver, Colo.  
Felix Klein, Vice President, Council of  
Graphological Societies
- 12:00-2:00 P.M.: **Fund-Raising Luncheon** (optional)  
International Ballroom  
Presentation by James Randi  
*Speakers:* Philip J. Klass and Mark Plummer
- 2:00-5:00 P.M.: Two concurrent sessions (choose one)
- Session 1: **Media Responsibility and the  
Paranormal**  
*Moderator:* Milton Rosenberg, Professor of  
Psychology, University of Chicago  
John Baker, Editor-in-Chief, *Publishers Weekly*  
George Gerbner, Professor of Communications,  
Annenberg School of Communications, Univ.  
of Penn.  
Richard Lobo, Vice President, NBC, General  
Manager, WMAQ-TV, Chicago
- Session 2: **UFO-Abductions** (2:00-3:30 P.M.)  
Philip J. Klass, aerospace editor, Washington,  
D.C.  
Robert A. Baker, Professor of Psychology, Univ.  
of Kentucky, Lexington

Sess. 2 con't. **CSICOP Goes to China** (3:30-5:00 P.M.)

Paul Kurtz, CSICOP Chairman  
Kendrick Frazier, Editor, SKEPTICAL INQUIRER  
Barry Karr, CSICOP Public Relations Director

Entertainment continued

Ben Harris, (Australia)  
Henry Gordon (Canada)  
Robert Steiner (USA)

6:00- 7:00 P.M.: **RECEPTION** (Cash Bar)  
Mexicana-Olympic-Swissair Rooms

7:00-10:30 P.M.: **Awards Banquet** (optional)  
Rosemont Ballroom

**Awards Presentation:** Paul Kurtz, CSICOP  
Chairman

**Entertainment:** "Skeptical Magicians from  
Around the World"

Master of Ceremonies: "The Amazing" Randi  
(Canada)  
B. Premanand (India)

**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6**  
The Forum Room

9:00-12 NOON: **Enhancing the Skeptics Message**  
Ray Hyman, Professor of Psychology, University  
of Oregon  
Jeff Mayhew, computer consultant, Aloha,  
Oregon  
Paul MacCready, President, AeroVironment,  
Inc., Los Angeles, Calif.  
Jerry Andrus, magician, Oregon

2:00-4:00 P.M.: **Groups meeting**

**REGISTRATION:** Please use the registration form below. Pre-registration is advised. The fee is \$85.00 (meals and accommodations not included). Student fee is \$45.00. The Keynote address is \$7.00 for nonregistrants.

## 1988 CSICOP CONFERENCE, P.O. BOX 229, BUFFALO, N.Y.

☐ **YES. I (we) plan to attend the CSICOP Conference on the New Age.**

☐ \$85.00 registration for \_\_\_\_\_ persons, includes Keynote Address \$ \_\_\_\_\_

☐ \$29.50 Awards Banquet for \_\_\_\_\_ person(s) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

☐ \$17.50 Friday Luncheon for \_\_\_\_\_ person(s) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

☐ \$7.00 Keynote Address for \_\_\_\_\_ (This fee is for nonregistrants only.) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Check enclosed ☐ **Total \$** \_\_\_\_\_

Charge my MasterCard ☐ or Visa ☐

Acct. # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

☐ **NO. I will not be able to attend the conference, but please accept my contribution (tax-deductible) of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to help cover the costs of this and future special events.**

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** Hyatt Regency O'Hare International Airport. Telephone 312-696-9000 or 800-228-9000. Single room: \$69.00. Double room: \$69.00 per person (Triples and quads are available.). Please mention CSICOP conference for special rates. This rate will be extended only for accommodations for November 2 to November 6, 1988. The cut-off date for reservations at this rate is October 19th. Complimentary transportation between the Hyatt Regency O'Hare and O'Hare International airport every 15 to 20 minutes. Complimentary parking.

For further information contact Mary Rose Hays (716-834-3222), CSICOP, Box 229, Buffalo, N.Y. 14215. Media representatives should contact Barry Karr (716-834-3222).

## News from Other Skeptics Groups

By Julie D. Stern

The March/April issue of *The Skeptic*, the North Texas Skeptics (NTS) newsletter, included a description of the group's response to a local psychic fair and an article that raised—and attempted to answer—some questions about the situation. On January 30, NTS members attended a psychic fair presented by an unlikely sponsor—a local chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. After NTS questioned the propriety of a scientific research organization holding such an event, the chapter's executive director announced that a second planned psychic fair had been cancelled and that the foundation will no longer present such fairs.

NTS followed up by contacting a medical consultant to the foundation and the group's national office, and discovered a lack of communication between the foundation's fund-raising and research activities on both the local and national levels. NTS responded by sending a letter to the foundation's national headquarters, stating that the group's "sponsorship of psychic fairs gives pseudoscience claims credibility with an unwary public and discounts the rational, scientific approach to the study of our world by implying that science and pseudoscience are equally valid."

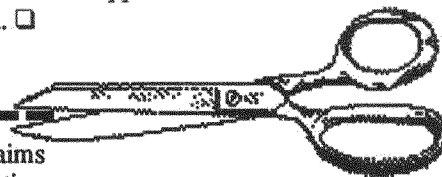
The January/February issue of the *Phoenix Skeptics News* reported on the Arizona group's response to faith healer Peter Popoff's three-day visit to Phoenix in February. The day after a Popoff ad appeared in the religion section of the *Arizona Republic*, local skeptics put together a press release and information packet and sent them to local media the following day. They also attended several of Popoff's sessions (at which one of the skeptics, wearing an unneeded back brace, was "healed" of a malady unnamed by Popoff), distributed flyers outside the hotel where Popoff was appearing, and spoke with reporters covering the appearance for local newspapers. Their efforts appear to have paid off: Attendance and proceeds were much smaller than anticipated and Popoff's appearance received a humorous paragraph in one paper and a scathing column by the religion editor of another.

The Midwest Committee for Rational Inquiry has also been dealing with a faith healer, making repeated attempts to get W.V. Grant's television program taken off the air in Chicago. As reported in the January issue of the *Pseudo-Science Monitor*, the group has sent a videotape of an investigative report on Grant and a copy of James Randi's *The Faith Healers* to WCIU, which has carried Grant's show for 10 years. The station responded that it was "holding off doing anything about Grant," but had decided not to sell him time to publicize his upcoming visit to Chicago.

The Rocky Mountain Skeptics is running a "Library Project," through which it contacts public schools throughout Colorado and offers them free subscriptions to *The Skeptical Inquirer*. The only stipulation is that the schools must agree to put the publication on display in their libraries with other popular magazines. Members of the group were asked in the January/February issue of the *Rocky Mountain Skeptic* to donate \$10 to cover half of one subscription.

The *Minnesota Skeptics Newsletter's* April edition announced that group's audience participation presentation, "My Favorite Fraud." Individuals were invited to "present, discuss, perpetrate, explain, or demonstrate a favorite claim of an anomaly, a pseudoscience example, a supposed paranormal event, a con game, a trick, a scam, etc." Participants were allotted five minutes for each presentation. Already on the schedule were presentations on creationism, dog psychology, telekinesis, computer fraud, "cures of the evil eye," and "religious bunk over the radio."

Finally, NCAS Interim Board member Philip Klass's activities were reported on in several other groups' newsletters. The Winter 1988 issue of the *ISRAP Newsletter* (published by the Iowa Society for a Rational Approach to the Paranormal) reported on Klass's UFO presentation at Iowa State University last December, and the *Phoenix Skeptics News* announced Klass's appearance at Arizona State University in March. □



Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring 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. I understand that my membership will be good for one year and will include a subscription to the *NCAS Skeptical Eye*.

Check particular areas of interest: ☐ Astrology ☐ Creationism  
☐ Education, ☐ Fringe Medicine ☐ UFOs ☐ Other (list below)

Single: \_\_\_\_ @ \$20.00

Double: \_\_\_\_ @ \$30.00

Make checks payable to  
Nat. Cap. Area Skeptics  
and mail to:  
Grace Denman  
8006 Valley St.  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

NAME			
STREET		APT #	
CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	

## NAPTHA SPEAKS

"Naptha," as readers of the last issue of this publication know, is the spiritual channel guide to the cosmic unconscious of NCAS member Jamy Ian Swiss. "Before Naptha first spoke through me," Swiss explains, "I thought channelers were just bad ventriloquists: they talk funny, but their lips move."

The 39,000-year-old Naptha, who attributes his longevity to having taken a long rest in a box of mothballs found in Swiss's closet, has deigned to provide us with his words of wisdom on a regular basis. Accordingly, Swiss has permanently enshrined his spirit guide by casting two of the mothballs in brass, which he now carries with him at all times. This way, at any moment Naptha can "bang me on the head with his wisdom stick," as Swiss so eloquently puts it.

Readers are encouraged to submit questions for Naptha on any issues of concern to them, whether they seek commentary on current news affairs, scientific and skeptical issues, or personal advice. Swiss's sessions with Naptha usually begin with the following incantation:

SWISS: Eenie Meenie, Chili Beenie, the spirits are about to speak.

NAPTHA: Keep it down, you could wake the dead!

SWISS: Are they friendly spirits?

NAPTHA: Friendly? Just listen!

S: Do you have any news for us this month?

N: Paul McCartney is dead.

S: Not that again!

N: You mean you heard?

S: What can you tell us about psychokinesis? Is Uri Geller proof of mind over matter?

N: His mind don't matter.

S: A lot has been written about so-called "near-death" experiences. Could you describe your experience for us? What was the first thing you saw?

N: It was if I was in a tunnel, a tunnel of glowing light. And as I reached the end, I entered a portal, and I remember

looking for a sign. And then I saw the sign—and it said, "Today is the first day of the rest of your afterlife."

S: What can you tell us about "possession?"

N: Possession is 9/10ths of the law...next question.

S: Could you define the term "clairvoyant" for us?

N: In the words of Ambrose Bierce, a clairvoyant is a person, commonly a woman, who has the power of seeing that which is invisible to her patron: namely that he is a blockhead.

S: Could you contact any other spirit guides for us?

N: You mean, you want to change channels?

S: In a manner of speaking.

N: Sure, I got cable. Ask a question.

S: Is this the spirit to whom I am speaking?

?: This is Marshall McLuhan.

S: Have you a message for us?

M: The medium is the message.

S: Could we speak to someone else? How about Alexander Graham Bell?

?: This is Alexander Graham Bell. I'm not in right now, but if you leave message at the tone...□

### NAPTHA'S BIRTHDAY HOROSCOPE

(For all persons born June 21 through July 22, under the sign of Cancer):

A SURPRISE IS IN STORE FOR YOU!

ALSO, BEWARE UNSIGHTLY CELLULITE.□

### MOVING?

Don't leave NCAS behind! Send the mailing label from this issue of the *NCAS Skeptical Eye*, plus your new address, to: Grace Denman, 8006 Valley Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

Please allow four to six weeks for delivery.

Bulk Rate  
U.S. Postage  
Paid  
Permit No. 895  
Merrifield, VA

National Capital Area Skeptics  
c/o D. W. Denman  
8006 Valley Street  
Silver Spring, MD 20916