

WOULD YOU BELIEVE...

...exploding grandmothers, fearless firewalkers and psychic crimebusters? The Phoenix Skeptics don't.

BY DEWEY WEBB

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VENTURING WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE

...and where this man wishes he never had: a department-store cosmetics section.

BY FRED MOODY

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New Times

The Valley's News and Arts Journal

WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

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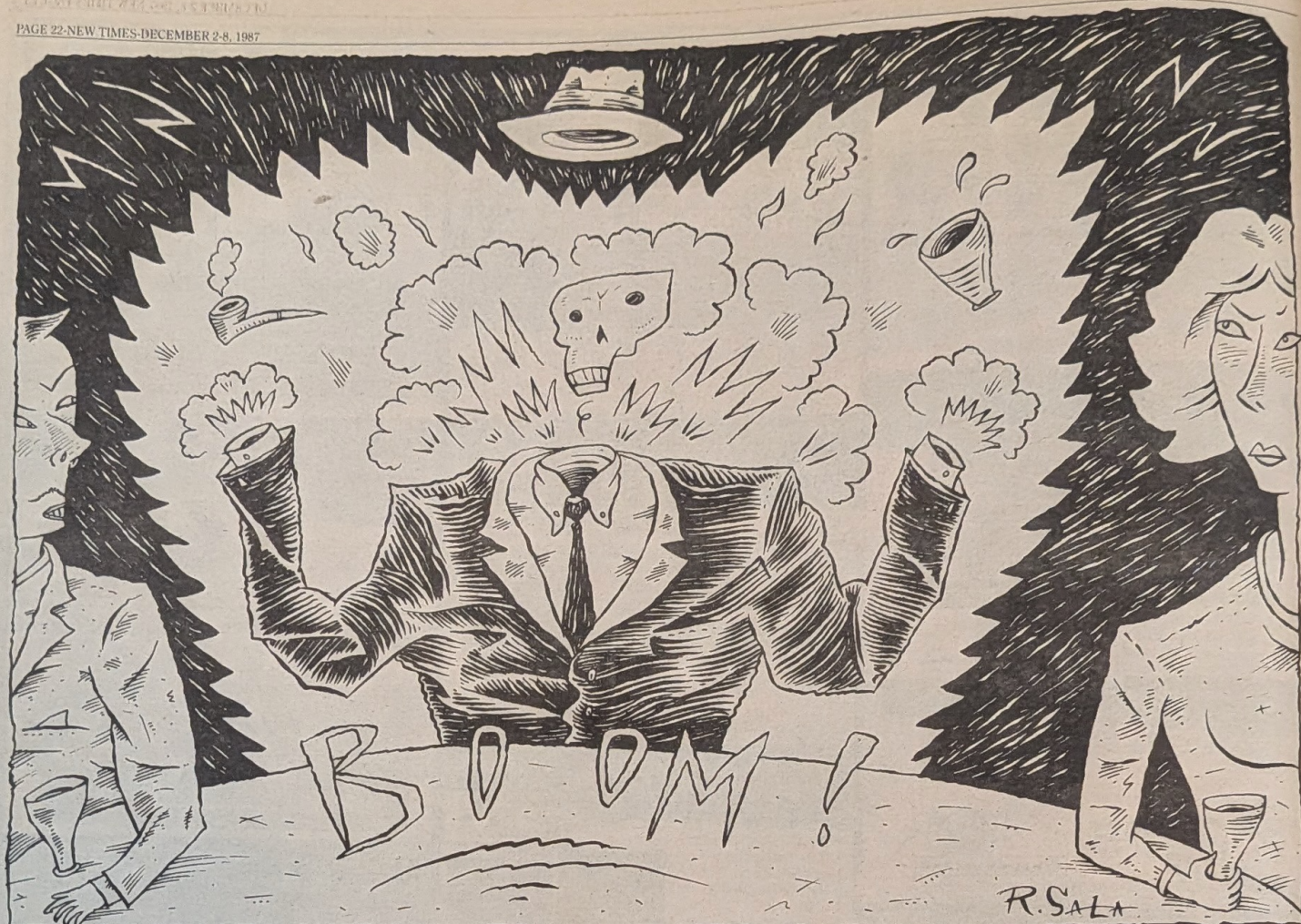
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GIFTS FOR PEOPLE WHO EAT

Surely you have one on your Christmas list. Some outstanding ideas; this week in CHOW!

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When Mary Reeser settled into her favorite easy chair one evening in 1951, it's a cinch she never dreamed she would go out in a blaze of glory, firing imaginations around the globe.

Unfortunately, the 67-year-old Florida widow never lived to see the next morning. That's when neighbors, fearing a possible fire, broke into the elderly woman's apartment after someone reported the doorknob was too hot to touch. The stunned neighbors discovered what was to be the world's most celebrated case of a phenomenon dubbed "spontaneous human combustion." Mary Reeser's charred remains still smoldered on the seat of the easy chair, which, like everything else in the room, had survived the conflagration untouched by fire! Clearly, here was one for the books.

Jim Lippard, an Arizona State University philosophy major, laughingly recalls that as a kid he often pored over those books, paperback compilations of uncanny occurrences with titles like *Stranger Than Weird*. Which is not to say that the self-avowed doubting Thomas has lost his taste for incendiary oldsters over the years. Far from it—he's still totally stoked.

Today, however, the 22-year-old Lippard is more interested in the smoke screen than the fire. As both the founder and chairman of the Phoenix Skeptics—an

DEBUNK STOPS HERE The Phoenix Skeptics declare open season on the paranormal BY DEWEY WEBB

organization he characterizes as "a consumer protection agency for the paranormal field"—Lippard attempts to put the lid on the uncanny by scientifically proving that there's less to paranormal phenomena than meets the eye.

The Phoenix group, one of nearly sixty similar clubs scattered around the world, is an unauthorized offshoot of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation

"It was amazing how many people were convinced this bear was a human figure of some kind."

of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), a nonprofit scientific and educational organization based in Buffalo, New York. Although there is no official affiliation between the eleven-year-old CSICOP and smaller organizations like the Phoenix Skeptics, members of the satellite groups often assist CSICOP in regional investigations and contribute articles to the *Skeptical Inquirer*, the CSICOP journal. In addition, they also swap information with other skeptic groups

regarding pseudoscientific scams currently making their way around the country.

Lippard contends that there's really nothing new under the sun—the now popular concept of channelling, for instance, is just a new-age take on nineteenth-century spiritualism. Nevertheless, he insists that from a scientific standpoint, every paranormal claim should be judged on its merits. That's why, whenever possible, paranormal investigators try to sit down with their subjects prior to testing and hash out a written statement that outlines the parameters of an experiment, as well as exactly what will and won't constitute a successful demonstration of the subject's claim.

At least that's what's supposed to happen. In truth, Lippard says, relatively few people who profess supernatural abilities are willing to put their mantra where their mouth is. And of those who are, most wind up crying "Foul!" when presented with their inevitable failing grade. "It's very difficult to pin some of these people down," he says. "These people tend to rationalize away failure"—

even though the rationalizations often seem irrational. One popular dodge is "negative vibes," a mysterious phenomenon that rears its ugly head whenever a skeptic is around.

According to ASU student Mike Norton, another skeptic, that excuse recently got a real workout when the producers of a network TV news program invited four self-proclaimed dowisers to use their divining rods to determine which of five barrels—all buried, four of them empty—contained water. Even though the experiment gave the dowisers a built-in 20 percent chance of success, all four came up dry. Chuckling, Norton parrots the dowisers' disclaimer: "Obviously, there is a negative energy force around that hole... otherwise, one of us would surely have found it."

Another phenomenon that didn't hold water was firewalking, the focus of a self-help seminar that the Phoenix Skeptics investigated several months ago. Local advertisements promised the class would help attendees conquer fear so thoroughly that they'd be able to do practically anything—like take a barefoot stroll down a ten-foot bed of red-hot coals without burning their feet. Norton points out, however, that those who shelled out the \$125 tuition fee in hopes of picking up firewalking finesse got a very pricey lesson in elementary thermodynamics.

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The thing to remember, he explains, is that wood coals are notoriously poor conductors of heat. "The coals are hot—but if you keep moving, the heat isn't transferred to your foot and you won't get burned. Imagine that you're baking a cake at 400 degrees. You can open the oven and touch the cake—it'll be warm, but you're not going to get burned because the cake doesn't conduct heat well. But if you touch the metal pan, which is also at 400 degrees, you're going to burn yourself. In this case, the coals are like the cake—but, of course, very few people realize that. They hear 'walking on fire' and immediately think something magical is going on."

Extinguishing the mystery of firewalking once and for all, Norton tells of the member of California's Bay Area Skeptics, who, prior to attending a similar

The psychic charlatans "always slide out somehow. It's like trying to nail grape jelly to the wall."

seminar, secretly taped a Band-Aid to the bottom of his foot. "When he got done [firewalking], the Band-Aid was unscathed," he explains. "Obviously the Band-Aid wasn't exercising any mind over matter."

The firewalking fallacy—in which a supernatural cause is attributed to a scientific effect—is typical of the faulty reasoning that skeptics often encounter while challenging fantastic claims.

Unfortunately, says Phoenix member Charles Cazeau, few of those who revel in the realm of the paranormal seem to want to be bothered with facts.

"Our major goal is to convince people that they don't have to believe what we believe," he explains, "but that they should look at anything anybody tells them in a critical manner."

In that regard, the skeptics of the world have their work cut out for them. Cazeau, a retired State University of New York geology professor who recently moved to Apache Junction, had ample opportunity to ogle the public's gullibility while assisting on several CSICOP investigations in Buffalo. Some years ago, he was called in to help CSICOP founder Paul Kurtz check out a biggie—someone in Lewiston, New York, had bagged Bigfoot. But after examining the corpse of the decapitated beast, CSICOP begged to differ. "It was a bear," says Cazeau. "Anybody could see that. But it was amazing how many people were convinced this bear was a human figure of some kind."

Another time, he joined the CSICOP bunco squad to investigate a psychic lecturer who claimed he was able to pick up the sound of whispering ghosts on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. "When he played the tape back, you were able to hear noises that might be construed as some little phrase," he explains. "But if you played the same tape back before a

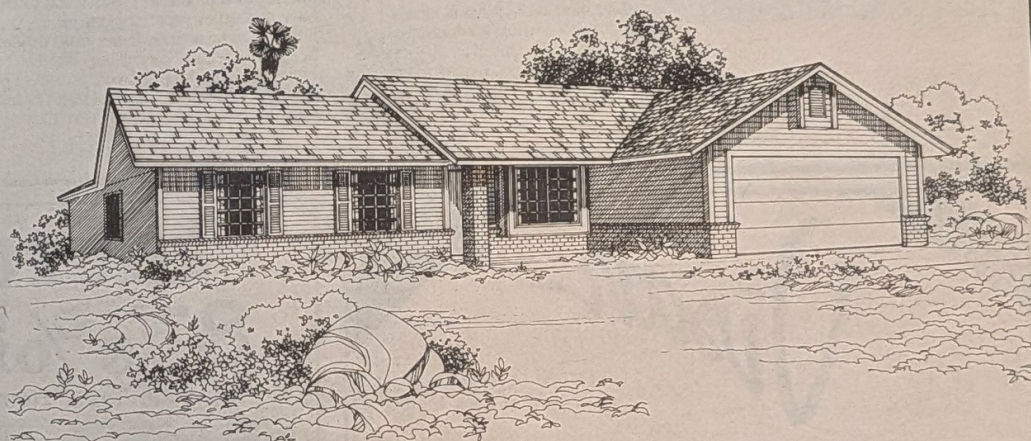
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German audience, they'd probably have been able to pick out little phrases that sounded like German." After taking a closer look at the setup, the CSICOP team determined that the "whisperings" were really nothing but the tape recorder picking up the sound of its own motor.

Clazeau gleefully recalls, although he didn't personally take part in, a particular project masterminded by magician James Randi, whose work in exposing paranormal fraud has earned him the sobriquet, "the CSICOP hit man." Randi arranged for two psychics to be tested by the parapsychology lab at St. Louis University. Only after both subjects passed the tests did Randi reveal that the "psychics" were actually magicians who had conned the panel into believing they had superhuman powers simply by performing ordinary parlor tricks.

WHY ARE SO MANY PEOPLE eager to believe a headless bruin is Sasquatch or that simple tape hiss is a communiqué from beyond the grave?

Cazeau chalks that puzzler up to a combination of ignorance, gullibility and, to some degree, a breakdown of traditional organized religion. "There seems to be a need within each of us to have an allegiance with someone higher than us," he theorizes. "In the disillusionment with organized bodies of

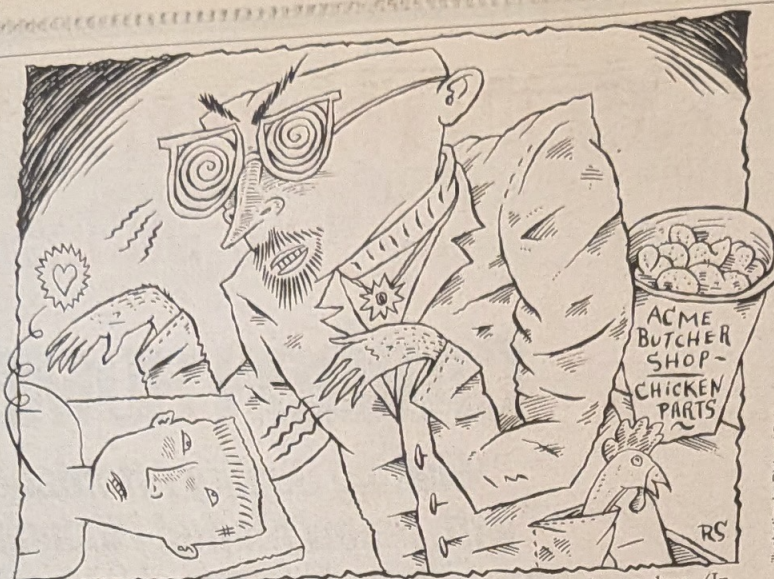


Illustration by Richard Sala

religion, people turn to cults. There is very little participation in cults like the Moonies in the American Midwest, where church attendance is very high. But in places like San Francisco, where there's relatively low participation in organized religion, there's a much higher participation in cults and other demi-groups. A need is not being filled, so people turn to a guy like Jim Jones [founder of the People's Temple] who they think has all the answers."

Were he alive today, that ill-fated Kool-Aid guzzler would no doubt find himself being investigated by skeptics (as well as by law officers), thanks to his penchant for performing "psychic surgery"—a procedure whose practitioners remove "tumors" from patients without benefit of incisions or any

other medically sound procedure. (In reality, what the "surgeons" have up their sleeves are butcher shop entrails.)

"It would be nice to think certain quack theories of medicine were real and didn't require huge operations or vast outlays of money," says Norton. "But people fail to distinguish between what's imagination and what's reality."

In the case of psychic surgery and other spurious forms of faith healing, this inability to separate fact from fantasy can have disastrous repercussions for believers who actually suffer from serious health problems. "We call this 'harm by omission,'" says Jim Lowell, president of the Arizona Council Against Health Fraud. "These people don't get the care they

should have. If there's really something wrong. If they've got it going in, they've got it coming out."

Last year Lowell was indirectly involved in exposing a psychic-surgery clinic in Phoenix where for a brief time as many as fifty patients a day had paid \$75 for bogus "tumor" operations. After viewing a videotape on the clinic's procedure prepared by the Tucson Skeptical Society, a group with which Lowell is involved, police determined that the medical miracles were simply sleight-of-hand maneuvers and arrested the "surgeon."

"[They're] really not very sleight," says Lowell, explaining that it doesn't take much talent to pull off the illusions, "especially if you have believers." And even though skeptics around the country have repeatedly exposed this particular brand of fraud, believers still keep the faith in psychic charlatans. And the charlatans persist. "They always slide out somehow," sighs Lowell. "It's like trying to nail grape jelly to the wall."

But psychic surgeons have no patent on the slippery dodge. Tucson skeptic Ted Bluestein, a senior engineer at Hughes Aircraft, laughs dryly as he recalls how one self-proclaimed psychic of some renown attempted to salvage victory from the jaws of defeat with a particularly mind-boggling piece of logic. Called into a missing-person case after the son of a prominent Eastern family disappeared, the soothsayer predicted that the young man would be found dead somewhere near an airport. When the son later turned

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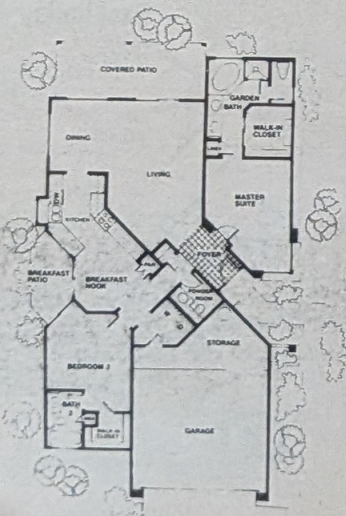
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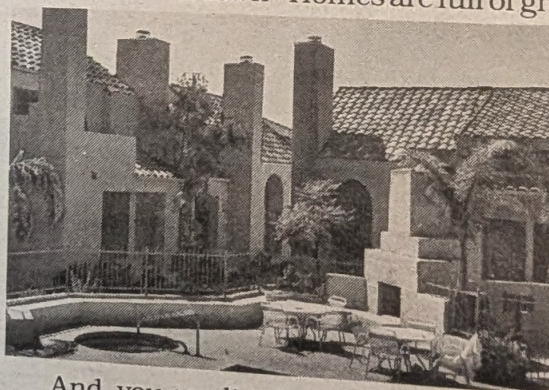
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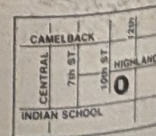
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up very much alive at a Moonie meeting in Manhattan, the woman was undaunted and termed the prediction a success.

"[She] claimed that he was 'spiritually dead' because he was at a Moonie meeting—so she was right about him being dead," Bluestein explains. "And he was 'near an airport' because several blocks away from [where he was found], the PanAm building had an unused heliport on the roof." This, he notes, is the same publicity-minded psychic who provided police with fifty names of probable suspects in the Atlanta child murders. And even though the name of Wayne Williams (who was eventually convicted of those crimes) did not appear on that list, the woman continues to promote herself as having "worked" on the case.

Several years ago, the Tucson Skeptics found psychic folderol in their own back yard when the Pima County Sheriff's Department utilized the services of a Texas soothsayer to help determine the whereabouts of Vicki Lynne Hoskinson, a missing Tucson child. According to Bluestein, the Tucson Skeptics immediately "climbed all over" Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik, demanding to know why the psychic had been called in on the case.

Dupnik had his reasons—although those reasons in no way represent an endorsement of psychic crimebusters, he recently told *New Times*. "It was the humanitarian thing to do," he says,

explaining that the sheriff's department was "forced" into working with the psychic at the request of Hoskinson's family. Even so, Dupnik says that to the best of his knowledge, no psychic has ever provided information that cracked a case. And certainly not this particular psychic, who reportedly did nothing more than tour several tracts of desert land—tracts that law officials had already determined were the places where Hoskinson's body was most likely to be hidden—and give police his impressions.

Why then, after Hoskinson's remains were indeed found on one of those predetermined sites, did local newspapers proclaim that the Texas seer had actually "pinpointed" the location of the body?

Kendrick Frazier, editor of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, CSICOP's quarterly journal, suggests that, as a rule, the media isn't quite sure how to handle stories involving alleged paranormal phenomena. "The media are torn between treating these stories as entertainment on the one side and treating them seriously on the other side," he says. "In general, the media often panders to the entertainment value of these things without doing a thorough job of investigating or seeking out the proper expertise to provide proper balance."

As editor of a publication that might be seen as the thinking man's *National Enquirer*, Kendrick himself has been striving for that balance for the past ten years.

He's quick to confess, however, that one man's hot copy is another man's wet blanket. "We are the main central source for publication for articles and reports investigating the paranormal. We're not writing for the hard-core believer."

It's a safe bet that virtually none of the journal's 28,000 subscribers fall into that



category. But if perchance, some hard-core believers did stumble upon a copy of the *Skeptical Inquirer* during the past year, they'd be in for a rude awakening as they leafed through exposés of everything from haunted houses and UFO crashes to subliminal advertising and spontaneous human combustion.

And for the record, no, Mary Reeser did not explode. Following a two-year investigation into the phenomenon, recently published by the journal, researchers determined that Reeser, like several others of her ilk, had simply fallen asleep while smoking. □

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