

# The Phoenix Skeptics News

A Bimonthly Publication of the Phoenix Skeptics

Volume 1, Issue 2

September/October 1987

## August Meeting

The August meeting was well attended. Our guest speaker was our very own Hans Sebald. He gave an entertaining and informative talk on the history of witchcraft.

## September Meeting

Charles Cazeau gave an informal talk on prophecy, specifically the works and interpreters of Nostradamus. Mr. Cazeau is widely read in areas of interest to skeptics and he used to teach a class that examined many such topics.

## Surveyor Needed

We are planning to do an experiment on dowsing and need the services of a surveyor (and equipment). If you know of anyone willing to volunteer to help us, please let Michael Norton know. Mr. Norton may be reached at 437-3778 or through the mail c/o Phoenix Skeptics. He is also interested in hearing from people interesting in helping with other areas of the project.

## Committee Formed

The Phoenix Skeptics now have an official organizing committee. Members are Jim Lippard (chairman), Michael Norton, Charles Cazeau, Ted Karren, Ron Harvey, Hans Sebald, and Keith Hemstreet. Michael Norton is chairman of the Investigations subcommittee. Ron Harvey is chairman of the Publications subcommittee, and Ted Karren is chairman of the Media Relations subcommittee.

## Halloween Party

Our October meeting will be held on the evening of Halloween. Hans Sebald has graciously offered the use of his home. The starting time is 7:30pm. The address is 6380 E. Forest St, Apache Junction and a map to help you find it is later in the newsletter.

## Randi on Faith Healers

Jim Lippard and Michael Norton of the Phoenix Skeptics interviewed James Randi on September 16, 1987, while he was in town for the Arizona Public

Health Association's conference on health fraud. Mr. Randi (The Amazing Randi) is a magician, a member of the Executive Council of CSICOP, and the author of a new book on faith healers.

**Jim Lippard:** I had some questions about some of your faith healing investigations. I was wondering if you'd ever done any investigating of R.W. Shambach. A person told me they saw R.W. Shambach cause someone's missing arm to grow back. I couldn't get any documentation of who this person was.

**James Randi:** That's the problem. You can't get any documentation. You can't find out who it was, when it happened, or where it happened. They repeat the stories, and repeat them and repeat them. A simpler example is of the Happy Hunters, they're called. I think I've made them the Unhappy Hunters by publishing them in my book. They gave a very detailed description of a young boy who had lost his thumb in an accident. He challenged them at a meeting at a Methodist church, they said, in West Palm Beach, Florida. He walked up to them and said, "Make my thumb grow back". They commanded the thumb to grow back, and to their astonishment the thumb grew right back right there in front of their eyes.

Well, that seemed easy enough to follow. All you do is write to them and say, "What was the name of the church?" There ought to be one person alive in the vast audience there that remembers the event and can remember who the person was.

They wrote me back, eventually, after months and months of waiting, and they said they had no idea of the name of the church but they believed it was a Methodist church and probably was in West Palm Beach. But they weren't sure of the name of it and it was such a long time ago and these things happen all the time. So I subsequently wrote them and said, "Well, give me another example, one that you do remember and are able to give me the name of the person and/or the witnesses". They never responded.

Tracking down apocryphal stuff like this is useless. It's like trying to shovel water uphill—you never get any place. You do an

awful lot of shoveling, but there are no results. The ocean is still full. It's typical of the kind of thing they get away with. They just make these statements—grandly and very loudly and everything, and nothing happens. They aren't required to answer. At least they [the Happy Hunters] did answer me. People like Pat Robertson and Oral Roberts refuse to answer altogether.

Father Ralph de Orio, Vatican-approved faith healer, advertises widely that he has a medical team that documents the fact that he cures Down's syndrome, and diabetes, multiple sclerosis—all incurable ailments. I asked him for the name of one person on his medical team that I could consult with. He never responded.

The reason is—no one ever puts their nose to the grindstone and says, "Now answer. Do something. Actually answer, do something that you said you will do in your publicity and in your printed matter and in your public statements. Do it. I'm calling you on your bet. You say you've got a pair of Jacks in your hand, I want to see the pair of Jacks." And they won't show you any of their cards. They won't even show you if they've got cards in their hands or even in the room holding a hand. But they should be required, by good common sense, by somebody, to actually do that. But they don't do it.

And, as for Shambach, I mention some of his affiliations with some other much more famous faith healers, but I don't handle him as a faith healer. He is a very very very small item in this whole thing. He's probably a multi-millionaire, but they're all multi-millionaires, so that doesn't make him distinctive at all.

JL: I just read in the paper recently about Florida evangelist Benny Hinn being sued by the family of a woman. They claim he's responsible for her death—he pushed someone else against her. I was wondering if you had come across any other cases similar to that—where there were deaths.

JR: Yeah, there are a lot of deaths. Oral Roberts has had a great number of deaths reported. His argument: "Isn't it marvelous that there weren't more deaths?"

It's just exactly like the man who appears in front of the judge accused of murdering a man, there are 18 witnesses. He says, "Yes,

your honor, I've got 18 witnesses here, I admit, that say they saw me commit the murder, but I can produce 5000 people who didn't." And it's exactly the same kind of reasoning. Nobody ever wins with these people. If they do take it to court (and it's very seldom that happens) the decision handed down usually is a rap on the knuckles or a tongue-lashing of some kind: "You really shouldn't do this sort of thing." They [the faith healers] say "I agree" and they go right back and they continue to do it. Because they've got "Reverend" in front of their name.

Michael Norton: You think, then, that the state is afraid to interfere?

JR: Oh, absolutely. Yes. We found that all across the U.S.A. and Canada. We went to attorneys general, we went to state attorneys, and we went to federal attorneys and we gave them the evidence we have—and we have damning evidence against these people: not only the fact that they don't heal, but that they use blatantly fraudulent methods to raise money and to fool people into believing that they are healing others and themselves—and yet they ignore it. Because they say, "well, he's got 'Reverend' in front of his name." When we point out that they do not have any accreditation of any kind—that they weren't ordained as ministers in most cases—they still say, "but he puts 'Reverend' in front of his name and I'm not going to touch him". Because these people have got to be reelected and they don't want to come up against anybody with "Reverend" in front of his name. Whether he's killing people or not, it makes no difference to them. They're in the business of being reelected, they're not in the business of doing what they're called upon to do.

JL: About Peter Popoff—what's he doing now? Last I heard he was "on vacation" or something.

JR: Well, he walked away his million-dollar home in Upland, California—that's commonly done in California, where you just walk away from it and the bank eventually takes it over. He is \$2.2 million in debt to over 800 creditors. He just declared bankruptcy in a court in California a matter of a few days ago, though I don't understand as a church how he can do that. I believe he cannot do that and yet I just got a report that

he did do that in court. I've got to find out more details on it.

He's now living in a rented home in Anaheim, California. His income dropped from \$1.25 million dollars a month in one bank account that we know of (that's tax-free money) to \$20,000 a month within about six months of my exposé of him on the Carson show. He still has his mailing list of 100,000 people, and he's still sending out mailings. He has not paid for the last couple of mailings.

In fact he owes Synanon a very large sum of money for handkerchiefs which they sold to him which he then ripped into three pieces and mailed out. He mailed out a few tens of thousands of these handkerchiefs, but they're all supposed to have been original handkerchiefs that he used during sermons to wipe his brow. So he must sweat a great deal during each and every ceremony and he must have a whole truckload full of handkerchiefs following him around up and down the aisles with which he wipes his brow and then tears them up and puts them into envelopes.

But it just shows you the sad state of affairs with the man. However, his wife has claimed to personal friends that they have \$9 million in cash put away.

He used to be on 61 TV stations, he's essentially out of business and I couldn't be happier. But he is going to come up for very serious investigation by the IRS and other people because we have got him on several blatant frauds that I've not even mentioned yet—they're coming out in my book. One fraud raised \$1.2 million according to this controller, and it was a very simple thing which they did all in one afternoon on videotape. They faked a situation where it appeared that vandals had broken in on them. We even have Popoff's voice on tape saying, "I'll help you break the window." That's pretty good evidence.

**MN:** Yeah, you had mentioned something at the [CSICOP] conference in Los Angeles about "damning evidence".

**JR:** Yeah. The details of that thing are just so horrendous that I really honestly can't picture how law enforcement people are not going to have to respond to this. I mean, they're going to have to literally say, "The

faith healers and the evangelists can get away with anything they want and we don't care."

## Health fraud isn't 'snake oil' anymore

By PHILLIS GILLESPIE  
The Arizona Republic

Medical charlatans and faith healers are conning more and more unsuspecting people into believing that bee pollen, ointments, chest thumping and prayers can cure everything — even AIDS.

"Quackery is massively on the increase," said James Lowell, a speaker at the annual meeting of the Arizona Public Health Association, held last week in Ahwatukee.

The meeting's theme was, "The Great Pretenders: Health Fraud in the Marketplace."

Lowell, a professor of life sciences at Pima Community College in Tucson, member of the National Council Against Health Fraud and president of the Arizona chapter of the council, said, "There is a pseudoscientific sentiment all over the country.

Out there, there exists an entire community, a whole underground, of health-care providers who operate primarily by casting doubt on public-health people, conventional, orthodox medicine and the products of the food industry."

Lowell then went through a litany of quacks with phony credentials and cures he has come across:

- Forty vitamins a day will keep most people healthy, says a doctor who graduated from the University of Beverly Hills.
- Cod-liver oil will cure arthritis and cancer, says a doctor who graduated from the Stanley College of the Spoken Word, but don't drink water, because oil and water don't mix.
- The leader of the Church of Humanity sells "concentrated water." Just add a gallon of distilled water to dilute.
- A man who alleges to have spent years in the Himalayas sells Amazing Nuclear Receptors for \$110 each. Depending upon the stone set in these medallions, a person can be cured of diseases, improve his or her sex drive or lose weight.
- And then there's the therapist who claims people are deaf, blind, lame, mentally

retarded or dwarfs because their brains are crooked. His cure is to stick a balloon up their noses and inflate it.

But quacks are nothing new.

The country's first food and drug law was passed in 1906, and one of the first convictions, involving brain food, came the next year. A judge barred the product because the seller could not prove that it fed the brain, Lowell said.

Holding up half a dozen bottles of brain-enhancer pills he recently purchased at Arizona health-food stores, Lowell said, "It looks like we're back in 1906."

He then held up a bottle of blue-green algae tablets he bought recently. These pills are supposed to cure 100 different ailments, especially Alzheimer's disease, leprosy and acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

The Food and Drug Administration spent hundreds of thousands of dollars getting the product off the market in the past decade after tests showed that besides algae, the tablets contained such things as dead flies and water lice.

Dr. John Renner, another speaker at the meeting, commented, "I'm astounded at how fast the quacks in other fields are transferring (their attention) to AIDS."

Renner is director of medical development for St. Mary's Hospital in Kansas City, Mo., and a member of the board of the National Council Against Health Fraud. He estimates health fraud is a \$25 billion-a-year business in the United States.

"It is not snake oil anymore," he said.

"It is way, way beyond that."

At a recent "quack convention" Renner attended in the Midwest, he said he noticed that every product and healing method was supposed to improve a person's immune system, cure yeast infections and prevent or cure AIDS.

The same products also are supposed to cure cancer, Alzheimer's disease, obesity, heart disease and most other ailments, he said.

Renner said that one of the more common and expensive cure-alls is chelation therapy, which involves intravenous injections of chemicals to supposedly "clean" the arteries and rejuvenate the cardiovascular system. A series of treatments can cost \$6,000 to \$10,000.

The treatments also can cause liver toxicity and, like other medical frauds, delay competent medical treatment, he said.

One chelation therapist that Renner checked on was charging the same high prices as other such therapists but was using only glucose water with vitamins to avoid trouble with the law.

One Kansas practitioner sold his patients pieces of crystals each month as part of his therapy, Renner said. If he found what he thought was a bad piece of crystal in a new shipment, he took it outside and shot it with a .38-caliber pistol, Renner said.

"If you hear anything, believe it about these guys," Renner said.

James Randi, a magician who bills himself as "The Amazing Randi" and has made an occupation out of exposing charlatans and faith healers, showed the Arizona health professionals a \$10,000 check he has been offering for 24 years.

To earn the check, a person must demonstrate a psychic, occult or supernatural occurrence that will stand up to scrutiny. So far, there have been no takers, he said.

Last year, Randi was a guest of Johnny Carson on the *Tonight Show* to demonstrate psychic surgery, a sleight-of-hand procedure common to the Philippines in which the "doctor" pulls bloody, diseased parts from the patient's abdomen without making an incision.

Also on the *Tonight Show*, he exposed faith healer Peter Popoff, Randi said Popoff was taking in more than \$1 million a month in donations until the magician showed how Popoff's wife was providing information about audience members via radio messages the faith healer intercepted with a hearing aid.

Randi, Lowell and Renner said real physicians are at a disadvantage because they generally tell patients the truth, that science has not developed cures for terrible illnesses such as AIDS, cancer and multiple sclerosis.

The previous and following articles are by Phyllis Gillispie and they first appeared in the Sept. 20 edition of The Arizona Republic. Reprinted with permission of The Arizona Republic. Permission does not imply endorsement by the newspaper.

## Charlatans can be spotted if you know common clues

Authorities on medical quackery say there are several signs to identify a fraudulent medical treatment or doctor. Some of the common clues are:

- The treatment is offered as a cure-all for several serious illnesses.
- The treatment is "natural," implying that traditional medicine is unnatural.
- the treatment has approval from the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA does not approve non-prescription remedies.
- The treatment claims to be a "miracle cure."
- The treatment claims to significantly increase the length of the user's life.
- The treatment or the doctor comes from some faraway place like Tibet or the mountains of Peru.
- The doctor claims persecution by the medical profession.
- The doctor lists impressive credentials or degrees from non-accredited or non-existent institutions.

People who have questions about possible charlatans, medical treatments or nutrition claims can call the Dietitian's Answering Service, 266-0587; the Maricopa County health department, 258-6381; the Maricopa County Extension Service, 628-5161; or the Arizona Department of Health Services, 255-1886.

## Proper Criticism

By Ray Hyman

Since the founding of CSICOP in 1976, and with the growing numbers of localized skeptical groups, the skeptic finds more ways to state his or her case. The broadcast and print media, along with other forums, provide more opportunities for us to be heard. For some of these occasions, we have the luxury of carefully planning and crafting our response. But most of the time we have to formulate our response on the spot. But, regardless of the circumstance, the critic's task, if it is to be carried out properly, is both challenging and loaded with unanticipated hazards.

Many well-intentioned critics have jumped into the fray without carefully

thinking through the implications of their statements. They have sometimes displayed more emotion than logic, made sweeping charges beyond what they reasonably support, failed to adequately document their assertions, and, in general, have failed to do the homework necessary to make their challenges credible.

Such ill-considered criticism can be counterproductive for the cause of serious skepticism. The author of such criticism may fail to achieve the desired effect, may lose credibility, and may even become vulnerable to lawsuits. But the unfavorable effects have consequences beyond the individual critic, and the entire cause of skepticism suffers as a result. Even when the individual critic takes great pains to assert that he or she is expressing his or her own personal opinion, the public associates the assertions with all critics.

During CSICOP's first decade of existence, members of the Executive Council often found themselves devoting most of their time to damage control—precipitated by the careless remarks of a fellow skeptic—instead of toward the common cause of explaining the skeptical agenda.

Unfortunately, at this time, there are no courses on the proper way to criticize paranormal claims. So far as I know, no manuals or books of rules are currently available to guide us. Until such courses and guide books come into being, what can we do to ensure that our criticisms are both effective and responsible?

I would be irresponsible if I told you I had an easy solution. The problem is complicated and there are no quick fixes. But I do believe we all could improve our contributions to responsible criticism by keeping a few principles always in mind.

We can make enormous improvements in our collective and individual efforts by simply trying to adhere to those standards that we profess to admire and that we believe that many peddlers of the paranormal violate. If we envision ourselves as the champions of rationality, science, and objectivity, then we ought to display these very same qualities in our criticism. Just by trying to speak and write in the spirit of precision, science, logic, and rationality—those attributes we supposedly admire—we would raise the

quality of our critiques by at least one order of magnitude.

The failure to consistently live up to these standards exposes us to a number of hazards. We can find ourselves going beyond the facts at hand. We may fail to communicate exactly what we intended. We can confuse the public as to what skeptics are trying to achieve. We can unwittingly put the paranormal proponents in the position of the underdogs and create sympathy for them. And, as I already mentioned, we can make the task much more difficult for the other skeptics.

What, then, can skeptics do to upgrade the quality of their criticism? What follows are just a few suggestions. Hopefully, they will stimulate further thought and discussion.

1. *Be prepared.* Good criticism is a skill that requires practice, work, and level-headedness. Your response to a sudden challenge is much more likely to be appropriate if you have already anticipated similar challenges. Try to prepare in advance effective and short answers to those questions you are most likely to be asked. Be ready to answer why skeptical activity is important, why people should listen to your views, why false beliefs can be harmful, and the many similar questions that invariably are raised. A useful project would be to compile a list of the most frequently occurring questions along with possible answers.

Whenever possible try your ideas out on friends and "enemies" before offering them in the public arena. An effective exercise is to rehearse your arguments with fellow skeptics. Some of you can take the role of the psychic claimants while others play the role of critics. And for more general preparation, read books on critical thinking, effective writing, and argumentation.

2. *Clarify your objectives.* Before you try to cope with a paranormal claim, ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish. Are you trying to release pent-up resentment? Are you trying to belittle your opponent? Are you trying to gain publicity for your viewpoint? Do you want to demonstrate that the claim lacks reasonable justification? Do you hope to educate the public about what constitutes adequate evidence? Often our objectives, upon examination, turn out to be mixed. And, especially when we act

impulsively, some of our objectives conflict with one another.

The difference between short-term and long-term objectives can be especially important. Most skeptics, I believe, would agree that our long-term goal is to educate the public so that it can more effectively cope with various claims. Sometimes this long-range goal is sacrificed because of the desire to expose or debunk a current claim.

Part of clarifying our objectives is to decide who our audience is. Hard-nosed, strident attacks on paranormal claims rarely change opinions, but they do stroke the egos of those who are already skeptics. Arguments that may persuade the readers of the *National Enquirer* may offend academics and important opinion-makers.

Try to make it clear that you are attacking the claim and not the claimant. Avoid, at all costs, creating the impression that you are trying to interfere with someone's civil liberties. Do not try to get someone fired from his or her job. Do not try to have courses dropped or otherwise be put in the position of advocating censorship. Being for rationality and reason should not force us into the position of seeming to be against academic freedom and civil liberties.

3. *Do your homework.* Again, this goes hand in hand with the advice about being prepared. Whenever possible, you should not try to counter a specific paranormal claim without getting as many of the relevant facts as possible. Along the way, you should carefully document your sources. Do not depend upon a report in the media either for what is being claimed or for facts relevant to that claim. Try to get the specifics of the claim directly from the claimant.

4. *Do not go beyond your level of competence.* No one, especially in our times, can credibly claim to be an expert on all subjects. Whenever possible, you should consult appropriate experts. We, understandably, are highly critical of paranormal claimants who make assertions that are obviously beyond their competence. We should be just as demanding on ourselves. A critic's worst sin is to go beyond the facts and the available evidence.

In this regard, always ask yourself if you really have something to say. Sometimes it is better to remain silent than to jump into an

argument that involves aspects that are beyond your present competence. When it is appropriate, do not be afraid to say, "I don't know."

5. *Let the facts speak for themselves.* If you have done your homework and have collected an adequate supply of facts, the audience rarely will need your help in reaching an appropriate conclusion. Indeed, your case is made much stronger if the audience is allowed to draw its own conclusions from the facts. Say that Madame X claims to have psychically located Mrs. A's missing daughter and you have obtained a statement from the police to the effect that her contributions did not help. Under these circumstances it can be counterproductive to assert that Madame X lied about her contribution or that her claim was "fraudulent." For one thing, Madame X may sincerely, if mistakenly, believe that her contributions did in fact help. In addition, some listeners may be offended by the tone of the criticism and become sympathetic to Madame X. However, if you simply report what Madame X claimed along with the response of the police, you not only are sticking to the facts, but your listeners will more likely come to the appropriate conclusion.

6. *Be precise.* Good criticism requires precision and care in the use of language. Because, in challenging psychic claims, we are appealing to objectivity and fairness, we have a special obligation to be as honest and accurate in our own statements as possible. We should take special pains to avoid making assertions about paranormal claims that cannot be backed up with hard evidence. We should be especially careful, in this regard, when being interviewed by the media. Every effort should be made to ensure that the media understand precisely what we are and are not saying.

7. *Use the principle of charity.* I know that many of my fellow critics will find this principle to be unpalatable. To some, the paranormalists are the "enemy," and it seems inconsistent to lean over backward to give them the benefit of the doubt. But being charitable to paranormal claims is simply the other side of being honest and fair. The principle of charity implies that, whenever there is doubt or ambiguity about a

paranormal claim, we should try to resolve the ambiguity in favor of the claimant until we acquire strong reasons for not doing so. In this respect, we should carefully distinguish between being wrong and being dishonest. We often can challenge the accuracy or the validity of a given paranormal claim. But rarely are we in a position to know if the claimant is deliberately lying or is self-deceived. Furthermore, we often have a choice in how to interpret or represent an opponent's arguments. The principle tells us to convey the opponent's position in a fair, objective, and non-emotional manner.

8. *Avoid loaded words and sensationalism.* All these principles are interrelated. The ones previously stated imply that we should avoid using loaded and prejudicial words in our criticisms. We should also try to avoid sensationalism. If the proponents happen to resort to emotionally laden terms and sensationalism, we should avoid stooping to their level. We should not respond in kind.

This is not a matter of simply turning the other cheek. We want to gain credibility for our cause. In the short run, emotional charges and sensationalistic challenges might garner quick publicity. But, most of us see our mission as a long-run effort. We would like to persuade the media and the public that we have a serious and important message to get across. And we would like to earn their trust as a credible and reliable resource. Such a task requires always keeping in mind the scientific principles and standards of rationality and integrity that we would like to make universal.

Ray Hyman is a Fellow and member of the Executive Council with CSICOP, and professor of psychology at the University of Oregon.

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## Upcoming Meetings

Our meetings are normally held on a Saturday near the end of the month. Meetings start at 12:30pm and are held at the Jerry's at 1750 N. Scottsdale Rd in Tempe.

**October 31.** Special Halloween Party meeting. Featured will be the James Randi TV special on Houdini — if any station actually carries it! The meeting/party starts at 7:30 pm and will be held at Hans Sebald's

house in Apache Junction. See map. This is a BYOB party. Costumes encouraged — "Come as you were."

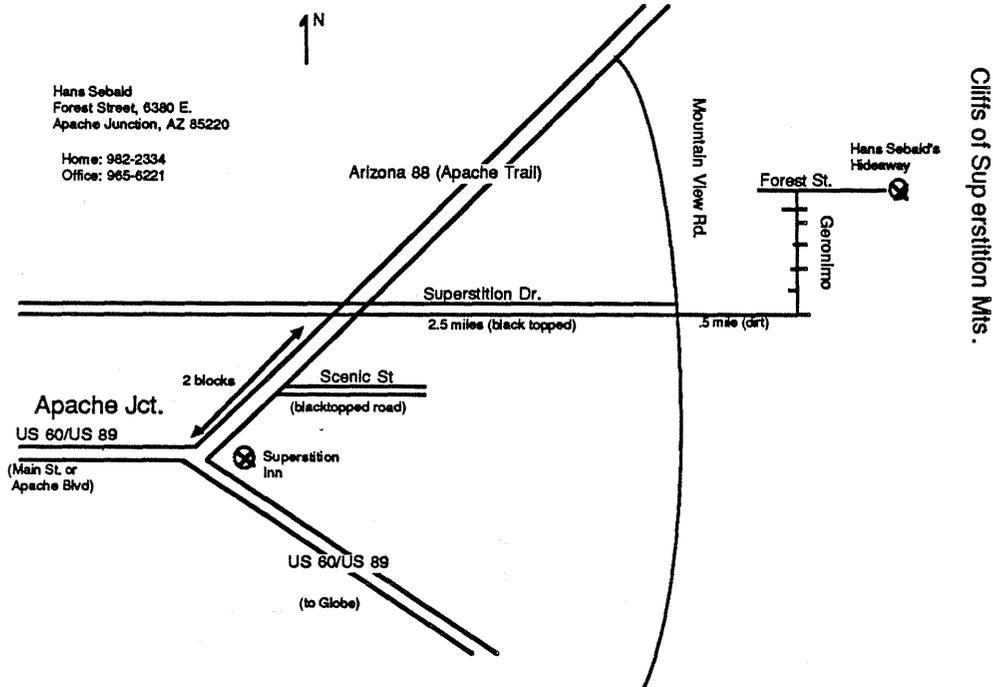
**November 21.** Normal meeting time and place. We will be showing a video tape

of James Randi's address at the Health Fraud conference here in September.

The Phoenix Skeptics News is published bimonthly by the Phoenix Skeptics, Jim Lippard, Chairman. Editor is Ron Harvey.

The Phoenix Skeptics News is the official publication of the Phoenix Skeptics. Phoenix Skeptics is a non-profit scientific and educational organization with the following goals: 1. to subject claims of the paranormal, occult, and fringe sciences to the test of science, logic, and common sense; 2. to act as a clearinghouse for factual and scientific information about the paranormal; and 3. to promote critical thinking and the scientific method. Subscription rate is \$10 per year. All manuscripts become the property of Phoenix Skeptics, which retains the right to edit them. Address all correspondence to PS, P.O. Box 62792, Phoenix, AZ 85082-2792. CSICOP-recognized skeptic groups may reprint articles in entirety by crediting the author, The Phoenix Skeptics News, and Phoenix Skeptics. All others must receive Phoenix Skeptics' permission. Copyright © 1987 by Phoenix Skeptics.

### Halloween Party Location



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