

The Rhine Research Center

When Harrison Ford's character encounters a spirit in last summer's hit film *What Lies Beneath*, he phones a "paranormal psi" guy at Duke University for answers.

The scene is interesting though inaccurate publicity for the Rhine Research Center Institute for Parapsychology Research in Durham. Although the internationally famous institute began in 1927 as part of the venerable Duke school, it became an independent research facility in 1965. Its founder, J. B. Rhine, moved his life's work off-campus when he was faced with mandatory retirement.

"He wanted to keep working," explains Sally Rhine Feather, Rhine's daughter. Sally's mother, Louisa, worked with husband J. B. in the research. After a long career as a clinical psychologist, Dr.

Feather joined the center in recent years to continue her parents' legacy.

Today, Duke alumni and present-day students often tour the facility, which is near campus, and some faculty members lecture at Rhine's summer program for students from around the world.

Scientists, Not Seers

But visitors—and Harrison Ford's questing character—won't find any ghostbusters among the Rhine scientists. Or as the center's literature puts it, "We have no truly satisfying explanations for [ghostly] disturbances, nor do we know how to make them go away." The researchers also don't recommend

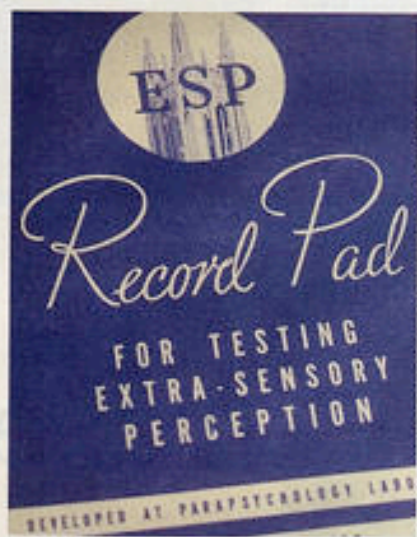
Parapsychologists predict science will reveal the secrets of psychic phenomena—and the answers won't be cloaked in mysticism and magic.



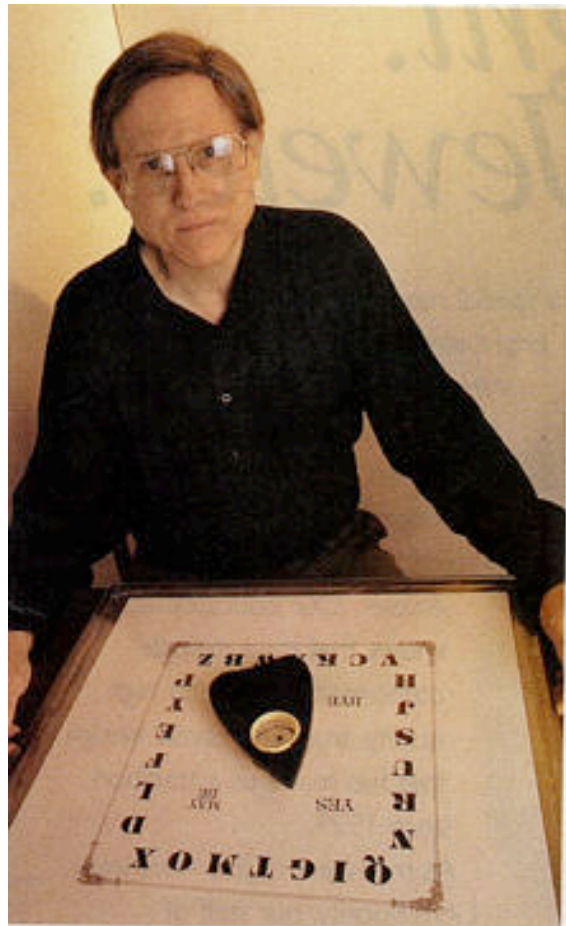
psychics, although they receive calls for such advice once or twice a week.

Instead, the button-down academicians at Rhine favor science over séances, taking a systematic approach to understanding extrasensory perception. The terms "ESP" and "parapsychology" were coined by founder Rhine.

It's vexing work trying to produce, then replicate, laboratory results of elusive psychic ability, or psi. "People who are prone to have [psi] experiences in the real world and people who do well in the laboratory are not necessarily the same," says Dr. John Palmer, acting director of the center. "In the laboratory you need to control it." ▶



TOP: "If you tell people something they want to hear, people will believe almost anything," says Dr. Sally Rhine Feather. "We have to be careful. Before we feel we have a new finding, the test will be repeated." The bust is of her father, J. B. Rhine, who coined the terms "extrasensory perception" and "parapsychology."



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Dr. Sally Rhine Feather

Parapsychologists also must contend with the disbelieving cynics who scoff at their work and the gullible innocents who burn up 1,900 psychic hot lines.

"We're in this narrow channel between skeptics who say, 'There's nothing to it,' and people who just want to believe anything," says Dr. Feather.

Surveys indicate that many maintain there's something beyond the ken of our five senses. Almost everyone has experienced a dream that comes true, a phone call from a person in our thoughts, or an intuitive hunch.

"My mother championed the stories that people sent [the Rhine Center]," says Dr. Feather. Mothers told about foreseeing in dreams the deaths of their soldier sons, only to receive the dreaded telegram days later. People wrote about avoiding flights that later crashed.

Throughout history, people have made sense out of the unknown by conjuring colorful yet flawed answers—the belief that evil spirits caused disease, for example. Today, parapsychologists believe society "explains" psi phenomena using the same type of

LEFT: In his research, Dr. John Palmer uses a Ouija-like board, which he calls an "alphabet board," to avoid mystical connotations. If the pointer moves, it's likely caused by the same ability we use to keep the car on the road while talking to a passenger.

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faulty thinking—it's magic, it's ghosts.

"I like *The X-Files*," says Rhine researcher Bob Bourgeois about the popular television program. "But most of what they have on that show has no connection to parapsychology at all." He adds wryly, "We don't do things like aliens."

Instead, psi researchers believe the truth *is* out there and use science to answer questions. Perhaps research will yield the 8-ball jackpot of all answers: how to use psi ability in real life.

Uncle Sam Wants Psi

No less than the U.S. military has added credibility to that notion. In 1995, the government announced it had been using remote viewing—what used to be called clairvoyance—for situations such as pinpointing downed airplanes or enemy locations. A review committee concluded the government's research did not warrant continued federal funding, but the committee also recommended that the private sector continue the study.

At Rhine, remote-viewing subjects are asked to give their impressions of randomly selected computer images in another room. From this and other studies, researchers hope to assemble a team of people with psi ability. Then

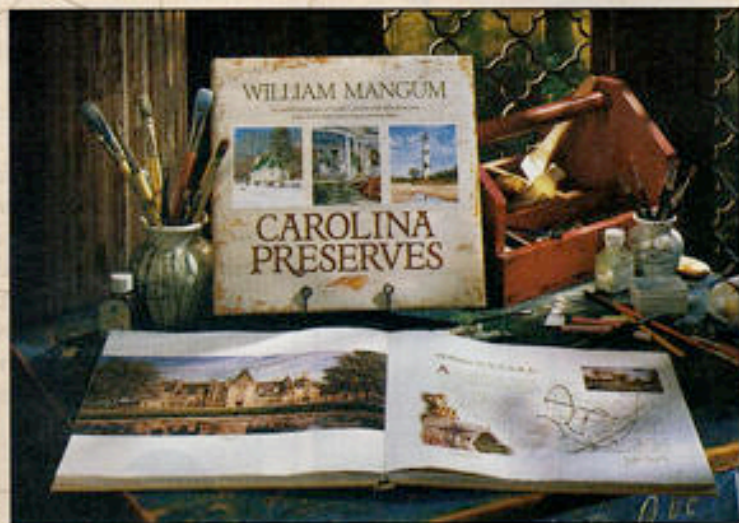


ABOVE: "There's evidence that ESP in general exists," says researcher Bob Bourgeois, who once served in the Air Force. "Actual science is involved here; it's not people dancing around the fire."



ABOVE: J. B. Rhine believed scientific testing would explain strange phenomena. "What drives the science is not some kind of otherworldly belief in weird things, but the fact that people report these experiences," says Dr. Richard Broughton.

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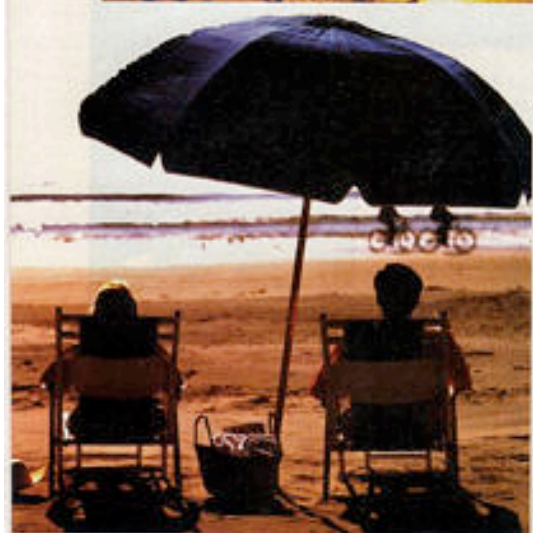
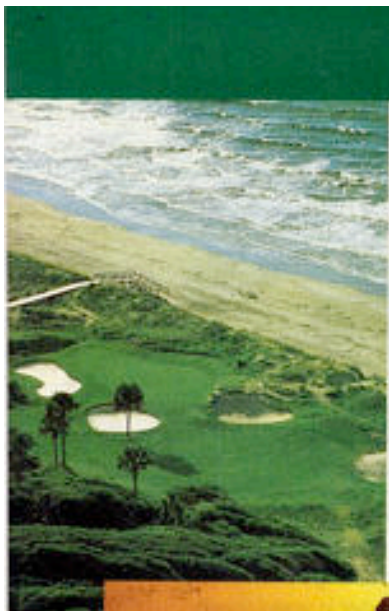
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Bob Bourgeois

they'll look at why they're good at it: Brain patterns? Psychological make-up? Personality traits? Genes?

Psi-zing Up the Business

Even now, researchers are looking at possible psi in the corporate arena. "A president of a company might make a decision that's completely off the wall," says Bourgeois. But it turns out to be the right one.

Adds Richard Broughton, "They may not think of themselves as psychic. They call it a hunch, a lucky guess, or intuition." Dr. Broughton heads the business/intuition study with Bourgeois. The Durham consultant and author is the former director of the

Rhine Center (and, by the way, was a consultant on *What Lies Beneath*).

Research shows that people who seem to have some psi ability outguess 50-50 chance by small margins, somewhere between 2% to 5%. In the past, that minor difference was dismissed. But new analysis techniques—the same ones that led to doctors recommending aspirin for heart patients—give new meaning to the figures.

"It's like a batting average," says Dr. Broughton. "If you translate that into Wall Street numbers, somebody with a 3% advantage might be making millions of dollars of difference."

He adds, "It's visionaries who tend to see the potential; it's not the bean

RIGHT: Young Sally Rhine Feather (right) and her siblings often participated in ESP testing devised by their parents, J. B. and Louisa Rhine. "For children, it was just a fun game," says Dr. Feather. BELOW: With her daughter, Sally Rhine Feather repeated ESP tests she "played" as a child.





It's visionaries who tend to see the potential; it's not the bean counters.

Dr. Richard Broughton

counters. But it could be that the bean counters start getting interested if we can talk about upping your bottom line by 3%.”

The key to using psi in real life, he

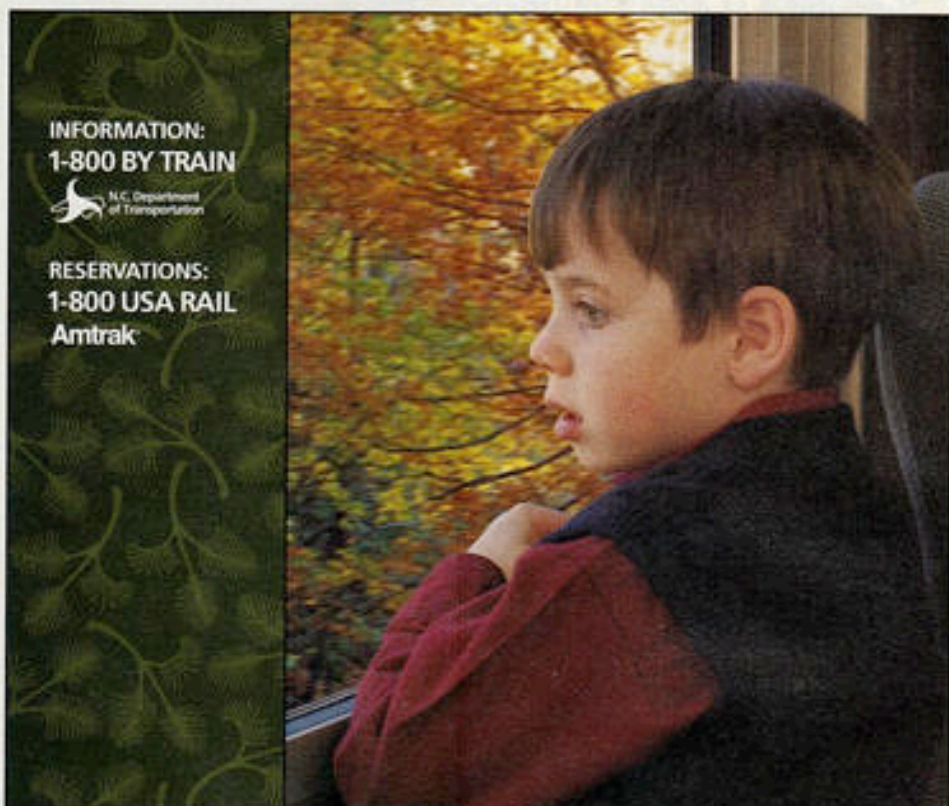
LEFT: People who seemed to demonstrate a slight edge over 17% chance when rolling die proved to be good test subjects for psychokinesis.

says, is to stop dismissing it as a hoax and to “stop thinking of it as magic that is going to work 100% of the time.” Rather, think of psi ability as a tool that complements other talents and resources. Think about what that slight advantage might mean, for example, in finding a lost child or a kidnapped victim or in making an accurate medical diagnosis.

After years of watching researchers struggle to continue her parents’ work, Dr. Feather predicts an optimistic future. “We’re feeling now that we’re very close to the point [of application],” she says. “We’re going to get into it slowly, but everybody is very excited that we’re close to major discoveries. It’s going to have an important bearing on science in general.”

After all, Dr. Broughton adds, “What’s science fiction one decade becomes science the next.”

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