

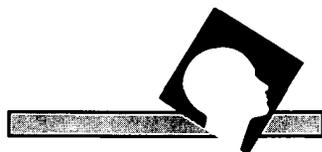
Spook Hill: Angular Illusion

GUSS WILDER

Cars and oranges roll uphill, baffling scientists? This is the sort of stuff you expect to see in the *National Enquirer*. But if you picked up the October 25, 1990, *Wall Street Journal*, you saw a headline in the middle of the front page proclaiming: "Spook Hill Baffles Scientists, Defies Laws of Gravity." While this spot in their paper is traditionally devoted to human-interest and local-color stories with only a tenuous link to financial matters, this particular article on Spook Hill was unusually lacking in factual substance.

Spook Hill is located in the city of Lake Wales in central Florida. It involves a public street that, when viewed from one approach, has the appearance of sloping somewhat downward before rising up a steeper slope. Signs at the location direct cars to drive forward and stop at the apparent low point. At that point, when the car is put into neutral, it rolls backwards—apparently uphill. The illusion is quite striking, and the location has been a minor attraction for decades.

It is, however, just an illusion, nothing more. The contours of the surrounding terrain combined with the twists in the approach road lead the viewer's senses astray. When viewed from any angle other than from the designated approach road, the alleged "low point" is obviously higher than the road behind it. A substantial portion of the visitors never get out of their cars to size up the situation properly and drive away with bewildered looks on their faces. The street has been made one-way, so drivers cannot turn around and get the very different perspective driving back down the steep hill. It is an interesting study of human nature just to watch the befuddled people who stop their cars, look around a while, and finally



Do cars really roll up Spook Hill? The Wall Street Journal seemed to think so.

get that "Now I see it!" look on their faces.

One wonders how it was that Robert Johnson, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter, happened to miss what was there for anyone to see. Most reported strange phenomena are not usually available for firsthand investigation—a fleeting Loch Ness monster, for instance. But since this one is quite accessible, negligence in reporting is inexcusable. Does the *Wall Street Journal* expect its reporters to know "up" from "down"? According to Johnson, a reporter (unnamed) placed a carpenter's level on the slope and verified that the hill sloped upward in the direction the cars rolled. It only takes a moment's thought about how a level works to question this observation. Why is it that the water in a level would be drawn in one direction while cars and oranges are drawn in the opposite direction? Bringing my own level to the site, and checking three different points on the slope, I found that the downward direction, according to the level, was the direction that the cars rolled. Further, any dutifully observant reporter would have noticed the storm drain positioned at the true low point of the road to which the cars roll "up." At least the city engineers knew the low point when they built the street.

Under a "Scientists Baffled" sub-heading, the article quotes from four people—three geologists and a psy-



View from approach leads the eye to believe the road goes slightly downhill. (Photo by Guss Wilder)



Side view of same section of street shows its uphill inclination. (Photo by Guss Wilder)

chologist—whose titles and backgrounds would seem to give them prima facie respectability among scientific thinkers. The quotations, however, did not seem to deal with actual observations of the site. Curious as to whether they were truly representative of the observations and conclusions of those quoted, Gary Posner, founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, was able to contact two of the quoted scientists. Jack A. Kapchan, a University of Miami psychologist, stated, "Without any data, I am unable to advance any hypothesis explaining the phenomenon. Therefore I am

Time Hypes Hill Too

The *Wall Street Journal* isn't the only national news publication recently to hype Spook Hill. In *Time* magazine's May 27, 1991, cover story on Orlando, Florida ("Fantasy's Reality"), the weekly newsmagazine, in a sidebar entitled "Strange But True," said: "The oddest natural curiosity in the area is Spook Hill, 50 miles south of Disney World, where drivers can shift their cars into neutral and mysteriously roll backward 'up' toward the top."

inclined to go with the optical-illusion explanation. However, I hope to visit the site in the very near future." Another *WSJ* interviewee, Anthony Randazzo, of the University of Florida Geology Department, stated bluntly that he had never visited the site, that he was quoted out of context (in a way that implied a true gravitational anomaly may exist there), and that he did not wish to continue to be involved in such "foolishness." So where are the "Baffled Scientists" alluded to—perhaps they are vacationing in the Bermuda Triangle (also referred to in the article).

It could be that Johnson's report

was mistreated in the editing department. According to Eric Pera, a reporter for the *Lakeland Ledger*, Johnson grew up in that area of Florida, and he quotes Johnson as saying of his visit, "I went as a skeptic, and I returned a skeptic." If Johnson really was a skeptic, it did not show up in his article. While this was certainly not a "hard" news article, there are many people in the world who will assume that if a *Wall Street Journal* reporter was confounded, there must be a "real" phenomenon there. To have preserved its integrity as a solid source of information, and to have made a worthwhile contribution to the education of the public, the *Journal* should have stated unequivocally that Spook Hill was an amusing illusion, well worth the current price of admission (free).

Contrary to suggestions in the article, it appears that there is no serious intent to charge a fee for this attraction. So, after you have blown the family vacation fund at Disney World, drive over to Lake Wales for this. Even after you figure it out, it's still fun to watch the string of tourists mulling it over. And if you are looking for a reliable news source for your investment considerations, well . . .

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