

Heaven's Gate founder skipped town without paying motel bill

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By Rob Dollar

Five years ago this month, the world learned the bizarre details of a mass suicide at a mansion in a well-to-do San Diego suburb.

Thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate cult, dressed in black and wearing their hair in buzz cuts, used pills, alcohol and suffocation to methodically kill themselves -- performing the deed in shifts.

The dead included a beauty queen, a former cowboy movie actor and the group's founder -- Marshall Herff Applewhite, a one-time music professor at a Texas college.

At the time of their deaths, Applewhite, 66, and his followers had been making their living as professional Web page designers while using the Internet to recruit new members for the cult.

Apparently, they also were waiting for a spacecraft that was supposed to pick them up and take them to what they described as a higher plane of existence.

In the months leading up to the mass suicide, several of the Heaven's Gate cult members, including Applewhite, underwent voluntary castrations.

A front-page headline in the March 27, 1997, edition of the Kentucky New Era screamed out the hard-to-believe story: "Mystery surrounds computer-cult suicide."

Back then, part of that mystery -- what hadn't been discovered yet -- was the "Hoptown Connection" to the strange event in California.

But now it's finally seeing the light of day, thanks to the person who unearthed it -- former Hopkinsville resident Steven D. Johnson.

Johnson, who lives in Nashville, Tenn., heard about the Kentucky New Era's plans to publish two volumes of "Hoptown Connection" stories later this month.

So, he sent this reporter a letter and a copy of an old newspaper clipping as proof of the Heaven's Gate connection to Hopkinsville, hoping it might be included in one of the books.

Johnson's contribution arrived too late to make the deadlines for the two publications. But it's an interesting story and worth sharing with readers.

It seems that Applewhite, before he became famous, and a companion -- presumably Bonnie Lu Nettles, the woman who introduced him to the world of metaphysical studies -- made a one-day pilgrimage to Hopkinsville on Oct. 9, 1973, to visit Edgar Cayce's grave at Riverside Cemetery.

While here, they checked into the old Holiday Inn on Fort Campbell Boulevard, now the Econo Lodge, where they managed to make a lasting impression.

At the time of the 1973 visit, there had been quite a bit of publicity about psychic David Bubar's claim that he received an "angel message" from Cayce, directing him to establish a mountain-top healing center near Hopkinsville.

Interestingly, news reports of the day indicated that Bubar, of Memphis, received his instructions from Cayce's spirit on Sept. 8 of that year while also staying at Hopkinsville's Holiday Inn.

Applewhite's visit to the community caught the attention of the late Joe Dorris, who wrote about it in his "Watching The Parade" column, published on Oct. 19, 1973.

Dorris' Applewhite column -- based on an interview with Chip Miles of the Holiday Inn -- had been saved all these years by Johnson, who stumbled across it and made the Heaven's Gate connection several months after the cult's 1997 mass suicide.

In the column, Miles recounted how a mysterious couple, without a car and no luggage, showed up at the Holiday Inn and asked for a room.

The man's driver's license identified him as M.H. Applewhite, 42, and he told the desk clerk that he and the woman were

from Texas.

When a maid went to clean their room the next morning, she found the guests had vanished, skipping town without paying the \$20 motel bill.

Left behind was a two-page note that suggested the man and woman were not from this world.

The note read:

"From occupants of 47.

"Dear Sir: Thank you for permitting us accommodations in your inn. It would be impossible to explain to you who we are, where we come from, and who we represent. If we tried, you would not believe us.

"We exist in another dimension, which does not allow for the use of currency. We are on the planet for a few more months and our mission is for good.

"It would be useless for people to attempt to treat us as they would their own or to bring us harm, for it would result only in their death. This note is true and certainly not to be understood as threatening but as thanks for accommodations.

"This information should be kept in the strictest of confidence for your best interests. You will be rewarded well for your cooperation."

Miles, although out \$20, had some fun with the odd encounter, according to Dorris' column.

On the Holiday Inn marquee, he changed the wording from the traditional "The Nation's Innkeeper" to "Innkeeper Of The Universe."

"It was probably worth the publicity we got out of it," Miles said, with a laugh, while recalling the incident after he was asked about it earlier this week.

Now, more than 28 years later, Miles said he still remembers the purported space travelers and the note they left for him.

However, Miles said he had forgotten that the stranger from the Lone Star state signed his name M.H. Applewhite on the motel's guest register. As a result, he never made the connection to the Heaven's Gate mass suicide when it occurred about 23½ years after the two Texans visited Hopkinsville.

"I'll be darned. I just never put all that together," Miles said.

About two years after seeing Hopkinsville, Applewhite and Nettles made national headlines when, claiming to be space aliens, they reportedly convinced a group of 20 people from Waldport, Ore., to leave their homes and move to Colorado to meet up with a space ship that was supposed to take them to a far-off planet.

It was around this time -- the fall of 1975 -- that their UFO cult, later to take the name Heaven's Gate, began to take shape. Applewhite and Nettles even changed their names, first to Bo and Peep, and then to Ti and Do.

Nettles, a former nurse who met Applewhite while he was a patient at a Houston psychiatric asylum in the early 1970s, was not among the dead in the Heaven's Gate mass suicide.

She died of cancer in 1985 -- like millions of earthlings do every year.

And now everyone knows the "Hoptown Connection" to the Heaven's Gate cult.