

Mysterious Deaths:

Bobby Fuller, Rock Icon

By Rubi Luna, Isabel Hernandez and Ruth Vise

Over the years, the public has seen numerous deaths of those in their prime in the music industry. Artists and musicians are no strangers to addiction, suicide or murder. It has happened to hundreds like Janis Joplin who overdosed on heroin and John Lennon who was shot to death by a crazed fan.

But there is one among other famous individuals whose death has proved enigmatic. Bobby Fuller was a young El Paso musician whose life and career were cut short. Whether it was suicide or murder, the cause of Bobby Fuller's death remains a mystery.

Robert Gaston Fuller was born on Oct. 22, 1942, in Goose Creek, Texas, according to the *Handbook of Texas Online*. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Utah. His parents, Lawson and Loraine Fuller, had a younger son named Randy and Loraine's son from her previous marriage, Jack Leflar. During his childhood, Bobby Fuller learned to play the drums, piano and the trumpet while his brother Randy learned the guitar and trombone.

When Bobby was 14, his father was offered a job with the El Paso Natural Gas Company. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the family moved to El Paso and lived on 9509 Album Street. After graduating from Burges High School, Fuller enrolled in college. Randy was sent to military school, "in an attempt to steer him away from the path taken by brother Jack" who had some criminal history, according to a detailed web article on Bobby Fuller by writer and musician Aaron Poehler.

Dave Marsh, a music critic, notes that Bobby Fuller wished to major in music; however, he realized that "school wasn't for him and stopped going to his classes before mid-terms." According to Marsh, Bobby's parents attempted to persuade their son to continue his education, but Fuller was determined to succeed with his music.

Poehler wrote that Bobby's half-brother, Jack Leflar, was murdered. His body was found on Feb. 22, 1961. It is believed his death was due to the criminal connections he had.

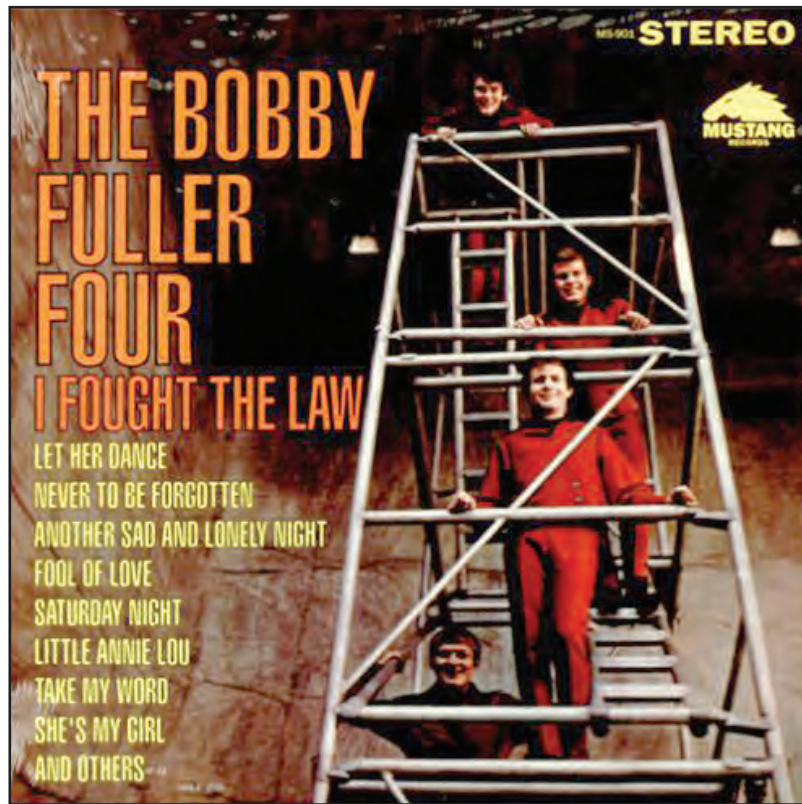
The death of his half-brother hit Bobby hard; however, this is what led Bobby to pursue his musical career with greater intensity. "He had already attracted attention around El Paso as a drummer, but was working diligently on his songwriting, striking up a collaborative partnership with lyricist Mary Stone, a friend's mother," wrote Poehler.

Fuller decided he wanted to start recording music and with his family's financial support, he was able to start his own record label, Exeter Records. In addition, he started a local club for all ages to hang out called "Bobby Fuller's Teen Rendezvous" on Dyer Street, according to Bernadette Self in a 1996 *El Paso Times* article.

With Randy gone, Bobby taught himself to play the guitar in order to increase his musicality. When his

brother Randy came back from military school, he was impressed with Bobby's work. With Randy back, the brothers were able to record two tracks which aired on local radio on Thanksgiving 1961.

The all-ages club increased activity with his record label. In 1964, Exeter Records recorded three singles including "I Fought the Law," first recorded by the



The Bobby Fuller Four released its second album in 1966. (File image)

Crickets, the late Buddy Holly's band (Holly died in February 1959) and written by Cricket Sonny Curtis. Although the Crickets' own version was not a hit and was rarely, if ever, played in public, the cover by Bobby Fuller and his band established Fuller as a regional star.

According to Poehler's article "The Strange Case of Bobby Fuller," Bobby was never satisfied and on one of his tours to California to promote his music, he met Bob Keane of Del-Fi Records. Keane was famous for discovering Ritchie Valens in the late 1950s (Valens, whose real name was Richard Steven Valenzuela, died in the same plane crash as Holly). Fuller made an impression on Bob Keane at the time, but he did not feel the group was ready for the big time.

In 1964, the Teen Rendezvous in El Paso burned down, according to the *Handbook of Texas Online*, and the band decided to move to Los Angeles in November. The Bobby Fuller Four, as the band was now known, consisted of Jim Reese as the rhythm guitarist, Dewayne Quirico on drums (replacing Dalton Powell), Randy Fuller playing the bass guitar and Bobby as the lead singer and guitarist.

This time, Bob Keane signed the group, and they were soon playing in clubs around Southern California. Rapidly, the band became known by young people who frequented the clubs and music scouts like Phil Spector.

The Bobby Fuller Four began recording tracks which established them as more than a regional success. The first hit was "Let Her Dance" in 1965. Then the group re-recorded "I Fought the Law" also in 1965 for Mustang

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Tom Ogle, Inventor

By Cynthia Cuevas, Isabel Hernandez and Ruth Vise

Technology used in the automobile has advanced tremendously over the century, allowing vehicles not only to provide a comfortable and relaxing drive but also to save on gasoline. Today, many automobiles are run by electricity or other alternative fuel sources.

About 40 years ago, a young El Pasoan developed an astounding system for fuel efficiency to be used in any automobile. Even though Tom Ogle was not the first to think of the basic idea, his device did have unique differences that simplified his invention. Tom Ogle created a vaporized fuel system which allowed a car to travel over 200 miles on two gallons of gas. He decided to follow through with his invention, even though it led to many conflicts, and perhaps even his untimely death.

Thomas Venor Wolfgang Peter Dinglestaedt Ogle, like many other inventors, started his invention by being curious. According to the article "Auto Gas Fume Invention May Save US" in *The El Paso Journal* by William C. McGaw, Ogle was born in Pirmasens, Germany. His parents, Hans and Helga Venor Dinglestaedt, had three children: Tom, Kurt and Ralph. Hans, an electronics engineer who was described as "a brilliant, inventive man — a near genius" by his mother-in-law, left Helga while the boys were still young and the couple divorced.

According to McGaw, Helga met Lieutenant Clarence Ogle, an American soldier stationed in Pirmasens. Clarence proposed and Helga agreed to marry the soldier only if he adopted her children, which he did. Returning to the United States, the military family was stationed in Oklahoma and then El Paso.

Ogle earned a graduate equivalency degree at Irving High School, according to *El Paso Times* article "Tom Ogle Wants His Invention to Help People" by Gregory Jones, who wrote extensively on the inventor for the *Times*. Ogle explained to Jones that he had constantly been repairing home appliances, fiddling with combustion engines and even fixing a truck at the age of 10. He also attended an automotive trade school for three years in Morgantown, W. Va., according to McGaw.

In the *El Paso Times* article "EP Fuel Systems Inventor Claims 160 Miles a Gallon," Jones reported that Ogle had attempted to replace windshield wipers with pressurized air but failed. In 1971, Ogle moved on to a four stroke lawn mower. That is when he discovered something incredible. Ogle stated in the article that while working with the mower, he accidentally punctured the fuel tank.

According to Jones, Ogle removed the carburetor from the mower, out of curiosity, and placed a hose that connected the fuel tank to the carburetor intake jet, allowing the mower to run off gasoline vapors. He claimed that the mower ran for 96 hours.

Ogle began to experiment with the same process in a car, failing in several attempts to convert the basic idea into a device that would work in ordinary cars. Jones wrote that Ogle finally succeeded in converting one of his own cars, a 1972 Thunderbird, and racked

El Paso Connections



Ogle makes adjustments to his "Oglemobile" in 1978. (Photo courtesy of University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department, El Paso Herald-Post records)

up 60,000 miles powered by the system, getting more than 100 miles to the gallon. This early success motivated Ogle to seek help in further developing his invention which omitted the carburetor and the fuel pump and replaced them with a complicated system of hoses and filters.

Ogle met El Paso businessman James Peck, then owner of Peck's Automotive Service in Northeast El Paso. Peck granted Ogle access to his shop and provided the necessary equipment for Ogle's vaporized fuel system experiments, including a 1970 Ford Galaxie.

On April 30, 1977, a *Times* reporter, the young inventor and his assistant drove the experimental car equipped with the vaporized fuel system to Deming, N.M. The goal: to prove that with his system, a car could travel 200 miles on just two gallons of gas. On that Saturday, the 24-year-old did just that.

In an article entitled "Ogle Fuel System — No Hoax," Jones wrote that before the test drive, "reporters and onlookers witnessed a mechanic at Peck's empty the special, pressurized gas tank, and pour two gallons of fuel into the tank after it was empty." The car was also inspected for any hidden fuel but none was found. The inventor had succeeded in taking the 1970 Ford Galaxie, weighing almost 5,000 pounds, on a 205-mile drive on two gallons of gas! The "Oglemobile," as it was dubbed, put Tom Ogle in the public eye.

On May 18, 1977, *The El Paso Journal* announced in the article "Ogle's Gas System Rejected by ERDA Expert, R.W. Hurn" by Burny A. Paca, that the young inventor would get no support from the governmental agency Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) because Hurn reported that Ogle's system was "not practical."

Despite Hurn's report, Ogle continued his research and testing with confidence. Meanwhile, critics consistently surfaced. Robert Levy, an unemployed El Pasoan with a Ph.D. in physics, challenged Ogle based on the laws of thermodynamics. However, two engineers in the mechanical engineering department

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Ambrose Bierce, Writer

By Robert Yarbrough

One of the most famous American disappearances, as noted by *Time* magazine, concerns the American author Ambrose Bierce, an author of exceeding popularity between 1880 and 1910. Bierce supposedly disappeared into Mexico and the Mexican Revolution during the end of 1913 or the beginning of 1914. According to the experts writing his biography after his disappearance, he was last seen in the United States in El Paso, Texas.

He was born in a log cabin in rural Ohio (he would later describe his parents as "unwashed savages"). At the age of 15, he became a printer's apprentice on a small newspaper. He enlisted in the Union Army very early in the Civil War and was quickly promoted to the rank of lieutenant. His experiences in the Civil War would later provide material for his many war and horror stories. According to various sources, he eventually became either a captain or a major in the army.

The army sent him to the West on a military assignment, and he remained in San Francisco. There he started writing for various newspapers, including William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner*. During his career as a writer, many considered him to be a master of the English language.

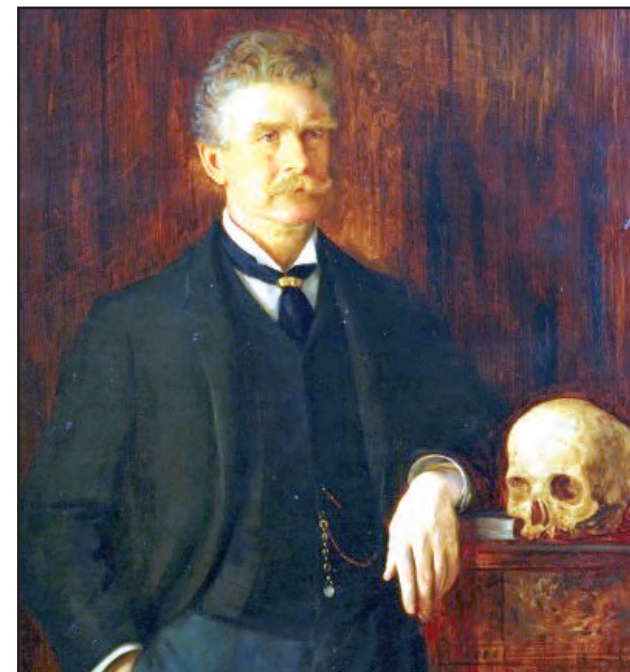
Ambrose Bierce was one of the most famous journalists of the 1800s, a short story writer of war and other horror stories, a literary critic, and a bitter cynic and misanthropist. He kept a human skull and a cigar box of (supposedly) an enemy's ashes on his desk. His contemporaries named him Bitter Bierce with his constant motto, "Nothing matters." He wrote the often anthologized short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." He also wrote the well-known book *The Devil's Dictionary*, the entries for some of which were accompanied by humorous pseudonyms. His definition for DEAD, adj., reads:

Done with the work of breathing; done
With all the world; the mad race run
Though to the end; the golden goal
Attained and found to be a hole!
—Squatol Johnes

Many movies came from both Bierce's stories and his life. Several versions of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" were produced, a French version winning both an award from the Cannes Film Festival and an Academy Award and later appearing in the United States as an episode of *Twilight Zone*.

Several more of his stories became short videos. Bierce himself also provided the principal character of two movies set in Mexico — Carlos Fuentes' *Old Gringo* and Robert Rodriguez's *From Dusk till Dawn 3: The Hangman's Daughter*.

Bierce left several clues behind as to his plans to disappear in Mexico. "Good-bye — if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs," he wrote in a letter to his niece Lora. A close associate of Bierce reportedly received a letter with a postmark from Ciudad Chihuahua, Mexico. The letter stated, "As to me, I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination."



Ambrose Bierce disappeared during the Mexican Revolution. (File image)

Nobody ever received any communication from Bierce after that. In 1914, the U. S. State Department searched for Bierce in Mexico. Several articles appeared in American newspapers about Bierce being executed by firing squad in Mexico, but a body was never found.

Eventually, theories grew about Ambrose Bierce. One article in a newspaper placed him in France fighting for the Allies. There was the story of Bierce and a crystal skull. Another story placed him in a South American jungle dressed in animal skins. The possibility of alien abduction was mentioned. Some Bierce biographers suggested a more practical way to disappear — suicide.

Various writers soon after Bierce's disappearance and even into contemporary times have linked Bierce and El Paso, Texas. Most of the accounts of Bierce's disappearance mention El Paso. According to the experts nearly a century ago, El Paso was Bierce's departure place for Mexico and the Mexican Revolution.

Carrey McWilliams wrote in *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*, "He proceeded on to El Paso and passed across the line into Juárez." Paul Fatout, a Bierce scholar of the 1950s, noted, "Later in November the traveler moved on to El Paso, where international relations were so friendly that crossing the border was relatively simple." Richard O'Connor stated in his Ambrose Bierce biography, "Late in November he finally crossed the border at Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso." Roy Morris, in his Bierce biography *Alone in Bad Company*, observed:

Bierce's statement to the journalists in El Paso, however, is entirely consistent with his characteristic doublespeak throughout his Mexican venture. First he announces that he is going into Mexico, then he qualifies his statement with an ominous reference to his likely fate. When he told the porch sitters at El Paso that he was either going to join Villa's army or else crawl off into the mountains and die, he might well have been telling them the truth.

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the circus to “the world’s tallest traveling salesman.” In his new job, his height was a big plus. “No secretary ever tells me her boss isn’t in,” he said. Drimmer commented, “His customers never forgot his name.”

In his business travels, people did not see him as “freak”; he was just an extraordinarily tall salesperson. In a May 1950 interview with Hal Boyle of the *Evening Independent*, [St. Petersburg, Fla.], Jake said the principal difficulty in traveling was not in adjusting physically to his size. “It was psychological—getting other people to realize that, despite my size, I was just another man trying to earn a normal living in a normal manner.”

In an interview for the University of California at Berkeley Regional Oral History Office, John B. Cella II, whose family bought Roma Wines, commented on Jack Earle, who traveled all over the country for their wines: “He had a calling card that was six inches by 10 inches. ... he’d always come out [of a store] with an order. ... He was a very kind and gentle man, too.”

Jake was indeed extraordinary — he had so much compassion for others. One would think that after being the “giraffe” of the school or the tall “freak” of the circus, he might find it hard to show kindness towards others. However, Jake managed to accept people’s remarks and realize he was tall and nothing could be done to change that. The only thing he could do was live life as it came.

Jake dressed as Santa Claus during Christmas, visiting orphanages and pediatric wards of hospitals on the West Coast, according to Drimmer. There he

would tell the children stories and sing carols to them. On many other occasions, Jake loved “telling stories to children about the good giants who helped people and who loved boys and girls . . . to counteract the children’s fear of giants, and of him, as a person,” wrote Fox. Besides helping children, Jake helped sell thousands of dollars of war bonds during World War II.

Jake was a sensitive man who had many talents, including portrait photography, sculpting, painting and writing poetry. His poems were serious, at times even “brooding,” noted Drimmer. In 1950, Jake privately published a short book of poems called *Long Shadows*, which was written in free verse. His nephew Andrew would take this title for his novel based on his uncle’s life.


In January 1952, Jake decided it was time to go back home to El Paso. He had a house built for himself, with ceilings nine feet high and furniture that would sustain the weight of a 370-pound man. It was built at 817 College Avenue in El Paso, but he would never get to live in it.

In June of that year, Jake’s kidneys failed, and he was admitted to Hotel Dieu Hospital. He died on July 18, 1952, only 46 years old. However, the average life span for a pathological giant is short: the young woman mentioned in the opening paragraph died shortly after her appearance on television. She was 33. Most die at a very young age. Robert Wadlow was only 22 when he died. Jake was more than twice as old as Wadlow.

Although Jake suffered from a medical condition that held him back in many areas, he managed

to accomplish more than many “normal” human beings only dream of. He had wanted to be an actor when he was young and succeeded in becoming a Hollywood movie star as a teenager, working with famous actors and starring in almost 50 comedies. He became a world traveler while working in the circus for 14 years and produced breathtaking art. Then as a salesman, he helped make Roma Wines the largest wine company in America. Jake made his dreams come true.

Throughout the years, Jake Erlich has been remembered by newspaper articles, magazines, books and museum collections. Dr. Andrew Erlich, a clinical psychologist who celebrated his third birthday the day his uncle died, has dedicated much of his time researching Jake Erlich’s life and creating an intriguing novel about him. In June 2012, the El Paso Museum of Art exhibited Jake’s art.

What seemed destined to become a tale of tragedy in the beginning was transformed into an amazing, uplifting story of a life full of achievements. With the unconditional support of his family, Jake was able to overcome humiliation, blindness, accidents and depression. He made his distinctive height work for him. He was a man with great sensibility who took all of his possibilities and transformed them into a story of success. 

**Note: Drimmer and one Missouri doctor, who never met Jake, claimed Jake was only 7 feet, 7 ½ inches tall. Dozens of other sources agree that Jake was 8 feet, 6 ½ inches tall.*

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at the University of Texas at El Paso, Dr. Garry Hawkins and John Whitacre, inspected and analyzed the vapor system in the test car. Hawkins said that Ogle’s system was “sound and feasible,” according to a May 4, 1977 *Times* article by Jones.

The engineers made sure there were no hidden fuel compartments. Hawkins further said that Ogle’s fuel system, “has achieved what was intended for the internal combustion engine . . . to operate on fumes.” He added that problems with stalling-out could be fixed with “engineering refinement.” In response to the question why the system had not been developed before, Whitacre said, “Everybody’s been trying to make the carburetor work better.” A by-product of the system was clean emissions, an environmental concern that became important in the 1970s.

Jones wrote in the *Times* on Aug. 2, 1977, that Ogle had obtained a patent pending number on his system. While waiting for the patent, Ogle continued to refine the system and resumed independent testing. A computer test at Casa Ford showed that the device produced emissions cleaner than El Paso’s air, according to Jones. Ogle and Peck became partners and several other individuals, including two local automobile dealers, also provided funds for Ogle’s research and testing. Attorneys began work on an agreement between Ogle and his backers regarding possible royalties if the device were to reach the market.

The U.S. was in the middle of an energy crisis when the Oglemobile appeared, and many corporations, including at least one oil company and two car manufacturers, and even the U.S. Air Force expressed interest in buying Ogle’s device. On June 22, 1978, the *El Paso Herald-Post* announced “Ogle Sells Rights to a Gas-Saving Device.” According to the article, Advanced Fuel Systems Inc. (AFS), a company in Washington state, had bought the

manufacturing and marketing rights. The contract specified Ogle would receive an unspecified amount of advance money, 100,000 shares of AFS stock, six percent royalty on sales of each device, a monthly salary and the right to visit AFS, stated reporter Doug Lenzini.

About two months later, the Securities Exchange Commission filed a complaint against AFS as specified in the *Times* article “Complaint Surprises Ogle” also by Lenzini. The SEC charged that the Seattle company had violated provisions of the federal securities laws. Ogle and his backers became further entangled with legalities. Meanwhile, Ogle went ahead with plans to open a chain of computerized diagnostic centers and opened the first (and only) one in Northeast El Paso in April 1979. Before the end of the year, Ogle apparently had closed the site and the phone had been disconnected, according to a Feb. 24, 1980 *Times* article by Laura Hlavach. Ogle was hard to find.

In May 1980, the IRS came looking for Ogle, claiming that he owed more than \$20,000 in back taxes. Ogle apparently had begun living the high life soon after selling the rights to his invention, including riding around in a custom-made limousine with all the perks. In April 1981, news about Ogle began to surface once more. *Times* writers Laura Hlavach and Patricia Tatum reported that Ogle had suffered a gunshot wound in his stomach near a bar in Northeast El Paso. No one was ever charged in the shooting, but police for some reason had officers guarding his hospital room.

Hlavach and Tatum reported that in other incidents, Ogle was arrested for reckless driving and for having an illegal firearm. In addition, he had sued a man to whom Ogle said he had been forced to sign over 22% of his royalties in order to pay debts acquired in losing a string of pool games, according to a June 20, 1981

Times article by Jeannie Kever. Ogle’s lawyer, Bobby Perel, described his client as a “26-year-old kid, a free target for anybody. ... He’s scared of ... a whole group of gamblers and others, just fleecing Ogle, getting him drunk and taking advantage of him,” according to Kever.

On Aug. 19, 1981, the 26-year-old Tom Ogle died of what medical examiners said was an alcohol and drug overdose, citing large amounts of Darvon, a tranquilizer, in his body. He had been at a Northeast bar drinking and collapsed at a friend’s house. Pathologists were uncertain whether the death was accidental or suicide, but many people, including some of his backers, believed it was neither. Even though Ogle had legal and money problems, his friends and lawyer refused to believe that he would have deliberately taken 20 Darvon pills in addition to drinking heavily.

For years after his death, more than 50 supposed financial backers were still battling over money derived from Ogle’s device. Although Ogle did not leave a will, his wife Monika won the right to oversee his estate. His invention? Forgotten. Dead and buried, like its young, naïve inventor. But perhaps not totally.

In 2008, *Gashole*, a documentary about America’s dependence on fossil fuels highlighted Tom Ogle’s invention, along with several others intended to increase mileage in the nation’s cars, some of which the film accused big oil companies of buying and suppressing. The Internet also has various bloggers and journalists who ask the question, “Why are we still oil-dependent when the technology exists to free us from this tyranny?” Tom Ogle appeared to have solved the problem of gas guzzlers and going to war to protect our oil supplies, but it was not to be. However, the fact that intelligent thinkers are still asking questions and researching the subject gives one a little spark of hope. 