

Skull-judgery

PHRENOLOGY: Presentation at Banning Residence Museum offers a look at an odd and amusing science of the 19th century.

By Dennis Johnson
DAILY BREEZE

As you read this, reach up and palpate the ridge of your brow. If it's bony and protrusive, immediately put the paper down and take to something more suitable for your character like breaking rocks with your teeth or lifting Volkswagens.

Relatively flat? Nicely shaped forehead? Read on, you brainy devil, and learn a bit about one type of vintage quackery courtesy of your premier frontier phrenologist, Dr. Malatesta.

"Natural law shows that man is who he is at birth," says the doctor more commonly known as Walter Nelson. This is the thesis behind the practice of phrenology, he says.

Tucked into the basement museum of the Banning Residence in Wilmington on Saturday, Nelson offered a 19th-century-themed presentation on the practice, which held that a person's character could be determined by feeling the various bumps and depressions on the cranium.

"What you are within is portrayed by what you are without," says Nelson, who performs his living history show as a member of the Lively Arts History Association.

On the Web

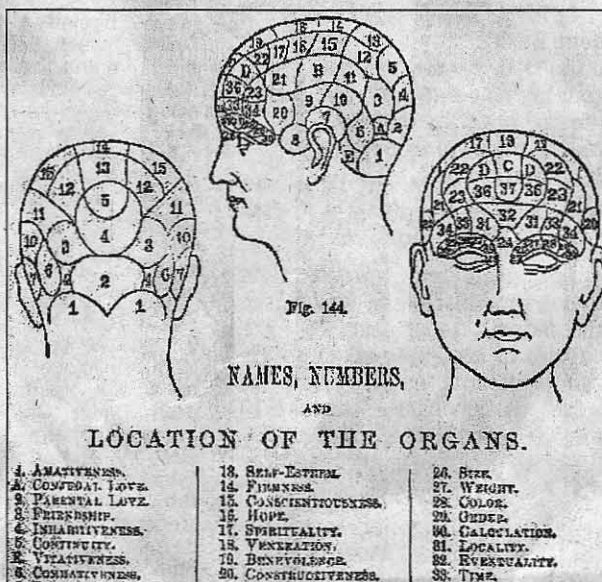
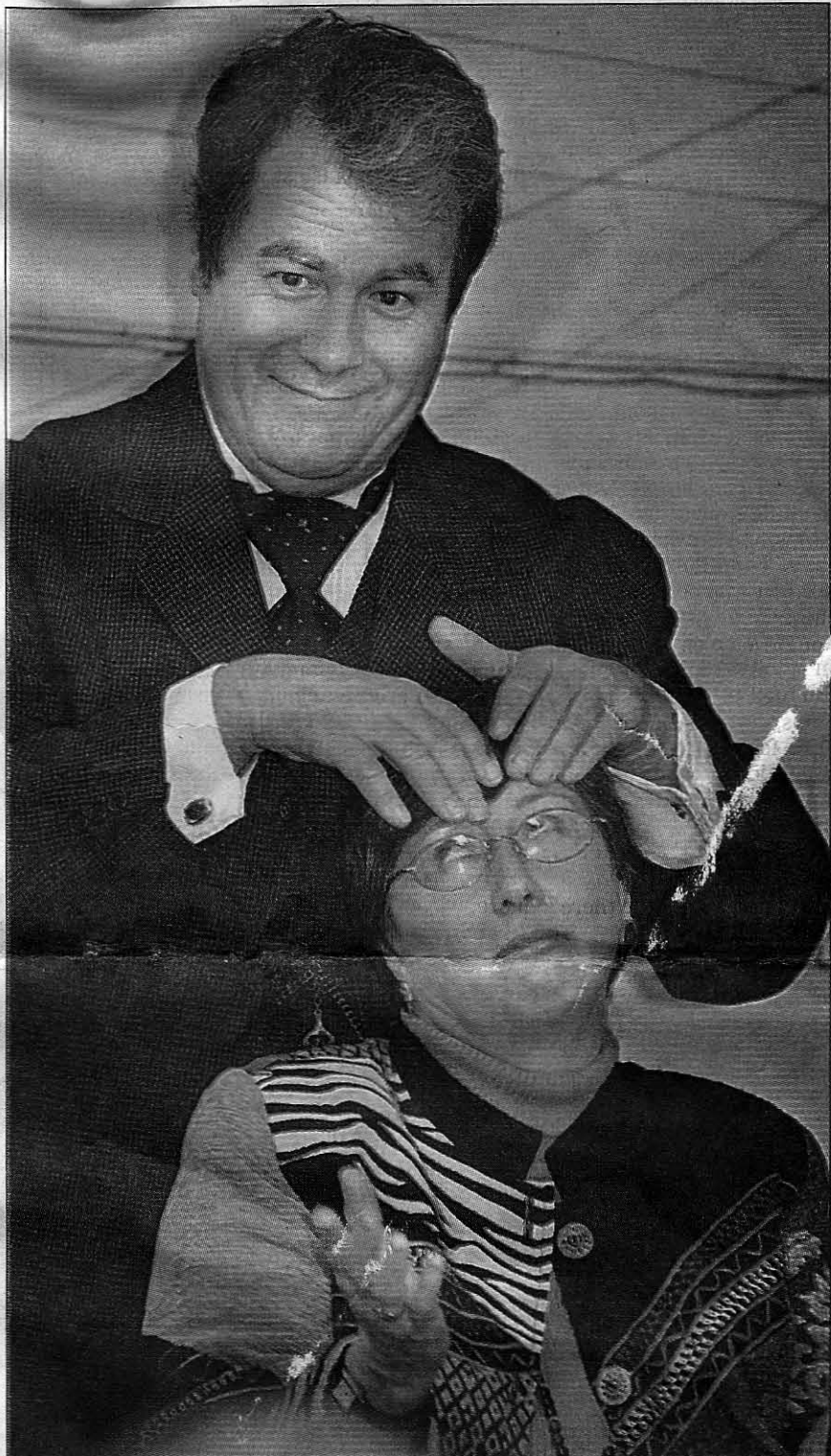
To find out more about Walter Nelson and Dr. Malatesta: www.lahacal.org/malatesta.html

The idea was based on the belief that natural law determined a person's character and was set at birth. As such, phrenologists said the brain was made up of separate organs, each representing a personality aspect. The shape of the organs affected the shape of the skull. Therefore, a trained professional could examine a person's head and determine his or her character. Easy enough, right? With the explanation sinking in, Dr. Malatesta calls up a volunteer.

Diane Yoshitomi raises her hand and steps up on stage. (Both her phrenological organs representing bravery and wit must be well developed.)

At this point in the story, use your fingertips to feel the spot just above your hairline. This is the area that will determine if you're sympathetic

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Phrenologist Dr. Malatesta, portrayed by Walter Nelson, examines Diane Yoshitomi for a show at the Banning Residence Museum in Wilmington on Saturday. The good-humored verdict: "I find this lady has a tendency not to be overly intellectual." At left, a 19th century chart numbers the regions of the skull used in the pseudo-science.

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DAILY BREEZE

SKULL: Museum brings pseudoscience of the past alive

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enough to deal with the good-natured ribbing Yoshitomi is about to get.

Dr. Malatesta explains that at the time it was considered a serious science, phrenology was used by employers judging the character of new employees, spouses looking for a worthy partner and school headmasters checking to see if a student was suited for a life in letters or work in the field.

"If you attempt to go against nature, you are doomed to failure . . . and a life of crime and drunkenness," he says. After all, you can only be who you were born to be, he adds.

Yoshitomi looks nervous, yet inquisitive. For now.

He checks her pulse then examines her face to check her brow and forehead. A prominent brow is characteristic of a brutal and animalistic nature, he says.

"I find this lady has a tendency toward not being overly intellectual," he says. The crowd chuckles.

Down to her nose, cheekbones and chin, which he proclaims is rather weak.

She frowns.

"Madame, this is science," Malatesta retorts.

Then onto the phrenology exam where he points out sections of her skull indicating weak moral and religious inclinations, other spots that show stubbornness, dislike for chil-



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Dr. Malatesta (Walter Nelson) explains that the science of Phrenology is based on "natural law."

dren, transient nature, greed, and one indelicate observation that earns him a slap on the hand.

The examination ends and Yoshitomi, explaining that she was through with the doc-

tor's observations, exits the stage.

"I was prepared to be insulted," the chairwoman of the museum's volunteers later says. She says she knows Nelson and his show and had a good idea of how the exam would go.

With the show over and Nelson back in the 21st century, he explains phrenology's twin science of physiognomy, or the reading of facial features.

Both have racial overtones and were used as proof of the "superior" features of white Europeans over those of other ethnic groups.

He says that although the practice was abandoned by mainstream medicine in the mid-19th century, it carried on as a fad practiced at carnivals and saloons for years.

The British Phrenological Society only closed down in 1967, he says:

Even today, there are still people who believe in phrenology, some of whom have contacted him via his Web site about doing readings.

And in the end, the theory behind it still hasn't gone away completely, he says.

"We still look at people and say 'He looks like a nasty (one)' or 'He looks like somebody I can trust,'" he says.

Again, take your hand feel the back of your skull, just below the crown — right here you'll be able to gauge your sense of the ludicrous. It should be very prominent.