The Occult: Olathean remains firm skeptic in studies about cult activities

By LORALEE SAXON
Daily News Reporter

The telephone rings at Laird Wilcox's Olathe home.

It's the police. They've found some weird, cult-related paraphernalia near a murder victim's body and they want to know what it means.

"I tell them it means the person who was killed happened to be interested in the occult, that's all," Wilcox said recently.

"It's amazing how quickly people will jump to conclusions about the occult. There's something about the occult, Satanism and the paranormal that really captures the American imagination."

Wilcox gets these calls once or twice a week, he says, from police and intelligence agencies all over the nation. His name comes up because many of them have a copy of the occult directory he has been publishing for the past 16 years or so.

Covens of witches, pagan newsletters, astrologocial chartmakers and groups of UFO believers are all catalogued in Wilcox's *Guide to the American Occult*, a directory and bibliography.

Wilcox, who divides his time between carpentry work and gathering and publishing information on American extremist groups, says he is a firm skeptic and thinks most reports of cult activity are sensationalized and exaggerated.

"There's a lot of misinformation and just plain hogwash going around about so-called cults," he said. "There's something about the idea of a dangerous, mysterious, evil and violence-prone secret religion that seems to appeal to the American public's fantasies."

The highly publicized case of convicted murderer Robert Berdella is an example, Wilcox said. Because Berdella bought and sold a line of products connected with Satanism and the occult, some people thought the murders were connected to cult activities. That simply is not true, Wilcox said.

"There is no evidence that he believed in it or was in any way associated with it," he said. "It was guilt by association. Most of those people listed in the book are businesses — people trying to make money. There's a huge market for it.

"Most of this belief is not very deep. It's just something they play with. The myth of widespread Satanism and devil-worship responsible for all of the otherwise unexplained mysteries in our society seems to have wide appeal right now."

About 5,000 different metaphysical and occult organizations exist in the U.S., he said. Most of their activity is focused on marketing a line of course materials, tape recordings or other self-improvement products.

Photo by Scott Smith

Although Olathean Laird Wilcox's interest in the occult is purely academic, he has compiled an extensive directory and bibliography, 'Guide to the American Occult.'

Witchcraft is small, but thriving in the U.S. According to Wilcox, there are about 500 covens with an average of 10 members each, and several thousand individual witches, called "solitaries." In the Kansas City area, there are about eight covens, he said.

"Most people who believe in witchcraft burn incense, make little altars to the god of the woods and run around naked in the woods if they have the privacy," he said. "Most witches are basically very mystical-minded nature worshippers who feel alienated by main-line religion."

In researching his book, Wilcox has met and rubbed shoulders with dabblers, con artists and true believers, but he hasn't found any evidence to support a belief in mystical or paranormal explanations.

"I've been to psychic fairs, and talked to fortune tellers, had my astrological chart made," he said. "I'll tell them I'm a Gemini or a Cancer when I'm not. 'Oh, I knew it all the time,' they'll say.

"No, I've never wondered whether they really knew something. I have stopped and wondered if these people had all their marbles."

Most people caught up in the occult are trying to fill a void in their lives, he said. The occult and paranormal beliefs are used to explain things that have happened to the person, rather than accepting personal responsibility.

"Your stars were wrong, or there's a hex on you," he said. "Your body's out of balance. This is where exorcists do so well, in removing hexes. They can make a lot of money."

Wilcox makes it very clear that he merely researches and catalogues occult groups — he doesn't promote them or agree with their beliefs. However, he does believe in freedom of speech.

"I support their right to exist," he said. "I'm very skeptical of the claims of the paranormal, but I'm against censorship. I think the best way to deal with the beliefs and logic the occult represents is by honest discussion."