

UFO's from inner,

not outer space

By MARK BOWDEN

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

The thing, whatever it was, came to young Matt Graeber as in a dream. It was 1953, and he was 12 years old. Sitting in darkness, he saw from his bedroom window a milky white disc, glowing, that moved silently through the sky. The thing slowly turned and then shot due south and out of sight.

Amazed, the boy sat on his bed wondering. Was the thing real? Or was it some sleep-induced vapor coursing through the hot summer night sky? He pinched himself and knew he was not dreaming.

For 27 years Graeber has been haunted by that night. A short, trim man with dark wavy hair, he is today a commercial artist with children of his own. For most of his adult life Graeber has been obsessed with unidentified flying objects (UFOs). He founded his own small group of UFO buffs in 1973, and has personally investigated nearly every UFO sighting in the Philadelphia area since. Most nearby military installations, police departments and planetariums routinely refer reports of UFO sightings to Graeber.

Now, after years of chasing flying saucers and after hundreds of exhaustive investigations, Matt Graeber is convinced that UFOs are visitors from inner, not outer, space.

"It's all perfectly human," he said. "Ain't nothing abnormal about it at all."

Graeber's findings are not strikingly new, but his process was unique. Modern philosophers have long noted from their armchairs that what today are called UFOs were once called visions, that what are seen today as weird spacecraft were once seen as gods or saints or long-dead prophets. But Graeber, a self-educated, determined man, took the low road to this insight, slogging through late-night rainstorms to measure so-called flight paths, probing hundreds of wide-eyed witnesses for shreds of hard detail about their sightings.

"It has made me a better person," he said. "That one experience as a boy led me to question basic things about myself and others. What started as an interest in UFOs became a fascination with psychology, literature, ancient history and mythology, religion. It opened up whole new worlds."

Graeber was never comfortable with what he saw that night from his bedroom window. He said his mother told him not to report it unless it happened again. It didn't, but Graeber said he couldn't forget.

He was drawn, almost against his will, into the world of UFOs, a flourishing American subculture consumed with the idea that we are being visited by creatures from another planet. It is a world heavily populated with kooks — a hundred hoaxsters and oddballs for every one serious man. Graeber was discouraged. He is a precise man with tireless curiosity, and it seemed the UFO groups he encountered were content to just believe.

"Most of the groups whose meetings I attended were like kaffeeklatsches, almost like cults," he recalled. "For \$10 they would certify you as field investigator, and they were happy with whatever report you turned in about a sighting, the juicier the better."

Graeber was determined to find out more for himself. To have seen something, something that so stubbornly evaded simple and logical explanation, and to have seen it so vividly, was an experience that ate away at him always. So

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JUL 2 1980

when there was a rash of UFO sightings in the Philadelphia area in 1973, four years after the U.S. Air Force had stopped studying UFO sightings, Graeber began investigating on his own.

The first casualty was Graeber's faith in other investigators. His best example was a sighting in Carbondale, Pa., in November 1974 — the famous case of the lantern in the lake.

Working late in his south Philadelphia home on a design project, Graeber first heard about the Carbondale case while listening to a late-night radio talk show program. Callers were describing a scene like something out of Orson Welles' broadcast of "War of the Worlds." Three teenagers had seen something flash through the sky and then zip into a small man-made lake. A glowing object could be seen under

the water. There were five or six eyewitnesses, including some local police officers — who had fired at the object.

"It seemed consistent with other strong UFO sightings," Graeber recalled. "It had what we refer to as 'elements of strangeness,' which is to say that the accounts could not be easily dismissed. So after verifying the reports with the Carbondale police chief by phone, Graeber packed a meal and a change of clothes, kissed the wife and kids goodbye, and set out on a four-hour nighttime drive north to see this thing first-hand.

"I got there at about 10 a.m." he recalled. "By midmorning, there were thousands of people watching around the lake." Graeber went to work taking soil samples and radiation readings,

and interviewing witnesses. Two other UFO investigators were there. One was handing out leaflets to the crowd proclaiming that flying saucers were, in fact, fallen angels.

Later that day, a volunteer diver located the object — a lantern-style Sears Roebuck flashlight, still faintly shining, Graeber chalked the incident up as a hoax, but was amazed to learn that other UFO groups, ones he had considered more serious, were still taking the Carbondale case seriously. One investigator, the one with the fallen-angel leaflets, alleged that the U.S. military had actually retrieved something from the lake secretly (without attracting the attention of any of the thousand watching), and was "covering up" what really happened.

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Graeber watched with dismay as the outlandish story gained wider and wider acceptance in UFO societies, until it had become part of the whole fabric of UFO history. When he tried to distribute his own report of the Carbondale case — scrupulously detailed but somehow less fantastic — he was ignored. Graeber said one angry caller accused him of being an "Air Force colonel in disguise."

Not all UFO sightings were so easy to dismiss, Graeber gradually learned how to strip imagination from fact in telephone reports, and developed clever techniques for checking and double-checking the stories of UFO witnesses. Over the years he became a competent investigator and amateur psychologist. But he was still stumped by extremely sincere, well-meaning people who insisted they had seen something strange in the sky. In the end, Graeber concluded that one could only believe them — after all, he too had seen something in the sky. But what?

"I eventually came to the conclusion that people really were seeing things in the sky, but what they were seeing depended as much on them, on their own psychological makeup, as it did on anything actual out there," Graeber said. In other words, sightings are triggered by some aerial object, be it a balloon, plane, bird or whatever. In the eyes of a susceptible witness, however, that object becomes something else. It is "subjectively contoured," he explained, "into a projection of some visual image buried in their subconscious mind."

So, for instance, a man who insisted he saw three bright objects in the sky assailed by a fourth, lone object coming from another direction, turned out to be recently separated from his wife and two children and secretly living

with another woman. What the witness saw in the sky, Graeber reasoned, was a visual display of his inner turmoil — of another woman intervening to chase away his family.

Several people witnessing the same object in the sky all see the same thing, Graeber explained, but each sees it differently. While that statement may correspond to psychological theory, Graeber learned it by tracking down all 10 witnesses and conducting detailed interviews with each. He insists that every UFO sighting he has been allowed to thoroughly investigate has been explainable according to these principles.

"When you stop and think about it, that explanation makes a lot more sense, and assumes a whole lot less, than explaining a sighting as a visit from outer space," Graeber said.

If anything, Graeber's new outlook on UFOs has made him even more interested in the phenomenon. He wonders exactly what seeing strange things in the sky means, why it happens. UFO sightings in his area have fallen off dramatically, he said, but when and if the reports pick up again, Graeber will be rushing to the scene.

"I still don't know the answer to my own sighting as a child," he said. "It doesn't bother me anymore, though. I've run through it countless times, tried to figure it from different angles, what was happening to me then and to my family, but I can't put it in line with anything in particular. I can't explain it, and I doubt that I will ever be able to."

Graeber knows that what he saw was real. It's just that his definition of reality, even the plain old earthly variety, has horizons as wide as the stars.