

HOAX

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

The question of hoaxes presents an interesting aspect of the UFO phenomenon. It can test the adequacy of UFO investigations and measure the powerful "will to believe" of many UFO investigators and authors. Only when, and if, these lessons are fully appreciated will serious UFO investigators be able to escape the suspicion that they are often victimized, willingly or unwillingly, by hoaxes.

English physicist David I. Simpson engineered some very revealing "UFO controlled experiment" hoaxes several years ago. According to his report published in the Spring 1980 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, the tests "compared known details of fabricated 'UFO' stimuli with the issued statements of investigators." In addition, Simpson wanted to test the abilities of UFO researchers by leaving clues that could suggest a practical solution. The hoaxes "were designed to present substantial inconsistencies that would allow any moderately critical investigator to cast strong suspicion on their authenticity."

One particular experiment was performed on the evening of March 28, 1970, while a group of British UFO enthusiasts near Warminster, in Wiltshire, were watching for UFOs that reportedly frequent the region. Simpson installed a purple spotlight on a neighboring hill. As it suddenly flashed on and off, a phony "magnetic detector" sounded an alarm at the observation site. An accomplice with a camera containing preexposed film (which already showed UFO images) made several exposures of the horizon and then handed the camera—to a prominent UFO researcher.

Simpson prepared the hoax film so that the photographed direction and appearance of the "UFO" were grossly at odds with what observers actually beheld. He also saw to it that the first two pre-exposed frames (taken almost a year earlier) showed background scenes significantly different from the two subsequent real exposures (which of course did not show any UFO). This should have been evident even to the least experienced investigator.

But no one seemed to notice (and no one even interviewed the photographer). After two months of study by top UFO experts in Europe, the photographs were declared by *Flying Saucer Review* editor Charles Bowen to be "genuine beyond all reasonable doubt."

One consultant reported that "there is nothing about these photographs that suggests to me they have been faked in any way whatsoever."

Ufologist Dr. Pierre Guerin, director of research at the Astrophysical Institute of the French National Center for Scientific Research, reported that "there is no question that the object photographed was the result of faking."

An artist's impression of the UFO appeared on the cover of the July–August 1970 issue of *Flying Saucer Review*; it showed the "object" with an angular diameter ten times too large (the experts had computed that the flying saucer was 60 feet long and 30 feet in diameter).

Eyewitness accounts described how the UFO—purple, fringed with white, having a crimson light in the middle—hovered for a moment and then moved toward Warminster before stopping again. All estimates of direction and duration were significantly erroneous, and the errors accumulated as time passed. (Later the object was described as giving off ultraviolet light and being surrounded by a "ruby-red halo.")

Simpson's critique of the "investigation," which he allowed to continue for two and a half years before revealing the hoax, was devastating: "My experiences in the UFO field have shown that the investigative incompetence demonstrated by this particular experiment, far from being exceptional, is typical. . . . Occasionally individuals with relevant technical backgrounds become involved; it is disturbing to witness the abandonment of their mental disciplines and common sense. . . . If ever there is subtle evidence suggesting extraterrestrial visitation, it is unlikely that it will be discovered by a typical ufologist."

Some UFO hoaxes start out as impulsive pranks rather than as carefully



Fact or fantasy? This UFO photo from Pennsylvania is a type commonly associated with hoaxes.

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planned scientific experiments. In March 1968 several college students at the University of Maryland were listening to a call-in radio-show interview with a man who claimed to have been taken by flying-saucer people to their home planet, Lanulos, "in the distant constellation Ganymede." One of the students, Tom Monteleone, an avid science-fiction buff, called to ask a question. Then Monteleone suddenly thought, *Just for the heck of it, why not claim I've been to Lanulos, too? It'll blow his mind!*

And so he did, and it did. The dumb-founded "contactee," Woodrow Derenberger, quickly regained his composure and corroborated Monteleone's description of the planet Lanulos, agreeing with details that contradicted things Derenberger had just disclosed on the show. Fifteen minutes later Monteleone hung up and enjoyed a good laugh with his roommates—until the phone rang. The radio station had traced his call and now wanted further information.

For the next two years Monteleone went along with the ruse, cleverly providing UFO investigators with information gleaned from Derenberger's accounts and from the general UFO literature. Whenever he "corroborated" information given earlier, his credibility rose further (he had told investigators that he was unfamiliar with UFO literature, and they believed him). UFO publicist Harold Salkin was impressed that Monteleone's story was "so tightly synchronized" with Derenberger's; UFO writer and editor Timothy Green Beckley taped an interview and wrote several magazine articles that presented the account as factual; noted UFO author and theorist John Keel called the story "one of the most puzzling contact stories in my files. . . . I'm forced to accept that it's true" (even though, as Monteleone noted, Keel's published accounts of the story were vastly distorted).

"I underwent long interviews," Monteleone recounted in *Omni* (May 1979). "I not only repeated my false experiences but also added further embellishments and absurdities—just to see how far I could carry the hoax before being discredited." Monteleone even submitted to a hypnosis session, sponsored by Salkin, during which he faked the trance and "passed" the test like a champion.

Strangely enough, when the full admission of the hoax was published in *Fate* magazine late last year (*Omni* had scooped *Fate* by a year and a half), Monteleone was the one blamed for all the confusion. His actions, wrote author Karl Pflock, "served to muddy still further the already muddy waters of ufology. The last thing we need, if we are to unravel the UFO mystery, is false leads that absorb any part of the far-too-limited resources of serious researchers"—which Pflock considered

Salkin, Beckley, and Keel, among others, to be. This ironic complaint appeared to absolve the gullible investigators of any responsibility for their careless and credulous acceptance of Monteleone's deliberately absurd fabrications. *Fate* magazine seemed to be saying that it was not their fault that they were hoaxed.

Some other reactions to Monteleone's confession are quite amusing. Salkin, who is described by long-time ufological observer James Moseley as "a warm, likable, but somewhat gullible sort," still refuses to believe Monteleone's confession. Keel is particularly upset and has issued a statement calling the *Fate* piece "an attempt to discredit my entire body of work and my professional reputation as a journalist for over 35 years." Keel is preparing a lawsuit, according to some accounts.

As for Beckley, he has to worry about fresher wounds in his credibility as a competent UFO investigator. In a recent issue of his monthly tabloid *UFO Review*, Beckley apparently became the victim of yet another UFO hoax.

In an article entitled "Erotic Encounters of the Very Close Kind," Beckley opened with the startling words, "It is not uncommon for the occupants of UFOs to have sexual contact with humans." He tried to lay the foundation for this far-out story in an editorial on the facing page: "Some readers undoubtedly will believe that we are getting a wee bit carried away when we turn to sex in order to sell a UFO newspaper. . . . We really aren't trying to capture a larger audience by printing a sensationalistic headline on our cover. If we wanted to take this approach, we'd . . . simply fabricate the stories we print. But we don't cater to the gullible. . . . All the items we mention in our story are fully documented. We need not substitute fiction for truth—for truth is far greater than fiction in the field of UFOlogy."

The principal source of Beckley's "saucer sex" story was a newspaper account dated February 12, 1978, which carried the headline KIDNAPPED TO VENUS. Reporter Jerry Burger told of a thirty-one-year-old librarian found by police as she rambled around in a park, wearing no clothes. She claimed she had been "abducted by Venusians" and taken to the "back of the moon," where she was "implanted with outer-space semen" before being returned to Earth. Beckley reported the case as true and added that "such reports are taking place on a global scale. . . . There can be little doubt from the documented evidence that some tremendous event is slated to happen that will guide us to a higher understanding of ourselves and the cosmos. . . . The UFOnuts are trying to teach us a lesson—that love is universal and encompasses every living creature, regardless of their planet or dimension of origin." And for those readers who wanted more information, Beckley added that the "saucer sex" story is just one chapter in his new book, *Strange Encounters—Bizarre & Eerie Contacts with Flying Saucers*, avail-