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Look! Up there in the sky! Great balls of fire!

by Don McAninch
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Wendell McDougald of 560 S.E. Andrews St. was driving eastbound on Interstate 90 at about 10 p.m. on December 19 when a brilliant white ball of light whooshed across the freeway only a few hundred feet over his head.

The object was flying at a low angle, McDougald said. It appeared about four feet in diameter, trailed an illumina-

ated streamer several hundred feet long and sparked off pieces of burning material as it flew.

McDougald said he thinks the object was a meteorite.

McDougald was one of several people who phoned the Issaquah police that night to report the unidentified flying object, police records show.

The Issaquah police called the University of Washington

police, who relayed the story to the university's astronomy department. Helga Byre, a spokesperson for the Department of Astronomy, said several people reported the flying object to them.

McDougald also reported the sighting to the Issaquah Fire Department. The firefighters who were at the station called in fire chief Tony Singleton, who was at home. McDougald led Singleton to

the area where he thinks the object hit, but they couldn't find it.

"These guys knew I wasn't lying," McDougald said. "I was so hyped-up it wasn't funny." He said the sight of the burning object blasting across the sky above him sent chills up his spine.

McDougald refused to tell where he thinks the object struck earth. He said he plans to keep investigating and looking for the "meteorite." He added that a U.W. scientist wants to join him in searching for the object, and will be allowed to.

Until the object sighted by McDougald is found, there is no physical evidence to indicate what it was. Byre confirmed that "some people did see it," but added that none of them were connected with the university.

The university's observa-

tory is "useless" for spotting and tracking objects inside the earth's atmosphere, she explained, because its telescope can only be focused on a small area of the sky.

"All we know is that people called in," Byre said. "It could be space garbage, or it could be the hoped-for meteorite. We don't know we have a meteorite until we find something on the ground." ("Space garbage" is junk left in space by human activity. For instance, expired satellites have been orbiting the earth for decades.)

McDougald said he reported the sighting to the Federal Aviation Administration and someone there told him the object was tracked by FAA radar until it fell below 200 feet, the lowest level at which ordinary radar can track an object.

Bill Hawks, an FAA spokesman, said the agency received one report from a person who saw the flying object from the ground, and two from airline pilots who spotted the thing from the air. He said the pilots only described the unusual flying object, they did not say what they thought it was.

However, Hawks said that to the best of his knowledge the object was never tracked by FAA radars.

An Issaquah police report on the sighting says that a seismograph at the U.W. did not detect any seismic activity at the time the flying object was sighted. That probably means that if the object did strike earth, it had already been burned down to a fairly small size by the heat generated by air friction.