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# Panel investigating 'close encounters'

By STEVE ERICKSON  
of The Oregonian staff

BEAVERTON — John Merrell, sole Oregon member of an international group of UFO watcher-watchers, spends his spare time debunking UFO sightings — with a few exceptions.

One of the latter was his own.

Investigating such claims is what the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal is all about.

Merrell, a 28-year-old home furnishings salesman, is an associate member of the group's UFO subcommittee. He said 94 percent of the reports of "unidentified flying objects" have produced logical, earthly explanations.

His own UFO encounter, seven years ago near Eugene, was in the other 6 percent.

"I saw something I couldn't explain," Merrell said. "It appeared to be three stars that were in a triangle formation, and they split."

Merrell's sighting went into the "unresolved" file, where 6 percent of the committee's investigations end up. Conclusions in resolved cases range from "weather balloon" to "hoax."

So far, the subcommittee has found no cases it can definitely attribute to visitors from outer space. Nevertheless, Merrell said, its members are more than a bunch of debunkers.

"It's fair to say committee members are detectives," Merrell said. "We're all little Sherlock Holmeses."

Members of its parent body include "scientists, philosophers, educators, writers and magicians," Merrell said, adding that all "share a common concern about the rising tide of uncritical acceptance of claims about such alleged phenomena as extrasensory perception, astrology, pyramid energy and UFOs."



JOHN MERRELL

"I've had people think we're a bunch of eccentric skeptics who have already made up our minds when it's just the opposite," he said.

The group materialized in 1976 at Buffalo, N.Y., now its headquarters city, sponsored by the American Humanist Association. Its quarterly magazine, "The Skeptical Inquirer," has 16,000 subscribers in the United States, Merrell said.

The committee's chairman is Paul Kurtz, philosophy professor on the State University of New York's campus in Buffalo. Among its more widely known fellows are science writer Isaac Asimov, evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, astronomer Carl Sagan and psychologist B.F. Skinner.

The overall group does "good, critical investigation of anything that borders on pseudo-science or paranormal claims," not just UFOs, Merrell said.

The 12-member UFO subcommittee was established partly because there has been no governmental research for several years on UFOs, Merrell said. In five months on the panel, he said, he has reached some conclusions about UFOs.

"There are plenty of things people see in the sky. People don't know what they're looking at," he said. "Just because an object is strange, people shouldn't jump to the conclusion it is a UFO craft" from outer space.

Often, what earthbound skywatchers actually see are satellites or meteors, Merrell said. "The planet Venus, of course, is a classic, much as it sounds like a cop-out like swamp gas. At times it's one of the brighter stars," he said.

Other UFO sighting claims turn out to be disturbances in upper cloud patterns, city lights, planes refueling while airborne at night and search and landing lights on planes, he added. "A ground observer has an extremely difficult time trying to relate to depth of field, trying to put in perspective angles, motion and speed when they occur up above," he said.

Merrell said that once a subcommittee member learns of a sighting claim, he goes to the site, interviews the person who saw the UFO and makes notes. Six months later comes a second interview.

After that much time has passed, if a sighting is valid, all details of the scene will remain crystal clear, Merrell said. In other cases, persons who originally reported UFOs hovering over bare trees during winter might recall during a summer re-interview that foliage was full.

"Something as remarkable as UFO craft, that dramatic, that's going to stick in their memory," he said.

Merrell said he is neither cynical nor gullible about UFOs. "I believe there is the possibility in the universe of intelligent extraterrestrial life," he said. "I don't believe in 'E.T.' life visitations of Earth."

He said he expected a spate of UFO sightings as a result of the hit movie "E.T.," but it never materialized. He said the state averages two to three valid UFO reports a year.

"People want to believe it," Merrell

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said. "It's good-natured fantasy as long as the public realizes there's a difference between fantasy and real scientific investigation."

Merrell calls fellow subcommittee members "the best investigators I've met." They don't want to tear apart someone's story but to find out the truth, he said. Still, the subcommittee has found no definite sightings of craft from outer space.

"It would be nice to be able to say 'That worked out, we agree with their stance,' but it's never happened," Merrell said. "As far as I'm concerned there is no unresolved UFO case out there that needs to be resolved — none."

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### ALIVE AND WELL

We want to thank and compliment J. Kingston Pierce on the article he wrote about our centers ("You're gonna think I'm crazy, but . . . .," Oct. 3). However, there was an ambiguous statement that we feel must be cleared up as we have been receiving mail from all over the United States asking us why we are giving up the Contact Center.

The UFO Contact Center International is alive and well in the state of Wyoming. We now have 22 centers around the United States and four foreign centers starting up. Each center is a subsidiary of the International Center directed by us. We are not turning the Contact Center over to anyone but are actively pursuing the creation of more so that they will serve those contactees that do not know where to obtain help.

If there are persons with questions or persons who would like to start centers, they should feel free to write to us at the International Center, P.O. Box 775, McFadden, Wyo., 82080. We will tell them the closest center in their area or help them from here.

Thank you for printing this letter and clearing up this matter.

Dan and Aileen Edwards, directors  
UFO Contact Center International  
McFadden, Wyo.