

Quest to meet outer space visitors ends in tragedy

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GRAND MARAIS, Minn. — From Oct. 5 to Nov. 15, Gerald Flach and LaVerne Landis sat in the bucket seats of his 1979 Chevrolet Monza and waited, deep in the northern Minnesota wilderness, for visitors from outer space.

The autumn leaves, already faded past their prime, fell from the trees. Crisp days gave way to blowing snow and temperatures that sometimes dropped to 10 degrees below zero.

The visitors never came.

The couple might have waited longer — Flach later said his companion insisted "spirits" had reassured her a UFO would arrive — but after weeks without food and days without water, Landis, 50, perished of starvation, dehydration and hypothermia.

Flach stumbled and crawled the quarter mile to the main road and was found by a passing construction contractor.

"She was in contact with them (the spirits) just about every night," Flach told

Deputy Frank Redfield of the Cook County sheriff's office after his rescue. "They kept telling us they would be picking us up. It never happened. Every time it never happened."

What drove them to abandon their families and roam through the Northern Plains for six months, searching for unidentified flying objects, then maintain a six-week vigil without food, heat or adequate clothing?

What part in the expedition to Loon Lake was played by a spiritual group called Search and Prove, to which Flach and Landis belonged?

Flach, who may hold the answers, has been hospitalized for psychiatric treatment and reporters' telephone messages asking for an interview have gone unanswered.

Part of their story is now known from interviews with sheriff's deputies who talked to Flach, people who saw Flach and Landis at the remote lake and with sources

close to the family who asked not to be identified.

Friends and relatives described Landis, a registered nurse who worked at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul, Minn., as always seeking to learn more about people. She once commented that much was known about the body, "but we know so little about the mind," according to a friend.

People said she was extremely stable, a person who, "if you were down, would always say look at the bright side." They also said she had a longstanding interest in psychic phenomena that approached obsession after her husband died in 1975.

In 1973, she joined Search and Prove, which had advertised workshops on astral projection and psychic development. There she met Flach, 39, a founding member of the group. Flach's interest in UFOs preceded his involvement with Search and Prove, but had not appeared excessive, friends said.

Search and Prove members believe in contacting spirits through meditation and

astral projection, the phenomenon in which a person's spirit is thought to leave the body to function independently. A spirit named Mora purportedly spoke in a rasping voice "through" group leader Jerry Gross, advising members on lifestyle and the seven astral planes of existence.

Early this year, Flach and Landis attended a psychic convention in California. After that, they began taking trips, often for several days at a stretch and usually neglecting to tell their families of their whereabouts.

On May 17, they disappeared. Flach's wife of 14½ years, Diane, traced her husband through a credit card bill to a motel. Friends said he refused his wife's request to come home.

Flach filed for divorce; her husband was still missing when the petition was granted Oct. 25. She has refused to talk to reporters.

One of Landis' five daughters telephoned Gross a month after her mother disap-



Landis: A follower

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Gross: The group leader

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peared. Family sources said the daughter told Gross she would file a missing person report with the police if her mother did not contact her. Landis called within hours, the sources said.

Gross was the contact again five months later when he bore the news that Landis was dead and Flach was in a Grand Marais hospital. Nevertheless, Gross has denied any connection between Search and Prove and the couple's trek to the north.

During the six months from May to Nov. 15, Flach told Redfield, he and Landis drove through Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Dakota, always seeking contact with spirits and unidentified flying objects.

"We made contact out in the central Dakotas and they guided us into the Gunflint Trail for a pickup," Flach said in a statement made to Redfield.

The Gunflint Trail is State Route 12, a narrow, winding highway that stretches 50 miles into the wilderness toward Canada from Grand Marais. They reached the road on Oct. 5, settling at a secluded spot near a boat landing.

They parked in a small, circular lot surrounded by tall pines, balsam, spruce, birch and aspen. Flach backed the car up against the south side of a hill and waited.

Deputy Kenneth Carlson, who interviewed Flach in the hospital, said Flach told him he and Landis were "supposed to be picked up by a flying saucer ... and get

a transaction of some money ... and make payments at Search and Prove and then get back with their families."

In the same interview, Flach said they expected the spirits to give them powers to heal the sick and money to pay off loans for the Search and Prove Study Center in Afton, Minn.

The couple got their water from the lake — until it froze. They had brought some food with them, Flach said, but for three weeks had nothing but vitamins to eat. He said the spirits had told them they didn't need any food.

"They would be taking care of us, our food needs," Flach told Redfield. "We believed. We had firm belief."

The area is sparsely inhabited, particularly between the summer resort season and the winter's cross-country skiing. Local residents were aware of the couple parked down by the lake. On Oct. 14, nine days after the couple began their vigil, residents reported their presence to the sheriff's office. Deputies drove past periodically until the side road into the landing was blocked by snow the first week in November.

The only person known to have talked with them at length was Patrick O'Leary, a U.S. Forest Service technician.

O'Leary and an assistant stopped at the car Oct. 13. "I asked him if they had any problems," O'Leary said. "He said, 'No.

There's no problem. We're OK. Everything's fine.' Then I looked at her and said, 'Are you OK?' She said, 'Yeah, we're fine, just fine, everything's OK.'

"She said that several different times and then he started on this spiel about how they were doing this study on hypothermia and car survival. He said he was working on a college thesis."

O'Leary said Flach told him they would sit in the car to observe the effects of cold weather on themselves for three to five days and then go into town to get food and clean up. In another interview, however, Flach said he and Landis remained beside the lake.

"They looked a little rough then, but no more than a person coming off a canoe trip or anything like that," O'Leary said.

The only other person known to have talked with the couple was Kim Danielson, a Gunflint Trail resident who drove to the landing to look for deer tracks in the snow Nov. 5, the day before hunting season opened.

"I pulled up to the passenger side. She opened the window and I asked if they needed a pull out or anything," Danielson said. "He said no, that they were doing a study for some college. He asked when the plow would come in. I told them it doesn't.

"She never said a word the whole time. She just kind of stared straight ahead."

Danielson said he thought it "kind of

strange they wouldn't have somebody overlooking it. Once hypothermia sets in, it's too late to do anything."

After his rescue, Flach told Redfield the hypothermia study had been "just a story to protect the project we were really on ... the UFOs."

Kevin Walsh, who works at Gunflint Lodge, made frequent trips to the landing to check traps.

"He waded maybe twice," Walsh said. "I never saw her move. They were just sitting there with pieces of blanket over their heads."

Walsh last saw the couple the day before Landis died.

"The car was covered with snow and the door on the passenger side hadn't been opened," he said. "The windows were so steamed up, you could barely see in."

Flach told deputies Landis started to talk irrationally the night of Nov. 14. He suggested he go for help. He described their last conversation in the official statement:

"She said, 'We've got to stay here. They're going to be in. I know it, I can feel it, they're almost here.'"

"I said, 'We better get going. I can still crawl out if I have to.' She said, 'No. They'll be here, they'll be here.'"

The next morning, Landis had stopped talking. Flach could not get a response. It was time to go for help.