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UFO Group Pursues Interest In The Strange

By Charlotte Grimes
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

What do a housewife, a surgical assistant, a map maker, a retired autoworker and a Lutheran clergyman have in common?

Would you believe . . . UFOs?

Not that any of the five, or the 50 others, who gathered at the Farm and Home Savings Building at 110 West Lockwood Avenue in Webster Groves on Sunday expected an unidentified flying object to materialize out of a crystal-clear sky. Some — in decidedly unexpected circumstances — say they have already had that experience.

Rather, they are pursuing a personal fascination with the strange, often hoping for explanations as to how it came into their lives.

Their communal attempt at that is called the UFO Study Group of Greater St. Louis Inc.

"We have members as young as 14 and two who are in their 70s," explained John Schroeder, chairman of the 14-year-old group and a Lutheran clergyman. "As far as education, most have college degrees and many have a background in the sciences."

He chuckled and added: "Some come to the meetings just because they like a good story."

He said the group has about 80 dues-paying members but that as many as 200 people might show up for its lectures, Schroeder said. Among them, good stories are not rare. And despite the official name, the stories don't always have anything to do with UFOs and visitors from space.

Anything will do — the strange, the unexplainable, the fascinating and perhaps the frightening. The Loch Ness monster or dinosaurs in Africa, say.

The featured attraction Sunday was Bigfoot — alias "Sasquatch" — North American cousin to the Abominable Snowman of the Himalaya Mountains.

But the lure only wears different skins.

"It's a very deep, personal thing,"

said Jeff Kretsch, by day a cartographer with the U.S. Defense Mapping Agency, by night an investigator into UFO sightings for the group. He likes to balance fact against wishful thinking.

"People want to believe in it," he said. "Sometimes when I'm investigating and can show that there was a natural explanation, the people lose interest. But others, well, they find it exciting and it becomes kind of a hobby for them."

Long before Steven Spielberg, close encounters were *de rigueur* for the group's members.

Schroeder had his encounter as a 17-year-old in 1941. He recalled that he and his 16-year-old brother had watched a 30-foot shape hover above a house, its skin a burnished metal and its portholes alternately flashing lights of lavender and orange.

"I've been looking for others who saw it ever since," he said.

Frank M. Brown, a retired General Motors Corp. worker, was snickered at by his co-workers and dubbed "The UFO Man" for his fascination that began with a sighting when he was 12. But he takes it seriously indeed.

He reads constantly in scientific and popular journals and hopes that someday, he'll get a chance to "walk right up to one." He advertises his interest with a highly personalized license plate. Under light-reflecting letters that spell out "Did", is the question "U C A UFO." He wants those who have to call him.

Gayle and Phil O'Brien, both 35, aren't quite so dedicated. But they know the feelings for UFOs well. Gayle, a housewife, saw unaccountable lights in a night sky not long after Phil, a surgical assistant at a hospital, had his car chased by a UFO, they say.

"It's scary and intriguing," Mrs. O'Brien said. "When you see strange things flying in the sky, you'd like to know why."

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