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It's been a relatively quiet year for UFO

WHITE SWAN — It was once considered a hotbed of the unexplained.

For years, a remote, roadless 2,800-square mile area of rugged hills and deep canyons located near Toppenish Ridge east of White Swan served as a natural setting for the mysterious. During the early 1970s, blinding lights were reported zigzagging across the sky almost nightly. There were even reports of encounters of the third kind.

In 1973, it was termed one of the busiest spots in the world for the number of UFO reports. It attracted such noted investigators as Dr. J. Allen Hyneck, a former consultant to the Air Force's UFO study known as Project Blue Book.

But in the mid-1970s the numbers of sightings began dropping. This year, less than a handful of sightings have been reported.

"Why it was such a hotbed and why sightings have decreased we don't know. But we do know they have decreased world-wide," said Toppenish resident Bill Vogel.

"They were so common in the early 1970s I got tired of taking pictures of them," Vogel said.

Before retiring in 1981 as staff fire control officer for the Yakima Indian Nation, Vogel supervised the fire spotters who manned the isolated watch



Craig Trolanello

From the
Lower Valley

towers in the area. Vogel says he and nearly all his fire spotters saw strange objects or lights during throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s.

"They (fire spotters) had seen things that looked like rockets coming out of canyons," Vogel recalls.

Vogel began collecting reports on the dozens of sightings in about 1972. His notebook containing interviews and various news clippings now fill a 3-1/2-inch-thick binder. "I'm not one who sees a UFO behind every tree. I've never let it really bug me, or let it become a fetish, it's more a hobby. I never came up with a conclusion other than it is something that the U.S. government isn't doing," he said. Vogel has also collected dozens of photographs, some taken by him, others by fire spotters.

None of the photographs show a classic "flying saucer" or disk-shaped appearance. Most simply resemble a burned out white, orange or reddish

sightings

along Pumphouse Road, he passed three panicked cattle headed in the opposite direction. A short time later his headlights fell on three figures standing in a depression next to the roadway.

According to the report, one of the figures moved to the center of the road. It was described as seven feet tall with a "very long face and a long pointy nose. His skin was very white as if covered by flour. The upper lip appeared to be pulled back in a permanent snarl and fine teeth were visible. The impression was that the individual did not have or had a very small lower lip.

(The person) drove around the individual in the road and headed home as fast as he could drive," according to the report.

While driving away, his vehicle was bathed in a bright light by an airborne object following the truck. The light diminished by the time he reached home, the reported stated.

A report on the incident concluded the witness did not appear to be making up the story and he did not want any publicity.

"In short, this is one of those cases where no assignment of belief or disbelief should or can be made. It is reasonable to expect that something very strange did happen to (him). Maybe time will add some more understanding to the case."

speck or series of specks against a black background.

Sometimes the intensity of the lights were too great to look at, let alone clearly photograph, said Dorothea Strum, a Yakima resident and 23-year veteran fire spotter.

Generally, the lights appeared only long enough to catch the eye before disappearing, Strum said. Sometimes there were reports of unexplained flashes of light from deep inside canyons, yet no fires were reported. Other times the lights would dart around ridge tops at high speeds, shift directions, break up and later reunite, she said.

"Airplanes can't makes turns like that. I can tell what are car lights and what aren't car lights," Strum said.

Occasionally, the lights would hover for longer periods of time, once for almost a half hour, Strum said.

Strum said lights usually didn't frighten her. But there was one notable exception. It took place several years ago when she was manning the Sophia Lookout atop Toppenish Ridge. Awakened in the middle of the night, Strum said she saw a cloud-like object outside her tower. It had an intense brightness that appeared to emanate from behind the object.

"It lit up the whole tower. I could see the pencils on my desk. I was real uneasy during the 20 minutes to half hour I watched it," she said. During that

time the intensity of the light would brighten and diminish, but Strum said she never determined the direct cause of the light.

"Every time it began to brighten, I kept thinking how I was going to see it," she said. Eventually, the light simply faded away, she said.

Vogel, whose job took him to the remote isolated regions of the reservation, said more than once he was swept by an overpowering sense of uneasiness. "A few times I'd get a feeling I had no business being were I was. It was just like walking into a dark room and you have a feeling that someone else is in the room," he said.

Vogel said when those feelings struck, he would leave the area. Inevitably a fire spotter would report a sighting in the area he had just left, he said.

Vogel said several fire spotters said they, too, had experienced similar feelings.

Only the frequency of sightings made the area unique, he said. "There is nothing on the reservation that hasn't been reported in other places," he said.

Like other places, there have been reports of encounters with strange beings. Vogel shared a copy of one report under the condition the witness not be identified.

A Toppenish area man reported that on Dec. 16, 1976, while driving west