

Anchorage, AK
Daily Times
(Cir. D. 43,212)
(Cir. S. 53,595)

FEB 19 1985

Allen's P.C.B. Est. 1862

Balloons

Continued from page B-1

zero temperatures, "now is an optimum time" for such balloons to reach great heights and achieve the desired effect.

FAA spokesman Paul Steucke, meanwhile, said his agency received several reports of similar, but apparently unrelated, sightings Monday in other parts of the state.

Accounts of a "flash" on Eklutna Flats at about 8:30 p.m. Monday from several Wasilla residents sent Anchorage police searching the area for a downed plane, Steucke said. Nothing was found.

Five minutes later, an off-duty FAA employee reported seeing a "very bright flash of light, followed by a large thunderclap" near Northway, about 275 miles northeast of Anchorage.

The agency also received reports of a bright orange flash in the sky from the crews of three airliners — Western Airlines flight 723, Alaska Airlines flight 58 and a chartered ARCO jet — flying over Alaska, Steucke said.

Air traffic controllers at Anchorage International Airport and Merrill Field failed to see the lights on both nights, the spokesman said, and neither tower reported spotting any unusual blips on their radar screens.

Night sky lights may be balloons

by Beth Cunningham and Earl Swift
Times Writers

Mysterious colored lights hovering and darting over the city surprised many Anchorage residents for the second consecutive night Monday. One local hot-air balloonist said today he'd "bet dollars to doughnuts" that night-time skywatchers can thank pranksters for the apparent UFOs.

"I know from experience; I did it when I was a teen-ager," said Paul Costa, co-owner of Anchorage's Hot Air Affair, a passenger hot-air balloon service. "It's pranksters."

"They do it for an effect, and that's what they got the Sunday night, so they did it again last night (Monday)," he said.

City police and Alaska State Trooper telephone lines were busy Sunday with reports from area residents that they had seen

strange, colored lights moving rapidly — and in apparent formation — over the city.

The sightings — which came shortly before 11 p.m. Sunday and again between 9 and 11:30 p.m. Monday — were explained as "balloons doing night flying" by Federal Aviation Administration officials shortly after their first appearances. Local hot-air balloon enthusiasts claimed Monday, however, that they could account for every balloon pilot in town at the time the initial sightings took place.

But Costa credited the lights to a local joker with a strong scientific bent.

An aerial-colored light is easy to obtain, the pilot said, simply by tying a lighted candle inside and blowing air into, a plastic garment bag. In very cold weather, such as Sunday and Monday nights, the bag's warmth

causes it to rise rapidly into the atmosphere, he said.

Soon the candle ignites the plastic bag, creating flaming, colored lights, he explained, adding that at some heights fast-moving air currents can carry the bags at speeds up to 50 mph.

Alaska State Trooper spokesman Paul Edscorn said he saw "about two dozen" of the lights from his West Anchorage home late Monday and agreed with Costa that they appeared to be homemade hot-air balloons.

"It's not difficult to do," he said, "but someone's putting some work into it. It looked like they just let them go one after the other in a line."

Whoever is behind the prank knows his science, Costa said: With the city's present sub-

See Balloons, page B-5