

Origin of big dirt 'cookie' puzzles experts

By Mercer Cross
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Among aficionados of oddball natural occurrences, it's called the "cookie-cutter" puzzle.

The term refers to a mysterious hole in the ground that was discovered last October in northeastern Washington state, on the Colville Indian Reservation, not far from the Grand Coulee Dam.

A chunk of earth 10 feet long, 7 feet wide, and 18 inches to 2 feet deep, weighing at least a couple of tons, was uprooted from a depression in a wheat field. It apparently arced through the air, rotated slightly en route, and landed virtually intact 73 feet away.

Since then, winter storms have blanketed the hole with snow. Cows grazing in the field have trampled down the edges.

Nobody has figured out how or why the dirt took flight. Several scientists have examined the divot and come away scratching their heads. Investigators of unidentified flying object phenomena have expressed interest.

Okanogan County farmers Rick and Pete Timm, who found the displaced dirt, notified Don Aubertin, director of mining on the Indian reservation. He suspected a meteorite fragment. A geologist hired by the reservation took a look and said no.

"There was no sign of impact," Aubertin told a newspaper reporter in November, when the story came to public attention. "The hole was not a crater. It had vertical walls and a fairly flat bottom. It was almost as though it had been cut out with a giant cookie cutter."

Theories abound. One is that an earthquake caused the freakish upheaval. A quake with a 3.0 rating on the Richter scale, its epicenter about 20 miles from the hole, had rattled the area nine days before the Timm brothers' discovery.

Stephen D. Malone, a University of Washington earthquake expert, discounts that possibility as "beyond the incredible." A quake that small, he explains, lacks the power to boost a heavy patch of turf out of the ground.

"A hoax, I think, is a possibility," Malone says. So do some other scientists who have not inspected the site.

Others say they don't see how a hoax



U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Geologists examine a mysterious chunk of earth near the hole it was lifted from

could have been perpetrated in the field, situated in a remote area sprinkled with massive boulders that local residents call "haystack rocks."

For one thing, no signs of human intrusion — no wheel tracks, footprints, or evidence of machinery — were found.

Robert L. Schuster, a geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Golden, Colo., examined the puzzling hole. He leans toward the theory that an underground methane gas explosion may have popped the earth out.

"I'm not ruling out the earthquake, myself," says Greg Behrens, a geologist

with the federal Bureau of Reclamation at Grand Coulee Dam. Behrens, who probably has spent more time studying the riddle than anyone else, thinks the methane theory is improbable.

The quake could have generated concentric surface seismic waves, Behrens says. "Trouble is," he wrote John P. Timmerman, chairman and treasurer of the Center for UFO Studies, in December, "that anything this large has neither been witnessed nor monitored during a seismic event."

In his letter to Timmerman, Behrens cited other potential natural causes of the so-far inexplicable uplifting: a "freak tor-

nado" or a "complex freezing action" combined with strong winds. But, he noted, the weather was warm when the incident is supposed to have occurred.

The cookie-cutter mystery "doesn't hold up as a very strong case for our field of study," says Timmerman, a savings-and-loan executive in Lima, Ohio. But, he adds, "It's a little hard to walk away from something like this, because it's so tantalizing. It's very suggestive."

Nobody can say with certainty whether an answer to the enigma will ever be found. "It's the most bizarre thing I ever saw," Aubertin says.