



— US Bureau of Reclamation Photo

Geologists examined the chunk of earth that came from the hole in the foreground

Who did it?

No one can explain odd hole, companion divot found out west

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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 northwestern 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, rotating 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 (UFO) 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 frankish upheaval. A quake with a 3.0 rating on the Richter scale, its epicenter some 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, discounted that possibility as "beyond the incredible." He said a quake that small would lack the power to boost a heavy patch of turf out of the ground.

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

Others say they don't see how a hoax 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 US 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," said 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.

Nevertheless, in November he sent soil samples to the bureau's regional office in Boise, Idaho, for analysis. No lab tests had been conducted by February; low priority and a shortage of staff were given as reason. The government plans no further investigations.

The quake could have generated concentric surface seismic waves, Behrens said. "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 tornado or a complex freezing action combined with strong winds. But, he wryly noted, the weather was warm when the incident is supposed to have occurred.

Behrens went on to mention several conceivable man-made causes, among them an excavation by an enormous crane or an airborne pick-up of the earth by a helicopter.

"Man has done more spectacular things," Behrens said. "But the cost would be high and the profit nil."

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

One scientist who is particularly tantalized is Bruce N. Kallier, hazards geologist for the Utah Geological and Mineral Survey.

In 1978, on an inspection trip after a 3.5 earthquake in northern Utah, he came up a cross-shaped depression 14 feet in diameter. The only possible explanation for it, Kallier concluded, was an object dropped from an aircraft, possibly a large chunk of ice.

Holes in our planet almost never go unexplained. Most common are sinkholes, the kind that occasionally make headlines with cave-ins that swallow buildings, cars and sometimes people. Such subsidence, as it is called, usually occurs in the 15% of the United States that overlies soluble limestone that erodes underground, from causes both natural and man-made.

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