

Did it come from outer space?

Old UFO controversy surfaces in dispute over OC Indian site

By Tom Krattenmaker
The Register

SANTA ANA — A dispute over Indian artifacts in south Orange County has revived an old mystery involving a San Bernardino County sheriff's deputy, Polaroid snapshots and alleged visitations from outer space.

The photographs — taken by a reserve deputy who since has died — show a saucer-shaped light hanging over an Indian religious site in the Mojave Desert.

They were produced Tuesday by local Gabriellino Indian Chief Jim Velasques to back up claims of his people's continuing contact with alien astronauts.

On the other hand, sheriff's personnel who remember the episode scoffed Tuesday at that interpretation, saying the saucer shape in the picture is a photographic quirk. And local archaeologists said there is no scientific evidence of such visits to the Indians.

The controversial Indian chief said he decided to go public with "the truth" about his people's religion to prove his point in a developing controversy over an El Toro rock formation.

The 3,000-year-old formation was termed a crude but "brilliant" calendar in an archaeological report released last week. The study was commissioned by a developer constructing homes on the site.

But Velasques, 56, angered that he was not notified when the rocks were unearthed nearly a year ago, says those interpretations violate the sanctity of religious artifacts.

He claims, rather, that the formation symbolizes his ancient ancestors' link to outer space — a link he says is proven by the controversial photographs taken in 1959.

"The reason I brought (the photographs) out was to show the celestial meaning of (the El Toro) archaeology discovery," Velasques said at his Santa Ana home Tuesday.

He said the photographs are his only physical record of contacts with spacecraft, although he claims to have experienced dozens of similar visits at the high-desert site known as Giant Rock, near the town of Landers.

"Had I known the time was coming (to go public), I'd have had my little camera going night and day."

According to accounts by Velasques and a San Bernardino County sheriff's official on duty that day, the pictures were taken in May 1959 by a reserve deputy named Franz Ackerman.

A now-defunct group of UFO hobbyists were holding a sighting conference at Giant Rock that day, said Joe Karr, then a deputy sheriff assigned to help monitor the crowd of several hundred people.

Velasques said he was on hand to address the gathering and request the visitation as his people's ceremonial leader.

"Some people called it a flying-saucer convention, some names not so nice," Karr said from Victorville, where he now heads the sheriff's desert-and-mountain command as a deputy chief.

Karr said he had to leave Giant Rock on a call just before 12:10 p.m., the time the picture was taken. But, he remembers the ensuing controversy over the picture Ackerman took with his Polaroid.

Karr and Velasques said Ackerman denied even seeing the saucer-shaped light, expressing surprise when it appeared in the developing snapshot.

"Franz reportedly took a picture

of something," Karr said. "When it developed, there was a little tiny thing in the upper corner. ... If someone has a good imagination, they could say it was a flying saucer." But Karr attributes it to a "flaw in the photographic material."

Velasques, however, calls it plain luck. "The sheriff, he just picked up his camera, focused and as he went to pull the lever, there he got it."

The most detailed account of the episode was printed in the June-July 1959 publication of the gathering's sponsor, an organization called the College of Universal Wisdom.

It, too, said Ackerman never saw the saucer-shaped light, which lasted about 10 seconds. In fact, the article says none of the people in attendance saw the phenomenon except two boys on top of the mountain beside Giant Rock.

The boys, the article said, reported that it came straight down and darted horizontally to the ground "so fast they could hardly follow it."

Annette Ospital, spokeswoman for the Native American Heritage Commission, said from Sacramento Tuesday that she, too, has heard stories about the 1959 pictures.

Constance Cameron, director of an anthropology museum at Cal State Fullerton, said Velasques' explanation of the photographs and El Toro rocks "are not a scientific outlook on life. ... That ancient visitors came from outer space, most archaeologists would say is nonsense."