

Egads, Ethel, they're back!



The Times/Chuck Grath

Frequent UFO sightings split town into believers and skeptics

By Robert Unger
Times Correspondent

HILLSBORO, N.H. — If E.T. ever does phone home, he's likely to call collect from the Moose Lodge bar. Folks are friendly there; they don't mind strangers.

And besides, the lodge does sit at the crossroads of the cosmos.

At least that's how Hillsboro has come to see itself. Heretofore, space travel has become a matter of watching the evening sky, and unidentified flying object sightings are so personal they carry the names of friends and neighbors.

By now, local folks would be downright offended if E.T. phoned from anywhere else.

If all that sounds a bit far-fetched to some, perhaps it's because they haven't walked the streets and backroads of Hillsboro and talked to the people, learning firsthand what it's like to live beneath an intergalactic freeway.

"Fact is, we just don't say as much about the space people any more," said Linda Stellato, who keeps the books for Hillsboro Crossing, the town's main restaurant. "That's doesn't mean folks don't see them up there. We just quit talking about it."

Hillsboro residents have been seeing things in the sky for decades. Not just strange lights, though there have been plenty of those, but also vessels themselves. And not just a few vessels, not just a few times, and not just a few people.

Sherman Larsen, a founder of the Center for UFO Studies in Evanston, Ill., says he

understands that phenomenon well: "It's simple. As more people are willing to tell what they've seen, even more people become willing to talk, even if they don't make an official report. They even talk for the first time about things that happened years before. They are willing to risk ridicule. There's no proof Hillsboro has more activity than other places, but people there apparently aren't afraid to tell about their experiences."

So scanning the Hillsboro skies is virtually a community pastime. And almost everyone has a story to tell about what he's seen, right down to the guy who pumps the visitor's gas.

"About 10 years ago my wife, Roberta, and her mother were driving along at night when they saw something strange in the sky," said Lewis Fletcher, who owns the gas station. "They wouldn't have thought much about just that. Happens too often. But then their car just suddenly died. Dead. Just sat there."

"Well, after about 10 minutes it started again, and they hadn't done a thing. Never turned it off. Never turned it on. It was a new Cadillac, too. The mechanic said it



couldn't have happened, but it did."

And then there's the strange story of James Gaskell, owner of a small general store in nearby Washington. He was taking his children to music lessons when he became a believer.

"I'd always thought people who saw flying saucers were nuts," he said. "There was no doubt in my mind about that. And there's no doubt in my mind about what I see."

Mr. Gaskell says he had just topped a low hill when he saw what looked like a dirigible hanging over the trees. It was so low, nearly scraping the treetops, that he thought it might be in trouble.

"I got out half expecting them to throw me a rope to tie the thing down," he said.

Instead, he said, a small "conning tower" emerged from the bottom, bright lights flashing and revealing small rooms inside. "Then it raised its nose and took off at incredible speed."

"There was no sound, no wind, no nothing. It was just there and then gone. One second I could have hit it with a rock. The next second it was gone. Now how could I explain that?"

And since he couldn't explain it, he didn't talk about it. After he told his wife, they both swore their children to secrecy.

That was more than 10 years ago. So many other stories that they now sometimes tell their own. But even today, some of their best friends have never heard about that evening. It is a common reaction in Hillsboro. Mark Poland understands it well.

Mr. Poland and his 9-year-old son encountered a "big orange light in the eastern sky" while duck hunting last fall. "I never said anything to anyone," he said. "I didn't want people saying I was drinking or on drugs. Or that I was just the crazy down the road."

The striking thing about Hillsboro is not the fact that strange things are seen. That happens in lots of places, though precise records are hard to come by. Rather, Hillsboro's distinction is in the attitude of its people, in the intense conviction of the storytellers. They aren't left to wonder. They believe.

"Then that say they've seen it, there's nobody in the world who would ever convince them otherwise," said Richard Robbins, the town's police chief. "A lot of people don't say much publicly because they don't want to be labeled as fruitcakes, but they still believe what they saw."

And how about the chief himself? Has he seen anything? He says it's not a question he much likes — because he won't lie. "There was this one night in Concord," he begins, "and this very strange light in the sky..."

Hillsboro's fascinating stories run the gamut:

• There's the real estate agent who woke up with the feeling he was being watched and saw something "grayish-blue and round, like a kid's beachball" outside

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