

Whatever happened to UFOs?

Movement at a low after 20-year hiatus

By Marje Lundstrom
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Sometime between 8 and 9 p.m. on a cloudy autumn night, newspaper reporter Bill Jackson turned his car onto a deserted road between Uta and Sterling.

He stared at the northern skies in disbelief. It was 1973, and Bill Jackson was about to have ...

A close encounter of the first kind.
Emerging from the darkness was an enormous airborne craft — "as big or bigger than a football field, with rows upon rows upon rows of lights." The craft drifted slowly and silently over his stopped car, then vanished into the night.

"I really hesitate to use the term UFO," said Jackson, now the agriculture editor of the Greeley Tribune.

Winged cigars, flying yo-yos

"But you stand out there on that kind of country night when there's no moon — and all those stars out there — and you just have to wonder, 'Who are we to say we're the only intelligent beings in that massive amount of space?'"

His is that knotty cosmic question that's been asked since Unidentified Flying Objects first swooshed onto the scene in 1947. Since then, the citizenry have seen whirling discs and flying saucers. They've told of flying saucers. Winged cigars. Flying yo-yos.

Then, a few years ago, it stopped.
Where once the nation seemed under siege by objects that hovered and hissed and zipped and zoomed, the skies suddenly look dimly empty.

UFOs, it seems, have all but vanished from the celestial landscape.

Interest ebbing

"These things go in significant waves, but I would say that interest in UFOs is at a fairly low ebb right now — probably the lowest ebb in 18 years," said Kendrick Framer, a free-lance science writer living in Albuquerque, N.M. Framer is editor of *The Skeptical Inquirer*, a quarterly journal of scholarly scientific research.

Some might say that this earth-bound skepticism was born — of all places — in Boulder, more typically known for its love of the ethereal. Two decades ago this year, in 1966, the University of Colorado was awarded a prestigious Air Force contract to investigate and evaluate UFO sightings.

The historic and controversial CU study came to a hard-boiled conclusion: Because of a lack of concrete evidence, further scientific investigation of flying saucers was unnecessary. Case closed.

Since then, several major UFO groups — determined to document the phenomenon — have disbanded. One group that remains intact, the Center for UFO Studies in Glenview, Ill., acknowledges that about a third fewer UFO sightings have been reported in recent years to the center.

Jackson's own encounter was in the fall of 1973, when he was investigating a bizarre series of cattle mutilations for the *Sterling Journal-Advocate*.

Today, the journalist says, he doesn't think much about that black night on an abandoned road in eastern Colorado. Nor does he puzzle anymore over what he saw.

The fading mystique

So what's the deal, anyway? Have extraterrestrial visitors taken a break from buzzing Earth? Or have people finally accepted what CU scientists asserted 20 years ago — that UFOs were not worth pursuing?

"It used to be, 10 or 12 years ago, if you called the National Enquirer and said, 'Hey, I was abducted by a flying saucer,' then they would send somebody to interview you and you'd be featured on



The Denver Post / Lyle Alwax

UFO investigator Richard Sigmond of Boulder displays sketches of 'extraterrestrial' victims while under hypnosis.

the front page," said Philip J. Klass, a journalist and author of three books debunking UFO claims.

Not so anymore, says Klass, who believes the UFO movement is running out of gas. Two reasons, he suggests, are sophistication of the news media and the fading mystique of space travel.

"Nearly 40 years have gone by, and there's not a single physical artifact. There's not a single, incontrovertible photo showing a craft-like object that can stand up under scrutiny," he said.

Deflating what is left of the UFO movement clearly is on Klass' agenda this Friday and Saturday in Boulder, where he will join other scientists and experts for the annual convention of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

UFO buffs, of course, vehemently disagree with Klass and the rest of these sportsmen, who would design to rain on the astral parade.

Richard Sigmond of Boulder has investigated the UFO phenomenon for more than 30 years, interviewing witnesses throughout the world, often under hypnosis.

His exhaustive research, says Sigmond, makes one thing perfectly clear: There is something out there.

"My conclusion, on the strength of the evidence, is that this country and planet have been under surveillance by a highly advanced society of unknown origin — presumably extraterrestrial," said Sigmond.

"... I don't care who says otherwise. There is enough evidence." For scientists, 1966 was a turning point in the UFO debate. That's when the Air Force gave CU the conclusive mission: To find out whether these sightings warranted additional scientific investigation.

Named to head the University of Colorado project was Edward U. Condon, an internationally known physicist and former director of the National Bureau of Standards. Little did Condon and university officials realize that their prestigious, two-year project would be tarnished by a bitter and vitriolic debate that continues even today.

"From the perspective of hindsight, it's perfectly clear that the investigation never was intended to be serious," said David Saunders, a former University of Colorado psychology professor who worked on the project for 12 months before being fired by Condon.

The project was fraught with bad blood; another staff member also was fired, while others resigned. After his firing, Saunders, who now lives in Princeton, N.J., fired off his

own version of the investigation in his book titled "UFO? Yes."

The whole point of the Condon Commission was to give the Air Force an excuse to close the doors on Project Blue Book," Saunders said. "It was costing them money, it was costing them their reputation, it was an embarrassment to them."

Condon was an avowed skeptic, something his harshest critics interpreted as outright bias. But it was Condon's findings that most infuriated the pro-UFO faction.

Released in January 1968, Condon concluded in a 1,485-page report that further study of UFOs wasn't worth it. The \$33,740 study uncovered no evidence that "flying saucers" were being flown by beings from outer space.

Not long later, the Air Force snapped that Project Blue Book — a two-decade investigation of more than 10,000 UFO reports. The government was out of the flying-saucer business.

Condon had based his findings on the examination of 59 sightings, many of which were proved to be hoaxes or were explained away by more natural phenomena.

One a dry-cleaning bag

In one case near Castle Rock in January 1968, in which more than 30 people spotted an ominous, tub-

ble-shaped object, the night-flying UFO turned out to be a clear plastic dry-cleaning bag launched by four birthday-cake candles. The UFO had been "pilot" by two teenagers.

In another instance, a Colorado farmer reported seeing a UFO land west of his farm nearly every day at about 4 p.m. — except when the western skies were cloudy. One of Condon's field teams visited the farmer and quickly identified the object as the plane's fuselage.

Yet some remained mystified. In May 1967, a ghostlike radar blip overtook and passed a Braniff plane descending into the Colorado Springs airport. No one ever saw the source of the blip, though it clearly had been detected on radar and should have been visible to air traffic controllers and pilots.

"This must remain as one of the most puzzling radar cases on record, and no conclusions is possible at this time," the report concluded.

To this day, Sigmond and many other UFO buffs insist that the Condon commission was a sham and cover-up.

Despite Condon's 17-year-old findings, UFO believers stand firm.

Betty Ricigliano, 52, of Golden, still recalls vividly the spring morning in 1960 when she witnessed what looked like "a submarine floating in the treetops" outside her home in Union City, N.J.

Ricigliano rushed to the window for a closer look at the noseless, cigar-shaped mystery descending on her neighborhood.

"It was a wonderful sight, and it was there," she said. "I know what the Goodyear blimp looks like, and this wasn't it. This is something I've never been able to explain."

Carol Del Duca, formerly of Fort Collins, still maintains that she, her husband and 4-month-old baby were abducted by aliens in western Kansas and examined by humanoid aboard a spacecraft. The couple had been returning to Fort Collins from Ohio in June 1976 when, about 1 a.m., they were confronted by "balls of light," said Del Duca, who was 18 at the time.

Later, she said, she and her husband discovered rashes on their bodies. And, she noted, they had "lost" hours of time since they first witnessed the bizarre lights.

"Still, to this day, I know it happened," said the woman, who since has divorced her husband and returned to Ohio.

Del Duca claimed she was able to recall details of the close encounter while under hypnosis with Sigmond. She acknowledges that her artistic rendering of the alien looks remarkably like the "Michelin Man."

In 1985, a Longmont man and his wife said they were abducted by aliens 34 miles north of Denver. Under hypnosis, Sigmond said, the Longmont man sketched a series of pictures, including a saucer-shaped craft and the face of a bald humanoid with a high forehead and hollow eyes.

Both of these alleged experiences, according to UFO language, are called "close encounters of the third kind," or contact with an alien and its craft.

The "first kind" is a sighting within 100 feet, the "second kind" is one in which the UFO leaves physical traces. The expressions were coined by astronomer J. Allen Hynek, director of the Center for UFO Studies and the undisputed leader of the UFO movement.

That all this might sound a trifle daffy is precisely the problem, say Sigmond and other UFO supporters, who believe the UFO phenomenon is vastly under-reported.

"People still have that fear of reporting because they're afraid of being laughed at," said Sherman Larsen, a co-founder of the Center for UFO Studies in Illinois. "You might be crazy as a herring, but we don't laugh at you here."