

Sightings of UFOs drop significantly, but debate continues

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Denver Post

DENVER, Colo. — Sometime between 8 and 9 p.m. on a cloudy autumn night, newspaper reporter Bill Jackson turned his car onto a deserted Colorado road.

He stared at the northern skies in disbelief. It was 1975, and Bill Jackson was about to have a close encounter of the first kind.

Emerging from the blackness 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.

"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 with the Air Force's Project Blue Book in 1947. Since then, the citizenry has seen whirling disks and flying platters. They've told of flying sausages. Winged cigars. Flying yoyos.

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 dismally empty.

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

"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 10 years," said Kendrick Frazier, a freelance science writer living in Albuquerque, N.M. Frazier is editor of "The Skeptical Inquirer," a quarterly journal of scholarly scientific research.

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

The historic and controversial University of Colorado

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 it has received about a third fewer reports of UFO sightings.

So what's the deal, anyway? Have extra-terrestrial visitors taken a break from buzzing Earth? Or, have people finally accepted what University of Colorado 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 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.

"In the late '40s, it was much more reasonable and rational for a Denver Post managing editor to say, 'Yeah, you know, gee, they could be extraterrestrial,'" said Klass.

"But nearly 40 years have gone by, and there's not a single physical artifact. There's not a single, incontestible photo showing a craftlike object that can stand up under scrutiny," he said.

UFO buffs, of course, vehemently disagree with Klass and other spoilsports, who would deign to rain on the astral parade.

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

His exhaustive research, says Sigismond, 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 extra-terrestrial," said Sigismond.

"I don't care who says otherwise. There is enough evidence."

For scientists, 1966 was a turning point in the UFO debate. Throughout the country, there was a scent of rebellion, of

impending change, that hung in the air.

And there was something else: widespread UFO reports. For a nation hooked on *The Twilight Zone* and *Lost in Space*, the notion of outer-space visitors was enticing. To scientists, it was a challenge.

In October, the Air Force announced its selection of University of Colorado for an exhaustive probe of UFOs. Already, the Air Force had devoted nearly two decades to investigating more than 10,000 UFO reports in its Project Blue Book.

University of Colorado was given 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 15 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 *UFOs? Yes*.

"The whole point of the Condon Commission was to give the Air Force an excuse to close the doors on Project Blue Book," said Saunders. "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 1969, Condon concluded in a 1,465-page report that further study of UFOs wasn't worth it. The \$539,740 study uncovered no evidence that "flying saucers" were being flown by beings from outer space.

Not long later, the Air Force snapped shut Project Blue Book; the government was out of the flying saucer business.

To this day, Sigismond and many other UFO buffs insist that the Condon commission was wrong.

Betty Ricigliano, 52, of Golden, Colo., 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.

Mrs. Ricigliano rushed to the window for a closer look at the noiseless, 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, Colo., still maintains that she, her husband and 4-month-old baby were abducted by aliens in western Kansas and examined by humans 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 Mrs. 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.

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

Sigismond has interviewed yet another Colorado couple, who claimed to have been brought aboard a spacecraft and medically examined.

In 1980, a Longmont, Colo., couple said they were abducted by aliens 24 miles north of Denver. Under hypnosis, Sigismond 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.

That all this might sound a trifle daffy is precisely the problem, say Sigismond 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 bed bug, but we don't laugh at you here."

HOUSTON CHRONICLE
C USA - TEXAS
MON. APRIL 28, 1986

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