

Petaluma's Early Birds See UFO

By George Snyder

More than a dozen early risers reported seeing a mysterious lighted object darting about the skies near Petaluma yesterday morning.

Local law enforcement agencies were besieged with inquiries about the UFO sightings, and were at a loss to explain the weird incident.

"I saw tiny lights in the northeast, hovering along the hilltops," said Arlette Cohen, who was driving north on U.S. 101 to Petaluma at about 4:30 a.m. "At first I thought it was an airplane, but then it came overhead and I saw that it wasn't."

Cohen, a radio news director, said a full moon was still visible above, when she saw the strange object.

She said she got a good look because "it seemed almost to stop over the highway."

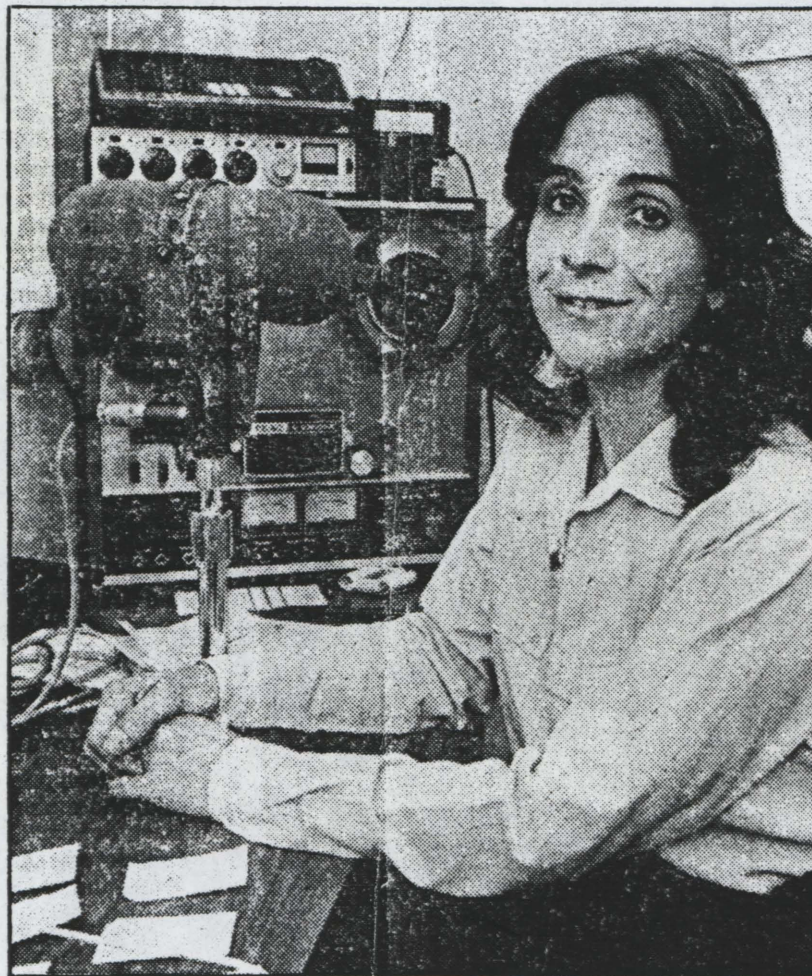
Cohen said she rolled down her car window and listened for the sound of a helicopter or some other recognizable flying machine, but heard nothing.

A California Highway Patrol officer, who did not want his name made public, also reported seeing a "large, orange X with white lights on the front" flying east near Petaluma at a high rate of speed about 4:30 a.m.

Various witnesses agreed that the object was shaped like an X, had small green, white and orange lights and was not an airplane.

Sue Hart was driving along Mill Station Road near Sebastopol delivering newspapers when her companion tapped her on the shoulder and told her to look skyward.

"I looked up and saw several orange lights hover-



By John O'Hara

Arlette Cohen, a radio news director, saw 'tiny lights' in the northeast, hovering along the hilltops at about 4:30 a.m.

ing in the sky," Hart said later. "I stared at them and they moved on rapidly several hundred yards, hovered again and took off again to the east. We were kind of joking around about it, but then I started to think and I got scared."

Witnesses said the object appeared to be traveling about 1000 to 1500 feet above the ground.

Bay Area air traffic controllers were unable to explain the episode.

"We have had some calls, but we know nothing about it," said a public relations officer for Beale Air Force Base, located about 50 miles north of Sacramento.

Robert Sheaffer, a member of the Bay Area Skeptics, a group that seeks to prevent UFO myth-making, speculated that the object may have been an ultralight experimental aircraft. He cautioned that shifting air currents, darkness and optical illusions may have affected the witnesses' ability to hear or see clues that the UFO was a man-made aircraft of some sort.

Dee Dee Long, co-owner of Ultralight Flight Inc. of Sebastopol, supplies ultralight aircraft used at Petaluma's Liberty Field, near where the sightings occurred.

She said the law forbids such craft from flying more than half an hour before sunrise — which occurred just before 6 a.m. yesterday — and that they normally are not equipped with lights. The craft resemble motorized hang-gliders.

Long added that the ultralights can fly slowly but cannot hover, and are easily heard from the ground when they fly at a height of 1000 to 1500 feet. An ultralight aircraft has an open cockpit and is built around a lightweight frame of aluminum tubing.