

ON THE ROAD SOMEWHERE IN OHIO

Nikon Dave wheels the blue Adventure-Mobile south on Interstate 71, toward the Ohio River and a date with aliens from outer space.

Supposedly, 12 alien crafts have crashed to earth over the last 40 years. UFO mavens insist that the bodies of the aliens were taken to an Ohio air base, where they were kept on ice.

"Aliens on ice," I say to no one in particular. My overworked imagination provides an ugly picture a Dorothy Hamill extravaganza with 250 European and Central American immigrants on skates.

I look out the window. Ohio south of Cleveland is as flat as the electronic curve measuring brain-wave activity among the spectators at a tractor pull. Great green acres of horizon-bumping farmland blur on each side of Nikon's stylish, whizzing vehicle.

Perhaps that is why the aliens come, I decide. Maybe the state looks like a big runway from the sky.

Ohio — specifically central and southern Ohio — has long been associated with UFOs and aliens. Among UFO cognoscenti, it's known as a UFO corridor, through which numerous unidentified objects have flown.

As Nikon pulls in yuppie rock on the radio, I check my notebook to review the Ohio-UFO connection:

■ Around 20 years ago, Cincinnati reported more UFO sightings than any other American city at the time, with person after person saying they

saw strange crafts diving toward the Ohio River. Some even thought there was an alien base underwater.

■ Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton was the center of Project Blue Book, the Air Force's 20-year study of UFOs between the 1940s and the '60s, which concluded that no extraterrestrials ever have been to a Cincinnati Reds game, or anywhere else on Earth, for that matter. Several UFO experts call Project BB a sham and say the U.S. intelligence community is covering up important UFO information. Why? Don't ask us.

■ Columbus-based Battelle Memorial Institute, one of the largest private research firms in the world, did a UFO investigation for the Air Force in 1953. It reportedly concluded that nearly 50% of UFO sightings then filed could not be explained.

The controversial report was sent to the National Archives in Washington. Archivist Ed Reese told me recently the report was "missing." Battelle isn't talking, at least not to me. Maybe the aliens have it.

Reese also casually mentioned that the CIA holds 900 pages of UFO info that it won't release to the Archives or anyone else "for reasons of national security."

■ The Ohio State University Radio Observatory in Delaware, O., conducts the only continuous, long-term search for cosmic life — the only one by Earth creatures, anyway. In 1974, the lab received what astronomer Bob Dixon calls a signal "of truly intelligent origin, truly from outside the Earth." The beam lasted only a minute and never repeated. Nicholas Sandulek, an astronomy researcher at Case Western Reserve University and an avowed UFO debunker, says scientists classified the mystery signal as a "Wow" event.

■ Finally, UFO researchers claim that clumsy aliens crashed into the Earth, and their bodies have been taken to Wright-Patterson.

Nikon's most fervent wish is to high-five an alien. I'd like to help him attain that goal.

Our first stop is the suburban Cincinnati home of Leonard Stringfield, a former Air Force intelligence officer who has devoted much of his life to UFO research.

He greets us warily. People still believe UFO "experts" are foot-sucking chuckleheads with tile grout for brains, although Air Force pilots, astronauts and even a U.S. president (Jimmy Carter) have claimed to have seen UFOs. I assure Stringfield we'll keep an open mind.

At 67, he's a distinguished presence, with a white beard and formal air. While Nikon shoots the man, I listen.

He tells us he saw UFOs in the service; they made enough of an impression to fuel his lifelong fire on the subject.

Stringfield gets up from his chair and walks Nikon and me into his indoor garden, a humid glass box filled with tropical plants, lizards and toads. He chooses this strange setting to continue his odd tale.

"This is the biggest story since Jesus," he says as a thunderstorm rages. Jesus was a pretty big story, I concede.

"I'm not just a kook talking about UFOs," Stringfield continues. "I've spoken with 28 firsthand witnesses who have seen alien crafts and bodies. I don't have proof, but my sources are good."

"All witnesses say the same thing: Wright-Patt has been involved with investigating the aliens, and bodies were sent there. I talked to many guards who've seen them. By 1966, there were 30 bodies there."

Nikon and I exchange puzzled glances. Stringfield goes on to explain the so-called Roswell incident, in which several witnesses saw a disc-shaped object crash into the desert in New Mexico in July 1947.