

Denise Snyder, 19, niece of a...

Rash of old UFO sightings were never totally explained

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SHARON — It had begun as an ordinary midnight shift for Sharon police patrolmen William Sprow and Robert Christensen on Jan. 27, 1968.

They were "up on the east side of town" about 4:39 a.m. when they "spotted it," according to 20-year-old news reports.

An unidentified flying object (UFO) was "traveling very fast in a southwest direction in the vicinity of the Sharon Country Club," Sprow was quoted to say. Today, he stands by his account.

"We put it on the radio right away," recalled Sprow, who today is a police detective-juvenile officer.

Sprow said in a recent interview that other Sharon policemen and cruiser-patrols from Hermitage (then Hickory Township) and Wheatland also saw the "bright object with a fiery tail."

In the preceding summer and fall of 1967 there had been a rash of UFO sightings. Most have been explained. Others, including the one reported by officers, were not.

Early in September 1967, local papers carried a story about two aeronautics students in England who made their own "flying saucers," complete with bleeping sounds. They were tracked down by Scotland Yard

after London was "thrown into a tizzy." The students claimed to be raising money for charity.

Perhaps the British students fueled the imagination, or inventiveness, of residents of the Shenango Valley; maybe it was the full-blown Apollo space program that turned America's eyes skyward; Perhaps, as one local trivia buff points out, it was "The Flying Nun" television series that first aired in 1967.

For whatever reason, many more sightings suddenly were reported:

- Police and private citizens said they saw "a brilliant white object in the northern sky which appeared to disintegrate" one evening.

- A Mesabi Street man reported an "orange ball" in the sky over South Irvine Avenue and Davis Street, near the Ohio border, about 11:30 p.m., traveling very fast in a northerly direction towards Sharpsville.

- The next evening, Sunday, Sept. 10, the Rev. Dr. William Newby, pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church, and his wife were just leaving the office at 8:45 p.m., when they were startled to see "a bright object in the sky, heading northwest." It was whitish orange with some sort of fiery exhaust.

Newby, who still is pastor of Friendship Baptist, said in a recent interview that he recalls even today

that what he saw was "quite visible" in the cloudless night sky. He thought at first it was a satellite, "but it hovered a few seconds," he said, "stopped, and then suddenly accelerated across the hemisphere."

- Newby's sighting coincided with that of three youths on Maple Way in Hermitage, who thought at first that it was a falling star, but said it moved in a straight line at a fantastic speed.

Two Westinghouse Corp. employees in Sharon admitted to a prank that may have cleared up some of the UFO reports. They told Police Chief Earl Holby they had launched a series of six 'UFOs,' intending to convince fellow workers flying saucers did exist, they said afterward.

Using plastic drycleaning bags inflated with hot air birthday candles on a strip of cardboard that was taped to a circle of drinking straws, the men sent their UFOs aloft.

Police did not take action against the pair, but they cautioned others not to duplicate the prank because of the potential fire hazard.

The caution, however, seemed to motivate residents to orchestrate other launchings. Skeptical but curious residents of one street on Sharon's East Hill gathered together and decided to try making a laundry-bag UFO, according to one

woman who recalls the craze. The woman, who asked not to be identified, said 10 people huddled in one of their backyards prior to the supper hour, armed with drycleaning bags, candles and straws. The original group grew as nearly everyone joined them, she said.

"We worked from before supper until after dark," said the woman. "There was no supper for my kids that night ... only sandwiches."

"The first one failed," she said, "But the second took off over the tree tops and looked just like a UFO."

Twenty years later, Sprow said the garment bag launchings don't explain his pre-dawn sighting the following January. "This was way too high and going too fast," he said.

Sharon Police Chief Robert Truitt, then a patrolman, recalled that he was on midnight turn the same night Sprow and Christensen called in the sighting, but said he hadn't seen that one.

However, Truitt said, he did have his own close encounter at around the same time. It was about 3 a.m. one winter night as he was walking his beat in downtown Sharon near The Wave restaurant, when he saw "a white flash shooting through the sky."

Hermitage police Sgt. Ernie Marenchin, who said that the reported sightings of Sprow and

Christensen could not be found in police records ("they were too old," he said), vaguely remembers the incident. He said he recalls more clearly "a batch that were reported that time on Swamp Road." There was an incident "reported in from Patagonia," he added, "in the vicinity of the cemetery on North Water Avenue," he said. "Most of the calls came in when we were dealing with a foggy night."

When asked if he had heard of any recent sightings in the vicinity, Bill Clepper Jr., coordinator of Skywarn, he said that he "hadn't heard of any at all."

Meteorologist Jim Kosarik, National Weather Service, Youngstown Municipal Airport, can only remember a couple of incidents in the 1½ years he has been there, although he said, "One evening last fall they got a couple of reports. We don't usually get a lot of reports."

Kosarik said it's easy to "see unusual things at night." When there are different temperatures in the layers of the atmosphere, even on a clear night, reflections appear differently.

"Fog reflects," he said, and can cause "weird reflections."

Any unexplained sightings are turned over to the National UFO Reporting Center.

Bob Truitt / 15 Police St.

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