

Waiting for E.T.



UFOs have landed near mainstream

By Mary Amoroso and Virginia Mann
Record Staff Writers

It's a Friday evening in June, nearly midnight, and a group of people is standing on a deserted



to Middletown, down to northern New Jersey, and out to Connecticut and Long Island.

UFOs have become a staple of morning and afternoon talk shows, the kind of topic Oprah Winfrey and Geraldo Rivera tackle when they've exhausted the topics of men leaving wives for older women and women leaving husbands for younger men. Talk show host Morton Downey Jr. goes one step further, suggesting that he himself might have been abducted by aliens when he was a



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It's a Friday evening in June, nearly midnight, and a group of people is standing on a deserted farm road outside Middletown, N.Y. The sky is an expanse of winking stars and luminous clouds. The dull red pinpoints of lit cigarettes provide the only light at ground level. Most of the group have traveled more than an hour from New Jersey.

Suddenly, a voice breaks the stillness: "Over there, it's a ship."

And just as suddenly, seven people lope into the fields to get a better view. To the reporters who are along, it looks like an airplane.

What these people scan the skies for and believe they see are the spaceships of aliens. They say that — for reasons unknown — the Hudson Valley is a prime spot for sightings of unidentified flying objects.

Ellen Crystall of New Milford has been driving up to the Middletown area three times a week since 1980, drawn as if by magnetic force to hunt for ships. Luann



ED HILL/THE RECORD

Ellen Crystall of New Milford has been photographing lights in the sky for more than a decade. She

says she wants to go for a ride in a spaceship, and frequently waits in Middletown, N.Y., for UFOs.

Petrella of Sussex and her sister Renee of Wayne have been up to Middletown six or seven times in the past two months; they say a member of their family saw a UFO hovering over the Wanaque Reservoir in 1965, and they want to pursue the phenomenon further.

In a 1987 Gallup poll, of an overwhelming majority of adults who had heard of UFOs, 49 percent said they believed UFOs were real, and 50 percent of all those interviewed believed there were

beings similar to humans living on other planets.

New Jersey seems to be a hot spot for sightings. The National UFO Reporting Center in Seattle says New Jersey and California are tied for the greatest number of reported sightings.

Over the last five years, astronomer Philip J. Imbrogno of Bethel, Conn., has investigated 5,000 sightings of UFOs in the Hudson Valley region — an area, he says, that extends from Albany

Winfrey and Gerald Rivera tackle when they've exhausted the topics of men leaving wives for older women and women leaving husbands for younger men. Talk show host Morton Downey Jr. goes one step further, suggesting that he himself might have been abducted by aliens when he was a young man.

Aliens — often lovable — and spaceships have become icons of popular culture, seen in everything from beer commercials to the movies "E.T." and "Close Encounters."

A new NBC drama slated for fall, "Something Is Out There," features a detective and his psychic extraterrestrial sidekick. A new "900" number offers a daily update on UFOs; it has been in business for a few weeks and has received thousands of calls.

Once the province of supermarket tabloids, UFOs have become almost mainstream. Skeptics still insist UFOs are figments of overactive imaginations. Believers say the government has hushed up scientific inquiry into the topic. But the reports of sightings — and even abductions — continue.

Is this UFO mania mass dementia, a developing vein of scientific

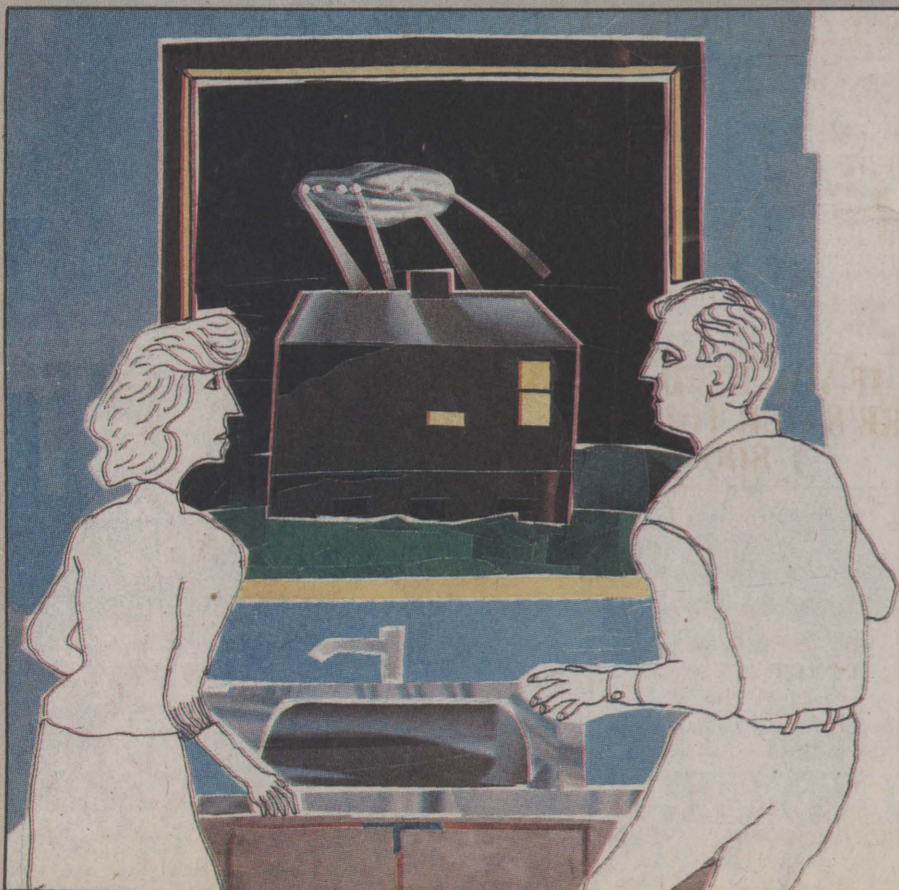


STEVE HOCKSTEIN/THE RECORD

Lisa Salviano of Parsippany says she was abducted by aliens when she was 5, when she was 10, and when she was 15 or 16.

inquiry, or a new pop cult? Are those who report having been abducted "fantasy-prone personalities," as University of Kentucky psychology Professor Robert A. Baker argues? Does interest in UFOs represent a kind of religious

See **WAITING** Page L-6



A unique sound in Ho-Ho-Kus

On Feb. 6 at 8:30 p.m., Nina and Henry Seelbinder were home in Ho-Ho-Kus watching a Channel 13 special when they felt a strange sensation.

"There was a rumbling, a noise, a vibration in the house," recalls Nina Seelbinder. "I asked my husband to go check if the boiler was in trouble."

Soon after Henry Seelbinder went to investigate, he called his wife to the kitchen window to look at something poised above a neighboring house.

"It was pretty low, I would say it was not more than about 30 or 50 feet above the house behind us. It was moving *very* slowly" says Nina Seelbinder, who, nearly five months later, still seems amazed by it all. "You really couldn't make any determination in the shape, but there were eight white lights — two, two, two, and two," she says, indicating with a finger the even spacing of unblinking lights arranged in a straight line.

Seelbinder estimates that she stood at the window for a good 20 seconds before the thing, which was heading east, went out of sight. She says the entire episode lasted about two minutes — long enough for her to know that it was not an airplane.

"It was a unique sort of sound, and the vibration was something we'd never experienced."

Afterward, the Seelbinders turned on the 11 o'clock

news, but there was nothing reported. The couple didn't know the neighbors over whose house the thing was hovering, so they were reticent to ask them about it.

They were also reluctant to call the police.

"You feel sort of silly. I mean, it's Saturday night over Ho-Ho-Kus!" says Seelbinder.

The Ho-Ho-Kus police say they received no report that night, but then, Seelbinder says she and her husband weren't looking for independent confirmation.

"I don't think we were looking for somebody to say that there was something there," she says. "We knew something was there."

In many cases, people do report such experiences to newspapers, airports, and police.

One series of sightings — over the Wanaque Reservoir in the mid-Sixties — has become something of a New Jersey legend.

"Years and years back, 22, 23, 24 years ago, we had some supposed sightings, but nothing that was ever confirmed," recalls Sgt. Dennis Schirmer of the Ringwood Police Department. The stories brought a steady stream of observers to the site — a narrow winding road in a remote area near the reservoir.

"We had a bit of a problem with traffic," says Schirmer,

See **UNIQUE** Page L-5

UNIQUE: Sighting and sound in Ho-Ho-Kus

From **UNIQUE** Page L-1

who adds that lately, things have been quiet.

Astronomer Philip J. Imbrogno, co-author of "Night Siege: The Hudson Valley UFO Sightings" (Ballantine Books, \$6.95), says that people who say they've seen a UFO should not be written off as crackpots or hoaxsters.

"Many of these reports come from professional people. We're talking about police officers, mechanical engineers, pilots, teachers, your average IBM executives, doctors, lawyers," says Imbrogno.

In the past two decades, Dr. George Obsuth, an optometrist from Washington Township, has had two unusual sightings — both of which were witnessed by a number of other people throughout Bergen County.

An amateur astronomer, Obsuth saw his first over Washington Township in the mid-Sixties; he doesn't recall the date.

"This was a pink light that pulsed across the sky from north to south, then became stationary and disappeared in a brilliant flash of light," recalls Obsuth. "That was all I observed. Other people said it was sausage-shaped."

Back then, Obsuth says, he requested that he not be identified by name in a newspaper story, for fear that it would affect his practice.

"Today, it's more open, he says. "You have more credibility."

And so, this March 17, when Obsuth again found himself among a large group of observers who spotted something unusual in the skies, he allowed The Record to quote him. Recently, Obsuth again described the blimplike object he saw traveling east over Washington Township.

"My observation, if I block out everything I heard from other people, is that it was not one single thing but a group of small things," Obsuth recalls. "The speed that it was moving was too slow for most aircraft. So it could then have to be a blimp or a helicopter. But I didn't hear any helicopter engines."

Obsuth, who at one time was a participant in a government program for amateur astronomers set up before the launching of the first American satellite, says, "My feeling is that probably 90 percent of sightings are explainable if we had more data." He adds, "Which leaves us with 10 percent. I believe there's something beyond natural phenomena in a small percentage of them."

Teterboro Airport reported that the March sighting was of a group of small planes flying in formation.

Carl Morales, operations coordinator for Pan Am at Teterboro, says his office gets sporadic re-

ports of UFOS, most of which turn out to be explainable.

"I would say probably 50 percent we have had, after a little investigation, there's some kind of confirmed reason, whether it be advertising, somebody using spotlights in an overcast sky," says Morales. "The majority that's left we didn't see at all. That's not to say that it wasn't something logical. But I can say I don't ever recall something so outrageously unusual that had any validity."

Sgt. Ken Bogdan, a public-affairs technician at Maguire Air Force Base in Wrightstown, says the base infrequently gets UFO reports.

The Air Force no longer investigates sightings, Bogdan says. In 1969, it discontinued its study of UFOs, called "Project Blue Book," after 22 years of scientific investigation. In that period, the Air Force investigated more than 12,500 sightings, 95 percent of which turned out to be explainable, caused by such natural phenomena as meteors, satellites, aircraft, lightings, balloons, weather, reflections of other planets, or were hoaxes.

"The very few that remained unidentified, there was no indication of a technology beyond our own scientific knowledge, or that any sighting could be considered an extraterrestrial vehicle," says

Bogdan, who was reading from a prepared statement.

If callers are persistent, Bogdan says, the Air Force gives them the number of the National UFO Reporting Center in Seattle. Morales says that Teterboro Airport does the same.

The National UFO Reporting Center, which was founded in 1974, gets calls from all over North America. Director Robert Gribble says the center is averaging about two reports a day, down from about 10 reports several months ago.

"It has always fluctuated like a yo-yo," says Gribble.

The center evaluates all reports and refers those with merit to the Mutual UFO Network in Sequin, Tex.

Although Gribble does not have figures, he says that New Jersey, along with California, is ranked No. 1 in volume of sightings.

Says Gribble: "I can't give locations and dates, but I know there have been a lot of good reports from New Jersey of landing and occupant sightings — where someone came out [of a craft] and left physical traces behind to acknowledge their visitation."

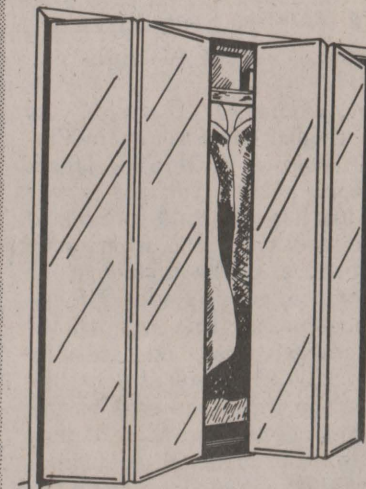
Why are there so many in New Jersey?

Says Gribble: "If there's a reason, we don't know it."

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WAITING: UFO watchers

From **WAITING** Page L-1

yearning, recast in high-tech terms?

Says Thomas D. Claeson, who as an English professor at the College of Wooster in Ohio specializes in science fiction: "It's an easy way out, and here, I would go back to the films of the 1950s, where your flying saucer people take over our supervision, act as guides, remove responsibilities from our shoulders, and in a sense, take care of us — much as a benevolent deity has done throughout the eras of the major religions. And these beings are always of higher intelligence."

Lisa Salviano of Parsippany believes she has had some very close encounters with extraterrestrials. Salviano, who is 24, believes she has been abducted by aliens for brief periods when she was 5, when she was 10, and when she was 15 or 16.

Budd Hopkins, a painter and sculptor from New York, has set up support groups for close to 200 self-described abductees liked Salviano. In his most recent best seller, "Intruders" (Ballantine, 1987), Hopkins recounts the stories of abductees who believe they have been unwilling parties to genetic experiments.

Mark Salviano has wrestled with the validity of his wife's reports of being abducted. "I like to be very logical and sensible about things. But it is as though somebody were to die and come back to life. I can't prove and justify what they say. I don't have any right to disbelieve what they say, and I don't have any justification to believe it."

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garden apartment complex in Parsippany, in a small but meticulous one-bedroom apartment. They've been married about a year and a half. She is a secretary who does word processing. He is a mechanical draftsman.

Budd Hopkins says many of the people in his abductee support group seem to have been traumatized by their recollections involving UFOs. But Lisa seems only frustrated that she doesn't remember more.

She attended a UFO seminar while in college, which jogged a memory she says burns in her brain. After reading Hopkins' first book, "Missing Time," she contacted him, and he led her through hypnotic sessions that uncovered more memories.

She feels she was first abducted when she was playing outside her Little Falls home, at age 5.

"I remember it was daytime," she says. "I remember being taken to — it looked like a farm, a barn. Little people made me climb up a ladder. I remember sitting on top of a loft."

For weeks afterward, she says, she would scrutinize everywhere she drove with her mother, trying to figure out where she had been.

The second time, at age 10, someone tapped on the window of her bedroom in the middle of the night, she believes.

She says she recalls saying, "Hey, where have you been?"

But she wasn't talking out loud. "Everything definitely, definitely was through telepathy."

"I starting floating around through the back of the house," she says. "I remember spinning in elliptical patterns. I remember landing somewhere. A lot of them

were moving in and out.

"They had bug eyes, big black eyes. They were saying I always have to help them. They weren't hostile or anything."

The third time, at age 15 or 16, she was sitting in bed at 3 a.m. and knowing somehow that she was due for a rendezvous with the beings, she recalls. She quietly walked downstairs and out her front door, being careful to leave it unlocked. She went into the street and stood under a street light. That is the last she remembers until she found her herself once more under the street light and eager to go back to bed.

"Can I go in?" she recalls asking.

"No, first you have to listen to him," she remembers being told.

The house across the street had somehow disappeared, and instead, she saw a robed and bearded figure by a cliff — a sort of Jesus figure, she says.

Telepathically, she was told she had to listen very carefully and store in her mind what the robed figure told her. But when he spoke, he was incomprehensible.

Finally, the speech was over. She went back inside her home.

"I was so thrilled, because it was only 5 o'clock, and no one in my family was up yet," she recalls.

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Author Hopkins, who spoke in April at the Fair Lawn Library, said he first got involved in UFO investigations in the mid-Seventies, when a friend of his saw a strange craft land late one night in North Hudson Park in North Bergen. The man believed he saw strange beings get out and begin digging up the soil. The next day, the friend went back and saw holes in the ground. Hopkins wrote an article that appeared in the Village Voice and subsequently in Cosmopolitan; it elicited a remarkable response.

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ting all of these abduction cases: people who can't account for missing time periods."

He continued: "People who believe they've been abducted often report having first been abducted as children. Then when puberty is in the offing or happening, they are re-abducted, and sperm and ova samples are taken."

Hopkins' theory is that aliens have evolved past the need to procreate.

"They have to go back and re-vivify themselves by experimenting with us," he speculates. "They need to observe maternal feelings."

Hopkins concedes that these reports sound like extreme flights of fancy. "It's extraordinarily difficult to entertain that these things are going on. The mind will only go so far, and then it just says no."

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Writing in the winter 1987-88 issue of Skeptical Inquirer magazine, he says fantasy-prone individuals are easily hypnotized and can hypnotize themselves into a private and vivid fantasy world. They are not insane, says Baker, but they have trouble distinguishing between reality and their vividly experienced fantasies.

To cope, says Baker, they become secretive about their fantasy life. But, when they are rewarded with the attention of best-selling author Budd Hopkins, who leads

them through hypnotic sessions, they respond to his cues and produce eerily similar tales of abductions, theorizes Baker.

Hopkins faults Baker for not interviewing some of the hundreds of people who have reported being abducted. And, he says, Baker's theory does not account for groups of people who report being abducted together.

Dr. Rima E. Laibow, a psychiatrist in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., has talked to more than 20 of the self-proclaimed abductees. If these are fantasies, she says, it is remarkable how similar the reports are. People's fantasies are normally highly individualistic, she says, shaped by their experiences.

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Lisa Salviano says her sister believes she, too, was repeatedly abducted. Another family member has the same sense of involvement with UFOs, but does not want to pursue it.

Lisa feels she and all the others who believe they've been abducted are being prepared for some event. Her description of this event sounds like Judgment Day.

"Somehow, everybody's going to remember what they've been told and use it to help people," she says. "I don't have a bad sensation about what this future will bring, but I think a lot of people will be too confused and scared to deal with it."

This event, she believes, will take place in five, 10, or 20 years — "within my lifetime."

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Occasionally, distant lights in the sky kindle the group's excitement, which dissipates as the

iences everywhere from the Gerardo Rivera show to The New York Times.

Jody Terwilliger of Sussex, the self-professed skeptic in the group, shuffles impatiently from foot to foot.

Are the others impressed by what they've seen?

"Well, not tonight," says Renee Petrella. She and her sister, Luann, have been coming up from North Jersey for several months, ever since they saw Crystall on a talk show. "The other night, now that was good."

Luann agrees.

"Memorial Day, that was the best one," she recalls. "We were in the second field, there's a dirt road that goes up, and there was a big white light. It was just circling in a small area — not like a plane path — back and forth, back and forth, with no sound at all."

For Sheryl Veith of Oak Ridge, a friend of the Petrellas, the Memorial Day sighting was an impressive first visit to Searsville Road.

Says Veith, "The first time that we saw it real close, we were in a car and the lights were green, and it was on its side. And we were in the car. It was very low, it was like eye-level. It was like there, between the trees. And then we pulled up and we stopped and we got out and it circled around, and it was just amazing."

This area of Searsville Road is near the border of two towns, Crawford and Montgomery. Daniel McCann, chief of police for Crawford, and Glenn Schoonmaker, chief in Montgomery, say their departments get occasional UFO reports. McCann and Schoonmaker said they respond to reports by sending men out to check. Their men have not confirmed any of the reports.

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Occasionally, distant lights in the sky kindle the group's excitement, which dissipates as the lights get closer. To the untrained eye, the crafts passing overhead look like airplanes.

"C'mon, ships, everybody wants to see what's shakin'," goads Ellen Crystall, a musician who has been photographing lights in the sky for more than a decade. Crystall has become something of a media darling, talking about her UFO exper-

iences everywhere from the Gerardo Rivera show to The New York Times.

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"I don't know if I want contact. It just really gets my interest up. I want to see more. I want to see full lights. I want to see metal," she says, adding: "I don't want to see anybody land and get out or anything. Anything besides that."

Says Veith: "There's a sense of wonder. It's the kind of thing where you have to keep coming back. I want to see exactly what is happening."

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