

Abducted by aliens? Amazed by a UFO? This show's for you

By Connie Bramstedt
Staff Writer

As he was walking down James Street in October 1973, he saw an orange blob in the sky with three white lights in the middle.

"It was larger than a star and smaller than the moon," Steve Zalewski said. "What it was, I didn't know. It was not a conventional aircraft."

If you think you've seen something strange in the sky — and you've never had the nerve to admit it — you'll have a chance next week.

Zalewski, who has been studying UFOs for the last 16 years, has invited the J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies to Syracuse. The center's exhibit opens Friday at Penn Can Mall.

Hynek, an astronomer who died in 1986, coined the phrase "close encounters of the third kind" to describe confrontations with aliens from other worlds.

Donald Schmitt, co-director of the Chicago-based organization, will speak to anyone who wants to know more about research on UFOs or wants to report strange things they have seen in the sky.

He will tape-record confidential oral reports or provide a form for anyone who wants to write down his or her UFO experience.

HUNDREDS of Syracusans looking for meteor showers on Aug. 12, 1986, saw a mysterious light — "a mist effect with a rooster tail that was spiraling" — but it was later identified, Japanese satellite, NASA said.

Zalewski said he hasn't heard of any really good sightings in Syracuse in more than a decade.

"It's been stagnant," said Zalewski. "It's been incredibly dead. I'm absolutely amazed. Maybe we'll hear about more next week."

Schmitt, the center's director for special investigations, will present a slide show and lecture at 7 p.m. Friday. He has been a technical adviser for the movie "Flight of the Navigator" and an updated version of the television series, "The Invaders: The Next Encounter."

The last sighting here turned out to be nothing special.

When hundreds of stargazers in Syracuse — and others from Michigan to Massachusetts — started calling in reports of a UFO that

August night in 1986, it took only a day to identify it.

EMPLOYEES of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said it was probably a Japanese-launched experimental geodesic satellite — equipped with more than 1,500 reflectors and 120 sets of laser reflectors.

Zalewski said 80 percent of all UFO sightings later can be explained.

But the remaining 20 percent sometimes are among the most strange.

Schmitt will discuss cases in which people believe they have been abducted by aliens and forced to submit to medical examinations.

"There's hundreds of cases that have been reported over the years," Zalewski said. "I'm serious, I'm dead serious. As time goes on these get bolder and bolder — as I call it, weirder and weirder."

Joseph Italiano, an astronomy professor at Onondaga Community College and Le Moyne College, is chairman of the observatory for the Syracuse Astronomical Society. He discounted any reports of abductions.

HE OCCASIONALLY gets calls from people who think they've seen a UFO, but Italiano doesn't believe in them and he said neither do 95 percent of the people in his group.

"I even had one astronomer call and claim he saw something down in Tully Valley," Italiano said. "Many people see jets in the sky, and they're coming directly at you and the way the sun hits them can make it look like a UFO."

Italiano said Hynek probably was the best astronomical authority on UFOs.

"He spent the last few years of his life studying the phenomena," Italiano said. "He gave a lot of talks and he made a lot of money, but he never came up with conclusive evidence."

Zalewski said Hynek, who had studied UFO phenomena since 1947, was scientific consultant to the Air Force's Project Blue Book on UFOs.

Mark Fleischman, an anthropology professor at Syracuse University, said reports of UFO sightings are part of our culture.

"We're all subjected to the whims of nature so it's very unsettling when things you don't understand happen," Fleischman said. "So you try to come up with some sort of explanation. We invent something that has a higher technology than our own and that's how we explain it. We address it from a pseudo-scientific standpoint."

He said the reports of UFOs are a product of a high-tech society.

"YOU WILL not have UFO sightings among native peoples of South America who have never encountered a Westerner," he said. "There is no such thing for them."

For Zalewski, the phenomena are very real.

He began a collection of UFO literature at Onondaga Community College about 15 years ago and has been adding to it ever since.