

Skeptic: UFO reports explained

By Jan Maxwell Avent
Scripps Howard news service

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — David Hackett is a scientific ghostbuster.

He has studied ghosts and other unidentified flying objects, sonic booms and the chunk of green ice that fell from the sky in 1978. And he has yet to find anything that could not be explained scientifically.

"I've not seen anything I would call a mystery," said Hackett, an engineer in private practice, with an interest in science. "But I'm not willing to make the jump from skeptic to cynic and say there is nothing (supernatural) that exists.

"Science is not to the point where we can explain anything and everything. Sometimes we explain one mystery with another. We say a UFO is swamp gas or ball lightning, but we don't know what that is."

Hackett is a member of Orion Research Forum and Network, an outgrowth of the former Oak Ridge (Tenn.) Isochronous Observation Network. ORFAN was chartered because Hackett said many group members were unhappy with the UFO hobbyist image of ORION.

The original group included many scientists and engineers from Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Hackett said. "Whatever UFOs might be, they are worthy of scientific study. To refuse to look at something is not scientific."

ORFAN has more than 100 members and includes a branch called Anomaly Investigations, which investigates UFOs, poltergeists and close encounters.

One of the "unexplainables" that Hackett explained was the Brown Mountain lights, ghostly illuminations that appear on Brown Mountain in western North Carolina. Some have said that Brown Mountain is a UFO landing strip.

"There are probably 100 of these ghost lights around the country," Hackett said. "The Brown Mountain lights are one of the most famous."

The original lights, Hackett said, were probably ball lightning, the kind of lightning people sometimes see rolling around their bathtubs. The myth of ghostly lights continues, however, because people often see stars or city lights beyond the

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mountain which appear to be on the mountain.

"Any mystery light you see there automatically becomes a Brown Mountain light."

Hackett also has investigated the Bristol booms, which shook houses in a subdivision in Bristol, Tenn., rattling glasses in the cabinets. Hackett said the booms turned out to be sonic booms that were intensified because they bounced off a nearby ridge.

"The people believed a cavern system was collapsing under them," Hackett said.

Although the Air Force Reserve did not confirm its pilots flew over the area, Hackett suggested a change of flight patterns, and within two weeks the Bristol booms had ceased.

He also researched the meteorite that fell in Anderson County in 1978, striking a ridge and starting a fire. The flames, it turned out, were from a hunter's campsite. Viewers, Hackett said, didn't notice the fire until after they saw the meteor falling in the distance and then assumed the two were related.

He also helped investigate the 25-pound chunk of green ice that fell in April 1978 in Ripley, Tenn. After Civil Defense determined the ice was not radioactive, some area residents tasted it.

But the ice remained unidentified until the ORFAN group studied samples and found they contained strains of syphilis and gonorrhea.

"A military jet had a leaking commode," Hackett said. "It had frozen on the outside of the plane and fallen off. What made it green was the copper sulfate disinfectant they used."

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