

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

People who crave dogmatic certainties should avoid the UFO arena, whether they are believers or skeptics. Since it is the viewer, not the UFO, who must identify any sighting, our less-than-perfect information flow virtually ensures that a small fraction of UFO appearances will never be explained. Despite this, there exists the distinct and never-disprovable possibility that UFO sightings are truly extraordinary, hitherto-unknown phenomena—and these are the possible pearls that UFO investigators have been seeking in a mountain of oysters.

However, as scientist Hudson Hoagland pointed out in *Science* in 1969, unexplained cases are not evidence for any theory. "The basic difficulty inherent in any investigation of phenomena such as those of UFOs," he writes, "is that it is impossible for science ever to prove a universal negative. There will be cases [that] remain unexplained because of lack of data, lack of repeatability, false reporting, wishful thinking, deluded observers, rumors, lies, and fraud. . . . Unexplained cases are simply unexplained. They can never constitute evidence for any hypothesis."

Even if all UFO reports were based on explainable occurrences, human perception, memory, and behavior would introduce an honest residue of completely unexplainable reports set off by ordinary but undiscoverable phenomena. Prominent UFO proponents reject the skeptic's attempt to lump the residual "true UFOs" into the "IFO" (identified flying object) column by assuming that the witnesses' perception and recollection were sloppy. True UFOs, they insist, are inherently different from IFOs, and this difference can be proved.

Dr. J. Allen Hynek, of the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), in Evanston, Illinois, is one leading researcher who believes entirely new theories are needed to account for unexplainable UFOs. "Experienced investigators quickly recognize IFOs for what they are," he wrote recently in his group's monthly newsletter, *International UFO Reporter*.

"But sometimes it takes hard work to unmask the masquerader. . . ."

Reports published by Dr. Hynek's own research center suggest that the line between insoluble UFOs and trivial IFOs may not be as clear as he would like to think. Early in 1977, for example, Hynek's managing editor, Allan Hendry, published an editorial "to illustrate the thin veil that can exist between UFOs and IFOs." Describing his attempt to solve some nighttime UFO reports from Las Vegas, Nevada, on January 19, 1977, Hendry recounted a series of frustrating dead ends. Then, by "sheer luck," he stumbled on the bizarre explanation: The Environmental Protection Agency had been using an illuminated balloon on a half-mile tether to collect samples of air pollution. This was the object that had set off the reports, Hendry concluded confidently.

But without Hynek's lucky break no amount of the hard work Hynek prescribes could ever have converted that UFO into an IFO. To be sure, without his persistence Hendry would never have had a shot at his luck. Hendry is considered one of the most hardworking and most diligent UFO researchers in the world; his reputation is

confirmed by the low "UFO residue" statistics that CUFOS reports.

Yet not even the most skilled and diligent investigator can reduce the unexplained cases to zero. A good example of why such a residue will always exist is provided by an interesting case from California, reported in detail in the *International UFO Reporter* after superficial and sensationalized treatment elsewhere in the news media. It's called the Colusa UFO, or the Pecha (pronounced peck-ah) case.

UFO sightings have often inspired awe, curiosity, puzzlement, and excitement. They have also been known to incite terror. Whatever the original stimulus—and there are many IFOs among these cases—the fear that UFOs instill in some witnesses is all too real.

The primary witness in this case was a thirty-nine-year-old heavy-machine mechanic named Bill Pecha, who lives with his family in a mobile home on a farm 3.2 kilometers west of Colusa, California, northwest of Sacramento. Pecha's neighbors see him as calm, trustworthy, and strong, not easily frightened. It would take something extraordinary to scare him.

Shortly after midnight on September 10, 1976, Pecha's TV and air conditioner went off. Stepping outside to check the circuit breakers, he glanced up and saw a glowing, domed "flying saucer" filling the sky above his barn. Later Pecha estimated that the UFO, about 45 meters wide, was only 15 meters above the ground.

As soon as he stepped forward, the UFO retreated toward the west, covering about 60 meters in four or five minutes. Hendry's report reads: "The dome was vertically ribbed with concave sections like a lemon-juice squeezer. . . . Both the dome and its base had a dark silver-gray appearance, like porous slag. The upper body of the saucer was like porcelain, while the outer rim was like stainless steel. The rim was seen to rotate in a clockwise direction, in contrast to the central area of the white, flat underside, which rotated counterclockwise.

"A large-diameter light source occupied the center of the underside, emitting a dim



UFO spotted maneuvering above Japan, 1974.

light while hovering, and a bright light when accelerating. There was a large, red light in front, two retractable sidelights, like clusters of cubes mounted on curved tubing, six dangling cables with frayed ends, and two hooklike arms. No rivets, bolts, screws, seams, or patterns could be seen."

Pecha described the UFO's movements, giving his estimates of distance, as it receded from his home. (Experienced UFO investigators realize that the only things a witness can really perceive are direction and angular size and that distance is a subjective judgment in such a case.) The hooklike arms partially retracted; the sidelights swung out; and a powerful searchlight projected downward but cut off in midair. Suddenly the UFO swooped off to some foothills about 32 kilometers to the west, reaching them in only a few seconds.

Pecha had also seen two other UFOs in the distance hovering over some 500,000-volt power lines. From an interplay of blue beams and an arc of light, Pecha concluded that the UFOs "might have been zapping power," which he thought would account for his electrical failure. Meanwhile, the large UFO abruptly leaped back across the 32 kilometers, looming again near Pecha's property. The two smaller UFOs then vanished, and the electricity in Pecha's home came back on.

At this point Pecha had seen enough. "I thought we were going to get destroyed," he recalled. In panic, he roused his family, loaded them into his pickup, and drove off at 150 kilometers an hour, and the object continued to follow him. He stopped at a friend's home a short distance away and pounded on the door. His friends came out and also saw a "domed saucer with an illuminated underside," larger than the full moon, which sped off toward the west and then southward, disappearing suddenly.

Three other independent witnesses soon appeared, each calling the Colusa County sheriff to report an extremely bright light whose movements closely matched those of the UFO Pecha had observed. Pecha remained shaken. "It was a bad nightmare, and I don't want to go through that again, never!" he declared. But neighbors repeatedly vouched for his honesty and calm.

So something very odd seems to have happened. In analyzing the case, CUFOS checked out nearby radar sites, helicopter services, and the U.S. Weather Bureau. Nothing had been tracked by radar at Sacramento or Oakland or Beale Air Force Base, and there had been no illuminated balloons in the area. CUFOS determined that there were four possible solutions and estimated the probabilities of each: hoax, 1 percent; misperceived aircraft, 4 percent; exaggerated fantasy, 35 percent; and genuine UFO, 60 percent. But the term *genuine UFO* is not an explanation, merely an admission that no explanation has been found.

Experienced UFO investigators know that Pecha's description of the apparition as zooming back and forth and then following his pickup truck is common when an honest observer misjudges the range to a large, distant light—a very convincing illusion once some unconscious and subtle wrong assumptions take root in the witness's mind. The jump to the foothills 32 kilometers away would have required an acceleration in excess of four million times the force of gravity, if Pecha's range estimates were accurate. And the object Pecha's neighbors described was at least 30 times smaller than the one Pecha told of—unless the witnesses were making wrong assumptions about the distance. Unfortunately, this happens all too often.

The dangling tentacles and the UFO's overall measurements are strikingly reminiscent of high-altitude rocket plumes. The inhabitants of Petrozavodsk, in the Soviet Union, were terrified by a "glowing jellyfish UFO" late in 1977. The apparition was ac-

“In panic, Pecha packed his family into the pickup and sped off at 150 kilometers an hour. “I thought we were going to get destroyed,” the normally calm mechanic recalls.”

tually caused by a Soviet space shot.

The direction taken by Pecha's UFO seems to point toward the rocket range at Vandenberg Air Force Base, several hundred kilometers to the south and west. And indeed there had been a rocket launch at the appropriate time, but it was made one day later. Neither Pecha nor the Air Force information officer who told of the rocket had confused the dates, because both events occurred near midnight. The rocket hypothesis, too, thus proved to be a dead end.

Pecha also mentioned feeling an immense charge of static electricity, which led to a suggestion that the mysterious phenomenon of ball lightning could have been involved. Some damage to vegetation was found near Pecha's home, but a check for radioactivity in the surrounding area found nothing abnormal.

One puzzle involves Pecha's description of the two small UFOs "zapping" the distant power lines. Pecha clearly believed, and many investigators would have assumed without question, that this activity caused his power failure. He told his story accordingly, and the belief may have colored his

raw perceptions. CUFOS investigator Hendry, who worked with reports from Paul Cerny, a CUFOS representative, and with Mutual UFO Network members Robert Neville and Lois Williams, found that the power lines Pecha cited had nothing to do with his own electrical supply. Though Colusa County was blacked out by an overloaded transformer eight kilometers west of Pecha's mobile home, the power line he mentioned led to a power system, named the Central Valley Project, maintained by the federal government. It had experienced no power problems at all on the night of September 10.

Although odd, this discovery does not suggest that Pecha was deliberately fabricating his story. But it does hint that his conclusions about what he had seen probably affected his memories. This happens all too frequently, much to the sorrow of serious UFO investigators whose work the effect obstructs.

The major problem in explaining many UFOs seen by honest, clearheaded witnesses is the hundreds of ways in which people can be fooled by their own senses. The result can be as fantastic as any sighting of a "true UFO."

A good example comes from the files maintained by CUFOS. On April 29, 1978, ten people called the Aurora, Illinois, police department to report a "saucer" flying at treetop heights. The object hovered motionless, then shot off eastward "in the blink of an eye."

The case, according to Hendry's final report, was "rich in elements that are traditionally supposed to underwrite the value of a genuine sighting." Yet Hendry proved that the UFO was really a 315-bulb advertising sign slung under a small plane.

The plane became a UFO, Hendry says, because of "the pervasive emotional climate that appears to be surrounding the entire UFO subject, one that succeeds in distorting even the most commonplace sightings into exaggerated miracles." This trap is one that UFO investigators for the most part fail to avoid when faced with the task of evaluating earnest, honest UFO reports.

Whatever the problems with Pecha's testimony, he had the courage to talk about his encounter—a courage all too rare. Investigators suspect that the risk of ridicule by friends and neighbors has silenced the majority of UFO witnesses and has robbed serious researchers of the data they need to explain many cases or to establish their inexplicability.

What actually happened, then, is unclear. Granting that physical evidence is inconclusive, a number of independent and presumably honest witnesses have testified to the event. Though their interpretations of the size, distance, and motivations of what they saw served only to confuse their narratives, their descriptions of angular size and movement might be valuable. There was a UFO over Colusa County that night. The dispute still rages over what, if anything, it proved. ∞