

# CLOSE ENCOUNTER

## UFO UPDATE

By Harry Lebelson

**B**illed as the "UFO Event of the Year," it promised—and I quote the brochure—"to weave a pattern of mind-boggling events into an emotion-shattering conclusion." Promised, but never delivered. UFO '79 offered the same old clichés to an audience long familiar with the pros and cons of ufology. There would be no revelations about 1979's most important UFO discoveries, investigations, or conclusions.

My own doubts about this November conference, held in San Diego, crystallized when someone named Walter H. Andrus, international director of the Mutual UFO Network, digressed on "A New Look at the UFO Entity Evidence." We were told that four types of aliens are looking in on us: dwarflike humanoids, human-appearing beings comparable in size to ourselves, animallike creatures, and robots. Each category possesses the following characteristics: head, body, two arms, two legs, and appendages (known to us as hands and feet). Though the similarity was not immediately apparent, these descriptions reminded me of some bizarre sculptures I had looked at earlier in the foyer of the Point Loma Royal Inn.

"The real purpose of a conference of this kind is to get people from the scientific community together who can exchange personal information and data," said James A. Harder, professor of civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley. But where were the scientists? The absence of two key speakers, both scientists, suggested that the conference was in trouble. Yet the promotional material claimed otherwise. After all, there were artifacts galore, automatic writing, and enough occult phenomena to attract any scientist.

A hot rumor at the conference hinted that recent analyses of metal fragments relating to a celebrated case were so startling that Carl Sagan himself asked to see them. The astronomer, the story went, told researchers not to reveal their findings to "those UFO nuts," but to present them before a legitimate panel of scientists for genuine verification. When asked about

this incident, however, Sagan stated, "Nothing ever happened. I never met these people, and in fact I've never even heard of them." Similar distortions compound the doubts that already surround UFOs.

Later on in the conference Dr. R. Leo Sprinkle, psychologist and professor of counseling services at the University of Wyoming, was introduced at the podium. Dr. Sprinkle spent the next 40 minutes boring everyone with an elaborate analysis of what he called emerging patterns of UFO activity. It all seemed redundant; so I excused myself to get a cup of coffee, hoping that the remainder of the conference would offer something new. I wandered down the foyer past a display of alien models, one of which bore a striking resemblance to a certain UFO skeptic.

I later bumped into nuclear physicist and UFO proponent Stanton Freidman. Slightly miffed, he spoke candidly about the symposium. "I think the organization of this conference leaves a lot to be desired," he declared. "It's poorly attended, sloppy in preparation, and three of the speakers

failed to show up." UFO '79 was the brainchild of Hal Starr, a veteran promoter, UFO researcher, reporter, and lecturer.

"This whole thing seems to be a big public-relations setup organized by Starr and an independent film outfit for the purpose of putting together a package for possible sale to national television," Freidman continued. "I have nothing against this attitude if it's made implicit in the advertising promoting the event. In this particular case that wasn't so."

Indeed, as Freidman implied, people spent \$145 for a two-day symposium on UFOs and deserved more professional preparation than they received.

After lunch, one of the few highlights of the conference surfaced when Alan Holt, astrophysicist training supervisor at NASA, spoke on "Field Resonance Propulsion." Holt suggested it may be possible to develop a spacecraft capable of carrying a team of explorers to another stellar system by the year 2000. Using physical theories that he hopes will eventually be accepted by mainstream physicists, Holt described the interaction between magnetic and electrical fields and the theory of space-time curvature as it relates to gravitational propulsion. Although Holt's paper was well articulated, its substance was beyond the grasp of most of those assembled. Their reactions ranged from indiscreet yawning to broad indifference. I found most of the material incomprehensible in spite of Holt's efforts to ensure clarity through visual aids.

"I wanted to give this research broader exposure but was disappointed by the lack of scientific inquiry in a number of the papers presented here," Holt told me later. "I expected a more scientifically motivated session and was appalled by the overall tone of the conference."

To sum up UFO '79: All the papers presented seemed to cry out for the scientific community to accept UFOs. Yet despite the efforts of people like Holt, rational scientific inquiry had clearly taken a backseat to promotion by those UFO groupies who sell the notion of visitations by alien beings. **DO**



*In the foyer: a familiar face at UFO '79.*