

COMPUCOP: PUTTING THE BYTE ON CRIME

02484

OMNIMAN

AUGUST 1990

**CELEBRITY
INVENTIONS
SPECIAL
PREVIEW:
THE NEW
COMPUTE
MAGAZINE**

**THE ZOO
OF FROZEN
EMBRYOS
BREAK-
THROUGH:
NO MORE
ULCERS!**



\$3.50



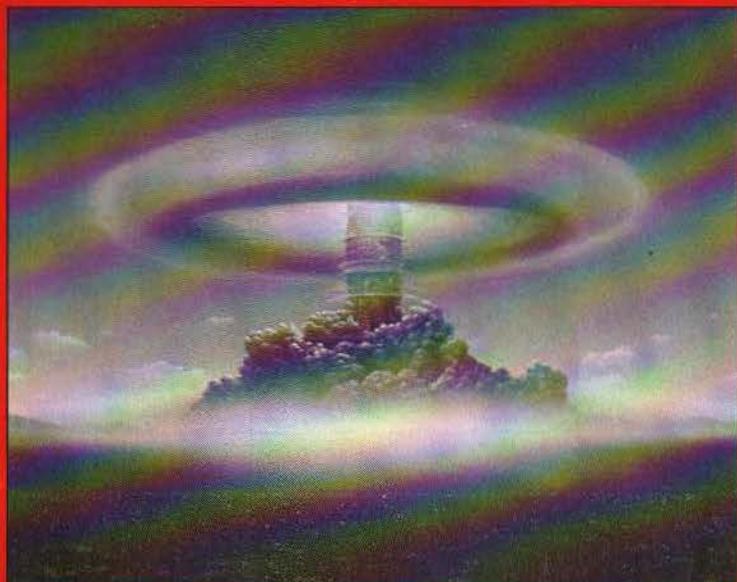
6 The mystery
cloud was seen by more than 50
people in five separate
cities more than 200 miles apart. 9

ANTI MATTER

You can't ask for a more qualified observer than Patricia Reiff, senior research scientist in the department of space physics and astronomy at Rice University. Early one night last summer she spotted a small, very bright cloud in the clear western skies over Hickley, Texas. She called it to the attention of her family, and within five minutes the cloud had expanded fourfold and dimmed considerably. More than 50 people in five separate cities more than 200 miles apart saw it as well. Virtually every witness reported an object of the same shape and in about the same position—roughly halfway between the stars Arcturus and Spica. Reiff calculated the cloud to be at least 700 miles away and nearly 350 miles up.

The cloud resembled a gas release from a sounding rocket, but a launch, Reiff thought, was unlikely to have been scheduled on a Saturday night with scattered thunderstorms forecast around the country. She called the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico and learned that no missiles had been fired that night and that a test laser, developed by the star-wars program to shoot down aircraft drones and low-flying rockets, was not functioning at the time. Checks with NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center, Vandenberg Air Force Base, and others failed to resolve the mystery.

"It's also unlikely that it could have been the aftermath of a fireball-type meteor," says Reiff, "since most meteors disintegrate at lower altitudes. But none of the observers



UFO UPDATE

reported a meteor at the time. It's clear that there was something in the sky, but the question remains: What?"

James Oberg, an engineer in the space shuttle program, has made a second career out of explaining aerial mysteries. But after looking into the Reiff sighting, he, too, has come up empty-handed. "It has all the characteristics of a gas release from a sounding rocket," he asserts, "but whoever launched it has not come forward. We checked with those who would know and they have no record of any suborbital

launches. But then, there is no international convention on registering such things. You only find out years later."

Strangely enough, Oberg had his own mystery cloud sighting just a couple of months after Reiff's. Oberg was trick-or-treating with the kids on Halloween when, he says, they saw "quite a strange visual phenomenon. There were a lot of clouds in the sky, and the object looked to me like a spotlight projecting on the bottom of the cloud deck."

Initially other reports from the area confirmed that the object was far away. But then "a very good observer" just north of Oberg said that as he topped a rise in the highway, he could see a refinery burn-off on the ground; it was, he observed, lighting up the clouds directly above.

The story holds a simple lesson. "It stresses the importance of watching for anomalous phenomena," says Oberg. "The more that people come forward, the easier it is to find a solution."—PATRICK HUYGHE