

*"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense."
-- James Randi*

Saucer Expansion

by Martin S. Kottmeyer

I overlooked a facet of the changing nature of UFO belief when I wrote "[A Plastic Phenomenon](#)" a few years ago. The question did not really cross my mind as I wrote it, though I almost certainly heard the idea somewhere that saucers had become larger after the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Even had I thought of it, I would probably have skipped it after



some searching. Statistical breakdown of the sizes of flying saucers are not offered in the works one is most likely to consult, specifically the ones you see referenced in my "Plastic Phenomenon" article. The absence of such statistics, I would guess, derives from the general feeling, even among advocates, that size estimates are so highly subjective they are next to worthless.

I changed my mind when I read the results of a study that Ed Stewart made of 1169 newspaper clippings in Canadian newspapers collected from the time of the 1947 wave of flying saucer reports. He recently posted the results on a UFO skeptics site. Though most clippings offered no information about the size of the saucers, 125 of them did. When he sorted them by size there was a surprise, the leading category had the saucers in the size range of 1-3 feet and the next had them even smaller than that. If you include in the tally saucers compared in size to basketballs, baseballs, and golf balls, the fraction of reports described as 3 feet or less comes to three-quarters of the 125, specifically 87 of them.

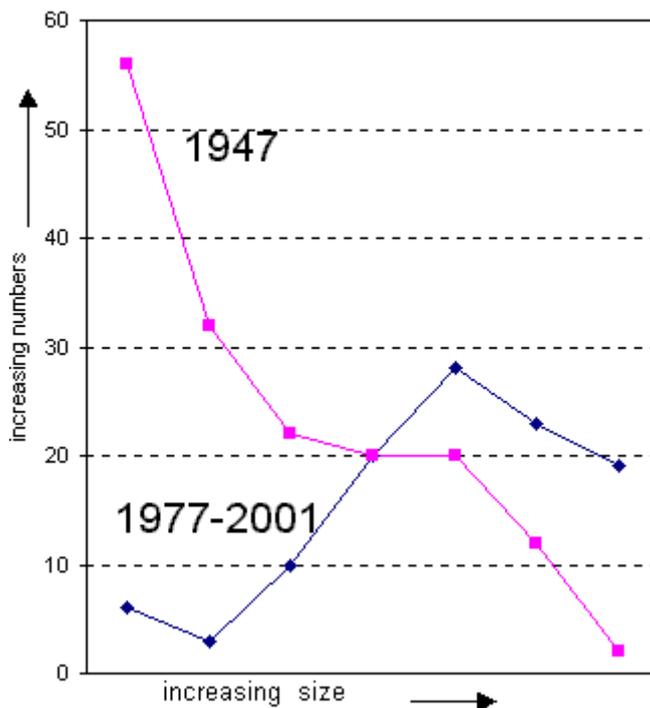
The oddity is paralleled in American data. Though Bloecher did not provide a table in his study of the 1947 wave, I was able to draw one up using the data he provided. The category breaks were chosen to be identical to those in Stewart's study.

Of 164 cases that gave usable descriptions, 53% (88) are described as 3 feet or less. Though the distribution is not as severely skewed here compared to Canada, the problem remains the same. Descriptions of saucers in 1947 have the majority much smaller than we are used to hearing.

Stewart saw the problem: such saucers "would not have been able to carry any occupants unless they were the size of a household lizard." Standard grays, reptoids, or mantis aliens are not going to fit inside. Similarly you would not be able to bring humans into them unless they possessed miniaturization powers indistinguishable from supernatural forces outside the realm of science.

< 1 foot	56
1-3 feet	32
3-10 feet	22
10-30 feet	20
30-100 feet	20
100-300 feet	12
> 300 feet	02

Reported Saucer Size in 1947 and 1977-2001



Similarly, this would call into question the involvement of new aircraft with human pilots like the Flying Flapjack, one of the prime suspects in a number of newspaper and magazine articles from the 1940s and 50s. The notion that it was related to crafts developed by the Horten Brothers would also fall. So what is going on here?

Some, of the debunker persuasion, will doubtless start entertaining the involvement of birds and weather balloons at this point. While probably not far wrong, this isn't quite what I am getting at. What is curious here is that these people bother to report these sightings even though they think saucers are this seemingly-to-us odd size. Why didn't they keep such small saucers to themselves?

Stewart has to have gotten it largely right in noting that people were, in part, taking the phrase 'flying saucer' a bit too literally. "Saucer descriptions in the news stories made reference to table top cups and saucers which

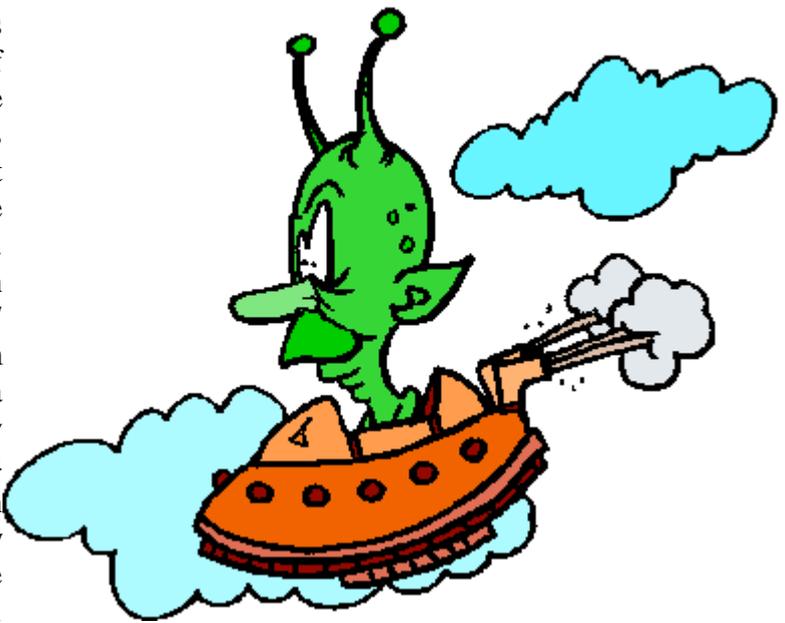
could have implanted a small size in the readers mind when they read the initial stories." We should add that the first AP article from June 25, 1947, breaking the story had no information on the size of the mystery objects. The repeated use of "objects" in the text of the story gives no good clue about size except in the vaguest sense that one might prefer use the term "object" for items you can lift or move. If these things were in the size range of a house or football field, you'd feel there'd be more.

Large was not used in the article. Arnold would elsewhere speak of the objects as "ships" or "strange aircraft" which implies something rather larger than table-top saucers were apparent in his perceptions. But this information clearly had less exposure than the first account and it was the magic phrase 'flying saucer' that was tip-most on people's tongues. It may be Canadian media carried even less of the follow-up interviews and that explains why the distribution skews to smaller sizes there.

Yet table-top saucers, in my experience, do not extend to the 1-3 feet size range and that is where the peak numbers go. We probably have to remember that polls in 1947, when they indicated any belief in the saucers whatsoever, had people favoring the idea that saucers were some sort of secret weapon being developed here in the United States. Was there something in the recent historical background skewing estimates to this size range?

Honestly, I'm not sure, and hope somebody someday can offer a definitive answer. Meanwhile, a couple of possibilities spring to mind. We do know that there was a rumor/myth complex about 'foo-balls' and 'foo-fighters' during World War 2 and I've seen items suggesting sizes comparable to basketballs or objects in the 1-5 foot range, but I'm unsure if this material was generally well-known in the culture of 1947. Alternatively, Robert Goddard's rocket experimentation in the pre-World War period was reasonably well known and I've seen photos and films where those rockets seem on the small side, certainly much smaller than the Nazi V-2 rockets. Given the saucers are 'American' secret weapons, Goddard's rockets might have provided an appropriately smallish ancestry. But, it seems more reasonable that the V-2 would seem the likelier choice to guide thinking about what size a secret weapon might be and they were 46 feet long. I hope it is obvious I am not enthusiastic about either of these notions. I only offer them to start discussion.

Regardless of the answer, Stewart's finding sheds light on a couple of long-standing puzzles about the early period of saucer history. It has for years impressed me as odd that there has been so few occupant case reports found from the 1947 wave. Researchers have found no less than 36 detailed CE3Ks in the 1896-7 Airship waves. At least 14 of them are explicitly extraterrestrial and a few more may be so implicitly. By contrast, in 1947, there are maybe 4 entity encounters with 3 of them more-or-less explicitly extraterrestrial. The other one involved people in Navy outfits.



"Why?" becomes somewhat self-evident now. In the airship waves, it was explicit from the outset that the objects were ships conveying passengers. In the saucer wave of 1947, the saucers were just objects. The going assumption seems to be they were also small, ergo there was no expectation among most believers that they would land and people emerge.

More speculatively, this may give us an answer to why the CE3K reports from the 50s, when they involve aliens (a good fraction did not, seemingly involving terrestrial pilots), preferentially involved small beings. Those three close encounters from 1947 were respectively described as "little people" (July 7 - Tacoma, Washington); "a little man, two feet tall, and with a head the size of a basket ball" (July 8 - Houston, TX); and strange little men (July 9 - Nashville, Tennessee). Given the skewing of the sizes of the crafts, this begins to make sense. This bias crept into better known yarns over the following years and by the time of James McDonald's study, published 1973, over 119 "dwarf" or "pygmy" encounter cases existed compared to 85 'normal-sized' humanoids and 13 giants. There may be some other explanation for this skewed distribution and I would love to know of any alternatives. Until something better comes along, this seems a comfortable enough fit.

Okay, we now know the saucers of 1947 were small, but do we know they have changed? We may recall some giant UFO cases from the recent past like the Hudson Valley cases or the Phoenix Lights, but there were also a couple of cases of giant UFOs in 1947. There are surely small saucers today as well; they are just less well known. What we really want to know is "Has the size distribution changed?"

We could briefly consider a pair of charts in the works of Jacques Vallee. One shows the average of a sample of cases from the 1954 wave in France was 5 meters or roughly 15 feet in diameter. Vallee was impressed that the strongest invariant among the properties of these cases was the diameter of the machines. However, this involved only landing cases. A sample of cases of objects in flight, he confesses, "is completely different: the objects are sometimes as large as ten, twenty, or even thirty meters (about one hundred feet), but seldom larger." Both of these results are inconsistent with what we see in 1947 cases. This is not good news for those who view UFOs as consistent over time and such constancy an argument favoring the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH).

Still, it might be argued that French data should not be compared to American data because of cultural disparities. I decided to do a study of size descriptions in the National UFO Reporting Center (NUFORC) database. I pulled out all size descriptions of UFOs having a disk shape from 1977, the year of Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, to the present - March 2001. The limitation of shape to the disk category was a matter of both convenience—less time—and a feeling that this might be fairer.

Reports in 1947 were heavily biased to saucer shapes and there might be a concern that including modern triangular UFO cases might be viewed as an effort to bias things to a larger size. The 1977 cut-off was specifically prompted by that notion I heard—apologies for forgetting who posed it—that Spielberg's movie made larger UFOs popular. The results: reviewing 651 cases gave 109 usable descriptions distributed as follows:

< 1 foot	06
1-3 feet	03
3-10 feet	10
10-30 feet	20
30-100 feet	28
100-300 feet	23
> 300 feet	19

A mere 8% are under 3 feet compared to the 58% and 75% of the two 1947 samples. Inversely, those over 100 feet now make up 39% of recent reports compared to 9% then—4 times more. It is also worth noting that of the NUFORC descriptions deemed too vague for use, over 50 include words in the range of large, very large, enormous, immense, giant, and gigantic. The word small appears less than a dozen times.

Five of the discs in the NUFORC database were compared to football fields and one is claimed to be twice the size of Tampa stadium. You also have to love the guy who estimates the craft he saw as 12,000 feet long and suggests it is using "magnetizum levitating propulsion." As alluded to above, the existence of large UFOs has been fairly high profile over the past couple decades and the impression it is a general trait among UFOs is one easily found among ETH proponents. Consider, for example, this quote from a popular website devoted to UFO sightings: "Flying Saucers of gargantuan size have been seen at close range by both civilian and military professionals and verified by radar... both ground and airborne." Abduction crafts can also be "big, big" as witness drawings by Betty Andreasson in *The Watchers* and the gigantic tractor-trailer truck sized sphere of the Allagash case.

We could quibble over the issue of how unlikely it seems such huge crafts manage to float about without substantial effects on the surrounding environment. Inevitably, proponents will dismiss it with Clarke's law about the magical quality of superior technology. Nor will the inscrutable matter of expending energy resources of the necessary magnitude bother them much. Dysonesque estimates of future civilization resources could be pulled out with reminders that the energies used in dubious Shuttle missions would stagger even the space opera buffs of a prior generation.

Minimally, the fact that the size distribution has changed reflects differences in beliefs about what saucers are. With saucers now firmly felt to be alien spacecraft, people who see things suggestive of small saucers have extra reason to doubt what they are seeing represent a real or significant mystery. There is also probably a tendency among those who report their saucers to skew size estimates to be more in line with preconceptions derived from high-profile UFO cases or sources like Spielberg's film. Hoaxers and attention-seekers will preferentially model their narratives in ways consistent with current beliefs.

The fact that saucer dimensions have been inconsistent in three separate studies is naturally a result that interests psychosocial advocates more than ETH theorists. It is something that they expect. We have merely to cite a prediction by David Clarke and Andy Roberts from their 1990 book *Phantoms of the Sky* that reads, "Aerial UFO-type phenomena will continue to be reported but craft will be larger and more complex in shape and illumination."

No ETH theorist has or would predict such a thing. They will offer excuses—size and distance are the most subjective things in UFO reports—and reinterpretations—the Hybrid program requires increasing numbers of abductions thus larger craft—but the fact remains it would never occur to them to expect such changes. Indeed, we cited an authority in "A Plastic Phenomenon" who alleged the UFO phenomenon is too constant in its properties to be myth. It simply isn't so.

Footnotes

1. "[A Plastic Phenomenon](#)" *The REALL News*, 6, #2, February 1998, pp. 1, 7-11.
2. Ed Stewart "-47/CANUFO: 1947 UFO Wave Canadian Media" UFO Updates, Tue, 13 Mar 2001, also *UFO Skeptics Discussion Forum* Message #386 March 10, 2001 "Stats from 1947 Wave on Shape, Size and Kenneth Arnold"
3. Bloecher, Ted *Report on the UFO Wave of 1947* author, 1967.
4. By usable, I mean that a numerical estimate or comparative like size of a baseball or automobile exists. Descriptions using small, big, large, or an angular comparative like half the size of the moon are excluded.
5. Clarke, Arthur C. *Profiles of the Future* Bantam, 1963, chapter 15.
6. Kottmeyer, Martin "[A Plastic Phenomenon](#)" *The REALL News*, 6, #2, February 1998, pp. 1, 7-11.
7. Ford, Brian *German Secret Weapons: Blueprint for Mars* Ballantine, 1969, p. 54
8. McCampbell, James M *Ufology* Celestial Arts, 1976, chapter 8.
9. Vallee, Jacques and Janine *Challenge to Science* Ace Books, 1966, pp. 185-7.
10. Vallee, pp. 204-6.
11. Occurs 1/27/1998
12. Occurs 9/22/1995
13. Neff, James "You Don't Have to 'Believe' in UFOs Any Longer" Sightings website 5-28-00
14. Fowler, pp. 81-2
15. Fowler, Raymond *The Allagash Abductions*, Wild Flower, 1993, pp. 71-72, 200.
16. *Phantoms in the Sky: UFOs - A Modern Myth* Robert Hale, 1990, p. 175.