

# Are There Close Encounters of Any Kind?

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Grand Island, Neb. There seemed little doubt about it. Something unusual — weird even — had occurred that foggy night in 1973.

First there was the noise. It seemed to be coming from overhead, con-juctured the Bennet, Neb., farmer, and adjusted his flickering television set. Moments later a brilliant blue flash filled the sky; electrical power failed. Strange, thought the farmer, down right spooky.

Next morning he was convinced that something out of the ordinary had taken place. There, on the barn roof, was a neat, freshly made square hole.

Word spread quickly . . . visitors

from outer space had paid a call to rural Nebraska. They must have. How else could you explain the strange chain of events, the mysterious square hole? Yes, a spacecraft undoubtedly had left its mark on the Bennet farm.

"It hadn't, of course," says soft-spoken Elmer Kral.

He shakes his head to emphasize the point, and squeaks back and forth in the old-fashioned rocker.

No, Kral says, there was a much ear-tier explanation.

"What happened was you had three unrelated events," he says.

There was a power outage, with an accompanying blue flash; a helicopter

passing overhead, which caused some local TV interference; and an unexplained symmetrical hole.

"We finally came up with scientific evidence to explain that hole," says Kral.

"We found hairs on the shingles. Laboratory tests showed they were raccoon hairs. It appeared that a raccoon had pulled up on the shingles, which broke off in a rectangular shape. Game commission people and others verified that this is not unusual."

Kral can tell a lot of stories about unidentified Flying Objects. He can tell you about the strange material found on a Hastings farm, about the Ashland police officer who claimed he was taken aboard a spacecraft, about a flood of UFO reports across Northeast Nebraska in September of 1974, about

Well, all in all, there were 58 UFO reports fielded during Kral's six-year stint as state director of the Mutual UFO Network. About 80 percent of those reports were investigated by his group.

And the results?

Kral rocks back in his chair, savoring a moment or two of suspense before he answers.

"I think an investigator of integrity simply must say that we don't have the evidence we need to prove that we have received an alien visitation."

This thinking, Kral notes, does not conform with the national organization's belief. So Kral has resigned as state director, and the Nebraska unit is being reformed, independently, under Glenn Underhill, a professor of physics and astronomy at Kearney State College.

"I'm still in the national group," notes Kral, "but that will end this year because my two-year term as regional director will expire. I clearly disagree with the viewpoint of the national organization and it would be wrong if I continued with them."

Kral, an English teacher at Grand Island High School, says he was drawn into the UFO group by a lifelong fascination with mysteries.

"I was listening to a St. Louis radio station one day and heard this intelligent-sounding engineer talking about the subject. I guess I was surprised that someone who was educated, like an engineer, would be involved."

Kral wrote to the engineer and received a letter back from the national director of the Mutual UFO Network, urging him to form a Nebraska unit. It took him the better part of a year to get the job done.

"I went out to recruit the scientific people. I thought if you were really trying to get an answer, you would need the scientists."

The 42-year-old teacher talks somewhat esoterically of his learning experience during the six years he spent chasing UFOs. About the unreliability of eye witnesses, for instance.

"It's hard to deal with eyewitnesses. They feel they have the truth when, in fact, you have the truth from other kinds of evidence. And the so-called experts are no better than anyone else."

Kral gets out of his chair and shuffles hurriedly through the stacks of papers on top of his bookcase.

"Airline pilots, among others, are no better witnesses than most," Kral insists.

He reads a report of an airline pilot complaining that a weather balloon was dangerously threatening his plane flying at 33,000 feet.

"When, in fact," says Kral, "radar showed the balloon to be at 76,000 feet."

He cites another case in which 100,000 people viewed a crash during an air show. The witnesses were asked to report what they saw. Thousands of letters were submitted and hundreds of interviews were taken.

"The air crash investigator said later that, 'There was only one letter of some use, and there were only a half-dozen people who captured in some way the true picture of what happened.'"

As a result of such studies, and his own investigative experience, Kral says he tends to discount the reports by 15 million Americans who claim to have sighted UFOs.

"I don't want to get into the psychology of it, but I am sure there are people who want to see a UFO. It's sort of a worldwide treasure hunt."

Kral separates UFO sightings into two categories — errors of good faith and errors of bad faith.

“There are all kinds of natural phenomena that the trained person can understand and explain. But the untrained person, particularly if he is suggestable, will see it as a UFO.

“And there is a certain bias that exists. Most people see UFOs as circular or cigar-shaped, because that is what they have been led to believe they look like. But we really don’t know.”

There is a less innocent kind of bias, too, Kral says. The bias that prompts

what he terms “errors in bad faith.”

The mild-mannered teacher rocks a bit faster as he elaborates.

“Errors in bad faith emanate from paranormal industries,” he says. “Paranormal industries would include UFO groups which continue even though they really may not have the necessary evidence to stay in existence. They keep going because people like to belong to the organization. This is what has happened to UFO organizations. All of them, I think, to some extent.”

Kral’s disenchantment, in fact, reflects a worldwide upheaval among those interested in UFOs. The warring factions are split into two camps — the Skeptics and the Sympathizers.

Kral feels the UFO groups have become self-serving and do not support the search for truth.

The skeptics — composed primarily of scientists, educators and writers — appear to be a bit more reliable, says Kral, “maybe just because they do their homework a little better.

“But it works both ways. Either they are so determined to explain everything away or they are trying to stretch everything to prove what they want to believe, that the man in the middle is caught in a trap.”

Kral hopes the new Nebraska organization being formed by Underhill will cooperate with both groups, in its investigations.

And these investigations, he says, must turn up multiple, link-by-link chains of hard evidence which can hold up under “rigorous scientific examination” by independent researchers if alien visitations are to be adequately proven.

“Rigorous scientific examination.” It’s a phrase Kral uses over and over. And it holds the key to what he sees as a possible solution to the study of UFOs and of all paranormal aspects — ESP, biorhythm, whatever.

What Kral proposes is a scientific center in each state, ideally in a centrally located college physics department, which would deal with the paranormal.

He envisions a physics professor serving half-time, assisted by a volunteer group of consultants in various fields on “a need basis.” A second committee made up of professional scientists would then evaluate the work and the entire operation could be “watched” by an advisory board comprised of one representative each from a variety of governmental, scientific, legal, educational and journalistic disciplines.

Each center would collect, investigate, evaluate, store and disseminate information on all reports recording the paranormal.

Without some such safeguard, says Kral, the paranormal industries will continue to “contaminate thinking.”

He points to a 1974 Gallup Poll which indicated 54 percent of the American population believes that Earth has been visited by aliens.

“They believe this despite the fact that there is absolutely no evidence to support such thinking,” says Kral.

“Contaminated thinking such as this can be most harmful over a period of years. If people begin to seek answers to real problems through astrology and the like, they are not going to seek out more reliable sources of information to solve their problems.

“People are going to start visiting some psychic, for example, instead of going to a good clinical psychologist if they have an emotional problem.”

Kral acknowledges his hoped-for scientific centers may not become reality in the near future. In the meantime, he apparently is willing to wage a private war against the distribution of what he considers “contaminated information.”

Last year, for example, he took exception to a National Enquirer story which quoted CBS news commentator Walter Cronkite as saying that he believed in UFOs. Kral filed a complaint with the National News Council charging that the article was an “outright misrepresentation in the area of UFO reports.” The council upheld the complaint when Cronkite testified by letter that he had never been interviewed by the author.

Kral currently is doing battle with major grocery chains in an attempt to halt the sale of such publications at the check-out counters.

“I wrote to the presidents of 14 companies asking them why they select certain publications to be put on the checkout counters while others are on the magazine racks. They answered that this does not constitute endorsement of the product. That’s how they got out of it.

“And it made me furious, because I know they would not knowingly put contaminated food out on the counters. Yet, in my mind, they are putting out contaminated material of an equally serious nature right where the consumer is most apt to be trapped by impulse buying.”

The rocker is moving faster now, as Kral’s anger grows. Suddenly he stops and looks out the window of the modest house he says he likes because “it’s only three blocks from both the library and the ice cream shop.”

“You know,” he says thoughtfully. “Everybody is interested in the paranormal. It’s understandable. But if there is something of use there, or something that is harmful, then we should apply the highest scientific standards to determine that.”

He pauses and rocks a spell. “The way things are going now, we’re not finding the truth; we’re going in circles.”