

From
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Turn Page →

Still Waters

John Waters talks about the re-release of *Pink Flamingos* and what America was like in '72

BY SONO MOTOYAMA

After 25 years, *Pink Flamingos*, the film that earned director John Waters the title "the Prince of Puke," is being lovingly re-released by its original distributor, New Line Cinema. (It opens April 11.) This time, there are two bonuses: at the beginning, a hilarious no-smoking message shows Waters enjoying a cigarette and doing a nasty French inhale; and at the end, there are 13-plus minutes of scenes that were cut from the original.

Pink Flamingos, once billed by Waters himself as "an exercise in poor taste," is clearly not in the same category as other re-releases this year, such as *The Godfather* or *The Graduate*. Even a quarter of a century after its premiere, the movie remains one of the more shocking and putrid cinema atrocities around. The story of two families competing for the title of "the filthiest people alive," it includes scenes of sex with chickens, a man who makes his anus appear to "sing," fellatio performed by a mother on her son, a pre-op transsexual flasher, and of course the infamous final scene of 300-pound drag queen Divine performing an act of coprophagy (that's shit-eating to you and me — and yes, it's real).

One might expect the director of such a film to live in a brightly painted kitsch-orama, but, in fact, Waters's Baltimore house is a fairly normal sort of place. Of course, that's if you don't count the electric chair in the ground-floor hallway, Patty Hearst's eyeglasses hanging in a frame in one bathroom, or the portrait of child murderer Gertrude Baniszewski and reams of books about serial killers, sexual deviance, and mental illness in the guest room.

Seated on a red-velvet couch in the living room, Waters looks dapper in a plaid jacket, a light-blue shirt buttoned all the way to the top, and dark slacks. His trademark pencil-line mustache sits above his upper lip like a thin rime of graphite shavings.

We settle in to discuss the movie *Variety* called "one of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made."

Q: I must confess that I saw *Pink Flamingos* for the first time the other day, and it literally made me sick to my stomach.

A: The ending you mean? I'm really used to that. I can watch that unflinching and see only surrealism. But I understand that even the people in the lab when we did it this time were like, "Oh, God!" But they all laughed. It's not the kind of nauseating that you would get from *Faces of Death* or movies that show real violence. To me, that's much more vomit-inducing — not fake violence but real violence, when you see things on the news that to me are much more troubling than somebody eating shit, something that was done as a joyous joke. I know it would be hard to explain this to a marketing person, but at the time that was my version of an upbeat ending. And I think it is. People leave the theater laughing.

Q: What were some of the cinematic influences on this film?

A: There were three things that heavily influenced especially my earlier films. The New York/LA underground movie scene, which only lasted about three years — Kenneth Anger, the Kuchar brothers, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith. At the same time, I was influenced by Russ Meyer and all exploitation movies. Maryland was like the capital of exploitation movies — they tested them here. I'd hook school and see three movies a day for 45 cents. And then the artist movies — Ingmar Bergman

and all the art movies that I miss, that we don't have anymore. All three of them put together — nobody every put them together, really. Those were my influences.

Pink Flamingos was an exploitation film for art theaters, which maybe hadn't quite happened.

Q: How did you come up with the idea of chicken-fucking?

A: I'm basically frightened of chickens. Do you like them? They're stupid. They come at you and peck you. You can't pet a chicken or take it for a walk. It won't get your newspaper for you. All you can do is eat it — or fuck it [laughs], I guess, in that world.

Q: What was *Divine's* character about?

A: Divine was in some kind of way supposed to be radical — certainly a joke on radical politics. She had a new look. I think that new look still can be felt today. I'm blowing my own trumpet, which I don't ever like to do, but I'm also trying to blow Divine's trumpet for him. He was a drag queen who in some ways changed the way drag was thought of. He wasn't square.



'I think, to be honest, many, many people saw *Pink Flamingos* stoned.'

You know, drag queens, if you look back on the history of drag queens, were very middle class in what they wanted to be. Their values were just like their mothers'. They wanted to be the cliché of a beauty queen. And Divine challenged them and made fun of them and was almost a terrorist of drag queens, as if saying, "This is ridiculous. Let's think up a new kind of thing."

Q: Why do you think this was your breakthrough movie?

A: It obviously hit some kind of nerve. It was at a time that was the end of the hippie era but pre-punk. And I think, to be honest, many, many people saw *Pink Flamingos* stoned. Plain and simple. That is part of the appeal. It was a pothead movie. And it had to do with the times. There was a cultural war then that there certainly is not now. There were two sides to everything. There was so much political trouble. There were riots all the time. Part of my social life was going to riots, you know? Like parties. You'd say, "Which city should we go to this week?", which would make my parents so insane.

Q: Can you describe the period when you made the movie?

A: Certainly it was made in a very volatile time. Nineteen seventy-two was really crazy. It was still the '60s, but it was the most radical part of the '60s. The Weathermen, all that kind of stuff, was very much in the news. Terrorism was very much in the news. But not right-wing terrorism like today — left-wing. It's certainly come full circle in the 25 years. To be honest, I think the Weathermen had a lot more style than Timothy McVeigh. I mean, right-wing terrorists do not interest me that much. They all dress the same. They've never come up with a new fashion look. They still just look like out-of-work Marines. Camouflage is hardly new as a terrorist fashion accessory.

Q: You dedicated the film to the Manson women. Can you explain why?

A: I went to the Manson trial, and it was a very big influence on me because we wanted to scare the world, too, but in a very different way, obviously. I came home and wrote *Pink Flamingos*. I dedicated the movie not to the Manson family but to Sadie, Katie, and Les — the women. Not Manson. The people that interested me were the people that came from a background similar to mine. Manson was in jail his whole life. The girls were from suburban homes. It was a flippant, punk gesture before there was punk.

It was done at a very, very different time and I have changed about that very, very much. It's something from the times that's hard to translate today. Later, people put Manson on T-shirts for the same reason I made my dedication — it was the ultimate anti-establishment thing. When I knew more about it, I realized the incredibly complicated psychological thing that went on there, and I looked at it in a different way.

I have become friends with Leslie Van Houten [one of Manson's followers]. I have visited her in prison for 15 years. I seriously believe she is rehabilitated. The prison does, most everybody does. I believe she should be let out. And I worked seriously to get her out. I don't say that for shock value. I am serious about it. One day I hope she's here at my Christmas party. I think she will be.



Q: You were always fascinated by serial killers, crime, tabloid journalism, even car crashes. Is America catching up with you?

A: I think that our humor veered toward each other a long time ago. I got a little less angry, and the two did meet in a fairly good way.

Q: Many people say your influence has been to show budding filmmakers that you can just pick up a camera and do it. What made you think you could just do it?

A: My mother says this is terrible to say, but LSD made me think that. Well... I had confidence anyway. I was ambitious. I always was lucky enough to know what I wanted to do very, very early. I was a puppeteer at children's birthday parties when I was 12 years old. And my parents, even though they were horrified by these films, they encouraged it. It was very loving. I didn't realize it at the time. I was an arrogant teenager. Here were these movies that were against everything they had ever taught me to believe in, and they were scared. Yet they were wise enough to know that at least I was heading in some direction. If I didn't make movies and had all those thoughts, what would I do with those thoughts? I think they realized they had better encourage it rather than have me do it in real life.

Q: How does it feel for your movie to be re-released with all these "classics," such as *Star Wars* and *The Godfather*?

A: I think that is funny. It's luck that it came out, so it's almost like it's satirizing that. I feel sorry for the movies that are going to be re-released after *Pink Flamingos*.

So I find it delightful. I would have never ever predicted I would be talking about this movie 25 years later. And I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know how it's going to be received. ■

Sono Motoyama is a writer who lives in Baltimore.

Welcome to New Hampshire's North Country, where America is considered a foreign power and alien spacecraft have been dropping in for years

Tom Stephanos, Boston

The Extraterrestrials of Indian Stream

BY ELLEN BARRY

JOHN ANDERSON

ACROSS THE FLAT white expanse of Lake Francis, ice-fishermen's shacks are scattered like thrown dice. They are tiny and solitary and not built for comfort. As she bumps along Route 3 in her grandmother's battered Dodge Dart, Sandy Black looks out at the shacks and smiles.

"They think my hobby is silly," she says.

Black is a flatlander — in other words, she was born well south of the 45th parallel — and it is perhaps because of this that she can hold forth about what is, in the North Country, the only way of life imaginable. The people who live here don't notice things about themselves, but five years after moving up here from Virginia, Black still notices. The winters. The isolation. The extraterrestrials.

As she drives along Route 3, she reels off five years of local anomalies — mostly nocturnal lights and UFO fly-bys, but some close encounters and a few instances of direct contact.

This past winter, a woman saw a spacecraft light up the whole side of Magalloway Mountain, then sweep toward her and land in a cove on First Connecticut Lake. In Stewartstown, one man reported aliens in his home, though Black has doubts about this story. ("His wife, who is deceased, offered to make them nachos.") In February, a well-respected 73-year-old woman reported that 12 alien beings sat around her kitchen table for hours, taking notes and talking among themselves. Over in Canaan, a teenage boy saw a nine-foot yeti.

Most of it is the UFOs, though. So far this year, in her capacity as investigator for the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) — the country's only grassroots UFO investigative organization — Black has reported some 14 different UFO sightings, which is a record for this area and has drawn national attention. She doesn't pry stories out of people, because she doesn't have to. On a recent Saturday morning, Black — a large blonde in sweatpants and an *E.T.* lapel pin — demonstrated her information-gathering method by surveying a series of waitresses; before noon, she had leads to an alien base in North Hill, as well as a reported sighting of a cricket the size of a man.

Black, who is 47, had always believed in UFOs, but when she moved up here, she stumbled into a gold mine of anomalies. It was only a few miles south on Route 3 that Barney and Betty Hill reported the first famous alien abduction case, in 1961, and that was by no means the region's first brush with the supernatural. Peggy Cheries, 40, a cashier at George's Pizza, in Colebrook, estimates that "a couple hundred" locals have seen UFOs — she can actually recall a cookout that was interrupted by several hovering crafts — but adds that before Black came to town, people didn't talk about it.

Not so now. Once they are collated and mailed to MUFON headquarters, in Texas, these reports will constitute what UFO experts call a "flap" — in other words, a notable upsurge in localized sightings.

All of which has brought an abnormal amount of national attention to these small towns in the North Country, where looking for alien spacecraft is one way to spend a Saturday night — something like going to the movies, but less of a drive.

"We've been watching them for 10 or 15 years now," says one 63-year-old convenience-store owner, who has never spoken publicly about it and asks to remain anonymous. "When I go out at night, that's what I look for. I look for things in the sky." And sometimes not in the sky. One of his neighbors, he mentions, "had 14 of them over for breakfast."

ONE OF the qualities that people in the North Country notice about outsiders is a tendency to mention every single thing that happens to them.

"You just see things," says William Griffin, who has lived in Colebrook for 11 years and still considers himself a new arrival. "Most of the people who do tell people about things are flatlanders. Even a natural thing — like a hawk. A flatlander will run and tell someone 'I saw a hawk.'"

A native — and we're talking about families who received their land for service in the Revolutionary War — probably would not bring that hawk up in conversation. People up here keep their own counsel, and they're not used to outside interference. Sandy Black realized this early on; when she first started collecting UFO reports, one old lady assumed she had come to take away her food stamps.

The feeling of separateness has run deep here for 300 years. An entire strip of this area — bordered to the west by Indian Stream and to the north by Hall Stream — actually declared independence from the United States for four years in the mid-1830s, establishing the short-lived Independent Republic of Indian Stream before "yielding to New Hampshire" in 1836. According to local historian Granvyl Hulse, the republic fell when a representative of the US military barged in on the president of the Indian Stream Republic and threatened to kick his teeth in.

And today, pockets of secessionist spirit still linger.

"From the Notches on up should probably be its own country," says Ron Scott, 65, a Boston-born man who moved up here after two disillusioning years of military service in Korea. He suspects communist infiltration of the government. "I'll tell you, I don't think the state government or the federal government are worth a hill of beans."

This visceral distrust of Washington is intertwined with the alien phenomenon. Virtually every witness interviewed in the North Country backs up personal experiences with the classic *X-Files* syllogism: if the government lies, and the government says there are no UFOs, then there are UFOs. Denial equals proof.

Ultimately, though, it's an outsider who has made Colebrook's aliens into a talked-about phenomenon. Bobbing from booth to booth in a diner, distributing her MUFON



SIGHTSEER: a MUFON investigator, Sandy Black considers acceptance of the physically impossible to be a survival skill for the next millennium.

business card, Sandy Black has helped make it respectable — even exciting — to come forward. Right now, she's planning a little party for people who have seen them.

"I'm even beginning to notice a little bit of envy among people who don't have [these experiences]," she says, with a touch of pride. "One of my friends asked me, 'Why don't I see them?' I said, 'You're not one of the chosen few.'"

Certainly reported sightings have gone up abruptly. "Maybe people just weren't looking at the sky before," Cheries muses. Well, they are looking now. Every night at nine, when he closes his convenience store, Ron Scott strolls out and scans the skies for spacecraft.

"I gotta see one of these," he says. "I want to be a believer."

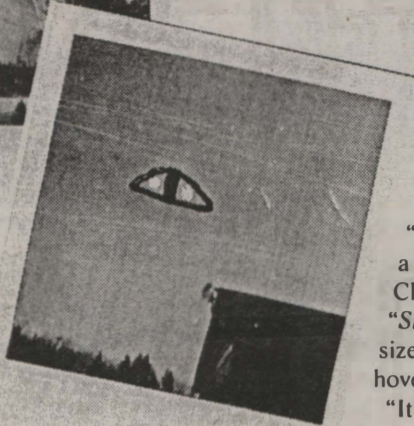
SANDY BLACK rolled in here from Herndon, Virginia, five years ago. She

thought at the time that her new home "would be something like that TV show, *Northern Exposure*." But as she and her husband made their way farther north, the landscape just got emptier. The road signs read FROST HEAVES and then FALLING ROCK and then MOOSE COLLISION. It wasn't much like anything she had seen on TV. "I kept thinking we'd driven off the end of the earth," she remembers.

In a way, she had. Certain influences just don't penetrate into the North Country, or if they do, they penetrate at a very slow pace. This 256,000-acre strip of land is actually classified as a different meteorological zone from the more temperate areas to the north, south, east, and west of it, Hulse says. There are towns here with no retail at all. "Down below" means "south of Portsmouth." Ask locals for phone numbers, and many of them will give you four digits.



EVIDENCE of alien life in Polaroid snapshots, and an artist's sketch.



Over time, the area's isolationist credo has rubbed off on Sandy Black. Once active as a union lobbyist on Capitol Hill, she has stopped following politics altogether, because she considers most of what is released to the public "a diversion." A lifelong Democrat, she has begun to see the appeal of Pat Buchanan. Everything below the Notches has begun to seem more distant.

"I lost interest in what's going on in the world. It's not concentrating on what's important," she says. What's important, in her view, is the way we are "destroying the planet" with chemical poisons and toxic sludge and volcanoes spewing carbon into the air, she says. She sees disaster in the future.

Black did bring one thing with her: ideas. She had seen UFOs before, when she lived in Arizona, but in her 30s she became deeply involved "as part of a personal-growth thing," and offered her services to MUFON, the world's largest UFO-investigation network. An avid fan of Harvard psychologist and abduction theorist John Mack, she is part of the New Age wing of UFO theory.

This line of thinking goes far beyond flying saucers; it is suffused with environmentalism, politics, and spiritualism. According to Mack, encounters with aliens are mystical and subjective, and they may have the potential to change your life for the better. Essential to the theory is a deep concern for the environment. Mack suggests that the aliens are warning us to stop ravaging our planet, like "butterflies coming back to stop the caterpillars from denuding the bushes." When they return from their abduction experience, abductees — or "experiencers," as Mack prefers to call them — are transformed people.

In stark contrast to the nuts-and-bolts recordkeeping of 1950s ufology, this new school of thought has dispensed with the task of physical proof, convinced that encounters and abductions are happening in a "fifth dimension."

In his academic-sounding 1994 alien-abduction manifesto, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, Mack writes that "experience, the reporting of the experience, and the receiving of that experience through the psyche of the investigator are, in the absence of physical verification sufficiently robust to satisfy scientific requirements of proof (there is physical evidence but not proof), the only ways that we can know about abductions." Crucial to the abduction theory are phenomena "for which we can conceive of no explanation within a Newtonian/Cartesian or even Einsteinian space/time ontology."

In other words, physical science is no longer a useful tool for dealing with abduction stories. You just have to believe. To Black, scientific method is not simply beside the point; it is an obstacle.

"Scientists work in the three-dimensional world. That's all they can relate to. They want to hear about metal — knock knock knock on the side of the craft," she says over waffles at a diner. "I have no interest in knowing how these things fly, propulsion systems and so on," she says. "It might be how women look at things, as opposed to men."

A form of this philosophy has rubbed off on locals. Their explanations veer from the extremely mystical to the extremely literal.

"I think they're looking for a place to move to," says Cheries, who has seen a "Star Wars-type thing" the size of a 10-story building hovering over her own house.

"It's something about the 45th parallel. There's a fifth dimension," explains Gifford, whose wife, Beverly, reported a UFO to Black. "Also, it's sparsely populated up here, so there's more room."

Black, meanwhile, looks with some pity on scientifically minded people who are "stuck in their little three-dimensional box." She considers acceptance of the physically impossible to be a sign of forward thinking — a survival skill for the next millennium.

Here's an example: Black recently took a report from a lady who said a two-and-a-half-foot sphere of light had come floating in her window in the middle of the night. The ball of light stopped, and four or five aliens emerged.

How tall? I ask. Black holds her hand four feet off the ground.

How could five four-foot aliens fit in a two-and-a-half-foot sphere? I ask.

"See?" she says. "You're dealing with old physics."

TO THE hard-science wing of ufology, which still puts a great deal of stock in "old physics," Sandy Black's theories are — to say the least — frustrating. They are also spreading very quickly.

"I'm always disappointed in what people will believe," says Dr. Mark Rodeghier, scientific director of the J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies, or CUFOS, in Chicago. "The standard of proof is pretty low. Most of these people are not trained in science. I've seen this time and time again."

The abduction story has made UFOs sexy again; cinema, television, and the popular press are saturated with images of inky-eyed Small Grays toddling into our homes. But far as Rodeghier is concerned,



the field is in danger of getting mired in magical thinking.

"What has happened is, while there has been more interest, there has been less scientific interest," Rodeghier says. "The abduction phenomenon has had a negative impact on attracting serious people to the field."

The change began right outside Colebrook about 30 years ago, when Betty and Barney Hill electrified the UFO community with that first report of alien abduction. The Hills' account went this way: they were driving south on Route 3 when they saw a low-flying spacecraft, stopped the car, and immediately slipped out of consciousness. The next thing they knew, they were driving down Route 93, and had somehow "lost" two hours. Under hypnosis, the Hills said they had been paralyzed and taken on board the spacecraft, where they had undergone some kind of physical examination.

The conventional wisdom within the community now holds that aliens are abducting humans in order to crossbreed with them. Abduction stories have been cropping up more and more often in popular culture, and an oft-cited Roper Poll taken in 1991 concluded that more than half a million Americans had had supernatural episodes consistent with the abduction experience.

Once the abduction stories started, they changed the field of ufology forever. A rift opened up between the conservative, "nuts-and-bolts" ufologists — who consider that the vast majority of sightings reports are bogus — and the psychosocial abduction theorists like Mack or Budd Hopkins, who believe the interbreeding stories on the strength of witnesses' emotional authenticity.

And even for hardheaded ufologists who distance themselves from the abduction phenomenon, the ante has gone up. When people across the country can describe having

MUFON on the California suicide

The Heaven's Gate mass suicide may have sparked new interest in UFOs in the major press, but the UFO-research community doesn't think much of the attention. For starters, says Ray Fowler, MUFON's national director of investigations, the spaceship trailing Comet Hale-Bopp — the vessel that was supposed to take the cultists on their final ride — wasn't a UFO at all, and it was nowhere near the comet. "It was a star," Fowler says, adding that it was in the same line of sight as Hale-Bopp, but light-years and light-years away.

Though Fowler tried explaining that fact on the Internet, the explanation obviously didn't take; he sees the spaceship notion as part of the traditional hysteria surrounding a comet's appearance, updated for the space age.

Sandy Black says she doesn't even read articles about Heaven's Gate. (The press, she says, closed in on the story "like sharks to a bloody steak.") "That bunch of nuts in California has nothing to do with serious UFO research," she says.

Fowler says he figures that the suicide story "hurts legitimate scientific UFO research" and makes it easier for the government to downplay and suppress its own UFO information. And, he says, the story continues a trend in coverage that keeps "legitimate sightings" by sober-eyed witnesses such as airline pilots out of the news. "It's only the fantastic that usually gets in the newspapers," he says.

— Tom Scocca

sex with aliens, even experts admit that mere sightings are pretty humdrum stuff. People don't want to hear about how the aliens arrived when they can find out how they brought captive women to orgasm. As for strange lights — well, forget about it.

"Nocturnal lights are blasé," says Ray Fowler, MUFON's national director of investigations, who is presently at work investigating a four-person abduction incident that took place on the Allagash River in northern Maine. "I'm very reluctant to even look into nocturnal lights. I get more excited about CE3s [close encounters of the third kind, or coming within 500 feet of an entity]. That type of experience is far more appealing to me now. People want something they can sink their teeth into."

And as the subjective approach comes to dominate the field, even investigators are involved on a fiercely personal level; it's not as simple as seeing lights in the sky. Where abduction is concerned, skepticism can be an insult.

"To me, if you're skeptical, that's just ignorance," Black says. "But if you're saying something to make [abduction theorist] Budd Hopkins look bad, then you're siding with the devil."

Both Black and Fowler hint at abduction experiences of their own. As representatives of the Mutual UFO Network, though, they don't talk about them to the press. They're not supposed to talk about what else they believe, either. It's right there in the Investigator's Manual, under the heading **WORKING WITH THE MEDIA**: "An impression of inextricable ties between UFO research and other esoteric pursuits serves to confuse the audience and erode the UFO researcher's credibility."

WHATEVER THE scientists might make of her, Sandy Black has brought many people in the North Country into the UFO fold. The Mutual UFO Network is the only national UFO-investigation network, and relies on its local representatives to spread the word among the populace. Along with Peter Geremia, the state MUFON director, Black has passed out innumerable business cards and introduced herself to innumerable strangers. She's tramped through the snow to knock on back doors.

"One of the things I try to instill in sec-

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Definitions (from the MUFON manual)

Following are the formal definitions. Field Investigators, analysts, researchers and interested readers of this manual should come to know the definitions and use them in their personal work and communication with others. Let MUFON headquarters know if you find cases clearly within the realm of flying saucer phenomena that cannot be classified within one or more of these "types."

	1	2	3	4	5
AN ANOMALY					
FB FLY-BY					
MA MANEUVER					
CE CLOSE ENCOUNTER					
	Sighting	Physical Effects	Living Entities	Reality Transformation	Lasting Injury

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People don't want to hear about how the aliens arrived when they can find out how they brought captive women to orgasm.

UFO, from page 7

tion directors is that you have people everywhere that are interested in the subject, and if they don't know you're there, it's going to be like looking for something in the dark without a flashlight," Geremia says. "Sandy has done an outstanding job of letting people know MUFON is there."

If the quantity of reports is any measure of success, then Black is succeeding. Locals are coming forward from every direction to say they had been seeing UFOs all along. Black attributes this to destigmatization. She knows how this works, because it happened with her own mother.

"She was really frightened when I first got into this stuff," Black recalls. "Now she sends me all these UFO magazines all the time. She actually took a cattle-mutilation report for me in Texas last year."

Black doesn't try to convince people — "It's like religion. People develop spiritually at their own rate," she explains. It's not really necessary, either; it is fairly common, for instance, for family members to follow each other into this realm. Johanne Rodrigue, a 33-year-old jeweler from Stewartstown, says there is only one person in her immediate family now who hasn't seen a UFO.

"It's funny the way it happened with my father," says Rodrigue, a bouffant brunette in a tiny miniskirt. "When I first joined MUFON, he had the greatest time with it." But he recently had another experience, Rodrigue says. "He comes to me and he goes — he's got these big, big hands — he says, 'I'll put my hand right in the fire. It was real.'"

And once a person accepts that what they saw was real, UFO investigation is a welcoming world. Part of what drew Black into the field was an expansive quality among the investigators she meets; they have "kind souls," she says. Black herself has the same quality — she is engaged, and open, and infinitely reassuring, if a little overcome by wayward case files.

And she's had some success in recruiting investigator trainees — 10 local people are card-carrying members. As with any volunteer network, recruiting is part of the job. The MUFON Investigator's Handbook advises recruiters that "civic, fraternal and professional organizations offer excellent opportunities for recruitment, as their members are typically intelligent, enthusiastic and proven joiners."

The "Elks Club" quality disturbs John Horrigan, who runs Boston's Paranormal Investigative Lecture League. Recruiting is a double-edged sword: it roots out unreported sightings, but it also prompts bogus ones. And one particularly charismatic field investigator can easily touch off a flap, he says.

"When you go in there, you're bringing a pathology with you. Bang, the UFO bug has hit the state of New Hampshire," Horrigan says. "When you have a small neighborhood, word gets around. The story is told and retold. It's a nice little literary genre."

To a certain degree, though, that's the point; Ray Fowler says grassroots UFO investigators like Black are doing the job that the government should have been doing all along: "conditioning" the populace to believe in the presence of extraterrestrial life.

"In a small way . . . MUFON [is] conditioning people without the government having to do anything," Fowler says. At press time, 48 percent of the American public believed in UFOs.

IN THE North Country, the sky seems close and the state capitol seems far. That's been true for three centuries.

Colebrook physician, historian, and geologist William Gifford — who is still called "Doc Gifford" even though he gave up his

license in protest of bureaucratic interference — tells a story about a whole town that was impounded in the mid 19th century because the farmers refused to pay taxes. One of Gifford's wife's ancestors purchased the town, for \$18.04, and he took a trip over to inspect his property. He banged on one farmer's door and asked him — just out of curiosity — how much he owed. The farmer said, "Seventy-five cents."

"It was just 75 cents, but he would not pay it," Gifford adds. "There are still people around here who think like that."

But it is in precisely this rocky, resistant atmosphere that the UFOs — and the body of ideas connected with them — have found purchase. To Sandy Black, as to many, many Americans, aliens are a part of the same narrative framework as the Trilateral Commission and the approaching destruction of the planet. "All the Whitewater stuff is a diversion," she says. "Our society has got-



A BELIEVER: Johanna Rodrigue, a MUFON member, says only one person in her family hasn't seen a UFO.

ten the point of bread and circuses."

Her beliefs are strong and sincere, and she considers them a guard against cataclysm. She tells people about them. It's part of a process — ideas multiply themselves through the media, through the Internet, or through people, and the UFO story evolves. The ufologist Jacques Vallee explained the evolution of ideas this way: "Conventional science appears more and more perplexed, befuddled, at a loss to explain. Pro-ET ufologists become more dogmatic in their propositions. More people become fascinated with space and the new frontiers of consciousness. More books and articles appear, changing our culture in the direction of a new image of man."

Here, in an area that seems to have more than its share of anomalies in the first place, the mysterious closeness of nature has combined with deep-rooted politics, creating an organic theory of government conspiracy and the supernatural. The ideas — whether they were born in John Mack's forums or in Internet discussion groups — bring meaning to what was already there: the eerie field, the hovering spacecraft, the huge insects, the yeti, the night lights, the day lights, the inexplicable humming of the earth.

Except that — as people up here will tell you — they've been seeing UFOs for centuries. That's how Black figures it, anyway. To her, she's just scribbling notes on a phenomenon that dwarfs her. Asked whether the number of local reports bears any significant relationship to the amount of UFO activity in the area, she is quiet for a long time, thinking. "No," she says at last.

People see what they see, she points out. She does not, in the end, consider herself a vital figure.

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