

# Aztec, New Mexico -- a crash story reexamined

by William E. Jones and Rebecca D. Minshall

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*William E Jones and Rebecca D. Minshall are the authors of Bill Cooper and the Need for More Research (1991).*

*Editor's note:* In 1950, in a best-selling book titled *Behind the Flying Saucers*, entertainment columnist Frank Scully reported that a spaceship had crashed on a rocky plateau east of Aztec, New Mexico, and the U.S. Air Force recovered it and the bodies of its occupants, 16 small humanlike beings dressed in the "style of 1890." Scully's source for this remarkable tale was a "Dr. Gee," identified as a government scientist. A subsequent investigation by J. P. Cahn, a writer for *True* magazine, found that Scully's informants were Leo A. GeBauer ("Dr. Gee") and Silas Newton, veteran confidence artists, and their saucer story was part of an elaborate swindle to peddle bogus oil-detection equipment to unsuspecting buyers. In the 1980s, as ufologists turned their attention to a question they had long ignored because of the Scully fiasco, some suggested that perhaps the Aztec case deserved another look. The result was a 625-page book, *UFO Crash at Aztec*, written by William S. Steinman and Wendelle C. Stevens and published privately in 1987. Its title notwithstanding, only a part of the volume deals directly with the event. That section is written by Steinman, with Stevens padding the rest of the book with other tales of crashes and conspiracies. According to Steinman, GeBauer and Newton were railroaded by an unscrupulous journalist and a sinister government agency "determined . . . to set an example for anybody else who might decide to divulge information . . . and to divert public attention completely away from the story of the crashed saucers and little bodies." Chapter 6 of the book consists of Steinman's account of what he found when he went to Aztec to investigate personally. In what follows, the authors take issue with Steinman's version of events.

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With the developing story of the 1947 Roswell, New Mexico, UFO crash it is natural that some UFO investigators should direct their attention to other crash stories which are not so well documented and well known. We at MidOhio Research Associates have been investigating the alleged crash of a flying saucer at Aztec, New Mexico, in 1948, the subject of a book by William S. Steinman and Wendelle C. Stevens, *UFO Crash at Aztec*.

We hoped to learn something about the Aztec story. Given the cost and difficulty of investigating a 1948 New Mexico case from our base in Ohio, we had little hope of conclusively proving or disproving it, but we wanted to see what we could uncover through telephone and letter inquiries. MORA was fortunate to secure the aid of Suzanne Belt, executive director of the Aztec Museum Association. Her investigation is underway, and we plan to report on her findings in the near future. What is being learned about the Aztec crash story is worth recording in the event that the Aztec crash takes on some claimed importance in the future.

## The Denver lecture

On pages 91, 267, and 268 of his book Steinman writes about a lecture delivered anonymously by Silas M. Newton before a "Basic Science" class at the University of Denver. According to the book, Newton was invited to give the lecture by the class instructor, Francis F. Broman. The purpose of the lecture was to provide the students with an assertion against which they could apply the critical thinking methods Broman was teaching. When word got out around the campus that a lecture on flying saucers was going to be given, the interest was so great that a larger lecture hall had to be used. In June 1991 we talked with Broman, who essentially verified what Steinman had written about the incident. Newton did, in fact, request anonymity at the lecture because, so he said, he didn't want the government to know who he was. He had the lecture taped and, as far as is known kept the tape for himself. Finally, for the record, the class was entitled "Science and Man."

Broman found Newton's claim about the crashed saucer unconvincing, as did many of those who attended his lecture. Further, Newton failed to live up to an agreement to allow his story to be critiqued using the methods being taught by

Broman. As a result of statements made later by Broman about some aspects of the lecture, Broman was reportedly threatened with a lawsuit by the author of a book entitled *About UFOs*. The dispute was settled out of court. Because of criticisms in *The Denver Post* and resulting pressures from within the university community, his memory of the event is not pleasant.

Steinman writes that Broman was contacted by a representative of the FBI or Army intelligence--Broman does not remember which--right after the lecture. The caller reportedly wanted to know what he and others thought of the lecture. When we asked him about this on July 1, Broman confirmed the book's account. The caller tried to reach him by telephone at his home soon after the 10 am. lecture. Since Broman had to drop off his laboratory assistant before he could go home, he missed the call. Broman was called back a second time soon after he arrived home. The caller did ask what Broman and others thought about the lecture. Broman replied that he didn't believe the crash story and didn't think many others did either. That seemed to satisfy the caller.

## Testimony from Aztec

On page 256 Steinman discusses "W.M." who was a deputy sheriff in 1948 and who supposedly left the Aztec area quickly, settling in Long Beach, California, only to return years later after retirement. A small article in the April 28, 1948, issue of the *Durango Herald*, a Colorado newspaper, led Steinman to conclude W.M. had left Aztec in fear after being threatened because of his knowledge of the UFO crash. The article reported that W.M.'s car hit a cow on the Gallup Highway as he was driving to California. The accident knocked W.M.'s teeth out and demolished his vehicle. "He bought another car in Gallup and finished the trip," according to the *Herald*. Steinman comments, "W.M. must have been in an awful hurry to get out of Aztec, even to the extent of buying another car along the road, and not even tending to his teeth!!" He intimates that W.M. knew something about the crash and goes, "The article didn't say whether W.M. left Aztec before or after the UFO crash. Did he see something that resulted in his having to leave at that time--or did something happen nearby while he was gone that he may have come into knowledge of which had the same effect? . . . Was he told by somebody . . . to mind his own business?"

"W.M.," who Steinman writes is "now deceased" is Wright G. McEwen. McEwen, who is in fact still alive, and lives in Aztec with his wife. They were contacted by telephone. McEwen was a deputy sheriff in March 1948, and he did leave Aztec to move to California. He confirmed that he had talked with Steinman and knew the general outlines of the story. But both he and his wife emphatically deny that a flying saucer crashed near Hart Canyon, northeast of Aztec. Mrs. McEwen added that Aztec was a small town back in 1948 and if something that momentous had occurred, everyone in town would soon have been aware of it. She thinks that the crash story may have been started by a newspaper man who she believes was named George Bower, he sometimes wrote partially true and sensational stories for the local paper to help boost circulation. (Other investigators of the story believe the more likely source was a much-publicized crash hoax used to promote a 1949 science-fiction film, *The Flying Saucer*. In a paper published in *MUFON 1985 UFO Symposium Proceedings*, William L. Moore suggests that the episode gave Newton and GeBauer the idea of a saucer crash. GeBauer had done business in Aztec, according to Moore, and this may have played a role in their decision to set the event there.

In those days, Mrs. McEwen told us, there were no roads east out of Hart Canyon over which Large objects could have been transported. She said the roads didn't come in until a later oil-search boom. As the manager of a motel out on U.S. Route 550 at the time, she would have been aware, one way or another, of anyone who came into town to assist in the retrieval operation, she said.

Steinman claims that he learned about McEwen through Harvey Melton, who had moved into Aztec in 1970 or 1972. (See pages 204-05 and pages 242-43.) According to Mrs. McEwen, Melton, an acquaintance of theirs, was interested in flying saucers and during the Steinman visit had become somewhat "abusive" with them over the Aztec story. She thinks that he was too willing to believe in such stories. Steinman writes that Melton and his wife Vivian learned about the location of the crash site from a "mysterious" Ray Meier who arrived in Aztec by bus in June 1975. The Meltons and a man named Benson Leeper reportedly escorted Meier to the site where he took pictures and studied the area for about an hour. He stayed with the Meltons overnight and, according to Steinman, left by bus the next day. Their attempts to reach him later at an Albuquerque post office box address he gave them were unsuccessful. The MORA investigators

also tried to reach Meier at this address; the letter was returned unclaimed. Meier was not listed in the Albuquerque telephone records as of July 1, 1991.

Mrs. McEwen told us that she and her husband are interested in flying saucers and have an open mind on the subject. When told about the mounting evidence for the 1947 Roswell crash, she said that she could accept that if there was enough evidence. But she is sure that no saucer crashed near Aztec in 1948; she would have heard about it.

Benson Leeper still lives on his farm north of Aztec. He remembered when a man came to town and asked him and the Meltons to take him out to the site. He could not recall the man's name, even when told that the name was Ray Meier. Leeper did not go to the site, and he is not sure whether or not Vivian Melton went. He recalled, however, that Harvey Melton did go out with Meier, though he did so reluctantly because he was a little bit afraid of the man. When we asked Leeper what kind of man Meier was, Leeper's telephone demeanor changed immediately. Until that point he had acted a little disinterested and bored. He quickly answered with a definitive, "I won't say!" We then asked if Meier was "strange," and he replied, "You could say that." He would say no more on the subject even when pressed. He urged us to talk with Vivian, who is now living some where in Nevada; Harvey has since died. He claimed not to know her address, saying that the McEwens would know.

We talked further about the crash story and about Steinman. Leeper claims not to know how Steinman came to the conclusion that he knew something about the crash. He mentioned that Steinman kept questioning him about "the humanoids" which he claims to know nothing about. "I don't even know what a humanoid is," he said. As far as he remembers, Steinman came to Aztec to investigate two or three times. At one point in the discussion about Steinman, Leeper got upset and perhaps a bit concerned. He asked, "Did he put my address in his book? How did you find me?" We replied that Steinman mentioned only his name and that we found his telephone number in the local telephone book. As the conversation came to a close, we asked Mr. Leeper if he believed the story about the crash. He replied that he did not and that it is treated as a "joke" by many of Aztec's old-timers. We then asked how he thought the story got started. He said that a P-38, a World War II-era fighter aircraft, landed up on U.S. Route 550 back in the 1940s because of engine trouble or a lack of fuel. "The plane sat up on the Close farm for about a week," he claimed. Then the military came in, disassembled the craft, and trucked it out. That is all he claims to know.

We called the McEwens and inquired about Vivian Melton. They referred us to a daughter, Pat Melton, who currently lives in Aztec. Contacted by telephone on July 3, she confirmed some of what Steinman wrote about her parents and added that she had met Meier when he was in Aztec. At first she was afraid of him, as her father was, but after talking with him three or four times, got to like him. She also confirmed that he came into Aztec by bus about 15 years ago; Steinman says it was in June 1975. So their statements agree.

But Pat Melton takes these exceptions to what Steinman wrote: Meier was there four or five days, not just overnight. According to her, Wright McEwen and her father accompanied Meier to the site; her mother and Benson Leeper didn't go along. (A second call to Mrs. McEwen did not confirm her husband's part in this trip; she thinks her husband went out to the site only when Bill Steinman came to town.) Pat Melton's parents had a Nissan, not a Toyota. She doesn't know if the Nissan was used to go to the site or if a vehicle had been rented by Meier and was used for this purpose. Melton added that her parents left Aztec sometime after Steinman's visit because of her father's health, not because they had learned something special about the crash story, as implied by Steinman.

Bill Steinman upset a lot of people when he was in Aztec, Melton said. Some of the people he interviewed, including her parents, claimed he was an aggressive interviewer, putting words into their mouths to prove the points he wanted them to make. They complained that he made "a lot of speculative assumptions" based upon very few facts. The matter-of-fact people of Aztec did not take kindly to Steinman's approach and his conclusions.

Meier told Melton and her parents that he had been a science teacher, was a vegetarian, and was interested in metaphysics. Melton doesn't know if he was retired from the Marine Corps, as claimed by Steinman. She found him "aloof." Meier did not reveal why he thought the flying saucer came down on the plot of land in question. That is unfortunate because Meier's claim that it is the crash site is one of the keys to the entire Aztec crash story as told by Steinman.

Meier's interest in Aztec was obviously influenced by Frank Scully's book which dealt with the Aztec crash story after

its alleged occurrence. In a May 31, 1975, letter to Pat's parents, the original of which is in our possession, Meier states, "I'll be heading for Denver shortly and hope to find the Aztec article on Dr. Gee which I read in [the] Spring of 1950."

## The site

Steinman places the crash site northeast of Aztec on Hart Canyon Road, about six miles east of U.S. Route 550. He claims to have learned about the site through Mrs. Melton during his trip to Aztec in 1~2. He locates the site on a copy of a county survey map that he had obtained from the San Juan County Assessors Office. This map is reproduced on page 245 of UFO Crash at Aztec. To the south of the crash site is property noted as being owned by Harry W. Young and a smaller parcel owned by the El Paso Oil Company. To the north of the site is a larger parcel noted as being owned by H. Knowlton and Rowland Robert Chaffee. A few other privately owned parcels are shown on the map, as well as a lot of space that is not marked as being owned by anyone.

Early in his book, on page 35, Steinman, writing about the disposition of the crash site, asserts, "General Marshall [Gen. George C. Marshall, then U.S. Secretary of State under President Truman] called the Secretary of the Interior asking him to transfer the piece of property on which the crash site was located, from the ownership of H.D. to Federal Status!! [We assume that this transfer was agreed to by the owner identified as "H.D." in the book, but Steinman is not clear on this point.] Marshall accomplished this in such a way as not to arouse suspicions concerning the real reason, and carried it off successfully." Steinman makes it appear that this land transfer took place during the short period when the vehicle was being recovered, but does not specifically make this claim. The ownership history of this parcel of land is the another key to the credibility of Steinman's story. He seems to realize this and reports on page 263 on his unsuccessful attempt to trace this history.

"H.D." is Harold Dunning. He is identified in footnote number 2 to Appendix B of UFO Crash at Roswell by Kevin D. Randle and Donald R. Schmitt and on a map in Steinman's book on page 34. We discovered these references on July 5, 1991. Coincidentally, during the July 3 conversation with Pat Melton, she had referred to a Hi Dunning and said he might know something about the crash. Harold Dunning, 93 years old, does not have a telephone, but his son Jack does and was easily located through cold calls to the only two Dunnings in the phone book. Jack Dunning said that his father knows nothing about such a crash, though they are both aware of the rumors, having met Steinman when he came to Aztec on his investigation. Jack claimed that his father had owned a little over two parcels of land in Hart Canyon, including the land on which the El Paso Oil Company pipeline station is located. The El Paso land is adjacent to and south of the land claimed by Steinman to be the crash site, so the land once owned by Dunning and referred to by Steinman as the crash site may be, at least in part, one and the same. Jack thinks his father sold his land to someone named Hank Knowlton, the H. Knowlton listed as part owner of the parcels adjacent to and north of the crash site on the map in the Steinman book. Jack believes the transfer of this land took place in the early 1950s.

His father also leased land in Hart Canyon, possibly 18 parcels, from the federal government back in those days. He ran cattle on this land. Jack could not remember which plots were leased.

Henry Knowlton confirmed in a telephone conversation on July 9 that he is the person who purchased land in Hart Canyon from Harold Dunning, probably in the early 1950s. He later sold the land to Rowland Chaffee. He is certain that none of this property included the site where the crash was said to have occurred. He is certain of this because he knows the location of this area, which he called a "bluff." As far as he knows, the bluff parcels were never owned privately, though they may have been leased for grazing purposes. He and his friends collected Indian pottery fragments and arrow heads from the area, so he is familiar with it. He stated further that there is, or at least was, a blackened area on this site about 10 feet by 10 feet in size where the pottery fragments were most heavily concentrated. The consensus among his friends is this is where the pottery was baked.

When asked whether there is a fence on the site, Knowlton said there is an old fenced-in area near where the pottery fragments were found. There were a number of these fenced-in areas in the desert near Aztec, having been placed there by the federal government. The government was attempting to determine how well the grasses of the area would grow when protected from grazing cattle.

Knowlton stated that the El Paso Oil Company natural gas pipeline station property was once owned by Chick Townsend. According to Knowlton, this was a part of the land he purchased from Dunning, which he, in turn, then sold to Townsend. He believes the sale to El Paso by Townsend took place in 1960. The pipeline station was built after this sale. There is a bit of a mystery in all of this, in that the Dunning/Knowlton/Townsend/El Paso land and the Dunning/Knowlton/Chaffee land are separated by the crash site, which reportedly has never been owned by anyone else but the federal government. Further, there have been no statements to the effect that all of the land originally owned by Dunning was ever split into two separate parts.

When asked if he knew anything about the crash of a flying saucer in the area, Knowlton laughed and said that this story had been around for years and simply wasn't true. He had no idea how it got started.

One problem with part of Steinman's story comes to mind. The alleged crash site is clearly out in the middle of nowhere. If the government was trying to protect the site from being searched by future investigators by building a fence, it certainly failed to accomplish its goal. No one is there to watch over the site and the fence supposedly put up by the federal government to protect it from human trespassers is useless for that purpose, though it would keep cattle out. The fence and federal ownership certainly did not keep Meier and Steinman out. If either had wanted to do so, an archaeological dig could have been conducted to locate buried crash-related artifacts, and it is doubtful that the government would have known about it for a very long time. Logic dictates that the fence was there for a purpose other than to keep out human trespassers, probably for the reason Knowlton cites. This factor removes part of the aura of conspiracy about the site that Steinman has attempted to portray in his book.

In May 1991 we ordered a map like that obtained by Steinman from the San Juan County Assessors Office. The legal description of the area covered by the map is "Township No. 31N, Range R10W." The land to the south of the crash site is still listed in the name of Harry W. Young. The land to the north is now listed solely in the name of Rowland R Chaffee. The El Paso Oil Company name no longer appears on the map, though the property is still shown separately. The site where the crash was alleged to have occurred is listed as "FED." On this map, that designation is for federal government land, seemingly supporting Steinman's claim. However, all of the land on the map in Steinman's book that is blank is federal land. It appears that the Assessor's Office map used in his book was altered to downplay this fact. In fact, most of the land north of Aztec is owned by the federal government, and a significant part of the remainder is owned by the state of New Mexico. Private land is relatively rare. In addition, unless the crash site parcels were originally attached to either the Chaffee or Young properties, these parcels could, by no stretch of the imagination, be considered a "ranch," as characterized by Steinman. The crash-site land is much too small for any such purpose.

We wrote the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Farmington Resource Area, in Farmington, New Mexico, to see if it had any information on the ownership history of the parcel of land alleged to be the crash site. According to John Phillips, acting area manager, in a letter dated August 22, "There is no record of the land being owned by anyone other than the federal government." Numerous pipelines cross the parcels, and the land is currently leased for grazing by a party not connected to the crash story.

The land-ownership history of the crash-site is somewhat murky. Clearly, someone needs to undertake a formal title search of the land if he or she wants to clear this matter up. (The cost of such a search could not be justified for this investigation, given the improbability of the crash's occurrence. The lowest quoted price for the title search was \$300.) But from what is known so far, the claim that Harold Dunning transferred the land to the federal government during or soon after the retrieval operation is certainly untrue. If the crash site land was not transferred as Steinman has claimed, and this appears to be the case, a shadow of doubt is cast on the entire story as he presents it.

## **Fiction and fact**

Neither the Scully book nor the Steinman book is persuasive. The critical information each presents is questionable. Everyone we contacted in Aztec, especially the older people who were adults in March of 1948, is certain that no crash ever took place. It is clear that the flying-saucer-crash story is part of Aztec's folklore but not its history.

All the same the reality of the 1947 crash at Roswell seems by now almost a foregone conclusion. There is also some reason to suspect other crashes may have occurred this light Broman's story about the way the FBI or Army

Intelligence reacted to Silas Newton's lecture on crashed saucers at the University of Denver is curious. The caller wanted to know if the lecture was believed, and when Broman told him it was not, the caller seemed satisfied. Perhaps that was because the cover-up--not of the nonexistent Aztec crash but of the real one at Roswell--was holding.

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