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UFO investigators say Roswell isn't best UFO case

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Beyond Roswell: Is the truth out there?

Investigators say 1947 incident doesn't represent best UFO case

Fifty years after the first modern flying-saucer reports, the UFO phenomenon continues to be fueled by thousands of sightings - as well as denials, deceptions and disappointments.

And although the Roswell Incident stands as perhaps the most spectacular flying-saucer story, the phenomenon goes far beyond the desert town of Roswell, N.M.

"Roswell is lost in a fog of confusion with all sorts of bewildering claims and counterclaims," says Jerry Clark of the Center for UFO Studies, author of the definitive "UFO Encyclopedia." The second edition of the multivolume encyclopedia comes out this fall.

"The problem is, no one began to investigate this thing until 30 years later, when memories are hazy," Clark says. Even Kent Jeffrey, the head of the International Roswell Initiative, says he now believes there was no flying-saucer incident at Roswell - a claim that has earned him blistering scorn in some UFO circles.

Clark says the debate over the reality of Roswell will remain "staleated unless there's some startling new breakthrough."

The U.S. Air Force is on the verge of releasing a second review of unclassified UFO files, but don't look for an amazing breakthrough.

Indeed, Air Force investigators reportedly will speculate that some reported sightings of alien bodies are traceable to '50s-era experiments involving dummies dropped from high altitudes to study the results of the impact.

The earlier review said in 1994 that debris recovered during the 1947 Roswell Incident actually came from apparatus used in Project Mogul, a top-secret operation to monitor Soviet nuclear blasts using aerial sensors hung from weather balloons.

UFO enthusiasts say the shifting stories coming from government sources only heighten their suspicions that the full truth has not yet been told about Roswell. But investigators such as Clark say there are other UFO reports that yield far more promise than Roswell.

"You really have to focus not on the most spectacular cases, but on the hard evidence, something you can take into the laboratory," Clark says.

According to the lore that has grown up around unidentified flying objects, the first recognized sighting was reported on June 24, 1947, by Boise businessman Kenneth Arnold. A trained pilot, Arnold said he saw nine disk-like objects flying in formation over Mount Rainier in Washington. It was that report that led to the creation of the term "flying saucer."

Clark says Arnold's report has held up to 50 years of scrutiny.

"His sighting remains puzzling," he says. "It was a very good sighting."

More recently, UFO investigators have focused on a series of sightings reported in Arizona on March 13. Dozens of observers, scattered across 100 miles, reported seeing a cluster of lights moving rapidly across the night sky.

The Arizona incident stands as "perhaps the most dramatic UFO sighting that has been reported to the National UFO Reporting Center" over the past two or three years, says the Seattle-based center's director, Peter Davenport.

Davenport has also gathered reports of a similar cluster of lights passing over a wide area of Texas on May 5.

In Clark's view, the best-documented UFO case involves a sighting on Jan. 8, 1981, in the French village of Trans-en-Provence. A farmer, Renato Nicolai, reported seeing an object several feet in diameter that landed in his garden and took off again after a few moments, disturbing the soil.

"At the time, the French government had an officially funded UFO research project," Clark says. The project, known by the French acronym GEPAN, found that traces of phosphate and zinc were left at the site, and that leaves from young plants in the garden showed a significant loss of chlorophyll.

GEPAN concluded that while "we cannot give a precise and unique interpretation to this remarkable combination of results ... we can state that there is nonetheless confirmation of a very significant event which happened on this spot."

Clark says the story illustrates that UFO research can yield intriguing results - provided it is backed up by money and expertise.

"The fact of the matter is that real science is really expensive," he says. "It's expensive to go into the laboratory, it's expensive to hire the services of competent scientists. ... The only reason why the UFO phenomenon continues to be controversial is because we haven't put resources into it."

Davenport, who is struggling to keep his center going with almost no outside support, agrees heartily.

"Funding is a major, major problem," he says. "In my estimation, the chokepoint is there."

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