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>From the StarTribune, Newspaper of the Twin Cities, Sunday, Oct. 29, 1995:

By Jim Dawson

Star Tribune Staff Writer

On a dark night in a rural area near Gulf Breeze, Fla., a man noticed an odd red light in the sky. He flipped on his video camera and headed out onto a dock, narrating what he was doing as he searched the sky with the camera. Suddenly a bright red object flashed into view - a UFO that was a little too big and too close for comfort.

"Holy Moly!" the man yells, and the video image turns to electronic garble. The audio portion keeps recording, however, and you hear heavy breathing and feed slamming as he flees the scene.

"The witness is scared," Jeffrey Sainio, a video expert, said with understatement to the 150 or so people gathered Saturday in St. Paul for the second annual UFO meeting sponsored by the Science Museum of Minnesota. Sainio, who tries to determine the authenticity of photos, films and videos for the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), then showed a still image of the red object that the video camera captured just before the man fled in terror. There is structure behind the lights, so it was apparently a craft of some sort, he pointed out.

Sainio ruled out all the ways he knows of to fake such videos, then left it to the crowd to decide if it really was a UFO. He commended the man for running, citing two other close encounters with UFOs in which people have suffered radiation burns.

So it went Saturday, the first day of the two-day conference. The experts included a retired UFO expert from NASA, an optical physicist from the Navy, and an investigative journalist.

The theme matched the title of the symposium: "The Science and Politics of UFO Research."

UFOs, or unidentified flying objects, are real, the speakers said in various ways. What they are isn't clear, but they are out there,

saucer-shaped craft that zip silently through the atmosphere at speeds in the thousands of miles per hour.

The problem, the experts said, is that the government doesn't want you know about them, airline pilots are afraid to report them because of the "curtain of laughter" that results, and mainstream scientists don't want to do serious studies of them.

So the UFO experts, mostly solid citizens with impressive credentials, go over photo after photo, video after video, sifting out obvious fakes, then trying to understand what the UFOs really are.

Bruce Maccabee, the physicist with the Navy Weapons Lab, went through case after case, dating back to 1947, when a pilot flying near Mount Rainier in Washington reported a flight of nine wingless saucers cruising at 1,700 mph.

The images went on and on Saturday - some just blurs of light, others impressive films of silver disks or bright lights.

So why, with all of their images and conviction, are UFO advocates not believed by mainstream scientists?

"Because we don't have any evidence that we've been visited by beings from another planet," said Bob Gehrz, an astronomer at the University of Minnesota. "If we could get some real, scientific evidence, then that would be different, but I've never seen any."

Astronomers and many other scientists believe, for the most part, that we are not alone - that there are advanced civilizations scattered throughout our Milky Way galaxy and, by extension, the billions of other galaxies. Indeed, there is a serious private program, supported by many scientists, called SETI, or the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, that is using radio telescopes to look for radio signals from those civilizations.

Where many mainstream scientists part company with UFO researchers is on whether flying saucers from those alien civilizations have come to Earth. One reason, as Gehrz noted, is the lack of rigorous evidence.

The other is the nearly incomprehensible size of our galaxy and the universe. It is so big and empty out there that travel between stars seems next to impossible given our current understanding of the physical laws of the universe.

As with most things in science, the question of the likelihood of alien civilizations has been reduced to a formula, known as the Drake Equation. When he presents the equation to his students, Gehrz does the numbers this way:

*The number of new stars formed per year is 10.

*The probability that stars, both new and old, have planets around them, is 100 percent.

*The probability that the star will shine long enough to support a planet that can develop life is about 10 percent.

*The number of planets suitable for life is about one per star.

*The probability that life will develop on that planet is 100 percent.

*The probability that life will evolve into an intelligent form is 100 percent.

*The lifetime of an intelligent civilization is 100 years.

Some of these numbers, such as the 100 percent probability of life-supporting planets developing around long-lived stars, are probably too optimistic. And the probability that an intelligent civilization will only last a century before it destroys itself may be pessimistic.

But given those numbers, it means there are about 100 "advanced" civilizations scattered around the Milky Way. That, Gehrz said, means each occupies an average space of 7.8 billion square light years, an immense area that makes contact with even the closest civilization very unlikely.

Gehrz, who gets a dozen or so calls a year from people who have mistaken Venus or a major star for a UFO, doesn't have a lot of patience with UFO advocates.

"The UFO cult is pretty interesting," he said. "They are like a religious movement."

The UFO experts don't have a much higher opinion of what they hear from the "tribe of astronomy."

"In every field of academia, they [scientists] go through courses that program their minds to think in a certain way," said Michael Swords, the former editor of the Journal for UFO Studies. "They come out with certain prejudices."

"The point of this is that politics plays a large role in UFO," said Chuck Penson, director of the Science Museum's computer education center and organizer of the symposium. "Our point is this should be studied. They [UFOs] are seen by large groups of credible people."

The "common wisdom," Penson said, is that the government, particularly the military, knows UFOs are real but "it doesn't behoove the government to admit there are things flying around that they can't protect you from."

Beyond a dramatic lack of funding for serious UFO research, the ufologists (that's what they call themselves) also are struggling with other problems of our modern age. The advent of video cameras, satellites that image the Earth (yes, there are pictures of UFOs taken from orbit), and sophisticated image-analysis techniques are all good things. But advanced technology is also making it much easier to fake photos and

films of UFOs, something that Sainio warned the audience to beware of.

And although the most common "UFO sighting" is Venus, a growing source of confusion seems to be smaller advertising blimps lit from the inside. Several of the experts have spent a lot of time trying to determine whether otherwise credible sightings were really blimps.

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