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Update: MUFON UFO Museum To Open In Denver

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The Truth Is Almost Out Here
A UFO museum may blast off in Denver.

By Karen Bowers

In the world of Ufology, it's tough to be taken seriously.

"There'll be a sighting somewhere, and it'll be a fantastic sighting," says Mike Curta, state director of the Colorado Chapter of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). "Five hundred people saw it, and there'll be an interview with a doctor, and they'll talk to the local fire chief, and they'll always put in a woman in a muumuu with curlers in her hair and missing three-quarters of her teeth, and she'll say how she's been abducted 27 times and that the last time they let her pilot the craft to Jupiter and back. And that blows the credibility. It seems like a losing battle."

But establishing credibility and rapport -- particularly with the FAA, the Air Force and NORAD -- is high on the agenda for Curta and for MUFON's recently appointed international director, John Schuessler, who hopes that moving the group's headquarters from tiny Seguin, Texas, to the Denver area will help.

A founding member of MUFON, Schuessler is a mechanical engineer and the former director of engineering for McDonnell Douglas in Houston. He was responsible for designing the life-support systems on the Gemini spacecraft, and he worked on the space shuttle program and on the design of the not-yet-completed international space station before his retirement two years ago. He's about as far from a muumuu-clad space abductee as one can imagine.

Schuessler, who now lives in Littleton, became interested in UFOs in the mid-'60s while working on the Gemini Missions, which used two-man capsules to test long-duration flights, docking techniques and space walking. "I heard reports from astronauts who'd seen things, and they didn't know what they were -- cylindrical-shaped things passing by the spacecraft at some distance. There was something up there that we didn't put up there that they didn't understand. It was really tough to build

spacecraft in those days, and if they'd seen something...it really pushed my interest. So I began looking into it, and the more I looked, the more I found."

In 1969, Schuessler -- who was based in St. Louis at the time -- teamed up with other UFO enthusiasts to form what was then called the Midwest UFO Network. The first director was a chemistry professor at Wisconsin State University in Oshkosh. He was followed by Walt Andrus, who worked as a consumer-products manager for Motorola. Under their leadership, MUFON grew to include a magazine, Skylook, and as many as 5,000 members. (Its roster is now down to 3,000, Andrus says, a fact he attributes to competition from the Internet and other magazines.)

Since the beginning, MUFON members have devoted themselves to the scientific research of UFO phenomena. They sponsor international symposiums presided over by scientists, engineers and university professors. They teach their members how to document sightings and how to investigate sighting reports, and they're aided in their investigations by a board whose members represent 45 areas of science and technology.

Andrus, who is 79, took over as director in 1970 and moved MUFON headquarters to Seguin five years later; the group opened the MUFON museum there in 1994 in a strip-mall storefront.

With 500 square feet of memorabilia, the museum's collection includes photos of UFOs and other phenomena such as crop circles; an art exhibit of drawings and paintings of aliens created by people who say they've seen the visitors; life-sized alien models; and assorted space debris from the days of the U.S./U.S.S.R. space race. The museum also contains a library of UFO- and space-related books, as well as a catalogue of sightings reports.

And it could all be in the Denver area as soon as next month.

The museum hasn't been a big draw in Seguin, says Andrus, in part because of the town's location --about twenty miles northeast of San Antonio -- and because it's usually closed during the school year.

Andrus, who stepped down as international director earlier this month, developed his interest in UFOs in 1948 when he spotted four unidentified objects flying over downtown Phoenix. It's a story he relates with precision, fit for the pages of MUFON's own Field Investigator's Manual. "It was one in the afternoon," he says. "A perfectly blue sky. A typical August day in Phoenix -- 117 degrees. There were four objects flying in formation. They looked like silver balloons. I saw the first one in the northeast sky. It moved slowly west. It was a dull aluminum color and didn't reflect the sunlight. The first one simply disappeared, like someone had stuck a pin in the balloon. Then the second disappeared, then the third, and eventually the straggler disappeared."

Unfortunately -- or perhaps fortunately -- the vast majority of sightings MUFON investigates aren't considered UFOs. "We get somewhere between 50,000 to 80,000 reports from some kind of official organization every year," Curta says. "It might be a police department, or SETI [Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence] folks in North Carolina. Of those reports, 90 percent can be explained as normal, everyday -- a planet, an airplane, a meteorite. Just slightly over 1 percent are found to be hoaxes. The other 8 or 9 percent go unexplained. Those are the ones we take a serious interest in."

Colorado is considered a hotbed of UFO activity. "Generally we get, I would say, a call a week out of the San Luis Valley. Cattle mutilations, too," Curta says. "They dropped off the last couple years, but we've had more in the last couple weeks than in the last year all together. Why, nobody seems to know. The San Luis Valley is just a strange place, anyway. The newspaper in Salida had an article in 1894 about a bunch of town residents who saw a cigar-shaped object hanging over the city. We still get a lot of that today."

The sightings that can be classified as UFOs are dissected by as many volunteer/ experts as MUFON can round up. Copies of the photos are sent to MUFON headquarters and may appear in the museum. The organization also maintains a UFO hotline and

distributes "What to Do If You See a UFO" lists. ("The number one thing to remember is REMAIN CALM!" one reads.) Its Web site contains detailed UFO-sighting report forms asking for information such as environmental factors, terrain and elevation, and providing space for sketches.

"I'm very much a skeptic and a cynic," Curta says. "I take it all with a grain of salt. No doubt there is something going on, but what it is, I wouldn't venture to guess."

John Schuessler has never even seen a UFO. "I'm not a sighter," he says. "I keep going where people see things, and I never get there in time."

For now, though, he's watching the real estate ads, not the sky, trying to find office/display space for the headquarters and museum. He's hoping to find something in southwest Denver, preferably with a storefront so MUFON can show off some of the museum's artifacts. With luck, the museum, which will be free and open to the public, will be unveiled by the end of the year. (For updates, check MUFON's Colorado Web site at comufon.org)

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