



Crashed Saucers and Saucer Conferences

The fortieth annual National UFO Conference (NUFOC), held in North Hollywood, California, this past September, represented a highly creative (if disorganized) group of UFO enthusiasts that has given the world such classic tales as the Men in Black, the MJ-12 conspiracy, and *The Mothman Prophecies*. James Moseley, franchiser and organizer of the past thirty-four conferences, has visibly slowed down since the last time I saw him. We reminisced how at the 1980 NUFOC in New York City, he had treated the speakers to a splendid dinner at the Windows on the World restaurant atop the World Trade Center. "We won't be doing that again," he remarked, making it clear that he didn't mean just for the obvious reason. In spite of a very favorable location, the preregistration for this year's conference was smaller than the state's average grade-school class size. Once a celebrated party animal, Moseley excused himself to the assembled tipplers and turned in early.

The UFO business isn't what it used to be—only about eighty people turned out for a world-class conference in the heart of Los Angeles. From a distance, the skeptic might assume that big money is being made fleecing the gullible with books, conferences, maga-

zines, and videos. The truth is, apart from the occasional blockbuster like Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, these days UFO promoters count themselves lucky if they can break even. *UFO Magazine* is struggling to resume publication, organizations are shrinking, and book sales are extremely slow. The one bright spot, selling UFO videos, is modestly profitable for only few dealers, assuming that they don't spend much in travel and shipping costs. But don't conclude from the above that levels of UFO belief are dropping. UFO belief is probably as high as ever, but with the growth of the Internet and the sensationalized pseudo-documentaries on cable TV channels, it's just gotten harder to squeeze money from the believers. UFO enthusiasts can get the titillation they are craving without having to pay much, if anything, to get it.

One recent UFO conference that did show somewhat better attendance was the First Annual UFO Crash Retrieval Conference held in Henderson, Nevada, this past November. The conference attracted about 200 attendees, meaning that its organizers probably broke even. Perhaps the most dramatic piece of evidence, as recounted by Moseley, was Art Campbell's description of a tiny shoe he says he found on the Plains of San Augustin in New Mexico, a location that reportedly had its own UFO crash. Because this shoe is so small and narrow that it could not fit even a child—at

least not any child of this earth—the implication is that the shoe must have been worn by an extraterrestrial.

The noted UFOlogist Budd Hopkins stepped outside his usual role as a promoter of UFO-abduction claims to regale the Crash Retrieval Conference with the story of a supposed UFO crash that occurred in 1963 north of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Perhaps this is a sign that UFO-abduction mania is fading and crash-retrieval claims may be taking its place. Hopkins's presentation featured "two videotaped, firsthand interviews of hospital and ambulance workers that responded to a call from state police. Upon arrival, there were three small alien bodies and an extraterrestrial craft. The bodies were X-rayed and examined, but soon after, the Air Force confiscated the evidence and told witnesses that 'this never happened' and not to tell anyone." Once again, intrepid UFOlogists got "this close" to having their eagerly sought, smoking-gun evidence, only to have it snatched away by the Conspiracy. And what is it about New Mexico that seems to induce equipment failure in UFOs as they fly over? At least half a dozen saucers must have crashed in Roswell, if all the conflicting crash-site accounts are to be believed. San Augustin, Aztec, and now Albuquerque—the state is a veritable saucer graveyard. Probably the Reticulans know it as "the New Mexico Triangle," where their craft seem to

Robert Sheaffer's World Wide Web page for UFOs and other skeptical subjects is at www.debunker.com.

vanish without a trace. In Arizona, some shops sell as a novelty item a Flying Saucer Pilot's License, valid in that state. If such a license is sold in New Mexico, it should be scrupulously avoided, as it seems that every attempt to fly a UFO across New Mexico results in a new crash-retrieval site.

But one alleged UFO crash that's currently getting a lot of attention took place a long way from there, in Kecksburg, Pennsylvania. According to witnesses, just before 5 P.M. on the clear winter afternoon of December 9, 1965, a "fireball" that "seemed to be under some type of intelligent control" appeared to crash in the woods near Kecksburg (see <http://ufocasebook.com/Kecksburg.html>). State police responded to reports of an object crashing, but didn't find anything. But according to some accounts, the military cordoned off the area, and hauled off an acorn-shaped metal object to some unknown destination.

The Sci Fi Channel premiered a sensationalist pseudo-documentary on October 24, 2003, titled "The New Roswell: Kecksburg Exposed." As one might imagine, it leaned heavily toward the claims that a saucer crashed and was covered up by the military, giving short shrift to any skeptical explanations.

The only problem with the so-called "Kecksburg Crash" is that the object was identified long ago, was reported to have crashed in many different places, and is known to have actually disintegrated above Ontario. What the UFO believers are calling the Kecksburg Crash is known to astronomers as "the Great Lakes Fireball of December 9, 1965." Indeed, it is one of the best-studied fireballs in history, because of the clear skies and mild weather that permitted large numbers of people to see it. It has been written up in leading astronomy journals, including *Sky and Telescope* and the *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* (for the details see my Web page on the case at www.debunker.com/Kecksburg.html). Indeed, so much information was available on this brilliant meteor that astronomers were able to determine that before it encountered Earth, it was in an eccentric orbit with a

period of approximately 2.43 years, taking it from past the orbit of Mars at its farthest point from the Sun to just inside Earth's orbit, where the rock met its doom.

Even before any UFO claims began to surface about it, the Great Lakes Fireball was cited as illustrating the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Prof. G. W. Wetherill, a professor of geophysics and geology at UCLA who investigated the incident, was quoted in *Sky and Telescope* (February, 1966): "The fireball was observed by many people in Ontario, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and to a lesser extent in neighboring states. In newspaper accounts, a great many supposed impact sites were reported, both in southwestern Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Fragments were claimed to have fallen in Ohio and Michigan. These imagined happenings arose from the impossibility of estimating the distance of an object in the sky. Almost everyone who saw the fireball thought it was much closer than it really was. When it disappeared behind a house or a tree many people thought it had fallen only a few hundred yards beyond."

Nor is any of this information particularly new. Astronomer Robert Young debunked the Kecksburg Crash claims when they first appeared on the TV show *Unsolved Mysteries* in 1990, which got extremely high ratings. (See "Old-solved Mysteries: The Kecksburg Incident," *SI*, Spring 1991). Young's paper was revised and reprinted in the book *The UFO Invasion* (Frazier, Karr, and Nickel, eds. Prometheus Books, 1997). It has been carefully ignored by UFO proponents.

The Sci Fi Channel has clearly done an extremely good job of leading the public astray. A poll on its Web site revealed that 67 percent of those taking the poll believed that the object at Kecksburg was an "alien craft" versus only 27 percent who chose one of several prosaic explanations. But the next time you hear someone routing Kecksburg as "the new Roswell," at least you'll know that this new crash claim is just as bogus as the old Roswell.

But before you go off feeling too

skeptical, ponder this: the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence has just gotten five times more likely, at least according to leading British bookmakers. They recently cut the odds that the Prime Minister will acknowledge the existence of ETI by the end of 2004 from 500:1 to 100:1 (see www.williamhillmedia.com/index_template.asp?file=2782). No word on what prompted the re-evaluation, but perhaps they've been watching the Sci Fi Channel.

Perhaps the most exciting recent development in woo-woo land was the announcement by George Noory, host of the late-night talk show *Coast to Coast AM*, that he would be participating in an experiment in time travel with the "physicist and hypnotherapist, Irving Glotch." Glotch's device is said to perform "dimensional" rather than "physical" travel. It is said to use "eye fluttering," "special tones," and a "massaging of the nerves" to transport the fearless traveler backward (but not forward) in time. (See www.coasttocoastam.com/shows/2003/12/17.html#glotch.) Glotch reminds his listeners not to confuse his time-travel device with his "teleportation" device, which works on different principles. "I teleported a small plant and a mouse from point A to point B. But cannot disclose anything else at this time on this subject."

Appropriately, *time-onaut* Noory will be wearing "an aluminum suit," although Glotch insists that this is not "necessary," but merely "helpful" in containing "the force field." Glotch, who says he has been working on his time-travel device for twenty-four years, explains, "The field of universal life is an uncharted force. George Lucas was correct in his *Star Wars* movies about the force." Noory says that the time periods he is most interested in exploring are Roswell, New Mexico in July, 1947, and the mid sixth century, to see if an asteroid impact caused the Dark Ages. Asked if Noory will be safe traveling so many centuries from home, Glotch replied "I believe he will," which seems to leave open the possibility that Noory might get stuck back in the Dark Ages, where such nonsense belongs. □