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What's that in the sky? Ask CUFOS

Oh, where have the aliens gone?

CUFOS founder J. Allen Hynek was an astronomer, and he appeared in the iconic Devil's Tower finale of "Close Encounters of the Third Kind."

Once a staple of summer, as familiar as humidity, the classic flying saucer Roswell types have vanished from pop culture. Instead, we've had different staples: Iron Man, Adam Sandler, Stephen King. We've been brought 31 rich flavors of apocalypse: Dan Brown-inspired apocalypse ("Inferno"), James Franco-filled apocalypse ("This Is the End"), zombie apocalypse ("WorldWar Z"). We've had visitors from other worlds, but when you think of "Star Trek" and Superman, do you really think of little green men?

And yet, at least until that sequel to "Independence Day" arrives, maybe stop watching the skies: You need only look to Chicago.

In a quiet residential home in Norwood Park in the northwest corner of Chicago, in a spare, brightly lit basement with a gray concrete floor— picture yourself inside the interrogation chamber of a Danish detective thriller— the Center for UFO Studies awaits your call. And then awaits some more.

CUFOS is among the longest operating UFO research organizations in the world; it's been studying UFOs for 40 years, partly defining the way that pop culture thinks and talks about aliens. CUFOS was founded in Evanston in 1973 and has been in Norwood Park since 2010, and here's why I found myself there recently, surrounded by boxes marked "Roswell" and metal cabinets with file drawers labeled "Abductees" and old Air Force UFO investigation files ("Shape: mushroom or light bulb") and bookshelves filled with titles such as "Unexplained!" "UFOs in the 1980s," "Wonders in the Sky" and "Invisible Residents": I saw a UFO. Last week. Aliens were not involved, nor were probes, crop circles or LSD. I saw a UFO in the literal sense: It was an object, it was flying, and I could not identify it. Of course, it didn't stay unidentified long (I'll get to that in a bit), just long enough that, unlike every other time I have paused to discern what I am seeing in the sky, the solution was not readily obvious. For hours. Never mind that this was around the Fourth of July or that I live near the lake in Rogers Park, a relative stone's throw from the busy Naval Station on the North Shore. Never mind that boorish principle of Occam's razor (the simplest explanation is often the best). Now I had goose bumps; now I understood how a casual glance in the sky could lead to a History Channel alien stakeout. Goose bumps beat logic. Here's what I saw: A bright red glowing orb moving above Lake Michigan, east of Evanston. It was cloudy, and fireworks were exploding everywhere. But this was no

floating ember. It had mass, a vaguely circular body and a sparkly brandywine hue. As I watched, the object traveled southwest, in my direction. Then it stopped in place for maybe 30 seconds. Then it backed up and receded from view, vanishing behind a cloud. Calmly, I searched Twitter. I found several UFO sightings around the Chicago area in the past month, videos of lights in the sky, a doctored photo of a flying saucer over Logan Square (which I wanted to believe, since skinny aliens need skinny jeans). More intriguingly, I found a number of regional UFO sightings that eerily mimicked my own. I Googled "UFOs Chicago." The first link was the Center for UFO Studies, which was located conveniently nearby, on a middle-class street in a glaringly obvious building— a blocky, blue modernist home that resembles a shipping container standing on end. This is the home of Mark Rodeghier, CUFOS' longtime scientific director, who is 60 and calm, with a long neck, smallish eyes and a round head. (I told him he looked a bit alien like himself. He laughed.) He grew up in northwest Indiana and studied astrophysics at Indiana University and sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. As for his day job: statistician, specializing in predictive analytics. He's also passionate, eloquent, thoughtful, did not come off like a crackpot and never once brought up the C-word— conspiracy. He would hear my story. He explained, leading me into his basement, that CUFOS was headquartered most recently in a Peterson Avenue office building but had to close in 2010 because it couldn't afford to pay the rent. Its vast archives are split between his home and the Skokie home of CUFOS' Webmaster (though Rodeghier kept the juicy stuff). He said the first CUFOS office was in the home of founder J. Allen Hynek, a former chairman of Northwestern University's astronomy department. It later moved to an Evanston storefront, closed during the recession in the early 1980s, reopened in Hynek's home, moved to Glenview and then to Peterson in 1987.

"Anyway, the interesting stuff," Rodeghier said, pointing around at shelves and boxes, neatly arranged in stacks and folders. "Years of abductee investigations, esoteric UFO books you can't find anywhere grouped in alphabetical order within areas, Roswell, physical traces— meaning traces that UFOs leave. Government materials, contactee materials, material on earth lights, natural phenomena, congressional proceedings, master's theses, materials from Project Blue Book (theU.S. Air Force's defunct UFO investigation wing), correspondence, more Roswell, my abduction research notes in this box, Hynek's personal UFO papers." He stopped. "Did you see Google?" he asked, meaning the recent Google Doodle celebrating the supposed 66th anniversary of the infamous UFO crash in New Mexico. "That's how rooted the UFO's been in our culture."

We sat at a folding table. He told me about CUFOS:

He joined in 1974, and, yes, he worried at first that it would reflect badly on him (though decades later it's had no impact on his career, he said). "I was 20 and, you have to remember, UFOs were much more seriously interesting to people in the 1970s. There was a wave of sightings. I was in college and read that Dr. Hynek was starting a center, so I wrote and asked to volunteer. Which took a few tries. He was hard to convince. He wanted a professional organization through and through, a research institution. He wanted Ph.D.s, professors. He was 64 and had started the center as a nonprofit, a 401(c)3. He was not a great administrator but he was wonderful, open to ideas.

“In the 1940s, he was a young astronomer at The Ohio State University when the Air Force asked if he wanted to make a little consulting fee on the side, advising them on UFO reports. All the established (astronomers) had said no. But Hynek worked for the government during (World War II) and already had security clearances, so he traveled around and listened to UFO testimonies. He was perfect for it, but didn’t really believe in the credibility of UFOs at first.”

Ironically, it’s Hynek who is responsible for first dismissing UFO sightings as “swamp gas.”

“When I think about that infamous episode, I think about ‘Mad Men,’ ” Rodeghier said, “how Hynek didn’t want to compromise principles, yet the Air Force was his client and paying him for a service— to calm people.”

Rodeghier jumped up and walked to a stack of boxes and found a picture of Hynek. “Quintessential professor,” Rodeghier said, placing the frame in front of me. “Absent-minded, smoked a pipe.” In the photo, Hynek looked like Hemingway impersonating a Confederate general. Straight out of central casting, I remarked.

Indeed, Hynek, who would eventually chafe at the public relations aspect of his Air Force job and begin to empathize with the people he was tasked with dismissing, went on to develop the “Close Encounter” ranking system for UFO sightings that gave Steven Spielberg’s “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” its title. (Hynek even had a close-up in the film, during the Devil’s Tower finale, playing a scientist, smoking a pipe.)

“The thing is,” Rodeghier went on, “he was an old-school guy, meaning that he was used to research money, and at Northwestern he had structure. When the Air Force closed Project Blue Book (in 1969), it opened the flood gates for others to get involved, but Hynek gave the subject some legitimacy, I think. We never really expected that we would solve anything. But we thought there would be breakthroughs. What it didn’t lead to was research money. Northwestern was never happy with him studying UFOs and never offered support. Or an office for the center.” Hynek retired in 1978, emeritus. He died in ’86 of a brain tumor.

“What was this job like when you started?” I asked. “More exciting,” he said. So I told him about my sighting. He asked if I shot video. I pulled out my phone and showed the jittery video I shot of a light in the sky, which now looked much less luminous (and far more colorless) than I recalled. He rubbed his face.

“Look, these videos, they’re never impressive,” he said. “You do a good job of actually capturing it, but the problem is there’s no context, no buildings, no lakefront. There is no context.” He said he gets lots of videos. He almost never investigates.

Actually, CUFOS is not the only UFO investigation and education organization in the area. There’s also the Illinois chapter of the Mutual UFO Network, a national group founded in 1969 in Quincy, Ill., on the Missouri border. In 2006, both MUFON and CUFOS investigated the UFO widely reported over O’Hare International Airport, and the local MUFON, based in Orland Park, was on top of a mass UFO sighting in Tinley Park in 2004. MUFON gets reports daily; CUFOS (being more of an academically minded group) about once aweek.

The truth, Rodeghier said, is Chicago never got many sightings and, in general, excitement drained out of the field 25 years ago. “The thing about science is you can’t do good science without money, and scientists involved with us became less involved when they realized we couldn’t make progress. There are still serious people left, but not many.” The group, which once had hundreds of participants, now counts about a dozen active associates; in 2012 it published the final issue of its academic journal, International UFO Reporter.

The CUFOS’ mission hasn’t changed: serve as a depot for UFO reports, act as a resource. “We’re 90 percent as effective as we’ve ever been,” he said. The biggest change is the quality of the reports. “We used to get people with supposed physical evidence, multiple witnesses. Now it’s always lights in the distance.” I’m part of the problem. Actually, said Mark Hammergren, an astronomer at the Adler Planetarium (who runs a summer program at Adler for high school students that Hynek ran in the 1960s, and, yes, it involves high-altitude weather balloons), the downfall began in the late 1970s when UFO studies gravitated to alien abduction. “I’m an astronomer, I want to see a UFO, but I’m skeptical because the issue is too important to take lightly.”

The hot phenomenon in UFOs now, he added, “is the mysterious red glowing ball in the sky.” No way … A couple of nights after I saw my UFO, I saw an identical red glowing ball in almost the same spot, only closer now. It was close enough to discern a flicker of flame dancing along the bottom. It was a sky lantern, a kind of pretty miniature hot-air balloon, which the Illinois state fire marshal recently categorized as a firework (and, therefore, illegal). The sky lantern has become the bane of UFOlogists, said Sam Maranto, director of MUFON’s local chapter. “We’ve been plagued by the sky lantern; they just muddy the waters.”

Indeed, UFO spotters say their next eventual headache will be commercial drones. The summer sky will get crowded. UFO reports will require texture, detail. “Frankly, at this point,” Rodeghier said, “we’re over lights in the sky.”