ASTRONOMERS AND UFOS

BY HENRY CORDOVA

Every year, in late summer, the astronomy department of the southern university where I was a student holds its open house. One particular open house in 1971 was especially noteworthy. The department was showing off its brand-new astrometric reflector and though there were still a few bugs to be worked out before the big telescope was fully operational, it was working fine for visual observations. Dozens of guests were lined up for breathtaking views of the planets, bright clusters, and nebulae.

Unfortunately, the weather was not cooperating. It was about 50% overcast, and low-flying scud clouds interfered with spectacular views of a very dark and transparent sky beyond. It was one of those situations familiar to any astronomer: If it cleared up just a little, some good observations were still possible; it it got any worse, we would have to pack it in and go home.

Fortunately, the guests still had a lot to do. The graduate students were manning a battery of six- and eight-inch reflectors in the parking lot, and guided tours of the observatory facility were in progress. Besides the telescope, there were other things to see: the plate archive, the measuring engine, and the refreshments.

"Dr. Davis" (pseudonyms are used here to avoid embarrassment) was well-liked by both staff and students; he was first-rate in his field and had a reputation as a snappy dresser. He was handling his position as master of ceremonies with the panache of a game-show host. His goatee was perfect.

Except for the weather, things were going well. As an undergraduate helping out with open house, I was excited to be there. Observatories are holy places, and I was eager to communicate this enthusiasm to our guests. Not present at our gathering was the chairman of the university's astronomy department, "Dr. Klein." Whether he had cancelled his appearance due to other commitments or simply had not yet arrived I can't recall, but I do know that he was not present during the events that followed.

Klein was an unforgettable man of vast proportions. He was enormous in both height and width, and he could shock an entire auditorium into silence by simply walking in. His Teutonic-English accent could be forgiven and he spoke several languages besides his own, perfectly filling the stereotype of the European renaissance man. He seemed to know everything, and besides being one of the top men in his own branch of astronomy, he could carry on a debate with anyone on any subject. At least, his students thought so. Klein treated us fairly, but we were nonetheless terrified of him.

He was also a well-known figure in the community. His pet peeves were UFOs and astrology. Every time either subject appeared in the local news, he went on the warpath with letters to the editor and interviews on the local radio and television shows. Although his staff and students all agreed that this nonsense required vigorous rebuttal from legitimate science, we often wondered if his shrill opposition might not have just the opposite effect.

With the observatory roof fully rolled back while the big scope was being used, Davis must have heard the commotion in the parking lot from inside the building. He came running out of the building where his dark-adapted eye caught the entire crowd frozen in a heart-gripping tableau. Everyone was pointing up at the sky, yelling "UFO! UFO!"

It was indeed a classic UFO. A featureless, single, blue-white light, brighter than Venus, was traveling across the sky behind the clouds. It was not an airplane. I saw it through binoculars and could see no navigation lights. Neither could an alert student who managed to get a brief glimpse of it in the field of a six-inch reflector. It was not a satellite; these were all several magnitudes fainter. Besides, its orbit was from southeast to northwest, and it never faded into the earth's shadow. It finally disappeared in the far west. Still the real show was not in the sky, it was in the parking lot. Everyone was excited and pointing, and Davis, who was standing on the steps of the building just beyond the front door, got a great look at it for a while. Then he spun around and walked into the observatory. The pandemonium in the parking lot continued until well after the object disappeared.

It is not necessary to assume an extraordinary cause for an unidentified light in the sky. In spite of the public reaction, I have no doubt that the mysterious light had a perfectly reasonable explanation. An unusual light display on an aircraft or satellite is always a possibility, as well as

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the usual suspects—illuminated weather balloon, a deliberate hoax balloon, perhaps even a reflection from an inversion. Not that it matters; one weird light does not an alien spacecraft make.

The truly extraordinary phenomenon here is the reaction of the senior scientist present. Davis could have conducted interviews, passed out questionnaires, surveyed the audience (at least the experienced observers present in the audience, about half a dozen astronomy students). What a marvelous opportunity to debunk the lay myth that science refuses to even look at evidence challenging the current orthodoxy! Alternatively, it might have been possible to identify the mysterious object by publishing our observation and soliciting additional information through the press. I can only speculate on what was going on in Davis's mind. Perhaps he had a fleeting nightmare vision of television cameras and microphones, the morning edition and film at eleven. Or even worse, the next staff meeting.

That night, and over the next few days, Davis refused to discuss the incident. When confronted, he either changed the subject or left the room. At any rate, Klein never found out about it, and I wasn't about to tell him either.

ASTRONOMERS AND UFOS: AN EPILOGUE

BY FRANK JOHN REID

Three stellar ufologists—real scientists who studied ufology in the same era as Henry Cordova's observation above—each came across cases of similar deliberate ignorance in astronomers. Astronomy (the original home of the term "extraterrestrial") has always been willy-nilly the science called upon to judge "flying saucers."

J. Allen Hynek, the astrophysicist who founded the Center for UFO Studies in 1973, began the first chapter of his *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry* (1972) with these words:

> During an evening reception of several hundred astronomers at Victoria, British Columbia, in the summer of 1968, word spread that just outside the hall strangely maneuvering lights—UFOs—had been spotted. The news was met by casual banter and the giggling sound that often accompanies an embarrassing situation. Not one astronomer ventured outside in the summer night to see for himself.

Hynek went on to say he had many times watched reactions when the UFO topic came up in gatherings of scientists:

> Frequently the reaction has been akin to that of a group of preteenagers watching a movie scene of exceptional tenderness or pathos quite beyond their years to appreciate: giggles and squirming suggest a defense against something the scientists cannot yet understand. . . . Perhaps they are expressions of deep-seated uncertainty or fear.

In a statement prepared for the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Science and Astronautics (*Symposium on Unidentified Flying Objects*, hearings, July 29, 1968), James E. McDonald, meteorologist and atmospheric physicist, addressed the question: Why don't astronomers ever see UFOs?

> I have had this question put to me by many persons, including a number of astronomers. Once I was speaking to a group from an important laboratory of astronomy when the director asked why astronomers never see them. In the room, among his staff, were two astronomers who had seen unconventional objects while doing observing but who had asked that the information they had given me about their sightings be kept confidential. I understand such strictures, but some of them make things a bit difficult.

McDonald went on to relate some known sightings by astronomers, and remarked, "It is often quite difficult to persuade a scientist to let his confidential report of a UFO sighting become a fully open UFO report; and my own experience suggests that perhaps astronomers, as a group, are just a bit more sensitive on this score than other scientists."

Jacques Vallee, the astronomer and computer scientist who has a real claim to being one of the early originators of the Internet, experienced the most egregious—or the most pathetic, or the most puzzling—of this sort of behavior. In June 1961, young Vallee was hired for the Paris Observatory's artificial-satellite tracking program, headed by Paul Muller. The trackers used theodolites (small, mobile telescopes with scales to show exact elevation angle, and exact direction in degrees clockwise from true north), a precision chronograph, and a tape recorder. Set up to anticipate satellite passages, they would call out observational data for use in refining orbits. This data would be telexed to the world center for satellite tracking at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Sometimes they saw things that were unspectacular but quite unanticipated, as Vallee recorded in his diary (published in 1992 as *Forbidden Science*):

> **Paris. 12 August 1961. . . .**
>
> Occasionally we observe objects that remain uni-

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dentified. Thus on 11 July at 10:35 p.m. I saw a satellite brighter than second magnitude. I had time to log a few data points. On another occasion several of us recorded no less than eleven points. The next morning Muller, who behaves like a petty Army officer, simply confiscated the tape and destroyed it, although a similar object had just been tracked by other astronomers at Besançon and by Pierre Neirinck, a satellite expert based in Saint-Malo.

"Why don't we send the data to the Americans?" I asked him.

Muller just shrugged.

"The Americans would laugh at us."

He seems terrified at the idea that the morning papers might come out with the headline: "Paris Observatory tracking something it cannot identify." Muller is a tough man who believes in discipline and a simple world where everything is neatly labeled. His previous career in astronomy was based on measuring the angular separation of thousands of double stars, the most painstaking work imaginable. He approaches artificial satellites in the same spirit.

Later on, when Aimé Michel (much worried about his health) offered to donate his UFO materials to the observatory for preservation, Muller had the brass castors to say: "You see, that's another letter for the crackpot file. Although properly speaking Aimé Michel is not really a crackpot, he is a crook."

To offer a parable: Galileo didn't invent the telescope, but he was first to apply it to astronomy. Largely on its evidence, he asserted Copernicus's heliocentric planetary system (including the earth) to be not just a useful mathematical model, but the proven literal truth.

It's a historical commonplace that a number of Galileo's astronomer critics refused to look through the telescope. This is cited as a great folly. But they had a point: How did Galileo know that telescopic optics, which worked well enough over a few terrestrial miles, remained constant over planetary distances orders of magnitude greater? Could they be sure they wouldn't see optical illusions?

The folly was not in skepticism, but in not letting the observations by the better observers lead them into the hard, grubby work of testing the instrument, or at least promoting the testing by others. (It's well-known that you have to *learn to see* when you first use a telescope, even modern ones.) To use a theological term, it's intellectual sloth.

The *Skeptical Inquirer* for Sept./Oct. 1999 quoted physicist Robert L. Park: "Alas, to wear the mantle of Galileo it is not enough that you be persecuted by an unkind establishment, you must also be right."

But I think Galileo owned two mantles. One was glorious, of purple velvet lined with cloth of gold, and he wore it—and bequeathed it to his successors to wear—only on being wreathed with victor's laurel by history. The other was of musty, worn, tenuous broadcloth, with which he kept out the chill after the curiously fastidious amongst his peers refused to look through the telescope.

At CUFOS, we wonder exactly how widespread this sort of behavior by scientists has been. Do readers have any more examples of it? And does it still occur?

ASTRONOMERS AND UFOS: SOME OTHER EXAMPLES

BY GEORGE M. EBERHART

Before the UFO phenomenon became widely identified as disreputable pseudoscience, astronomers were able to report strange occurrences in scientific journals without being stigmatized. The only requirement was that the observations be detailed, accurate, and instrumented, if possible.

British astronomer W. H. Steavenson described "bright objects observed near the sun" on September 9, 1914, in a communication to the *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*. Hundreds of round or dumbbell-shaped objects passed across his telescopic view singly, about once every five seconds, for three hours. Whether these were really airborne seeds, insects, or other aerial detritus is moot; if Steavenson had reported his observation in 1999, it would have been labeled a UFO sighting. But in 1914, he could be open-minded:

> Though the phenomenon described in this paper was probably not astronomical but purely terrestrial in origin, the excuses pleaded by the writer in bringing the matter forward are that the appearances were encountered in the ordinary course of observation; that similar observations have from time to time been reported by other observers, especially within recent months; and that a satisfactory explanation of them is still lacking.

This type of observational objectivity, though rare, has persisted into the latter half of the 20th century. A notice in the *Strolling Astronomer* for 1955 under the heading "An

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years, given known rates of substitution in mitochondrial DNA."

The following quotes are from an abstract of a paper by Libert et al. (25 authors) published in *Human Molecular Genetics* 7, no.3 (March 1998): 399–406:

> The chemokine receptor CCR5 encoded by the CMKBR5 gene located on the p21.3 region of human chromosome 3 constitutes the major co-receptor for the macrophage-tropic strains of HIV-1. The frequency of the Delta ccr5 allele was investigated in 18 European populations, and a North to South gradient was found, with the highest allele frequencies in Finnish and Mordvinian [an ethnic group found in the Middle Volga region of Russia] populations (16%) and the lowest in Sardinia (4%). . . .
>
> It was inferred that most if not all Delta ccr5 alleles originate from a single mutation event, and that this mutation event probably took place a few thousand years ago in Northeastern Europe. It is suggested that a selection advantage is or has been associated with homo- or heterozygous carriers of the Delta ccr5 allele.

I suggest that in view of the HIV pandemics presently sweeping the earth, there is an obvious selection advantage in carrying the Delta ccr5 allele, which evidently confers resistance/immunity to HIV and which on earth is found predominantly in Finnish and Mordvinian populations, and only in Caucasian populations.

Anyone interested in knowing more about the AIDS-ET connection is invited to contact me at drpduke@juno.com, or visit homestead.com/truthsetsfree/AIDS_ET.html.

Phillip S. Duke
Omaha, Nebraska

IN DEFENSE OF HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

To the editor:

Thank you for publishing Jennie Zeidman's review (*IUR*, Spring 1999, p. 29) of my recent book *How to Defend Yourself Against Alien Abduction.* I appreciate Zeidman's usual objective, sharp comprehension of the subject matter, but I am puzzled why she ended the review with the statement that "especially devout Christians may benefit from [its] instruction and guidance." I had no intention when researching the subject of resistance that any particular group in society would benefit more or less from my book. It addresses *all* groups in society, including atheists, humanists, New Agers, and persons with more traditional religious beliefs.

The book points out that the two resistance techniques that have religious overtones (two out of nine) were presented as *pragmatic* defense methods, just as the other seven are also pragmatic methods. I was not trying to teach religion. However, perhaps she was addressing the issue that some Christians consider parapsychological and ufological subjects as demonic, and was pointing out that my book, demonstrating otherwise, opens the UFO abduction subject to readership by these particular Christian groups. If this is what she meant, I heartily agree.

If not, *IUR* readers might assume from her statement that the book benefits "devout Christians" *especially.* It does not. It can benefit everyone besieged by this phenomenon equally, and they have nine separate and distinct techniques to choose from.

Ann Druffel
Pasadena, California

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Unusual Sky Phenomenon" gives the account of Harold Hill, "an outstanding lunar observer of more than twenty years' experience in astronomical work," who saw through his telescope near Wigan, Lancashire, on the evening of July 8, 1954, two daylight-disc UFOs:

> They were separating as I watched and not only appeared to be gyrating and flashing but also exhibited a slow pendulum movement about each other in a manner similar to dancing partners!

Sometime in the 1970s, J. Allen Hynek interviewed an astronomer at New Mexico State University, who told him he had seen a group of 6–12 unusual "white spots" northwest of Clovis when he was a college student on a summer morning in 1951 or 1952. They were "loosely strung out, but not maintaining a rigid formation." However, "the group itself had a very definite [westerly] course and speed that never wavered." The observation lasted at least one minute, during which time one of the bright spots dropped out of the group and headed northeast until it disappeared. He told Hynek, "The weirdest thing was the fact that two of the objects seemed to have a definite relationship to each other. They seemed to be rotating around a definite center of gravity. It was very reminiscent of a binary star."

Years later, after having forgotten the incident, his memory was jogged by seeing footage from the Tremonton, Utah, film taken by Delbert Newhouse on July 2, 1952, which shows very similar objects. Genuinely puzzled, he was willing to share his recollections with Hynek.

More recently, Chilean astronomer F. Noel shared his naked-eye observation with the readers of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* in 1993. On the night of January 17, 1980, Noel was standing in his yard in suburban Santiago when he saw

> a group of at least 30 lights distributed in a broad, symmetrical V-configuration, reminiscent of a boomerang. . . . Since the group was in view for approximately two minutes, the mean angular velocity must have been a bit more than one degree per second.

If only more astronomers were as forthcoming! ✦