

## CONDON COMMITTEE.

→See University of Colorado UFO Project.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND UFOS.

→See Dark Side and Paranormal and Occult Theories about UFOs.

## CONTACTEES

Contactees believe, or claim to believe, they are in regular communication with benevolent extraterrestrial intelligences, often referred to as Space Brothers. Space Brothers are essentially angels in spacesuits: strikingly handsome or beautiful (there are also ET women, but for some reason the phrase "Space Sisters" has never caught on), usually with longish blond hair and a wise, patient manner. They are here because the earth is an outlaw planet whose warlike ways alarm members of the Galactic Federation or its equivalent, an alliance of good ETs who are doing battle against evil forces in the universe. The earth is about to undergo vast changes resulting from geological upheaval in which much of the population will be destroyed. Those who survive will enter a golden age under the tutelage of Space Brothers and their earthly agents, the contactees.

**Contactees before 1947.** Contactees typically have a history of involvement with occultism and New Age doctrines. The space people they encounter discourse at length on cosmic science and philosophy, and the earthly provenance of the content is not hard to discern. The core of the contactee message is simply a continuation of the teaching of the occult-metaphysical religious tradition.

Perhaps the first contactee was the Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), author of *Earths in the Solar World* (1758), a chronicle of his astral travels to other planets and the moon. He found each to be inhabited, and he communicated at length with their residents. His book describes these worlds, their peoples, and their societies. Of Martians, for example, he writes, "Everyone there lives content with his goods, and everyone with his honor, in being esteemed just, and one that loves his neighbor."

During the nineteenth century, as fascination with Spiritualism swept Europe and America, mediums on occasion channeled material from alleged extraterrestrials. The most celebrated case involved Catherine Elise Muller, called "Helene Smith" in a classic work on abnormal psychology, Theodore Flournoy's *From India to the Planet Mars* (1899). In various states of consciousness Muller interacted with Martians and "saw" the Martian landscape. She even produced what pur-



ported to be a Martian language but what proved on analysis to be, in Flournoy's words, "an infantile travesty of French." Like other turn-of-the-century contactees, Muller reported seeing canals on the red planet's surface, in line with the popular belief—inspired by the now-discredited observations of astronomer Percival Lowell—that a vast irrigation system criss-crosses Mars.

The influential occult writer Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), founder of Theosophy, proposed a complex supernatural order with a hierarchy of "ascended masters." Among them are the "Lords of the Flame," who live on Venus. Blavatsky had little to say about them, but they played a large role in the Americanized, pop form of Theosophy, the Great I AM, devised in the 1930s by Guy and Edna Ballard, "who," sociologist David W. Stuppel remarks dryly, "most observers feel were frauds." Inside the Grand Teton Mountains, Guy Ballard met 12 "tall masters from Venus." J. Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of American Religion observes:

Not only did Ballard become the first to actually build a religion on contact with extraterrestrials (as opposed to merely incorporating the extraterrestrial data into another already existing religion), but his emphasis was placed upon frequent contact with the masters from whom he received regular messages to the followers of the world contactee movement. The movement took over the I AM hierarchy and changed it into a space command hierarchy.

An object very much like some described during the great 1896-97 UFO wave (see **Airship Sightings in the Nineteenth Century**) was sighted over San Diego during the evening of October 9, 1946. It had, according to witnesses, a long, tube-shaped fuselage with great bat- or butterflylike wings. Among the witnesses was medium Mark Probert, who subsequently told the press that he had communicated psychically with the ship's occupants. "The people are nonaggressive and have been trying to contact the earth for many years," he said.

**The rise of the movement.** In early 1952 **George Van Tassel**, who lived in the high desert between Yucca Valley and Joshua Tree, California, began holding meetings in which he channeled telepathic communications from the commanders of starships ("ventlas"). Van Tassel hosted the annual Giant Rock Interplanetary Spacecraft Convention, the major public gathering of contactees and their followers, until 1977.

Along with Van Tassel, **George Adamski** helped found the contactee movement of southern California. Its influence would be felt around the world, and Adamski, who would become a significant international occult celebrity, had already attracted some attention on the UFO scene through photographs he claimed to have taken of spaceships in and out of earth's atmosphere. Since the 1920s Adamski had made his living as a teacher in the California metaphysical scene and in the 1940s wrote a self-published novel, *Pioneers of Space*, whose content bore a curious resemblance to his later "true" stories of meetings with Venusians, Martians, and Saturnians recounted in his books *Inside the Space Ships* (1955) and *Flying Saucers Farewell* (1961).

Most contactees from Adamski on would describe benevolent visitors from a densely populated universe, but not all contactees would be like Adamski. Two kinds of contact claimants would come into prominence.

The first, those who like Adamski alleged physical encounters and who produced "evidence" to prove it, dominated the scene in the 1950s. They included Daniel Fry, Truman Bethurum, George Hunt Williamson, and others. They were nearly universally despised by ufologists, who felt that their actions were making the whole UFO question look ridiculous. "Sincere" was an adjective seldom used to characterize the testimony of these individuals, who were—to one degree or another—con men, even if, in some, cynicism and conviction shared an uneasy coexistence. Though dominating the attention of both UFO and non-UFO media in the 1950s, these more questionable contactees were less representative of the movement than the other type, around whom the movement has traditionally been built.

**The contactee mainstream.** The second and more typical contactee felt himself or herself to be the recipient of psychic messages from extraterrestrials. These messages were communicated in various ways: through automatic writing, voices in the head, dreams, visions, and channeling (once called mediumship).

One of the first notable psychic contactees was Dorothy Martin (now known as Sister Thedra and headquartered in Mount Shasta, California), a Chicago woman who received communications via automatic writing from Sananda, an extraterrestrial who said he had been Jesus in a previous incarnation. Martin was told that cataclysmic earth changes would take place on December 21, 1954, and that she

Contactee Dana Howard at the 1955 Giant Rock Interplanetary Spacecraft Convention. Former Project Blue Book head Edward J. Ruppelt (in sunglasses) grins in background. (J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies)



and her faithful followers would be rescued by a flying saucer just before a massive tidal wave destroyed the city.

As the date approached, she and the group were instructed to inform the press of the imminent end of the world. When none of the prophesied events occurred, Martin and company were subjected not only to massive public ridicule but, in some cases, to sanity hearings. Martin's principal supporter, Charles Laughead, was forced to resign his position on the staff of Michigan State College Hospital. Others had quit their jobs, given away their money, or dropped out of school in anticipation of apocalyptic things to come. The episode is the subject of *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), a classic study in the sociology of religion.

Psychic contactee Gloria Lee heard a voice inside her head one day in 1953. The voice belonged to a resident of Jupiter, J.W. Over the next several years Lee wrote down J.W.'s messages and published them in *Why We Are Here* (1959), a popular book in contactee circles. Lee became most famous, however, as a martyr of the movement. In the fall of 1962, J.W. instructed her to go on a fast for peace. The fast would end when a "light elevator" arrived to take her to Jupiter. Some weeks into the fast he told her she was to travel to Washington, DC, and present spaceship blueprints to government officials. On November 28, as she waited for word in a Washington hotel room, she slipped into a coma, and on December 2 she died. Her fast had lasted 66 days.

To ufologists as well as to observers in the cultural mainstream, contactees seemed little more than bizarre examples of fraud and social pathology. It was implicitly assumed that their numbers were few. In the 1960s, however, writer/investigator John A. Keel remarked on the surprising number of "silent contactees," as he called them to differentiate them from the public ones, he was finding out in the field. Keel concluded that these persons were having real experiences but not with, as they thought, benevolent Space Brothers—a notion earlier advanced by Trevor James Constable who came to believe many contacting entities are demons in disguise. To Keel the beings are amoral paranormal "ultraterrestrials" bent on doing contactees—and by extension all human beings—wrong. This interpretation would be embraced by conservative Christian UFO chroniclers.

In 1973, Brad Steiger's *Revelation: The Divine Fire* documented the growing channeling movement. Many of the channelers were getting messages, warnings, and admonitions from Space Brothers. In a sequel, *Gods of Aquarius* (1976), Steiger dealt exclusively with the new generation of flying-saucer contactees. The book contains Steiger's first mention of "Star People" who are "becoming active at this time in an effort to aid mankind [to] survive a coming Great Purification of the planet." In a later chapter he relates his discovery of "Star Maidens," beautiful, intelligent, compassionate earthwomen who in an earlier life were extraterrestrials.

Subsequently Steiger would be married for a time to one Star Maiden, Francie Paschal, and they would further develop the concept of Star People. Star People got their widest exposure in the May 1, 1979, issue of the *National Enquirer*,

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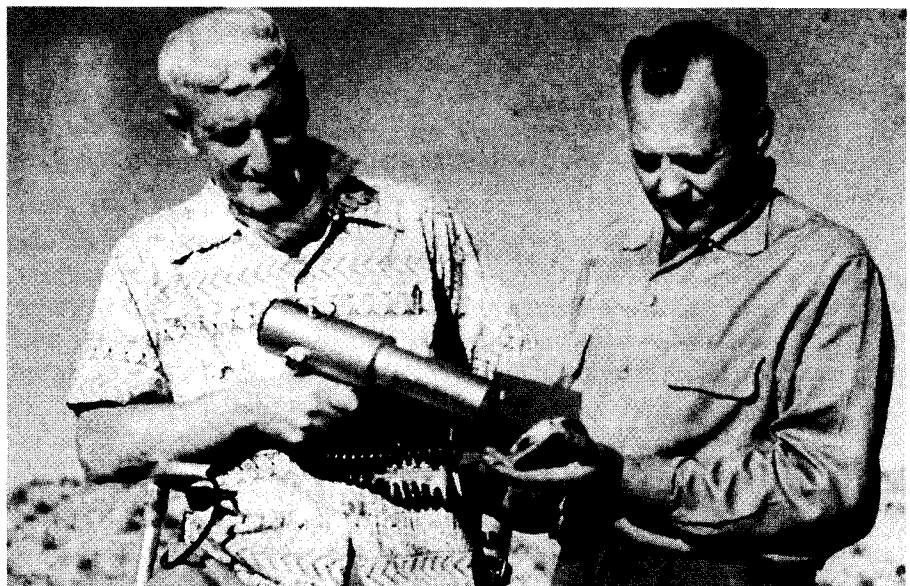
which reported on the Steigers's theories and brought them a flood of mail and telephone calls from persons claiming to be Star People.

Beginning in 1981 Berkley would publish five paperbacks in the "Star People Series," spreading the message further. The Steigers reported they were finding two groups of space-linked people: the Starseeds (the true Star People, who have both alien and human genes) and the Star Helpers ("Old Souls," descendants of the disciples of the extraterrestrials). At one point the couple were receiving as many as 70 letters a day from "activated Star People," some of whom were prophesying a catastrophic pole shift between 1982 and 1984, a world famine in 1982, World War III before 1985, and planet-wide space contacts in 1986. The collapse of the Steigers's marriage and metaphysical partnership (as well as Francie's subsequent death) slowed the Star People movement.

**The Rocky Mountain conferences.** Another important figure in the modern contactee movement is R. Leo Sprinkle, who until his retirement into private practice in 1989 was a psychologist in the counseling department of the University of Wyoming. Sprinkle was unusual in having a foot in both the ufology and contactee camps, though the latter, the focus of his deeper sympathies, would claim his greater attention as time passed.

Sprinkle entered ufology as a consultant to the **Aerial Phenomena Research Organization** (APRO) and as a participant in the 1968 Symposium on Unidentified Flying Objects at the U.S. House Committee on Science and Astronautics. As a hypnotist he worked with a number of abductees, including Nebraska police officer Herbert Schirmer (see **Schirmer Abduction Case**) and others whose stories would be

Frank Scully (left), author of the controversial "Behind the Flying Saucers," with contactee Daniel Fry at the Giant Rock Convention. (J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies)



widely reported in the UFO literature. In the 1970s Sprinkle entered into correspondence with contactees who had written him about their psychic communications with beings whom Sprinkle would good-naturedly call "UFOlk." Sprinkle helped the contactees get in touch with each other by mail. By decade's end he had established a small network of like-minded persons who were able to share ideas and experiences.

The next step, Sprinkle thought, was to have these people meet in person. So in May 1980 the first Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation was held in Laramie, on the university campus. Attendance was small, but from those who did show up Sprinkle was able to develop some initial impressions. They seemed to be average, normal people in their social and psychological functioning, though highly susceptible to hypnotic suggestion. A great many of them reported a feeling of being monitored or experiencing continued contact with UFO entities and, on occasion, a feeling of having been chosen or selected as a contactee. As a result they often expressed a sense that they had an important mission or task in life. They sometimes experienced anxiety about the state of the human race, and they warned others of the possibility of future catastrophes. They often possessed a deep conviction that they were not only Planetary Persons but also Cosmic Citizens and sometimes acted as if their real home were beyond earth.

In the next years the Rocky Mountain conferences became a popular pilgrimage site for contactees, just as the one at Giant Rock had been for an earlier generation. By the 1990s the conferences were drawing more than 150 participants. The 1996 one, the first to be sponsored by the Fort Collins, Colorado-based International Association for New Science, attracted nearly 200. According to Sprinkle:

[T]he messages and/or contacts that are reported by UFO Experiencers are very consistent over time. The two themes: ETs are presenting themselves to Humankind in order to (a) rejuvenate the planet (whatever that means) and (b) assist Humankind in its next stage of evolution (whatever that means). . . . [I]ndividual UFOers are given a personal puzzle or mission. It seems to involve society . . . and so the UFOer reacts in fear/anger/doubt. Later, when the personal transformation occurs, then the UFOer is able to work cooperatively with others in hopes of assisting in the social transformation: physical/biological/psychosocial/spiritual changes to assist Planet Earth and prepare for public contact with ETs and/or entrance into the Galactic Federation.

The Rocky Mountain conferences serve to validate contactees' experiences. Left to themselves, individual contactees may come to disbelieve the messages they are hearing. Some even conclude that their source is within their psyches, not on another planet. But when contactees gather at Laramie, they are able to see themselves not as isolated individuals undergoing fantastic visions that cause them to question their own sanity, but as members of a larger community with a cosmic mission.

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Another University of Wyoming psychologist, June O. Parnell, wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on a psychological study of more than 200 contactees who had attended the conference at various times. She found no detectable psychological differences between contactees and "normal" persons. Melton states that efforts to categorize contactees as "kooks" are

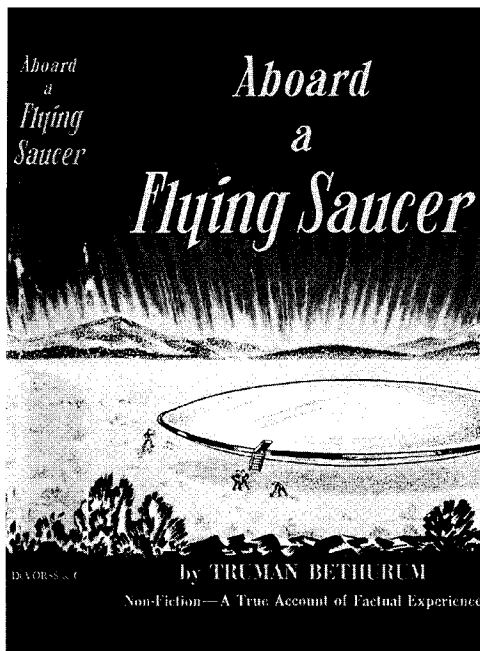
reminiscent of the way Pentacostals were dismissed as psychopathological by psychologists who had never studied Pentacostalism. Recent studies have indicated that as a whole Pentacostals have a higher mental-health rate than the general population. When people claim that contactees have a pathological bent, it would be a very good idea to ask, "Where are your data?", since unorthodox behavior and beliefs are no sign in themselves of psychopathology.

**Contactees and ufologists.** From the start ufologists and saucerians (persons who believed and supported contactees) occupied separate mental universes, and relatively few moved back and forth between them. Less hostile to ufologists than ufologists were to them, saucerians tended to see UFO researchers as not fully enlightened counterparts who nonetheless had a role to play in the ongoing cosmic drama; thus they were willing to overlook much of the abuse directed at them from the occupants of more conservative quarters.

For example, **Donald E. Keyhoe**, director of the Washington-based **National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena** (NICAP), fired a secretary when her pro-contactee sympathies became known. On another occasion NICAP published a devastating debunking of one Adamski claim. Yet on January 28, 1965, in an unsolicited letter written four months before his death, Adamski addressed Keyhoe as if the two were colleagues committed to the same cause: "What the difference of opinion may be between us, it matters not," he said. "I believe that both of us are interested in the same thing. And that is, to have the Truth of the Visitors brought out to the public. . . ." Keyhoe, who did not reply, was no doubt horrified.

In fact, the differences between saucerians and ufologists were to all intents and purposes insurmountable. Saucerians spoke in an occult-tinged language that, consciously or unconsciously, echoed Swedenborg, Blavatsky, the Ballards, and N. Meade Layne. Where ufologists spoke of "UFOs," saucerians had flying saucers, spaceships, scoutcraft, motherships, ventlas, and vimanas. The saucerians had no "UFO mystery" to contend with.

**Abductees or contactees?** In 1965 a Boston newspaper broke the story of the **Barney and Betty Hill abduction case**, and soon comparable reports were coming to light. Some were consciously recalled in their entirety. In other instances, witnesses had partial memories, usually of a UFO's close approach, followed by amnesia. Later, memory would re-emerge either via spontaneous recollection or through hypnotic regression. The witnesses came from the same diverse backgrounds as other UFO reporters. In other words, they were not mystics, occultists, or swindlers.



Truman Bethurum tells of his encounter with "scow" from the planet Clarion in "Aboard a Flying Saucer," published in 1954. (Fortean Picture Library)

essentially: 'You'll be fine/Hold still/You won't be harmed/You'll be back home soon'—much like a nurse would tell a child in a doctor's office." Some abductees, after exposure to New Age-oriented probers, move from anger and trauma to acceptance and even embrace of their alleged alien captors, seeing the unpleasantness of their experience as a necessary rite into a higher spiritual consciousness.

Of all those seeking to extract a contacteelike message from the abduction experience, Harvard University psychiatrist John E. Mack is far and away the best known and the most influential. In his book, *Abduction* (1994), Mack portrays abducting humanoids as rougher versions of the older Space Brothers, albeit with updated concerns: pollution this time, not atomic bombs. "If, in fact, the alien beings are closer to the divine source or *anima mundi* than human beings generally seem to be . . . their presence among us, however cruel and traumatic in some instances, may be part of a larger process that is bringing us back to God," he argues. The aliens are here to expand the consciousnesses both of individual abductees and of all humanity.

Hypnotized, Mack's abductees recall not only previous lives but abductions in previous lives. Others have previous lives as aliens. Mack encourages them to

By the 1980s the **abduction phenomenon** had become a staple of popular culture, and reports proliferated along with books, movies, television programs, and conferences on the subject. An abductee culture arose in the form of therapy groups, some led by individuals of a New Age orientation, and occult pilgrims once attracted to contactees moved on to abductees, assuring them of the extraterrestrials' benevolent intentions.

By the end of the decade and continuing to the present, proponents of a positive reading of abduction were speaking in a language indistinguishable from saucerian rhetoric. A few abductees do report positive experiences with friendly extraterrestrials, but most describe the abducting entities as cold and clinical in their demeanor. One experienced investigator, John Carpenter, writes, "In approximately 90 percent of the cases . . . the only communication, if any, is

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express love for, and even identification with, their tormentors and to act with the conviction that they are conduits through whom the aliens' message will spread. Mack hints that he himself may be part of the cosmic game plan.

The parallels between Mack's abductees and traditional contactees are sometimes striking. For example, one of the former reports hearing these words from an extraterrestrial named Ageeka: "You have sensitivity. . . . You pick up on things. You can talk to the earth. . . . You can hear the anguish of the spirits. You can hear the wailing cries of the imbalances." Compare these words allegedly spoken to a famous early contactee, Orfeo Angelucci, as recorded in his *The Secret of the Saucers* (1955):

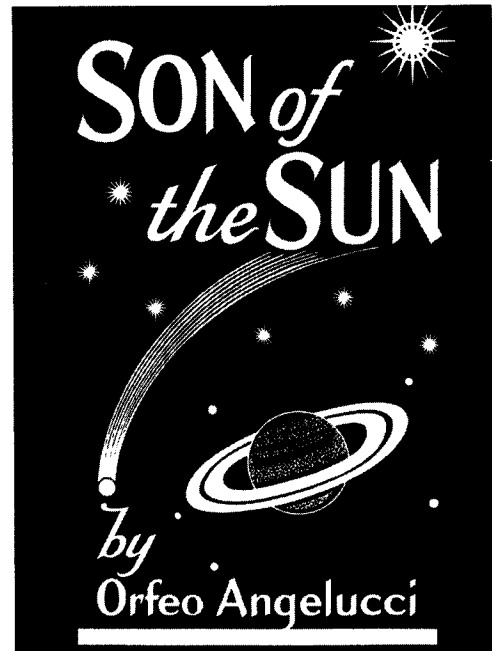
Weep, Orfeo. Let tears unblind your eyes. For at this moment we weep with you for Earth and her Children.

For all its apparent beauty Earth is a purgatorial world among the planets evolving intelligent life. Hate, selfishness and cruelty rise from many parts of it like a dark mist.

If the effort to graft the contactee message onto the abduction experience shows signs of strain, it nonetheless underscores the continuing religious appeal, to some, of the idea of extraterrestrial visitors.

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## CONTROL SYSTEM.

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## COYNE CE2

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In any arguing of the case for the reality of UFOs as extraordinary phenomena, the incident that happened near Mansfield, Ohio, on the night of October 18, 1973, looms large. It happened in the midst of a great UFO wave that engulfed the United States that month. The encounter reported by Army Reserve Capt. Lawrence J. Coyne and his helicopter crew, 1st Lt. Arrigo Jezzi, Sgt. John Healey, and Spec. 5 Robert Yanacsek, however, at first attracted little attention.

At around 10:30 p.m. on the eighteenth, with Jezzi flying the craft from the left-hand seat, an Army Reserve UH-1 Huey helicopter left Columbus, Ohio, and headed back to Cleveland, where it was based. Coyne and his men had flown earlier in the evening to Columbus to take their regularly scheduled medical examinations. It was a clear, cool evening. The route was familiar.

Just before 11 o'clock, as the helicopter cruised at 1200 feet above the farms, woods, and hills of north-central Ohio (2500 feet above sea level), Healey, seated at the left rear, noticed a steady, southbound red light. It looked like the port-wing light of an aircraft but seemed brighter than normal. Also it carried none of the other lights FAA regulations require. Healey watched it disappear from sight behind the helicopter. He said nothing about it to his flight mates.

Soon afterwards, at about 11:02, Yanacsek, in the right rear seat, saw a bright red light on the eastern horizon. It was not a star, he judged, and it seemed too high to be a radio tower; besides, it was not blinking. He continued to observe

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The story's plot comes from an early science-fiction story, "Charles Ashmore's Trail," published in an 1893 collection by Ambrose Bierce, *Can Such Things Be?* Set in Quincy, Illinois, in November 1878, it tells of the title character's ill-fated trip to the well and of his family's horrified discovery of tracks that "abruptly ended, and all beyond was smooth, unbroken snow." Later family members hear his voice seeming to "come from a great distance, faintly, yet with entire distinctness of articulation." No one has been able to determine how Charles Ashmore became Oliver Lerch, however, or how a tale never intended to be anything but fantasy became a "true mystery."

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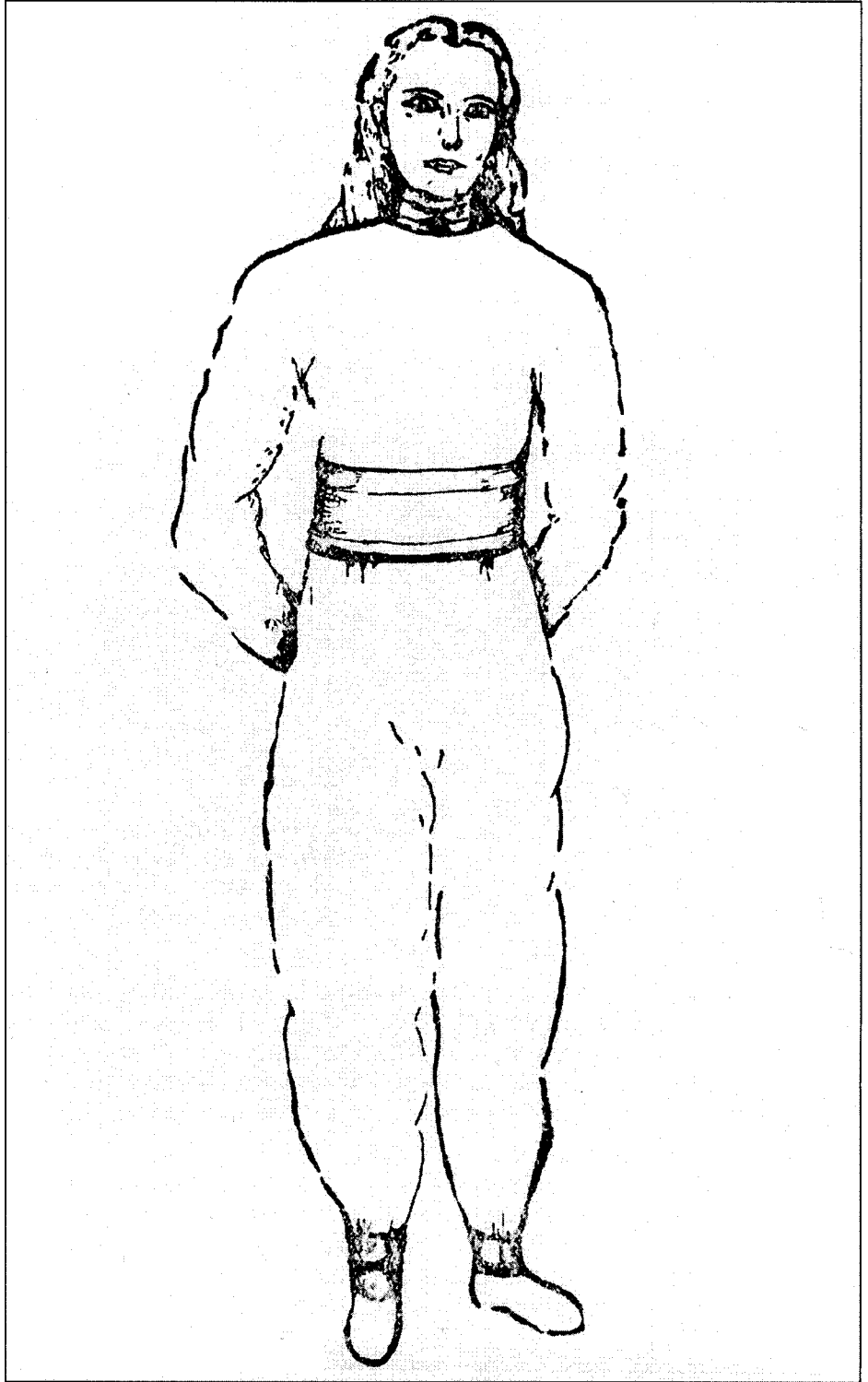
## Space Brothers

If one were to point to a date on which the modern flying-saucer contactee movement began, a good case could be made for January 6, 1952, when George W. Van Tassel received a psychic message from one "Lutbunn, senior in command first wave, planet patrol, realms of Schare. We have your contact aboard 80,000 feet above this place."

Van Tassel had worked in the aviation industry of southern California, all the while privately pursuing an interest in the occult. In common with many who shared his interests, he was quick to incorporate "flying saucers" – which came to prominence in the wake of Kenneth Arnold's famous June 24, 1947, sighting of mysterious discs over Mount Rainier, Washington – into a metaphysical worldview.

He was not, however, the first to claim contact with the occupants of strange aerial vessels. As early as October 9, 1946 – months before Arnold's influential encounter – San Diegans reported the nocturnal passage of a long, bullet-shaped object with wings like a bat's. A local medium, Mark Probert, allegedly received a telepathic message from the ship's crew, "nonaggressive" people who "have been trying to contact the earth for many years."

But it would take someone with Van Tassel's energy and charisma to make a movement out of the idea of communication, psychic or physical, with friendly space



George Adamski  
sketched this  
Venusian, who  
contacted  
Adamski from his  
space craft.  
*(Courtesy Fortean Picture  
Library.)*

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people. At first **Van Tassel** held regular meetings at his residence in California's high desert country. In due course these evolved into the Giant Rock Interplanetary Spacecraft Convention, held annually (the last in 1977, a few months before Van Tassel's death). At these conventions "contactees," as they were called by both their admirers and their detractors, gathered with their followers to disseminate the cosmic gospel.

Another major figure, George Adamski, became an international occult celebrity and wrote (or had written under his byline) the most widely read of the early contactee books. Even before the afternoon of November 20, 1952, when he had a face-to-face meeting with a Venusian named Orthon in the desert of southern California, he already had some small reknown as an occult teacher and, later, as a photographer of alleged UFOs in deep space. The meeting with Orthon would be only the first of many contacts with Venusians as well as Martians and Saturnians. He would call these friendly, good-looking extraterrestrials "Space Brothers" (or at least the male ones; though there were also extraterrestrial females, the phrase "Space Sisters" never caught on). Adamski would also travel into space and on one occasion attend a conference on Saturn.

Claims like these electrified impressionable persons all around the world. The movement based on such stories spread from California to much of the rest of the world. Other prominent contactees included Orfeo Angelucci, Truman Bethurum, Daniel Fry, Howard Menger, and George Hunt Williamson, all of whom published books in the 1950s and who became popular figures on the New Age circuit.

### **The contactee universe**

According to the contactees, angelic space people pilot the saucers. They are here on a benevolent mission for the Galactic Federation. In the universe the Earth is viewed as something of a backwater, its occupants primitive and violent; Earthlings threaten to upset the "balance of the universe" with their atomic weapons and warlike ways. If Earthlings will heed the space people's gentle message, they will enter a golden age of peace and prosperity and claim their place in the larger order. In some variants of this theme, the Earth is about to undergo massive geological changes that will destroy a significant portion of the planet's population; those who follow the space people's direction will be saved, either by relocating to places that will remain stable during the upheaval or by entering spaceships that will pick them up at the appropriate time.

Contactee theology is based in the doctrines of Theosophy, an occult system developed by Helene Petrova Blavatsky in the latter nineteenth century. In an early-twentieth-century refinement of Blavatsky, Charles Leadbeater wrote that Venus, which operates on a higher evolutionary plane than Earth, is inhabited by advanced beings called "Lords of the Flame," who occupy the highest rank in the "Great White Brotherhood" – spirit Masters who guide the development of the human race. Possibly the term "Space Brothers" has its origins in the earlier "Brotherhood."

Though the physical contactees, who often produced dubious photographs and other "evidence" supposed to validate their claims, dominated the scene in the



Contactee Howard  
Menger  
photographed this  
Venusian man in  
the 1950s.

*(Courtesy Fortean Picture  
Library.)*

first years of the UFO era, there were also psychic contactees who channeled space messages or received them in dreams or through automatic writings.

### **The odyssey of Sister Thedra**

One such individual was the late Dorothy Martin, known to her followers as Sister Thedra. Martin began producing messages from space people via automatic writing in January 1953. As these messages began to circulate among the metaphysically inclined, they came to the attention of an East Lansing, Michigan, couple, Charles and Lillian Laughead (pronounced *law-head*). Charles, a physician at the Michigan State College hospital, and Lillian were former missionaries and captive to seemingly limitless credulity.

From her "translation" of an alleged Venusian code left by Adamski's friend Orthon, Mrs. Laughead deduced that the Earth was due to suffer imminent

devastating geophysical cataclysms. When the couple learned that Martin was receiving similar messages, the three met to compare notes. Over the next months they and a small group holed themselves up in Martin's Oak Park, Illinois, house waiting for the disaster to occur on December 21, 1954. On that day a gigantic tidal wave would engulf Chicago and set in motion changes that would kill millions and alter the face of the planet. Martin, the Laugheads, and their followers would survive all this because at the last minute a flying saucer would pick them up and whisk them into space.

When newspapers learned of the group and its strange beliefs, they published mocking articles. The stories attracted the attention of social scientists who infiltrated the group to observe the dynamics of failed prophecy. (The result was a famous and influential book, *When Prophecy Fails* [1956], written by three University of Minnesota sociologists.) Laughead not only lost his job but was subjected to the indignity of a sanity hearing (he was pronounced normal).

When the anticipated disaster did not occur, Martin – now calling herself, at the request of her space friends, Sister Thedra – fled to the Southwest, then to Lake Titicaca along the Peru-Bolivia border, where – joined by the Laugheads, George Hunt Williamson, and others – she helped found the Abbey of the Seven Rays. All awaited the imminent cataclysm that would bring flying saucers from the skies and the lost continents Mu and Atlantis up from the ocean depths.

By the end of 1957, most had drifted back to the United States, but instructed by the space people to stay, Martin hung on, notwithstanding illness and poverty. In ecstatic states she met space people, angels, and biblical personalities. They told her that the savior of the world would be born in 1963 and reveal himself twelve years later by performing “mighty miracles such as the world has never known.”

In 1961 Martin relocated to southern California, then – following cosmic orders as always – moved north a year later to Mount Shasta to found the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara (two of the space people who communicated to her via automatic writing; Sananda was Jesus in an earlier, earthly incarnation). Her followers recorded and distributed the messages she received. As one association publication describes their contents, “These transcripts represent an indepth prophecy of the events and changes which both the planet and the consciousness of man shall undergo within the time which is near . . . the ‘Time of Awakening.’” Soon, according to the prophecy, the space people will arrive in the “White Star of the East,” the very craft that announced the birth of Sananda/Jesus 2,000 years ago.

Martin went on to America's newest New Age hot spot, Sedona, Arizona, in 1988. As her health, never good, deteriorated, Sananda told her of his plans for her in the next world. His last message to her arrived the day she died, June 13, 1992.

### Contactees as hoaxers

The sincerity of Dorothy Martin and many others who reported psychic contacts from extraterrestrials cannot be questioned. At the same time it is clear



that the supposed space people exist only inside the minds of the contactees. Other contactees, Adamski the first, insisted that their experiences were physical and that they could prove it. They produced a series of dubious-looking photographs and other less-than-compelling "evidence" that, except to the most resolutely uncritical observers, did not stand up to scrutiny.

Adamski died in 1965, and virtually all of the first-generation contactees are long dead. Nearly all active contactees are channelers, automatic writers, and visionaries. Relatively few seek the limelight.

Only one prominent contactee perpetuates the Adamski tradition. Switzerland's Eduard (Billy) Meier, who came to prominence in the 1970s, has had a hugely successful – and lucrative – career as purveyor of messages, photographs, and other materials allegedly documenting his interactions with visitors from the Pleiades star system. Except to his small army of followers, Meier is widely regarded as a clumsy hoaxer. In one instance a lovely Pleiades woman Meier supposedly photographed turned out to be a model in an advertisement that had appeared in a European fashion magazine. No less than his former wife Kalliope states that Meier's stories are "lies and deceptions."

More typical of modern devotees of Space Brothers, however, are those who flock to Laramie, Wyoming, every summer to attend the Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation. The conference caters mostly to contactees who live in small western towns or on farms or ranches and who believe themselves to be recipients of mental messages from kindly off-worlders. On this level – the level at which money and notoriety are not the motivating agents – the contactee movement looks very much like a religious response to the UFO phenomenon.

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### COMMUNION FOUNDATION

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The Communion Foundation was formed in 1989 by Whitley Strieber, author of *Communion: A True Story* (1987) and *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (1988), as a way of dealing with the many letters he received from readers of his books on the abduction phenomenon in general and his abduction experiences in particular. "Its main purpose," Strieber says, "is to provide grants for genuine research into the nature of the visitor experience and how best to help people who have had the experience" (Strieber, 1989). Hoping to find the "kind of hard physical evidence that will attract the interest of the best thinkers and scientists to our situation," it has arranged for magnetic resonance imaging scans of persons who believe they have alien implants inside them. It also publishes the quarterly eight-page Communion Letter, edited by Dora Ruffner.

The foundation, essentially a New Age group in which the contactee message has been grafted onto the abductee experience, takes a positive view of the abduction phenomenon, which UFO investigators and most percipients usually have seen as negative, even traumatic. But in Strieber's view this is the fault of "abduction researchers" who, being out of sympathy with the "visitors" benevolent mission and out of a desire to "control others," have unnecessarily frightened abductees. He encourages his followers to stay away from ufologists and to form groups in which they can

compare experiences and even seek out contact with UFO beings.

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### CONTACTEE

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Contactee is, in director Ellen Crystall's words, a "loose organization," as much a publication (the quarterly bulletin *Contactee*) as formal group. It calls itself "The First Organization for Research of UFOs by Direct Observation." Crystall's interest in UFO-observing came about in part because of a 1971 close encounter of the third kind she experienced one night in California. Since 1980 she has made regular trips to the Pine Bush, New York, area, often in the company of friends and associates, and there seen many hundreds of what she regards as UFOs: the "full range of sightings," of everything from distant lights to close-up discs. She has taken over 1000 pictures. *Contactee* (which, its title notwithstanding, is not devoted to channeling or contacts with Space Brothers) reports on Crystall's latest adventures and offers tips to UFO hunters.

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## UFOs in the 1980s

### CONTACTEES

Contactees are individuals who believe, or claim to believe, they are in regular communication with benevolent extraterrestrial intelligences, often referred to as the Space Brothers. The Space Brothers are essentially angels in spacesuits: strikingly handsome or beautiful (there are also ET women, but for some reason the phrase "Space Sisters" has never caught on), usually with longish blond hair and a wise, patient manner. They are here because the earth is something of an outlaw planet whose warlike ways alarm members of the Galactic Federation, an alliance of good ETs who are doing battle against evil forces in the universe, usually represented as unlovely beings such as the big-eyed humanoids who figure in UFO-occupant reports made by noncontactees. The earth is about to undergo vast changes resulting from geological upheaval in which much of the population will be destroyed. Those who survive will enter a golden age under the tutelage of the Space Brothers and their earthly agents, the contactees.

The words "contactee" and "abductee," though sometimes used interchangeably, in fact describe two categories of claimed experience whose only common element is an encounter with extraterrestrials. Contactees are often individuals with a history of involvement with occultism and New Age doctrines. The kinds of UFOs they observe (and sometimes photograph), as well as the UFO occupants they meet, are unlike those reported in noncontactee sightings and encounters. Abductees, in common with other UFO sighters, tend to be more ordinary persons, with little or no previous interest in unorthodox subjects. Unlike many contactees, abductees have not sought out the experience, and again unlike the majority of contactees they are likely to experience fear and trauma because of it. Abductees usually report humanoids who say little about themselves or their purpose and who treat their human captives as something akin to laboratory animals. Contactees encounter kind, and long-winded, Space Brothers who discourse at length on cosmic science, philosophy and ethics. Abductions, whatever their cause, seem clearly to be a part of the UFO phenomenon, whatever its cause.

Contacts seem clearly to be a social and religious response to the UFO phenomenon, not a part of the phenomenon as such. In fact, the core of the contactee message is simply a continuation of the teaching of the occult-metaphysical religious tradition, a slight flying-saucer-age elaboration on the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century Swedish seer, Helena P. Blavatsky, a nineteenth-century figure who founded Theosophy, and their more contemporary successors.

Another difference between abductees and contactees concerns the issue of fraud. Conscious fraud (as opposed to unconscious confabulation) has not been a significant issue in the controversy over abductions, but the contactee movement was tainted quite early by the well publicized antics of certain flamboyant figures in the 1950s. Even now many ufologists tend to regard contactees as deliberate hoaxers, although in reality the great majority of contactees are sincere. Nonetheless ufologists' memories of George Adamski and his associates are long and contactees have been victimized by guilt by association.

Adamski: Prior to his alleged first contact, with a Venusian named Orthon in the California desert on November 20, 1952, Adamski was circulating dubious photographs he had taken of "spaceships"—pictures that photoanalysts have determined to be of cardboard cutouts and small models. Since the 1920s Adamski had made his living as a teacher in the California occult scene and in the 1940s wrote a self-published science-fiction novel, *Pioneers of Space*, whose content bore a curious resemblance to his later "true" stories of meetings with Venusians, Martians and Saturnians recounted in his books *Inside the Space Ships* (1955) and *Flying Saucers Farewell* (1961). Adamski all but admitted to close associates that his claims were fraudulent, and on one or two occasions he was caught red-handed. Yet he had a worldwide following which even now, 2½ decades after his death (he died in April 1965), has not entirely faded away.

Most contactees from Adamski on would describe benevolent visitors from a densely-

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### CONTACTEES (continued)

populated universe, but not all contactees would be like Adamski (and in fact most were not). Two kinds of contact claimants would come into prominence. The first, those who like Adamski alleged physical encounters and who produced "evidence" to prove it, dominated the scene in the 1950s and were nearly universally despised by ufologists, who felt that their actions were making the whole UFO question look ridiculous. "Sincere" was an adjective seldom used to characterize the testimony of these individuals, who were essentially con artists. (One even peddled packets of hair from a "Venusian dog"; another sold shares in quartz mines he had seen from a spaceship while in the company of the Space Brothers.) Though dominating the attention of both UFO and non-UFO media in the 1950s, these more questionable contactees were less representative of the movement than the other type, around whom the movement has traditionally been built.

*The Contactee Mainstream:* The second kind of contactee reported being the recipients of psychic messages from extraterrestrials. These messages came in various fashions: through automatic writing, voices in the head, dreams, visions and channeling. One of the first notable psychic contactees was Dorothy Martin (now known as Sister Thedra and headquartered in Mount Shasta, California), a Chicago woman who received communications via automatic writing from Sananda, an extraterrestrial who said he had been Jesus in an earlier incarnation. Martin was told that cataclysmic earth changes would take place on December 20, 1954, and that she and her faithful followers would be rescued by a flying saucer just before a massive tidal wave destroyed the city. As the date approached, she and the group were instructed to inform the press of the imminent end of the world. When none of the prophesied events occurred, Martin and company were subjected not only to massive public ridicule (their story had been widely publicized) but, in some cases, to sanity hearings. Martin's principal follower, Charles Laughhead, was forced to resign his position on the staff of Michigan State College

Hospital. Others had quit their jobs, given away their money or dropped out of school in anticipation of apocalyptic things to come. A classic study in the sociology of religion, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), by Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, has assured lasting notoriety for this episode.

Psychic contactee Gloria Lee first began hearing a voice inside her head one day in 1953. The voice belonged to a resident of Jupiter, J.W. Over the next several years Lee wrote down J.W.'s messages and published them in *Why We Are Here* (1959), a popular book in contactee circles. Lee became most famous, however, as a martyr of the movement. In the fall of 1962 J.W. instructed her to go on a fast for peace. The fast would end when a "light elevator" arrived to take her to Jupiter. Some weeks into the fast he told her she was to travel to Washington, D.C., and present spaceship blueprints to government officials. On November 28, as she waited for word in a Washington hotel room, she slipped into a coma and on December 2 she died. Her fast had lasted 66 days.

To ufologists as well as to observers in the cultural mainstream, contactees seemed little more than bizarre examples of fraud and social pathology. It was implicitly assumed that their numbers were few. In the 1960s, however, writer/investigator John A. Keel remarked on the surprising number of "silent contactees," as he called them to differentiate them from the public ones, he was finding out in the field. Keel concluded that these people were having real experiences but not with, as they thought, benevolent Space Brothers. The beings were amoral paranormal "ultraterrestrials" bent on doing contactees harm. This interpretation would be embraced by conservative Christian UFO chroniclers who think that the Space Brothers are demons in disguise. In 1973 Brad Steiger's *Revelation: The Divine Fire* took note, a decade before mainstream media became aware of it, of the growing channeling movement. Many of the channelers were getting messages, warnings and admonitions from Space Brothers. In a sequel, *Gods of Aquarius* (1976), Steiger dealt exclusively

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with the new generation of flying-saucer contactees. The book contains Steiger's first mention of "Star People" who are "becoming active at this time in an effort to aid mankind survive a coming Great Purification of the planet." In a later chapter he relates his discovery of "Star Maidens," beautiful, intelligent, compassionate earthwomen who in an earlier life were extraterrestrials.

Subsequently Steiger would be married for a time to one Star Maiden, Francie Paschal, and they would further develop the concept of Star People. Star People got their widest exposure in the May 1, 1979, issue of the *National Enquirer*, which reported on the Steigers' theories and brought them a flood of mail and telephone calls from persons claiming to be Star People. Some said that just before the story appeared, ETs had appeared in dreams to tell them, "Now is the time." Beginning in 1981 Berkley would publish five paperbacks by the Steigers in the "Star People Series," spreading the message further. The Steigers reported they were finding two groups of space-linked people: the Starseeds (the true Star People, who have both alien and human genes) and the Star Helpers ("Old Souls," descendants of the disciples of the ETs). At one point the couple was receiving as many as 70 letters a day from "activated Star People," some of whom were prophesying a catastrophic pole shift between 1982 and 1984, a world famine in 1982, World War III before 1985, and planetwide space contacts in 1986. The collapse of the Steigers' marriage and metaphysical partnership in the mid-1980s only momentarily slowed the Star People movement.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, religious studies scholar J. Gordon Melton, director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, in Santa Barbara, California, tracked the growth of the contactee movement as a new expression of metaphysical religion. In the several editions of *The Encyclopedia of American Religions* (1979, 1989), he traced the development of the organized contactee groups, some of which (for example, the Aetherius Society, Mark-Age, and Unarius) developed national and even international followings.

*The Rocky Mountain Conferences:* Another important figure, probably even more influential than Brad Steiger, in the contactee movement of the 1980s is R. Leo Sprinkle, who until his retirement into private practice in 1989 was a psychologist in the counseling department of the University of Wyoming. Sprinkle was unusual in having a foot in both the ufology and contactee camps, though the latter, the focus of his deeper sympathies, would claim his greater attention as the decade passed. Sprinkle entered ufology as a consultant to the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) and as a participant in the 1968 Symposium on Unidentified Flying Objects, at the U.S. House Committee on Science and Astronautics. As a hypnotist he worked with a number of abductees, including Nebraska police officer Herbert Schirmer, Carl Higdon, Sandy Larson and others whose stories would be widely reported in the UFO literature. In the 1970s Sprinkle entered into correspondence with contactees who had written him about their psychic communications with beings whom Sprinkle would good-naturedly call "UFOlk." Sprinkle helped the contactees get in touch with each other by mail. By decade's end he had established a small network of like-minded persons who were able to share ideas and experiences.

The next step, Sprinkle thought, was to have these people meet in person. So in May 1980 the first Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation was held in Laramie, on the university campus. Attendance was small; barely 20 persons showed up, but from those attendees, Sprinkle was able to develop some initial impressions. They seemed to be average, normal people in their social and psychological functioning, though highly susceptible to hypnotic suggestion. Most seemed to experience many psychic phenomena and possess some psychic abilities. He was impressed with their loving concern for all humanity. A great many of them reported a feeling of being monitored or experiencing continued contact with UFO entities and, on occasion, a feeling of having been chosen or selected as a UFO contactee. As a result, they often expressed a sense they had an important mission or task in life. They sometimes expressed

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### CONTACTEES (continued)

anxiety about the state of humankind, and they warned others of the possibility of future catastrophes. They often possessed a deep conviction that they were not only Planetary Persons but also Cosmic Citizens and sometimes acted as if their real "home" is beyond earth (Sprinkle, 1980).

In the next years, despite an unpromising start, the Rocky Mountain conferences soon became as popular a pilgrimage site for contactees as the Giant Rock, California, conventions had been in the 1950s. The 1989 conference attracted a record attendance of 185. It should be noted that there is relatively little overlap among attendees from year to year; each year brings a largely new, not repeat, crowd. This is not a situation, in other words, of a small number of persons who get together continually to regale each other with the same stories. It is, however, an indication that the contactee underground is larger than is generally recognized.

The Rocky Mountain conferences serve to validate contactees' experiences. Left to themselves, individual contactees may come to disbelieve the messages they are hearing. Some even conclude that their source is within their psyches, not on another planet. But when contactees gather at Laramie, they are able to see themselves not as isolated individuals undergoing fantastic visions which cause them to question their own sanity but as members of a larger community with a cosmic mission.

Many contactee stories recount instances of personal transformation, demonstrating in unambiguous fashion the classically religious nature of the experience. The tale Merry Lynn Noble, a Colorado housewife and Rocky Mountain conference attendee, tells is a particularly dramatic example:

At one time in her life, she says, she was an "expensive hooker, one of the leading call girls in the western United States." Deeply unhappy, she suffered from both drug addiction and alcoholism.

In an effort to change her life, she turned to spiritual studies. Then in February 1982, depressed and exhausted, she went to Montana to visit her parents. One evening they went rabbit-hunting together. They drove through back roads on a clear, dark night until, having found no rabbits, they decided to stop the car and talk. Their conversation turned to religion and Noble declared, "I believe in some Power that unites the universe. And I believe God is connected with UFOs." Her father laughed and said, "You've been in the city too long."

Suddenly, Noble says, "there was a *whoosh* sound and the car was covered with white light. I tried to look out the window but the light was too bright. I did get a glimpse, no more than a few seconds, of a saucer-shaped outline, a dark gray disc. It was about 100 feet over the car. I looked at my parents. They were just frozen there. It was like a movie that's suddenly stopped. Then I felt my astral body rising through the roof of the car. I felt a sense of freedom that I'd never felt before. The light was no longer blinding. I began communicating telepathically with a source inside the UFO—a Presence. I was saying things and answers were being given.

"It's hard to describe in words. It was absolute ecstasy, total peace, womblike warmth. I felt a sense of relief. 'I'm so glad to leave that body,' I thought. 'No way I can go on, no way I can handle this life.' I put my hands up and said, 'Thy will be done.' The Voice said, 'That's all I wanted to hear—that you would give up and do my will. Now go back to your body and do My will.'

"I said, 'I need help, strength, support. I can't go back to my old life.' Then I received a sense that I would have help. My old soul went on. It had a big ego and it was worn out with emotional problems. A new soul came into my body, with new energy, new humility. At that moment I was dropped with a jolt into my body. The first thing I thought was, 'This body is so heavy.'

"My parents had no awareness that anything had happened. It was like their memories were blanked out" (Clark, 1986).

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Soon afterwards Noble returned to Denver where through, she says, a "series of 'coincidences'" her life took an abrupt turn for the better. She got a good job and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. There she met Dan McLerren. "The Voice told me he was the one," she says. Before long they were married, and both have remained sober ever since. Noble's space contacts continue and she has written an unpublished autobiography, *Sex, God and UFOs*.

There is no reason to believe such experiences are generated by mental illness. Another University of Wyoming psychologist, June O. Parnell, wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on a psychological study of over 200 contactees who had attended the conference at various times. She found no detectable psychological differences between contactees and "normal" persons. Religious historian J. Gordon Melton, the leading academic authority on the contactee movement, says that attempts to characterize contactees as "kooks" are "reminiscent of the way Pentecostals were dismissed as psychopathological by psychologists who had never studied Pentecostalism. Recent studies have indicated that as a whole Pentecostals have a higher mental-health rate than the general population. When people claim that contactees have a pathological bent, it would be a very good idea to ask, 'Where are your data?' since unorthodox behavior and beliefs are no sign in themselves of psychopathology" (Fuller, 1980).

Meier's Pleiades Contacts: The one remaining contactee in the Adamski tradition is a Swiss farmer named Eduard ("Billy") Meier, who in the 1970s came forward with clear photographs of "beamships" carrying "cosmonauts" from the Pleiades star system. Meier's farm drew occult pilgrims from all over Europe. In 1979 some American entrepreneurs brought Meier's tales to the United States with the publication of a coffee-table collection of beamship pictures, followed over the next 10 years by several fat, amateurishly-written volumes recounting "investigations" of Meier's claims. In 1987 an independent journalist, Gary Kinder, and Atlantic Monthly Press brought out *Light Years*, a sympathetic but naive inquiry

into the affair. Meier and his followers had a hard time explaining away such gaffes as the picture of a beautiful Pleiades woman later found to be of a model in a magazine advertisement. Scathing critiques of Meier's stories and photographs were published in the *MUFON UFO Journal* and *International UFO Reporter* and in Kal Korff's self-published expose *The Meier Incident: The Most Infamous Hoax in Ufology* (1981). Outside contactee circles, where Meier is regarded as something of a hero, he has few defenders. One of this small group is James W. Deardorff, a retired Oregon State University atmospheric physicist, who has presented pro-Meier papers at scientific conferences.

In 1987 Whitley Strieber's *Communion: A True Story*, an account of the author's abduction experiences, rode high on the best-seller lists for many weeks. A sequel, *Transformation: The Breakthrough*, was published the next year. In 1989 Strieber organized the *Communion Foundation* whose newsletter quickly became a forum in which Strieber could express his unhappiness with the UFO community, which refused to recognize that the "visitors," i.e., the abducting aliens, have a benevolent mission. Ufologists, Strieber complained, "are not helping us to understand our fears and build our relationship with the visitors. The visitor experience is rich, complex and fruitful. It is often terrifying, I won't deny that. . . . But it can be used by the individual as a source of strength and self-knowledge. As such it is something to be treasured, not thrown away to satisfy the curiosity of researchers, or altered to fit their theories" (Strieber, 1989b). In his novel *Majestic* (1989a), based on the Roswell UFO-crash story, Strieber calls the aliens "angels," who offer "freedom: the soul in the open sky. . . ."

Heretofore extraterrestrials who did not look like earthly movie stars—in other words, such beings as the little gray men of abduction lore—were considered agents of the dark forces of the universe. Now Strieber was saying they are good guys, too, though their means of displaying their good intentions are far from straightforward. They teach not by directing cosmic philosophy

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### CONTACTEES (continued)

into the throat of a channeler or by whispering into the ear of an automatic writer but by subjecting their students to near-traumatic ordeals, a Space Age version of traditional rites of passage at the end of which the seeker emerges mature and wise. How appealing this model of the contact experience will be remains to be seen, but it is one of the few new ideas to enter contactee theology since Adamski.

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### CRASHES OF UFOs

Spaceships from other worlds have been crash-landing on American soil since 1884, when the *Nebraska Nugget*, a weekly newspaper published in Holdrege, reported on June 6 that cowboys at work in remote Dundy County had seen a blazing object plunge to earth, spraying "fragments of cog-wheels and other pieces of machinery . . . and glowing with heat so intense as to scorch the grass for a long distance around each fragment and make it impossible for one to approach it." The brilliant light cast by the object blinded one of the cowboys, the *Nugget* said. On the 10th a Dundy County correspondent reported in Lincoln's *Daily State Journal* that the vehicle's remains vanished in a rainstorm, "dissolved by the water like a spoonful of salt" (Clark, 1986).



mediumistic (mental) contact with space people go back to the eighteenth-century seer Emanuel Swedenborg (Brown, 1970; Van Dusen, 1974) and were known in the 1800s to Spiritualists, psychical researchers, and psychologists (Evans, 1987; Flournoy, 1899), flying-saucer contactees came to prominence in southern California in the early 1950s, and many insisted their interactions with extraterrestrials were physical events. Some said they had actually flown in spaceships. The physical contactees often produced photographs and other alleged evidence, and a number made a living off their stories, writing books and touring the lecture circuit.

Even unsympathetic observers tended to see psychic contactees, or at least most of them, as sincere victims of psychological disorders. Certainly there could be no question about the commitment of many psychic contactees to the interplanetary gospel. In 1954, in one celebrated instance, a suburban Chicago woman and automatic writer named Dorothy Martin was led to believe geological upheavals would cause great havoc on earth on December 20. After alerting the world, she and her followers abandoned jobs and normal lives to wait for a flying saucer to pick them up on the designated date. When the prophecy went unfulfilled, the group was subjected to international ridicule (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 1956; "The End," 1955). Ordered by the space people to fast for peace, **Gloria Lee**, a prominent 1950s psychic contactee, eventually starved to death (Melton, 1978).

But where physical contactees were concerned, conservative ufologists and others nearly unanimously assumed that a UFO-age confidence game was afoot. If one could not believe **George Adamski's** stories about meetings with Venusians, Martians, and Saturnians, then one had to assume that the photographs he took of their spaceships were the product of conscious fraud. Or if one did not believe that Buck Nelson had ever been to Venus, then one was unlikely to believe that the packets of canine hair he was selling were really from a Venusian dog (Nebel, 1961).

Early ufologists held contactees in such contempt that few bothered to investigate their claims, since time spent on what was seen as blatant fraud could

only be wasted. Yet on those rare occasions when prominent contactees were subjected to investigative scrutiny, significant disconfirming information came to light. **James W. Moseley's** work on Adamski is considered definitive (Moseley, 1957). Moseley was unable to resist the temptation to hoax Adamski in turn, and so he and a friend, flying-saucer publisher **Gray Barker**, wrote a letter on State Department stationery and addressed it to Adamski. "R. E. Straith" of the "Cultural Exchange Committee" told Adamski that the State Department knew his claims were true and was quietly encouraging his work. Adamski soon informed his followers that he had determined that both Straith and his committee existed, State Department denials notwithstanding (Zinsstag and Good, 1983). Though one ufologist was quick to observe that the letter had obviously been written on Barker's typewriter (Dove, 1959), Moseley, who feared legal repercussions, did not confess until after Barker's death in December 1984 (Moseley, 1985).

New Jersey contactee **Howard Menger** suffered brief embarrassment early in his career when an accident of lighting exposed a trick he was playing on a follower. A woman was led into an unlighted room where she was to meet a spacewoman, but when a sliver of light came through the door and shone on the "extraterrestrial's" face, it turned out to be that of a close associate of Menger's ("Very Sincere Fellow," 1957). The incident received little publicity, and those of his followers who knew of it ignored it, as contactee enthusiasts usually did when their heroes' clay feet showed. Menger went on to become one of the most famous contactees of the period, but in 1960 he virtually recanted his testimony (Nebel, *op. cit.*).

Another early contact claim was proven years later to be a literary hoax. In 1954 a book entitled *Flying Saucer from Mars* recounted author "Cedric Allingham's" meeting with a friendly spaceman whose ship he saw land in Scotland. Though hailed by Adamski's defenders (Girvan, 1956), "Allingham" proved peculiarly elusive, and in the 1980s it was reported that the real author of the book was popular-science writer and television personality Patrick Moore, assisted by Peter Davies. Moore's motive was to spoof Adamski and show up the gullibility of his supporters (Hough, 1987; *see also Allingham Contact Claim*).

Reinhold Schmidt of Bakersfield, California, was among the few contactees to end up in jail for activities related to his contact claims. From November 1957 onwards Schmidt reported having regular contacts with Saturnians who among other things revealed to him the locations of large amounts of quartz crystal. Schmidt sought investors in a mining venture, but in due course, when they began to suspect they had been duped, the investors brought their complaints to the authorities. In October 1961 an Oakland, California, jury convicted Schmidt on two counts of grand theft, and he was sentenced to one to 10 years in prison ("Flying Saucer' Figure Convicted," 1961; *see also Reinhold Schmidt Contact Claim*). In March 1957 the FBI arrested Harold Berney of Mobile, Alabama, for swindling a Washington woman of \$40,000 in money and property. Berney, who claimed to have visited Venus twice and to have become expert in Venusian science, had persuaded Pauline Gobel to invest in a device called a "modulator" (in fact a television antenna) which the space people had asked him to develop. Berney had a long criminal history; in the previous three decades he had been arrested for grand larceny, violation of postal laws, and embezzlement in West Virginia, Michigan, and Florida ("Contact' Claimant," 1957).

Otis T. Carr, another flying-saucer figure who faced serious legal problems, was not a contactee himself, but Carr operated within the contactee milieu, traveling with contactee figures and speaking at their conventions to promote the flying saucer he was building. It was, he said, powered by "free energy" and based on the secret discoveries of the great electrical scientist Nikola Tesla. Before the end of 1959, he and his associates would fly to the moon. OTC Enterprises collected hundreds of thousands of dollars from investors, but the end began when a promised test flight of the OTC-X1, a six-foot prototype of the ship that would make the lunar voyage, failed to materialize, though hundreds had flocked to an Oklahoma City amusement park to see it as well as the extraterrestrial flying saucers that contactees had promised would also show up. Carr developed a mysterious illness and was nowhere to be found. In November Carr was convicted for the illegal sale of stock and sent to prison (Durant, 1958-1959; Flam-

monde, 1971; Nebel, *op. cit.*; *see also Otis T. Carr Hoax*).

Despite the manifest charlatanism of some prominent figures in the contactee movement, in other cases physical contactees may have been moved by deeper psychological impulses which led them to employ bogus claims of space contacts to ensure a hearing for sincerely held spiritual beliefs. Some contactee figures, for example **George Hunt Williamson**, seem to have harbored psyches of daunting complexity. And a few commentators, most prominently the eminent psychological theorist C. G. Jung but also scholars who knew him personally, have argued that **Orfeo Angelucci** was a genuine religious visionary (Jung, 1959; Story, 1980; *see also Jung and UFOs*). Other observers, however, have been less inclined to give any of the 1950s physical contactees the benefit of the doubt. In 1957 **Isabel Davis of Civilian Saucer Investigation of New York** reviewed the major books of the contactee movement and found striking contradictions in their depictions of alien life and cosmology. Noting that despite these problems Adamski, Angelucci, **Truman Bethurum**, **Daniel Fry**, **George Van Tassel**, and Williamson publicly supported each other, she concluded that privately they must have respected each other's scheme to peddle science fiction as cosmic fact (Davis, 1957). In line with this interpretation, University of Washington sociologist Rodney Stark, who as a California newspaper reporter in the late 1950s spent much time with the contactees of the period, recalls that backstage the contactees made little secret of what they were up to. "It was all a big joke to them," he says. "They even called their followers 'marks'" (Clark, 1986a).

*Twice-told tales.* Other kinds of hoaxes were perpetrated in the UFO literature by writers who were not contactees but who, out of naivete, credulity, or indifference, passed on dubious tales as documented fact.

One of these was a story of an unfortunate young man named Oliver Lerch, who on Christmas Eve 1890 stepped out of his family's South Bend, Indiana, house to fetch water from a well. Five minutes later occupants of the house heard piercing screams from Lerch. When they ran outside, they could hear his

voice, apparently emanating from about 100 feet above their heads, but they could not see him. He was screaming, "Help! Help! It's got me!" Within five minutes the voice had faded away. After a brief silence it returned, but again there was no one to be seen. Lerch's tracks in the snow ended suddenly about halfway to the well. The young man was never seen again.

That is the story told by Joseph Rosenberger in the September 1950 issue of *Fate*. No UFO is mentioned, but it was not hard for some writers to imagine that the "it" to which he referred was a spaceship. The first to cite (in this case to reprint) the story was **M. K. Jessup**, in his *The Case for the UFO* (1955), and the tale soon made its way into the pages of other books on UFOs and "true mysteries," though with variations in the details. **Frank Edwards** had the victim's last name as "Larch" (Edwards, 1956), and a decade later Oliver Lerch had become "Oliver Thomas," now 11 years old, of Rhayader, Wales, and the year of his disappearance 1909 (Steiger, 1966). By this time many ufologists were skeptical of the story (Clark, 1967). Kevin D. Randle's research led him to conclude the story had been created by person or persons unknown in 1946 (Randle, 1976). Yet curiously, in 1979 Rosenberger wrote Joe Nickell, who was also investigating the tale, "There is not a single bit of truth to the 'Oliver Lerch' tale. Every single bit is fiction. I wrote the damn piece way back when during the lean days.... It was all fiction for a buck." Thinking he had solved the mystery of the story's origins, Nickell wrote an article for *Fate* (Nickell, 1980), only to learn subsequently that the "Oliver Lerch" version of the legend was "current well before 1932" (Nickell with Fischer, 1988). Probably the story's origins will never be known. All that is known is that no Oliver Lerch or Larch lived in South Bend in 1890 or any Oliver Thomas in Rhayader in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (Begg, 1979). No contemporary account or police record attests any such disappearance ever took place.

Another disappearance hoax concerned one David Lang of Gallatin, Tennessee. On September 23, 1880, in full view of five witnesses, Lang was said to have vanished without a trace. In the July 1953 issue of *Fate*, Stuart Palmer wrote what purported to be a first-person account by one of the witnesses, Lang's

daughter Sarah (Palmer, 1953), but subsequent investigations by another *Fate* writer, Robert Schadewald, and others ("Fortean Corrigenda," 1976) established that no Lang family existed in the area during the period in question. A handwriting expert declared that Sarah Lang's "affidavit," reproduced with the article, was a forgery (Schadewald, 1977). In the 1950s the Lang story appeared in UFO or UFO-related books by Jessup (Jessup, *op. cit.*), Edwards (Edwards, 1959), and **Harold T. Wilkins** (Wilkins, 1958). The story may have begun as a nineteenth-century traveling salesman's tall tale, though it bears some considerable resemblance to the plot of a science-fiction story, "The Difficulty of Crossing a Field," which appeared in an 1893 collection by Ambrose Bierce, *Can Such Things Be?* (Nickell with Fischer, *op. cit.*; Schadewald, *op. cit.*).

*Carl Allen, mythmaker.* In what may have been the most successful hoax of the 1950s—it was still being believed three decades later, and a few individuals even claimed to have participated in the event (Eaglesham, 1991)—an eccentric drifter named Carl Allen created a sensation with no more than two rambling letters and annotations in a paperback book. The two letters, written by a man who signed himself variously as "Carl Allen" and "Carlos Allende," mailed in October 1955 and January 1956 to UFO-book author Morris Jessup, asserted that in October 1943 a U.S. Navy experiment at the Philadelphia dock attempted to render a destroyer invisible, with the result that half the crew went mad and the ship teleported to a Navy dock in Virginia. A few months later the Office of Naval Research (ONR) received a marked-up copy of the paperback edition of Jessup's *Case for the UFO*. Three gypsies seemed to have written the annotations, which hinted at inside knowledge of UFOs. ONR asked Jessup to look over the material, and he immediately saw the similarity between these writings and the letters from Allen/Allende. A few ONR officers were interested enough to arrange for the limited publication of the annotated book and the letters. The publisher was the Varo Manufacturing Company of Garland, Texas, and thus the book entered flying-saucer legendry as the "Varo edition."

Jessup's suicide in April 1959 sparked speculation about the shadowy Allen/Allende, and before long

books and monographs dealing in whole or in part with the "mystery" began to appear. The most successful were Charles Berlitz's best-selling *The Bermuda Triangle* (1974) and William L. Moore's *The Philadelphia Experiment* (1979). As early as 1969, however, Allen/Allende had confessed to Jim and Coral Lorenzen of the APRO that he made up the stories to scare Jessup ("Allende Letters," 1969). In 1978 Robert A. Goerman interviewed the man's family and learned that he was born Carl Allen in Springdale, Pennsylvania, in 1925; family members described him as a "master leg-puller" (Goerman, 1980). A 1984 science-fiction film, *The Philadelphia Experiment*, helped keep the legend alive (see **Allende Letters**).

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## UFOs in the 1980s

Scientific Exploration and a newsletter, The Explorer, also released twice a year. These periodicals contain articles, news, reviews and commentary on ufology, parapsychology, cryptozoology and other controversies on the borders of science. "Progress towards an agreed understanding of such topics (beginning with the basic question of their reality) is likely to be achieved only if they are subject to the normal processes of open publication, debate, and criticism which constitute the lifeblood of science and scholarship," the SSE says in a position statement. "The Society has no intention of endorsing the reality or significance of any particular topic. Neither does the Society regard current scientific knowledge as immutable, and no subject will be prohibited from discussion or publication simply because it is not now an accepted part of scientific or scholarly knowledge."

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### SOLAR LIGHT CENTER

7700 Avenue of the Sun  
Central Point, Oregon 97501

The Solar Light Center was established in the mid-1960s by "Telethought Channeler" Marianne Francis, who claims to receive psychic messages from a highly-evolved Space Brother named Sut-Ko. Francis, an active channeler since the 1950s, was associated with one of the early contactee

groups, the Solar Cross Fellowship, headed by Rudolph H. Pestalozzi, a channel for Baloran, an extraterrestrial. Eventually Francis' Solar Light group absorbed the Solar Cross. Francis, also known as Aleuti Francesca, is a popular speaker on the New Age occult circuit. Her organization publishes the quarterly *Starcraft*.

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### SPACE TECHNOLOGY AND RESEARCH FOUNDATION

448 Rabbit Skin Road  
Waynesville, North Carolina 28786

The Space Technology and Research (S.T.A.R.) Foundation is run by Dick and Greta Smolowe, a well-to-do corporate couple who moved to western North Carolina from Westport, Connecticut, at the direction of the Ogatta group, extraterrestrial beings with whom Greta believes herself in psychic communication. As Greta Woodrew she has written two books, On a Slide of Light (1981) and Memories of Tomorrow (1988), recounting her experiences and relating the Ogattans' role in ushering in a New Age, which will arrive only after massive earth changes in the near future destroy much of the world's population. The Smolowes publish a bimonthly newsletter, Woodrew Update, which reports on the Ogattan messages and ecological and other events which point in the editors' view to imminent upheaval.

## UFOs in the 1980s

### SPACE TECHNOLOGY AND RESEARCH FOUNDATION (continued)

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### SPRINKLE, RONALD LEO (1930- )

R. Leo Sprinkle was one of the first psychologists to study the UFO phenomenon from a sympathetic perspective. His openness to the subject stemmed from his own sighting of a daylight disc in 1951, when he was a student at the University of Colorado, and another sighting, this one five years later, which he experienced with his wife. In 1962 Sprinkle, who uses hypnosis in his practice, became a consultant to the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO). A few years later he served as a psychological consultant to the Condon Committee, the University of Colorado's UFO project sponsored by the U.S. Air Force and directed by Edward U. Condon. In this capacity he authored his first important work in ufology, a survey of attitudes held by people who were interested in UFOs. It was also in this capacity that Sprinkle was called in to the investigation of the case of Nebraska police officer Herbert Schirmer who had reported a puzzling loss of time during what otherwise seemed to be a fairly routine UFO experience. Under hypnosis Schirmer, whose case became one of the most celebrated in ufological annals, recounted a classic abduction experience.

Sprinkle later became involved in the investigation of the abduction phenomenon through such prominent abduction cases as those of Carl Higdon (Rawlins, Wyoming) and Sandy Larson (Fargo, North Dakota). In 1980, after years of corresponding with people who believed

themselves to be in psychic and other contact with friendly space people, he hosted the Rocky Mountain Conference on UFO Investigation, which brought contactees to the University of Wyoming campus in Laramie to discuss their beliefs and experiences. The conference has been held every summer since then, with published proceedings. Sprinkle, a genial New Ager with a strong interest in reincarnation, has identified himself as a contactee, but he also has encouraged his colleagues in the mental health field to study the psychological make-up of contactees. One result was his colleague June Parnell's research into Rocky Mountain Conference attendees, the subject of her 1986 Ph.D. thesis for the University of Wyoming's Department of Counselor Education.

Born on August 31, 1930, Ronald Leo Sprinkle graduated with a B.A. from the University of Colorado in 1952, earned his master's degree in personnel services from the same institution four years later, and got his Ph.D. at the University of Missouri in 1961. He taught at the University of North Dakota for three years (1961-64) and during his final year there assumed the directorship of the school's counseling center. In 1964 he joined the faculty of the University of Wyoming and in time became director of counseling and testing. He left the university in the summer of 1989 to take up private practice in Laramie.

Sprinkle, in outlining his own position, notes, "I take the position that there are physical craft, there are biological beings, that these beings are advanced to the point where they can use psychic events and manipulate time and space in such a way that we would regard them as 'angels' or 'demons.' Both physical and psychological processes are variable in the universe and these persons or these beings are in some way moving back and forth through what we think of as the limitations of space and time. . . . There is the possibility that UFO observers are being taught by this very significant event in their lives, perhaps down deep on a level removed from verbal communication" (Clark, 1976).

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## V

**VAN TASSEL, GEORGE W. (1910-1978)**

Born in Jefferson, Ohio, on March 12, 1910, George Van Tassel developed an early interest in aviation. In 1930 he moved to California, where for the next 11 years he worked for Douglas Aircraft. In 1941 he became the personal flight inspector of experimental aircraft for Howard Hughes, and two years later he went to work for Lockheed as a flight inspector on Constellation aircraft.

In 1947 Van Tassel and his wife and three daughters left Los Angeles and moved south into the high desert between Yucca Valley and Joshua Tree, California. Amid the 2600 acres he leased from the U.S. government was a seven-story boulder, called simply Giant Rock. In the early 1930s a friend of Van Tassel's, Frank Critzer, had blasted out living quarters in the part of the rock that lay under the desert surface. He lived there until 1942 when in the course of an altercation with three local deputy sheriffs he committed suicide by blowing himself to pieces with dynamite. When the Van Tassels moved into these quarters five years later, they were barely livable, but Van Tassel installed electricity and in other ways made their situation comfortable. In due course he opened a restaurant, an airport, and a dude ranch (Pearson, 1967).

Beginning in early 1952, Van Tassel claimed, he received psychic messages from a variety of extraterrestrial starship ("ventla") commanders. The first of these, received on January 6, was from "Lutbunn, senior in command first wave, planet patrol, realms of Schare [pronounced Share-ee, a saucer station in space]. We have your contact aboard 80,000 feet above this place." Other messages soon came from Elcar, Clota, Totalmon, Latamarx, Noma, Leektow, Luu, Oblow, Kerrull, Locktopar, Molca, Clatu, Hulda, Lata, Singba, and others (Van Tassel, 1952). One of Van Tassel's contacts, Ashtar ("commandant quadra sector, patrol station Schare, all projections, all waves"), was to become a metaphysical superstar, and in the years ahead many contactees would channel communications from him (Beckley, 1989; Tuella, 1985). These beings sought to raise humanity's "vibratory

attunement" so that earthlings will not threaten the wise and peace-loving space people. The operation was being run out of the Council of Seven Lights on the planet Shanchea.

Van Tassel reprinted many of the messages in a misleadingly titled book, *I Rode a Flying Saucer!* (1952), one of the first post-1947 contactee works. In early 1953 he began holding weekly Friday-night channeling sessions at Giant Rock, and in the spring he hosted the first of many annual **Giant Rock Spacecraft Conventions**, with guest appearances by other members of southern California's emerging contactee community. On August 24 Van Tassel got to step, for the first time, inside a flying saucer, when an extraterrestrial named Solganda roused the heretofore-only-psychic contactee from slumber and led him to a waiting ship. Solganda and the three other crew members gave him a tour of the interior before dropping him off and shooting back into space.

Soon the space people were imparting plans for an electrical rejuvenation machine which would be called the Integratron, and soon afterwards, in public appearances and in the pages of the *Proceedings* of the College of Universal Wisdom, Van Tassel was raising funds for its construction. He said that when the machine was ready, it could rejuvenate as many as 10,000 persons a day. Their bodies would not outwardly return to youth, but the cells would be recharged. By 1959 a four-storey domed structure, 55 feet in diameter, was in place, having been built mostly of wood and without nails, screws, iron, or steel (Curran, 1985).

In the course of its construction, Van Tassel discovered that the Integratron functioned also as a time machine. Strange images and television signals from other times appeared inside. (Van Tassel explained how this happened: The "time reference is a third dimension in electronics. You see, electronics has never had anything but a two dimensional science. The electronic flow of the magnetic pattern, perpendicular to it are the only two planes of reference they've ever had. And the time zone is perpendicular to both of them" [Toronto, 1978].) The Integratron was still uncompleted at the time of Van Tassel's death.

Van Tassel was a major, perhaps *the* major, promoter



The Emergence of a PhenomenonUtah Film

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of other contactees. The Giant Rock gatherings gave many their first significant public platforms. In 1956, in radio and television appearances Van Tassel introduced New Jersey's **Howard Menger**, who would turn out to be one of the most prominent (and controversial) of the 1950s contactees, to the world.

On encountering him, the anti-contactee **Civilian Saucer Intelligence of New York** (CSI) noted, "Mr. Van Tassel turns out to be a handsome, broad-faced, fair-haired man in his early forties, with a pleasant, deep voice and an easy-going manner of speech. It is impossible not to be struck at once by his evident 'sincerity'.... A person listening primarily to the *sound* of his discourse, and applying little thought to its *sense*, would probably never have reason to suspect that this big, sincere, affable, humble man was anything other than what he claims to be." Yet "he endorses everyone else's stories no matter how questionable they appear to others" ("George Van Tassel," 1956). CSI's **Isabel Davis** remarked that for all his promotion of them, none of the other contactees spoke of "ventlas" or in other ways acknowledged Van Tassel's universe in their claims. "On February 13, 1953," Davis wrote, "Ashtar ... tells the [Van Tassel] group that '86 projections, 9100 waves, of 236,000 ventlas' are combining forces to create a 'Light energy vortice' near the Earth that will 'create extensive damage.' Five nights later, with this armada still presumably patrolling space near Earth, [George] **Adamski** is having a long calm conversation with Orthon, Firkon, Kalna and Ilmuth, and the Venusian 'master'—none of whom breathe a syllable about the disciplinary ventlas" (Davis, 1957). To Davis and other critics, it seemed clear that their publicly united front notwithstanding, Van Tassel and his colleagues did not believe each other's stories.

**Van Tassel** died suddenly of a heart attack at 3:30 A.M. on February 9, 1978, in Santa Ana, California. In 1979, unable to pay a hefty tax bill, his widow Dorris sold the property to a San Diego real estate developer who then let it be known that he planned to turn the Integratron into a disco. Outraged, Van Tassel's followers raised money to buy the land back in 1981 (Curran, *op. cit.*). The Integratron, however, remains unfinished. In the late 1980s it was purchased by Emile Canning ("Integratron Revives," 1991).

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## PRINCE NEOSOM

In 1958 a Detroit baker named Lee Childers appeared before a local flying-saucer club and declared himself an interplanetary traveler. Not only that, he avowed, he could travel in space simply by closing his eyes and entering another state of consciousness. In fact, he said, he would demonstrate the technique to his audience. Over the next 10 minutes, eyes shut, he journeyed to the moon, Venus, and Mars. Soon Childers was telling interplanetary tales on a local radio station.

Among those who heard and believed Childers's yarns was Douglas Hancock, a member of the U.S. Army Band. In October 1958 Hancock arrived in New York, introduced himself to local flying-saucer

enthusiasts, and persuaded one group, the Bureau of UFO Research and Analysis, to bring Childers in to lecture. By the time Childers got to New York, in early December, he had become a spaceman, Prince Neosom of the planet Tythan, eight and a half light years from earth. Neosom also answered to the name Dana.

At a news conference Childers/Neosom/Dana produced a sketch of a rejuvenation machine and declared he had been killed three times by men in black. Just before he was to be interviewed on New York radio station WOR, Childers predicted the broadcast would be picked up by flying saucers and broadcast all over the world. On the show he told host Long John Nebel that he, Prince Neosom, had replaced a stillborn terrestrial child. An aged, infirm medical doctor had witnessed the exchange but even if still alive would not remember the transaction because the space people would have wiped out his memory. Within a few minutes Nebel, bored with what he saw as a ludicrous charade, ordered Neosom and two female associates to leave (Mapes, 1959).

Undeterred, Childers (as Neosom) made the rounds, telling ever wilder tales all the while, and in due course returned to Detroit. Soon a disgusted New York ufologist, Jonas Kover, got an idea which he thought would show up Childers even to the most gullible. He sent a telegram to Hancock and signed it "Mission for Space Unification." It read in part, "Congratulations. You search reality. Neosom no longer Prince. King. Dana's father gone to higher karma. We contact Tythan via pre-audio-electrolysis. Hail the King" (Mann, 1960). An excited Hancock immediately phoned Childers and read him the telegram. After hearing it, Childers declared that the people of Tythan had already given him the news. In fact, he added, he was surprised that it had taken the Mission for Space Unification so long to tell Hancock about it.

In short order Childers left his wife and five children to marry one of the women with whom he had been traveling, Beth Docker. The new Mrs. Childers was promptly renamed Princess Negonna. The two honeymooned on Tythan. Meanwhile, back on earth, on January 9, 1959, Hancock was committed to the psychiatric ward of St. Albans Hospital, Long Island,