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## Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO)

## *The Emergence of a Phenomenon*

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## AERIAL PHENOMENA RESEARCH ORGANIZATION (APRO)

The Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) was formed in January 1952, by Leslie James (Jim) and Coral Lorenzen of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. In its constitution APRO declared its purpose to be to "promote the eventual enlightenment of the people of the world in regard to the truth of the saucer phenomena—that they are in fact interplanetary vehicles. Contact with the beings operating them shall be strived for." Membership would be available to anyone with an "open attitude toward existence of saucers ... 16 years of age or over" and "nominated by a member of the club and ... elected by a majority

vote." Membership was unavailable to "Communists, parlor pinks, or fellow-travelers."

In those days, Coral Lorenzen would recall, "It wasn't really a research group.... We adopted that name because the Air Force was putting out those stupid explanations for incidents that were really unexplainable, and I thought there should be an organization that recorded the sightings for later, more responsible scrutiny" (Clark, 1977).

June 1952 saw the release of the first issue of *The A.P.R.O. Bulletin*, destined to be one of the most widely read UFO periodicals. Early issues consisted of editorial commentary on current ufology and newspaper stories of sightings. From the beginning APRO, whatever impression its credo might indicate to the contrary, was out of sympathy with the emerging contactee movement. After moving from Wisconsin in 1954, the Lorenzens lived briefly in Los Angeles; while there, they called on **George Adamski**, already the most famous contactee, and found him "quite a charming old faker" (*ibid.*).

In 1954 the Lorenzens moved to Alamogordo, New Mexico, and took jobs at Holloman Air Force Base, Jim in the data reduction facility, Coral in the range scheduling office. Two years later Coral resigned to devote her full attention to the rapidly growing APRO. In 1958 APRO suffered public embarrassment when the *Bulletin* reprinted a misleadingly translated four-year-old interview with Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung and it got picked up by press wires, which reported that Jung had affirmed the existence of extraterrestrial visitors. When interviewed, Jung said he had been quoted out of context, and the Lorenzens publicly apologized, amid much criticism (*see Jung and UFOs*).

The Lorenzens and APRO went to Tucson in 1960, when Jim joined the staff of the Kitt Peak National Observatory, where he designed computer interface for a remote-controlled telescope as well as instrumentation for rocket-elevated astronomical experiments. In 1967 Jim left the observatory to form Lorenzen Music Enterprises.

Along with such organizations as **Civilian Saucer Intelligence of New York (CSI)**, **Civilian Research, Interplanetary Flying Objects (CRIFO)**, and the **National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenome-**



Leslie James (Jim) and Coral Lorenzen founded the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) in 1952. APRO, which survived until the late 1980s, was one of the most important and influential of the UFO-research groups.

na (NICAP), APRO helped define serious ufology in the 1950s. As the organization grew beyond its flying-saucer-club roots, it attracted some of the small number of scientists willing to identify themselves publicly with UFO research, and it established links with foreign ufologists, most prominently a Brazilian physician and medical scientist named **Olavo T. Fontes**, who provided APRO with memorable case studies of extraordinary encounters from his country. One of these involved residue alleged to be from a UFO which exploded over Brazil's Ubatuba region (*see Ubatuba Residue*).

Unlike the other groups, APRO was less certain than NICAP was that a high-level UFO cover-up existed. The Lorenzens felt that NICAP's drive for Congressional hearings was largely a waste of time and that ufology's emphasis should be on investigation and documentation of cases. Moreover, from the beginning APRO (like CSI and CRIFO) championed **close encounters of the third kind** (UFO-occupant re-

ports)—typically brief sightings of humanoid beings—which it felt were more credible than claims by professional contactees of extended communication with benevolent Space Brothers. But NICAP, which sought to bring a broad constituency of conservative middle-class Americans to its struggle against Air Force secrecy, was skittish about these reports, which it feared could be used by critics to ridicule ufology as the pursuit of "little green men." The two organizations broke openly after an editorial in the *Bulletin* referred to NICAP (not altogether inaccurately) as a "lobbying" effort. On the other hand, "APRO's efforts ... are gradually drawing the endorsements of the scientific community. This[,] we feel, is real progress. Such endorsement would arise with more reluctance ... had we the reputation of using such for purposes of direct political pressure. A scientist, once aware of the true nature of the problem, becomes a firm supporter. Politicians ... are notoriously fickle" ("Support NICAP?", 1962).

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## Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO)

## *The Emergence of a Phenomenon*

The revival of UFO sightings in the mid-1960s also revived flagging public interest in the subject, and APRO's membership, which had been in decline, rose to over 1500 by 1967. In 1969, for the first time, APRO's headquarters were not in the Lorenzens's home, and the organization had a full-time employee, J. Richard Greenwell, trained as a scientist and translator. By herself or with Jim, Coral wrote several popular paperback books which considerably enhanced APRO's public profile, and the organization busily recruited a network of academic consultants. With NICAP in decline (director **Donald E. Keyhoe** would be fired late in 1969) and CSI and CRIFO long defunct, to all appearances APRO was about to become the dominant force in American ufology.

Instead, it suffered a serious blow from an unexpected quarter: a portion of its own membership. In 1969 Walter H. Andrus, Jr., an APRO regional officer from Quincy, Illinois, left the organization with enough followers to start a rival group, the Midwest UFO Network (MUFON), later—as it became a force on the national and international scene and relocated to Texas—renamed the Mutual UFO Network. The Lorenzens were furious, and their dismay only intensified as MUFON proved a spectacular success, bringing under its roof many former NICAP luminaries. Soon MUFON eclipsed APRO as the largest and most influential membership organization in ufology.

APRO never entirely recovered from the schism. It suffered a second major public embarrassment when a professional debunker, Philip J. Klass, reported that Jim Lorenzen and representatives of the *National Enquirer* conspired to cover up the negative results of a polygraph test on Arizona abductee Travis Walton in November 1975. In his defense Lorenzen argued that the test was poorly conducted and meaningless, a contention backed by at least one nationally prominent polygraph expert (Clark, 1981), and that Walton and other witnesses later passed similar tests. Yet Lorenzen's action surprised and disturbed those who had long known him to be a man of integrity.

By the late 1970s the *Bulletin* was appearing ever more irregularly and was littered with typos, bad phrasing, and other evidence of editorial apathy. Sightings again were in decline, along with public attention, and MUFON and the Center for UFO

Studies (CUFOS), formed in 1973 by former **Project Blue Book** scientific consultant J. Allen Hynek, claimed most of the loyalties of what remained of ufology during one of the bleakest periods in its history. Meanwhile the Lorenzens's health had begun to deteriorate.

Jim Lorenzen died of cancer on August 28, 1986. On April 12, 1988, Coral died of respiratory failure. With the Lorenzens gone, the APRO board elected to dissolve the organization. An agreement to give APRO's massive files to CUFOS fell through when the plan was sabotaged by an enemy of the latter organization, and eventually the files went, ironically in light of the Lorenzens's long opposition to contactees, to a contactee-oriented couple with no significant previous involvement or interest in serious UFO research. They announced that they would use the materials to launch profit-making projects in the popular media.

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### *The Emergence of a Phenomenon*

Aetherius Society

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### **AETHERIUS SOCIETY**

George King, a 35-year-old bachelor and veteran occultist, learned of his mission one Saturday morning in March 1954 when he was washing dishes in his London flat and heard a booming voice declare, "Prepare yourself. You are to become the voice of Interplanetary Parliament." Several days later, as King meditated, an Indian yoga master walked into his apartment to inform him that Cosmic Intelligences had picked him to be their "primary terrestrial mental channel." Soon, in meditative trances, King was communicating with a Venusian named Aetherius, one of the Cosmic Masters who meet at the Interplanetary Parliament on Saturn. Other Masters are Jesus Christ, Mars Sector 6, and Jupiter 92.

In January 1955 King gave his first public channeling at London's Caxton Hall and over the next few months attracted a following. A mimeographed magazine, *Aetherius Speaks to Earth* (later retitled *Cosmic Voice*), began appearing that June. In August 1956 the Aetherius Society was formed. Today it has several thousand members in chapters in a number of countries around the world. In 1960 King set up headquarters in Los Angeles.

Though most contactee groups attracted only periodic outside attention, usually in tongue-in-cheek newspaper stories, King faced controversy and criti-

cism early on, when he claimed to be the recipient of channeled communications from Jesus, characterized not as the Son of God but just "one of the Great Masters." Taking note of this as well as the space people's frequent plea for suspension of nuclear testing, the *Empire News*, a once popular but now defunct London Sunday newspaper, speculated that the Aetherius Society might be a Communist front (Evans, 1974). More frequently, King, like other prominent contactees of the period, was called a charlatan, once in a heated exchange on New York radio station WOR with comedian Jackie Gleason, a UFO buff but emphatic nonfan of contactees (Nebel, 1961).

The attacks notwithstanding, King and the Aetherius Society were an enormous success. The society developed a complex theology based on its role in defending the earth, in alliance with the Cosmic Brotherhood, from attacks by "black magicians" associated with evil extraterrestrials. One prolonged battle began in 1958, when Master Jesus directed King to climb 18 mountains to charge them with spiritual energy which would help repel sinister forces. Operation Starlight ended three years and one month after it began, and there have been others (such as Operations Prayer Power, Bluewater, Karmalight, Sunbeam, and others) since then. These operations take place when friendly spaceships position themselves above the earth and send energy earthward. Members of the society help to direct this energy.

The Aetherius Society continues to operate its London office, but *Cosmic Voice* is now published out of the society's building compound in Los Angeles. There services, classes, or lectures are held nearly every day. Now known as His Eminence, Prince George King de Santorini, Count de Florina, King lives in southern California. The master tapes of his channeled transmissions are locked in "the strongest vault in England" (Curran, 1985).

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### **LORENZEN, CORAL E. LIGHTNER (1925-1988) AND LESLIE JAMES LORENZEN (1922-1986)**

Two of ufology's pioneering figures, Coral and Jim Lorenzen, died little more than a year and a half apart from each other. The organization they founded, the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO), the longest-lived serious UFO-research group in the United States, died with them.

Leslie James Lorenzen, born on January 2, 1922, in Grand Meadow, Minnesota, worked professionally as an electronics technician. Among his employers were Holloman Air Force Base (1954-1960) and Kitt Peak National Observatory (1960-1967). When he died of cancer on August 28, 1986, in Tucson, he had been serving as head of his own music company for nearly 20 years. Coral E. Lightner was born on April 2, 1925, in Hillsdale, Wisconsin, and held various jobs as writer, editor, and proofreader for technical publications. She died on April 12, 1988, of respiratory failure.

The Lorensens' great achievement was APRO, which at its peak had some 3000 members. The organization was the outgrowth of Coral's long interest in the UFO phenomenon, beginning with a 1934 sighting of a white hemisphere-shaped object crossing the western sky from south to north in an undulating trajectory. Three years later, after she related her experience to the family doctor, he loaned her the books of Charles Fort, the great collector of reports of aerial and other anomalies, and she learned that other persons had

seen similarly unusual phenomena.

On September 29, 1943, she and Jim Lorenzen were married. Four years later, in Douglas, Arizona, on June 10, 1947, Coral saw her second UFO: a tiny luminous sphere which rose from the ground and vanished into the night sky. Kenneth Arnold's classic sighting, the one that started the "flying-saucer" era, was exactly two weeks away.

Fascinated by the flood of reports from 1947 onward, she entered into correspondence with other individuals who were monitoring the emerging UFO phenomenon. In January 1952, while living in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, she formed APRO and soon was publishing the *APRO Bulletin*, which for the next two decades would be essential reading for anyone looking for a comprehensive, intelligent guide to worldwide UFO activity. Eventually the Lorensens moved to the Southwest and in due course settled in Tucson. In 1964 Jim became director and Coral assumed the position of secretary-treasurer.

APRO was shaped by Coral's strong personality, with the gentle-natured Jim serving as a calming influence on his wife's occasional volatility. She and her organization were early champions of reports involving occupants, 20 years before J. Allen Hynek coined the term "close encounters of the third kind," which they insisted were not to be confused with the tales told by the **contactees** who claimed to be intimate with Venusians and other Space Brothers. Other early ufologists were reluctant to embrace humanoid reports—which to them seemed excessively exotic—but in time

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## *UFOs in the 1980s*

### LORENZEN (continued)

APRO's claims were vindicated. Persons who made these reports, as even Project Blue Book spokesmen would acknowledge on occasion, proved to be no different from other UFO witnesses; they were normal, sane, puzzled and sincere.

APRO collected these and other reports not only from the United States but from South America, where the organization was ably represented by such notable investigators as Olavo T. Fontes in Brazil and Horacio Gonzales Gauteaume in Venezuela. Through Fontes' and Gonzales' reports in the *APRO Bulletin*, North American ufologists learned of such seminal cases as the Venezuelan humanoid encounters of December 1954, the Trindade Island photographs, the Itaipu Fort "attack" and others.

Unlike Maj. Donald Keyhoe, who headed the other major organization of the 1950s, the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), Mrs. Lorenzen discounted theories of an official cover-up and criticized NICAP's attempts to force Congressional hearings on alleged UFO secrecy. She thought ufology was better served by concentrating on investigation and documentation of cases and making the subject palatable to scientists. The Lorenzens were articulate, outspoken advocates of the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH) and had little time for the psychological and parapsychological theories that came to prominence in the 1960s and gained great popularity in some circles.

In 1969 Walter H. Andrus, Jr., an APRO regional officer from downstate Illinois, left the organization with a coterie of followers to form the Midwest UFO Network, subsequently renamed the **Mutual UFO Network (MUFON)**, which in the 1970s would become the dominant force in organized ufology in America, eclipsing APRO. The split was far from amicable and for the rest of their lives the Lorenzens remained outspokenly bitter about the episode, resulting in an organizational and personal rivalry which ended only when APRO ended.

To the larger public the Lorenzens were best known for the popular paperbacks they wrote in the 1960s, such as the luridly-titled (by its publisher) *Flying Saucers: The Startling Evidence of the Invasion from Outer Space* (1966; an updated version of Coral's earlier hardcover *The Great Flying Saucer Hoax* [1962]). Four other titles soon appeared: *Flying Saucer Occupants* (1967); *UFOs Over the Americas* (1968); *UFOs: The Whole Story* (1969); and *The Shadow of the Unknown* (1970), which included UFOs in a discussion of psychic phenomena.

As the health of both the Lorenzens deteriorated in the early 1980s, the *Bulletin* was published infrequently and the few issues that did appear lacked the focus, clarity and editorial care that had characterized the periodical in happier days. Rumors circulated about APRO's imminent demise, especially following Jim's death, but the organization survived, if only in name, until shortly after Coral's death.

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