

had learned of another sighting, this one at the supersecret Sandia base at Albuquerque, where all of the nation's nuclear weapons were built. At 10:55 p.m. that Monday, Atomic Energy Security Service (AESS) officer Joseph Toulouse, waiting at a stop sign on the base, saw a "greenish flare" out of the right-hand corner of his windshield. The "flare," fully one-third the apparent size of the moon, developed a "flaming tail" just before it arched downward slightly and disappeared. It had been visible for a maximum of three seconds.

What was going on? Was somebody or something developing an unhealthy interest in America's nuclear facilities? The Hanford incident. The Memphis sighting (though that may have been stretching the point; at that moment its only connection with Oak Ridge was the same state). But the Sandia connection was real enough to make the security agencies in New Mexico nervous. They wondered if a pattern—an ominous pattern—was starting to develop.

The green UFOs seemed to be just one step behind the investigators. At 9:02 p.m. on December 12 La Paz had his own sighting as he and two Civil Air Patrol men were driving near Bernal, New Mexico. An expert meteor observer, La Paz noticed it first and shouted "Look!" four times over to establish the time frame for subsequent reenactments of the event.

As bright as Venus and about one-fourth the Moon's diameter, the green ball was traveling east to west low over the horizon. La Paz later stressed that it stayed horizontal for most of the 2.2 seconds it was in view, curving downward only during the last two-tenths of a second when it broke and vanished.

By a stroke of luck two AESS inspectors also witnessed the fireball and La Paz was able to triangulate its location and altitude and obtain a rough estimate of its speed.

When plotted on a map, the 25-mile east-to-west path pointed away from the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, the location of all United States nuclear-weapons-design work. The object, in other words, might have flown directly over Los Alamos.

But most astonishing of all was the fact that the object had maintained a horizontal path at an altitude of about eight to ten miles—deep in the earth's atmosphere. Most meteors burn up above 40 miles. La Paz

noted. It was inconceivable that a meteor could survive at such a low altitude, let alone keep from falling. (While meteorites can be seen at lower altitudes and can survive to strike the ground, they make a tremendous roar as they pass through the dense layers of atmosphere.) Moreover, the estimated speed, eight to ten miles per second (29,000 to 43,000 mph), was incredibly slow for meteors, with typical speeds of about 30 or 40 miles per second, but fantastically beyond the capability of aircraft and rockets. Only certain shaped-charge experiments during rocket flights had come close at that time.

In his report to AFCSI the next day, La Paz said, "I am now convinced the various 'green flare' incidents...are not meteoric in nature."

While Col. Rees contacted AFCSI Headquarters for advice on immediate action, La Paz prepared a study of the incidents for the colonel. While previously-unreported incidents from the nights of December 5, 6, and 7 streamed in, new sightings occurred on the 13th and 14th.

La Paz arranged with the AESS to set up a patrol with Speed Graphic cameras to try to photograph the fireballs. The patrol caught a normal meteor on the 18th and nothing on the 19th. Late on the evening of December 20 members had just packed their cameras to go home when a green fireball appeared, so they missed getting a photograph of it. Fortunately, a triangulation was possible because several persons had carefully observed it from separate locations. La Paz was able to fix a short seven-to-eight mile west-to-east path for the UFO. The path headed straight toward Los Alamos.

At the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, although people were still unaware of the New Mexico sightings, rumors were flying. George D. Rathman, chief of the investigation section of the AESS at Oak Ridge, sent some photographs of an unusual contrail taken in

July 1947 by an Oak Ridge resident to the Project NEPA (Nuclear Energy Propulsion for Aircraft) Research Center at Oak Ridge. NEPA was the Air Materiel Command program for building the world's first nuclear-powered airplane (the project was canceled in 1961 without ever getting a prototype built).

Col. C. D. Gasser, who was in charge of the NEPA center, was intensely interested in UFOs. When Gasser and Rathman later learned that the photographer had passed around a number of prints to friends, Gasser became quite concerned and insisted that publicity be kept to a minimum. Gasser had Rathman gather up as many of these prints as he could get his hands on so that they could be sent to the Air Force. A month later Project Sign, the Air Force UFO project, reported anticlimactically that the pictures were the product of a simple defect in the negatives.

Gasser did not yet know what the Sign conclusions would be when he supplied prints of the photographs to the Knoxville FBI office in early January 1949. He told the FBI that Air Force Intelligence officials believed the "mystery missiles" (UFOs) were "man-made" objects, not natural phenomena. The Air Force had compiled a "great deal of information" on them and conducted "extensive" research to find out "whether or not an adequate defense can be established." The military was keeping a lid on all this and even Gasser had not been entrusted with "all information pertaining to the missile."

Nevertheless, in a sort of personal intelligence-gathering operation, Gasser thought he had pieced together enough information to figure out what was going on. He had read many of the sighting reports (NEPA was on the distribution list for Sign's reports) and talked with the people at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. In fact, he claimed, these reports had given "impetus" to the

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