

Path of the Skinwalker

THE STRANGEST PLACE ON EARTH?

PART 3

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If you haven't read, or don't plan on reading the "Skinwalker" article elsewhere in the Mercury, chances are this column may not be for you either.

Admittedly, the "Skinwalker" subject matter is a bit strange, but I tried to write the two-part article as a straight news piece with only a few subjective comments. This column will put more of a personal slant on what it's like to chase after aliens, ghosts and such.

I made two trips to visit the Utah ranch that is the site of assorted weirdness. On the first trip, I was accompanied by photographer Eric Sorenson, as well as Dr. Colm Kelleher. On the second trip, Kelleher joined myself, photographer Matt Adams and former sheriff's deputy Keith Wolverton.

During both trips, we scoured pretty much every inch of the ranch. We were out in the field and up on the ridge day and night. We photographed and inspected every part of the property, prowled the ranchlands surrounding the area, interviewed townspeople and other witnesses, but we never saw anything remotely unexplainable.

On one night, I spent some time sitting out in a field, dangled there like a piece of bait. Whatever the phenomenon is, it has been known to react to the arrival of new people, to the presence of fire on the range and to disturbances of the earth. So before I took my seat out in the field that night, we made our presence known in a big way. We built a large campfire down in the third homestead and sat around telling stories. And just before nightfall, the caretaker of the property fired up his bulldozer, plowed over some dirt piles and cleared a new pathway into the lower homesteads. If anything was around, we hoped to have its full attention.

It was a disappointment that nothing happened during our visits, although, to tell the truth, I was a bit relieved during my stint as bait that the mystery cattle mutilators didn't show up to taste-test a new, yummy type of flesh. (Mmmm, too much gristle and marbling, wouldn't you say?).

Dr. Kelleher says the phenomenon has seemingly moved on or taken a hiatus. There has been very little unexplained activity of any kind for the past year. Some folks familiar with the ranch think that, whatever "it" is, it doesn't like to be watched, and that it may just be in hibernation until such time as the NIDS people move on.

The only odd thing we witnessed was a huge flash of light that occurred just after sundown. The flash was captured on one of the video cameras that run 24 hours a day on the property. We watched the tape of the flash over and over, trying to figure out what it might have been. It wasn't until days after we returned to Las Vegas that Dr. Kelleher called to say he had confirmed the flash was caused by a missile launch further west. That might sound anti-climactic to some, but is indicative of what NIDS has been doing up in Utah for the past six years.

I've been privy to info about the ranch for several years, even though I didn't have permission until now to write anything about it. And all through that time, I watched the way the NIDS researchers have operated. Mostly what they do is to search for mundane explanations for the things they've seen. They try to find normal explanations for what seem like paranormal events. For example, they didn't assume that the big flash of light caught on the video was caused by a UFO. Instead, they looked for other, more prosaic explanations. The same is true for their investigations of animal mutilations. While checking out the slice-and-dice job on an unfortunate calf, their first instinct was to look for evidence of tracks, either animal or human. They found none, but that didn't lead them to conclude that space aliens with a taste for beef were responsible. They drew no conclusions at all.

The fact that NIDS scientists would even dare to study such matters seems to be an affront to some of their snooty counterparts. Most of the scientific establishment has accepted the ridiculous explanation that coyotes and mountain lions are responsible for animal mutilations throughout the country, even though solid scientific evidence demonstrates beyond any doubt that sharp metallic instruments have been used to cut up the animals. From my observations, the NIDS investigators have gone into their study with open minds, and I've never heard one of them say that aliens are involved with any of this stuff. They just gather information, which is what I thought scientists were supposed to do.

Unfortunately, I was unable to use the real names of many of the researchers involved in studying the ranch. The sad fact is most of them worry that they would never be able to land another job if they were linked to such research. I think they're right. I would hate to think a good scientist like Colm Kelleher will be forever branded as a nutcase simply because he spoke with me about the ranch, but it's a possibility. That stinks.

The same prejudice exists within the journalism fraternity, and I should know. For the last 13 years, I've been The UFO Guy. The public seems very interested in my occasional pursuit of UFO stories and allegations of government disinformation on the topic, but it really drives my journalism brethren up the wall. I can't count the number of times I've been pilloried by radio DJs, newspaper columnists and others because of my interest in UFOs. They generally all use the same jokes (something about spotting Elvis, something about E.T. phoning home, something about beam me up, Scotty) but really think themselves clever at the moment for coming up with such rich, original material.

Since my face is on TV a lot, I figure it comes with the territory, and I have laughed at a lot of it along the way (including the hilarious parody songs produced by radio guys Johnson and Tofte.) The part that bothers me most is that many of the wisecracks are issued by people who haven't done one whit of work in the area of paranormal research. They don't know squat, other than a generalized belief that everyone involved with UFOs or animal mutilations is a wide-eyed saucer nut wearing an E.T. beanie and a Darth Vader mask. I will grant them that the UFO field attracts more than its share of mentally challenged true believers. No one has encountered more UFO wackos than yours truly. But at the core of the phenomena, there remains a body of evidence that is not easily dismissed and is worthy of further study.

Most mainstream scientists, even the stuffiest among them, will concede that confirmed contact with another civilization, an alien civilization, would be the most profound event in human history. It would change everything, absolutely everything. They have used this argument to justify spending money on SETI, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. Somehow, that endeavor is respectable, but looking for evidence of E.T.s closer to home is a waste of time, no matter how intriguing the data might be. After all, since we can't get to other solar systems, surely aliens can't get here either.

That sort of view is a form of prejudice, as closed-minded as a religion. In fact, many people would argue that science is our new religion, with its strict commandments against prohibited thoughts or behavior. In the case of the Utah ranch, the adherence to the scientific method has been an asset--and a necessity. The Science Advisory Board of NIDS has held the feet of the staff to the fire, insisting that they merely collect information and not try to reach any conclusions about calf-loving Zeta Reticulans who have a penchant for Utah scenery. The board has even been tough on NIDS founder Robert Bigelow, demanding that he justify his interest in the Utah property. Even in personal conversations, Bigelow is reluctant to say what he thinks might be going on at the ranch. He, like his staff, will only say that more study is needed before any conclusions can be reached.

There's an astrophysicist named Jacques Vallee who has written extensively about UFO phenomena. In my view, he's the most important guy to ever study the topic, although he has publicly kept an arm's distance from it for the past several years. (In the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the character played by Truffaut is modeled on Vallee.) Vallee once told me he would be deeply disappointed if the beings we refer to as aliens turned out to be "only" extraterrestrials. Vallee thinks the real explanation may be far more complex and more challenging than the simple idea of E.T.s visiting Earth. The possibility that other dimensions may exist and that these dimensions may help to explain some of our mysteries is a concept that is catching on with younger scientists, those on the cusp of cutting-edge research. Quantum physicists, for example, are now convinced that other dimensions and parallel universes really do exist and that wormholes might be a way to travel between worlds.

It isn't much of a leap from such theories to the strange stuff at the Utah ranch. The NIDS people won't say it, of course, but others familiar with what's going on at the ranch think the property might be some sort of roadway or shortcut to other realities. I know how wacky that sounds. So do the people at NIDS, and that's why they simply won't talk about it. Many of the true believers in the UFOlogy field are convinced that NIDS is hiding dark secrets, that the organization is a CIA front, that Bigelow wants to corner the market on E.T. technology. The simple fact is that NIDS hasn't spoken about the ranch because there isn't much to say other than relating anecdotal information that is unreproducible.

I really hope my articles about the research at the ranch don't result in damage to anyone's employment future, because from what I've seen, the study of the ranch has followed all scientific protocols. Instead of being scorned by their peers, the folks at NIDS should be praised for having the courage to proceed into unpopular areas, to explore new ground while adhering to accepted scientific practices. That, after all, is how progress is made.

Some mainstream types are convinced they already know all there is to know about UFOs, Bigfoot, animal mutilations, ghosts and such. They don't need to go out and study it themselves because it can't be true. It can't be true, and therefore it isn't. And woe to anyone else who dares to challenge the official mantra. I always believed it is the duty of science, and of journalism, to investigate the unexplained, not to explain the uninvestigated.

One more plea to the saucer nuts

I know in my heart that this will do absolutely no good, but I appeal once more to the UFO diehards around the world to leave the ranch alone. You are not going to see anything. The activity has stopped or moved on and you are too late. What you will see is jail if you trespass on the property. NIDS is very serious about that. What's more, the residents in that remote section of Utah generally don't want to deal with the paranormal stories, at least not with strangers. This place isn't Area 51 and there is no Little A'Le'Inn to help celebrate all that is weird and unexplained.

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