

THE SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER
June 24th, 1987

FARMER'S TALES OF SPACE TRAVEL
WON'T FLY WITH MANY UFO BUFFS
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To Billy Meier's fans, he's a gentle Swiss farmer who has befriended UFO pilots from the Pleiades, a powdery star cluster more than 2 quadrillion miles from Earth.

To Meier's foes, he's the biggest hoaxer since the UFO fad began four decades ago.

Meier's tales of flying aboard UFOs with lovely spacewomen have triggered civil war in the weird, wacky world of "Ufology," an international movement whose members slog through swamps and forests, night and day, to investigate sightings of unidentified flying objects or "flying saucers."

Wednesday is the 40th anniversary of the first "modern" UFO sighting June 24th, 1947 - when a private pilot sighted saucer-shaped objects zip-ping past Mount Rainier in Washington State - and ufologists are celebrating with conferences from Burbank to New York City and Washington, DC.

Although few are trained scientists, they like to form clubs with grandiose names such as "Intercontinental UFO Galactic Spacecraft Research and Analytic Network, Inc." and "Aerial Phenomena Research Organization."

But in four decades they've gained little scientific respectability, and some fear they'll lose even that because of the Meier controversy - a steaming stew of bizarre claims, ugly accusations, crude fakery, financial exploitation, "stolen" and "vanished" evidence, and alleged death threats and assassination attempts.

"If you ever want to see a parallelism to Jim Bakker and PTL, you're

seeing it right here," snarled one anti-Meier ufologist, William Spaulding of Phoenix. "I get emotional about (Meier) because I've just seen ufology go down the drain...it just reeks of money, a slick way to make a buck."

He isn't alone. "The Meier case is probably one of the most obvious hoaxes in the history of the subject," said ufologist Ronald Story of St. Petersburg, FL, author of "The Encyclopedia of UFOs."

Meier is a "damned charlatan - I wouldn't touch his stuff with the proverbial 10-foot pole," said Don Berliner, an official at the Maryland-based Fund for UFO Research.

The Meier fad is part of a "credulity explosion" that is helping to wreck ufologists' credibility, said one of the men ufologists fear most, Robert Sheaffer of San Jose, author of "The UFO Verdict." Sheaffer has exposed some famous saucer sightings as hoaxes and misidentifications of natural phenomena. Ufology "isn't dead yet, but it's dying," he said.

Ufologist Jim Speiser firmly disagrees and accuses Sheaffer of "wishful thinking." But he acknowledges that trying to gain scientific respect while Meier is in the news is "like trying to get a date when your little brother who picks his nose is always hanging around."

Speiser, of Fountain Hills, AZ, runs an electronic "bulletin board" that allows saucer buffs to rap via personal computers.

So why on Earth has Atlantic Monthly Press, one of the nation's most respected publishers, just released a book - "Light Years" by Gary Kinder - that suggests there may be something to Meier's claims after all? A book whose sources include an imprisoned child molester and a San Jose chemist who tells ghost stories to plants? A book that, some say, whitewashes what has been called "the most infamous hoax in ufology"?

Its a strange story that began in the mid-1970's in the green hills of Switzerland.

Eduard "Billy" Meier, a one-armed, bushy-bearded farmer, amazed lo-

cal residents by saying he had established psychic contact with saucer pilots from the Pleiades.

He also said he had photographed and filmed UFOs that resembled hubcaps; tape-recorded their noises, which resembled sound effects from old science-fiction films; conversed with female UFO-nauts, who taught him cosmic truths; flew aboard a UFO into space, where he photographed God's "eye" and the Apollo-Soyuz docking of 1975; and traveled by saucer into the future, where he saw the ruins of San Francisco after an earthquake.

But Meier's "evidence" dissolved under scrutiny, ufologists say. Ufologist Spaulding used a computer to clarify blurry details in Meier's photos and, he said, detected threads holding the "UFOs" aloft - evidence that they were small models suspended near the camera. Also, critics said, the photos of quake-ravaged San Francisco turned out to be copies of an artist's rendering from the September 1977 issue of Geo magazine. And in Meier's 8mm movies of UFOs, the objects sway back and forth as though they were lightweight models bobbing in the breeze.

Yet the Meier story has survived partly because of the relentless advocacy of his American backers, the Arizona ufologists Lt. Col. Wendelle Stevens (US Air Force, retired), Tom Welch and Lee and Brit Elders. Years ago, they obtained the legal rights to market Meier's photos and other memorabilia, threatened to sue anyone who used the material without permission and built a small publishing industry, Genesis III. The publishing arm sells books and videocassettes (for as much as \$29 apiece) about Meier's adventures.

Now they've landed a much bigger fish: royalties from Kinder's 206-page book, published May 26th. They're sharing royalties in return for giving Kinder access to Meier's photos and other documents.

Much money may be made by all: Kinder will take 50 percent of the

royalties, then the rest will be divided among Meier, Stevens, the Elderses and Welch.

Sales have gone "extremely well," Kinder said. The best-seller list is in sight, said the book's backer, New York publishing whiz-kid Morgan Entekin, who paid Kinder an advance of more than \$100,000. Bay Area bookstore owners say its selling moderately.

The book has infuriated many ufologists who think it lends an undeserved patina of respectability to a vulgar hoax, although Kinder doesn't reach a specific conclusion about Meier's claims. "Face it, you're in it for the money like the rest of the writers of superficial paranormal literature," Spaulding said in a bitter letter to Kinder.

"It's been a real ordeal trying to fend off the entire UFO community," joked Kinder, 40. "There were times when I would look at Meier and think, 'He's nothing but a clever con man.' There were other times would I would look at Meier and think, 'Here is a sincere and warm individual who has experienced something far above his understanding and intellectual capabilities and is trying to deal with it.'"

The Elderses say they've received threatening letters and phone calls and that Meier has been the target of several assassination attempts. They're not disturbed by evidence that Meier faked photos of, for example, the San Francisco earthquake; in fact, they haven't even discussed it with Meier, Lee Elders said. His wife insists that just because Meier faked "one or two things" doesn't mean all his photos are phony.

To Lee Elders, the best evidence for Meier's contentions is an analysis of metal samples from an alleged UFO. The analysis was conducted by Marcel Vogel, formerly a chemist at an IBM research center in San Jose. In the New York Times Book Review, a full page ad for "Light Years" quotes Vogel as saying the metallic composition was one "we could not achieve..."

on this planet."

However, the book doesn't mention that Vogel is a very, very imaginative fellow. In fact, he also has claimed the ability to communicate psychically with plants.

The 1937 best-selling "Secret Life of Plants" includes an entire chapter on Vogel. In one scene, he attempts to determine whether plants wired with electrodes show a physiological response to "spooky stories."

The book says that at "certain points in a story, such as...`Charles bent down and raised the lid of the coffin,' the plant seemed to pay closer attention."

Vogel, 70, said Meier's UFO movies convinced him the farmer had been in contact with "some form of extraterrestrial intelligence" However, Vogel doesn't regard the metal samples by themselves as proof of extraterrestrials because he didn't have a chance to consult with other experts before the samples mysteriously disappeared. Vogel added that since his plant work of the 1970's, he had founded a psychic research institute in San Jose, employed his "mental energy" to bend spoons and studied the use of crystals to cure illness.

"Light Years" also quotes authorities such as Robert Post, head of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, as saying: "From a photography standpoint, you couldn't see anything that was fake about the Meier photos... I thought, God, if this is real, this is going to be really something."

Or is it? In an interview with The Examiner, Post recalled that several years ago, Wendelle Stevens visited him at JPL and requested an expert opinion on the pictures. Post acknowledges he was fascinated by the images, but was unable to perform a scientific analysis for two reasons: First, he isn't a photo analyst but rather the operator of a photo proces-

sing lab ("like you take your film to K-Mart", he said); and second, the pictures weren't originals but rather copies of originals - perhaps even copies of copies of copies. Such multiple copying tends to obscure delicate details, making it hard to detect evidence of fraud - e.g., threads supporting hubcaps.

In addition, when Post examined some images with a magnifying glass, he realized "a lot of the pictures weren't really photographs at all - they were lithographs," or high-resolution ink prints made from photos - and, hence, were worthless for purposes of analysis. Furthermore, the photos were "a lot fuzzier than the stuff on the lithographs, and I thought that was a little strange."

For that and other reasons, Post began "to think, 'Nuts, maybe this guy is just a con man.' That's not the kind of guy I want to have anything to do with."

In 1983, Stevens was convicted of child molestation in Pima County, AZ. He is now serving time in the Arizona State Prison and declined to be interviewed. But he did send The Examiner a cryptic letter in which he said a "number of high officials...have taken a personal interest in some of the things we were doing, but they could neither support nor tolerate them officially."

Stevens' conviction triggered a wave of paranoia among Meier buffs. Some phoned Vicki Cooper, editor of California UFO Magazine in Los Angeles, and said Stevens "was 'set up,' that certain witnesses were being killed," said Cooper, who is not unsympathetic to Meier's claims. "I was discouraged and disgusted with the people I was talking to."

"It's a cesspool out there," she said. "Personality conflicts are rabid in this field...There are hoaxers, there are fraudulent people who are claiming outrageous things all throughout the UFO field."