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Fielding Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests at the National Security Research Center

By Laura McGuiness, WRS-NSRCMS Librarian

For staff at the Lab's National Security Research Center, fulfilling requests for information can sometimes be a bit otherworldly.

Some of these requests are made under the Freedom of Information Act or FOIA, which are submitted to NNSA by the public and directed to LANL for records search and review. The topics of these requests range from technical reports to records on unidentified flying objects.

"Fulfilling FOIA requests is an important part of what we do here," said NSRC senior archivist **Daniel Alcazar** (WRS-NSRCMS). "It's critical to our mission to ensure the public has access to information it has the right to see."

Congress passed the FOIA in 1967, giving any person the right to request access to federal agency records so they can better understand the U.S. Government's operations and activities. Federal agencies are required to disclose information requested under the FOIA, unless it falls under one or more of nine exemptions protecting interests such as personal privacy, national security, and law enforcement. Often described as the law that keeps citizens in the know about the government, the FOIA is a vital part of U.S. democracy.

The Laboratory's FOIA program works with over a hundred requests for records each year. As the Lab's classified research and technical library dedicated to information stewardship and education, the National Security Research Center (NSRC) regularly assists with these requests— as many as 45 per year.

Public queries cover a spectrum of topics, but most common include requests for Manhattan Project era documents and memoranda, Los Alamos technical reports, Los Alamos-produced historical and scientific motion picture film and videos, as well as those seeking any documents or files pertaining to a former scientist, engineer or employee.

While less common, Alcazar estimates that he receives a few FOIA requests a year related to unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and unexplained aerial phenomena (UAP).

"Project Twinkle": A mysterious hypothesis

One example of such requests included archived materials related to the evening of December 5, 1948, when witnesses reported green fireballs moving across the sky over Los Alamos. The fireballs appeared several times over the next three months, flying noiselessly and just within eyesight of residents on the mesa. Similar fireballs were reported near the Hanford site (the now-decommissioned nuclear production complex in Washington state, also known as Site W of

the Manhattan Project) and in the Memphis, Tennessee area near Oak Ridge National Lab. The number of sightings of these phenomena and their close proximity to such sensitive military facilities were issues of concern to the U.S. government. Could the fireballs be a threat to national security?

In response, a conference was organized at Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory (the Lab's postwar name) on February 16, 1949, to discuss these aerial phenomena. The conference was attended by scientists such as second Laboratory director **Norris Bradbury**, physicists **Frederick Reines** and **Edward Teller**, and members of the FBI, Atomic Energy Commission (predecessor to today's Department of Energy), and U.S. military. Also in attendance was **Lincoln LaPaz**, head of the University of New Mexico's Institute of Meteoritics and a firsthand observer of the green fireballs. The NSRC collections contain the conference minutes.

While not the preferred theory of the conference attendees, UFOs were of interest during the 1940s for the U.S. government. Army conference attendees confirmed that the fireballs were classed alongside flying discs within "Project Grudge" – a U.S. Air Force study of UFOs. After further discussion, the notion that the green fireballs were UFOs or significant national security threats was ultimately dismissed, as were hypotheses centered on meteorites, the aurora borealis and weather balloons. However, the 1949 Los Alamos conference was the beginning of a subsequent study, "Project Twinkle," which aimed to capture further data on the fireball sightings through a network of observation and photographic units.

Project Twinkle was never fully implemented, and discontinued after two years, with the official conclusion that the green fireballs were likely natural in origin.

Evidence of UFOs in the NSRC?

The NSRC collections do not appear to have other materials on Project Twinkle, although not all of the millions of items housed in the NSRC collections are searchable yet (the process of digitizing and cataloging materials is ongoing). Additionally, FOIA requests must be reasonably specific to direct the archivist's search. If keywords to search are overly specific or too general, materials could remain undiscovered. In cases where a FOIA query is too broad in scope or does not indicate a specific timeframe, the Lab's FOIA team with ALDPP-CL, which directs FOIA requests to the NSRC and other LANL repositories for search, may suggest that NNSA ask the requestors to reframe or narrow the topic area or time frame of their search requests. Once this is established, the search for responsive materials can begin.

The term "UFO," for instance, has not been consistently used over time. During the 1940s and 1950s, civilians often referred to UFOs as "flying saucers" or "flying discs." Very few materials in the NSRC collections, in fact, can be found by searching for the keyword "UFO." The term "UAP," is more current, but also more general. Information about UAPs or UFOs is more often included within other fields of scientific inquiry. Natural phenomena such as ball lightning and aurora borealis have been historically misidentified as UFOs. Drones are more recent sources of aerial mystery and misidentification. Each of these terms are potential keywords that might

turn up surprising information, Alcazar said, adding that conducting FOIA searches is always an interesting part of his work.

Fulfilling FOIA requests

By law, NNSA has 20 days to respond to a FOIA request, which can be a labor-intensive effort and require extensions of time to respond. NSRC staff can spend a significant amount of that time scouring the NSRC's collections for relevant documents and drawing on their considerable knowledge of the archives and experience with previous requests to inform searches. Since the subjects of FOIA requests to the NSRC tend to recur, Alcazar keeps records of those prior requests and his responses to them, tracking past keywords used and search pathways through indices and databases for future use. Although timely responses to FOIA requests often depend on a librarian or archivist's deep knowledge of an archive or body of records, in a collection as vast as the NSRC's there are often new search pathways and connections to be made.

"In general, due diligence is so important when it comes to fulfilling any FOIA request," Alcazar said. "Oftentimes, searches will take you in unexpected directions as you navigate all your leads. That's the beauty of the collections."

About the National Research Security Center

The [National Research Security Center](#) is the Lab's classified library, located in the NSSB. It is among the largest in the federal government with millions of materials related to nuclear weapons and national security.

The artifacts in this story are from the collections at the National Security Research Center.

Major Godsoe: The basic purpose of this meeting is: we want you to find a meteor!

Mr. Newburger: Have the military - anyone from the National Defense establishment - given us anything? Sent out any conjectures about this thing?

Major Godsoe: No, most of the military authorities think we are crackpots; that is, except for the Army Air Force, which is taking an active interest in details.

Mr. Newburger: The Air Force does have the primary interest in this gadget?

Major Godsoe: Yes, the Air Force is the gathering, reporting agency for this phenomenon.

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Caption: Excerpt from the minutes of the February 1949 Los Alamos Conference on Aerial Phenomena, where “flying discs” were a potential explanation for the green fireballs reported over Los Alamos, Las Vegas, NM, and Hanford, Washington site in December of the previous year. The NSRC collections contain the conference minutes.

Flying Green Lights Alert Constabulary

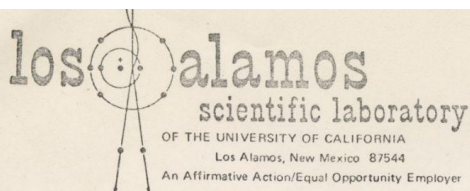
Shades of flying saucers? Los Alamos now has flying green lights. These will-o'-the-wisps, seen generally about 2 a.m., have the town buzzing. All official inquiries bring the same answer: “Quien sabe?”. Carroll Tyler, project manager, said simply that all he knew about the lights was rumor—the same rumor that everyone is hearing. A call to Kirtland Air Base brought a response from a captain who asked that his name not be used—“because he didn’t know anything”. He was eager to learn, though. There was even speculation—could these be visitors from Mars? Have you seen a green light lately?

Caption: A tongue-in-cheek “announcement” from the February 1969 issue of *The Atom*, the research newsletter published by Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory (the Lab’s postwar name), commemorating 20 years since the green fireball sightings of December 1948.



Caption: Lab guest speaker J. Allen Hynek in September 1967. Hynek was a scientific advisor for three U.S. Air Force studies on UFOs: Project Sign (1947), Project Grudge (1949) and Project Blue Book (1952).

PUB 75144 J. Allen Hynek Press Release

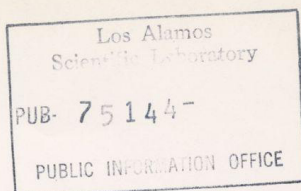


news release

Public Information Office

Los Alamos (505) 667-6101

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



LOS ALAMOS, N.M., March 14, 1975 -- Dr. J. Allen Hynek, chairman of the astronomy department at Northwestern University, will speak at a colloquium at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory on Thursday, March 20.

The title of his talk will be "Current Status of UFO Research." It will begin at 8:10 a.m. in the Administration Building auditorium and is open to the public.

Dr. Hynek has been a researcher of unidentified flying objects for more than 25 years and is currently head of the Center for UFO Studies in Evanston, Ill.

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Caption: Announcement of J. Allen Hynek's second visit to the Lab, to speak on "Current Status of UFO Research," in March 1975. By this time, Hynek had founded the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) in Evanston, Illinois.

Funny Observations

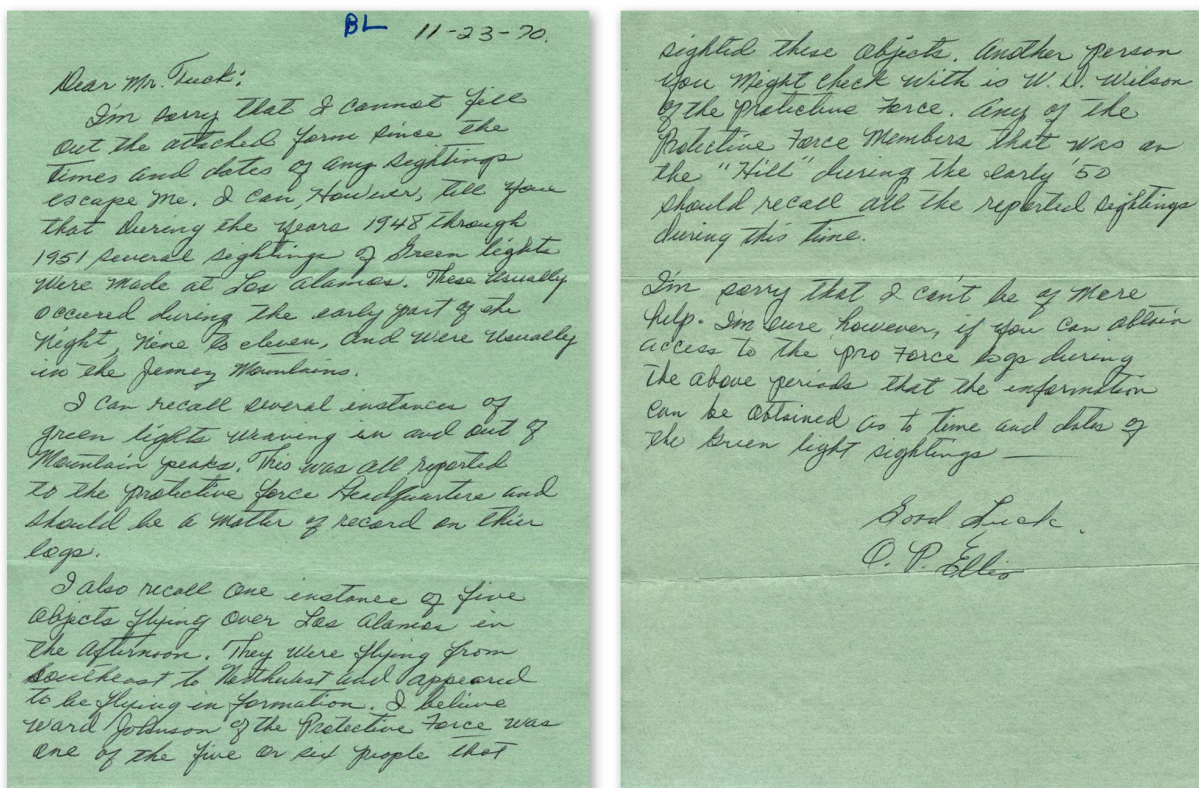
-15-

TABLE XII. SELECTED HUMAN INTEREST COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

1. "Physicists are notoriously unreliable observers".
2. "I have heard of this phenomenon from a highly unreliable source".
3. "Somebody must have better things to do with their time".
4. "Try 'White Lightning'".
5. "Try flying saucers".
6. "I don't look at lightning".
7. "I couldn't swear to any of the above answers, so I won't attempt to answer them".
8. "I will endeavor to be more observant".
9. "My salary doesn't pay for a scientific scope".
10. "You are really leaving no stone unturned".
11. "I've never seen flying saucers either".
12. "A man I once worked for many years ago described an orange ball of fire he had seen The man was poorly educated".
13. "Lightning struck tree several hundred feet away, ball flashed across and into open end garage, followed wall at ground level, probably faded as it left garage when I did".
14. "I ducked".
15. "It was pretty".
16. "Don't want to see any more".
17. "Let God handle this".

Caption: James L. Tuck, a Los Alamos physicist and member of the British Mission during the Manhattan Project, studied ball lightning during the 1970s. This is a compilation of humorous firsthand observations from study participants.

Letter from OP Ellis on Ball Lightning 1 and 2



Caption: A 1970 letter about the Los Alamos Protective Force observing aerial phenomena in the early 1950s. Written to Los Alamos physicist James L. Tuck for consideration in his study on ball lightning.

Looking for more?

- Visit the NSRC's [Oppenheimer website](#). Here you'll find rare audio of Oppenheimer among other related stories and photos.
- Listen to the NSRC's podcast, *Relics*, which includes an episode discussing [the Fat Man bomb manual's rediscovery](#).
- Revisit Atomic Hollywood films in [this throwback from the NSRC archives](#).
- Interested in NSRC collections, extraterrestrial or otherwise? Tell us your favorite search terms. Email us at nsrc@lanl.gov.