



For years, this desolate Nevada scrub has attracted ufologists. Last spring, just in time for Independence Day, the state decided to make it official.

AREA 51, WHERE ARE YOU?

Out West, flying-saucer entrepreneurs are giving the term “little green men” a whole new meaning

CHUCK CLARK IS SITTING AT the end of the Formica bar in the Little A’Le’Inn, draining a Diet Coke and staring at the bumper stickers affixed to a beer cooler. NO NEW WORLD ORDER and YEAH, YOU CAN HAVE MY GUN—BULLETS FIRST! they say—not uncommon sentiments in the Nevada desert. Chuck, who has come into the Little A’Le’Inn (pronounced “little alien”) almost every day since he moved to Rachel two years ago, pays them no heed. The stickers are as much a part of the backdrop as the pool table and the video-poker machines at the only saloon in town.

Chuck came to Rachel, a dusty medley of corrugated-steel trailers about a hundred miles north of Las Vegas, to complete his book of astronomical photography. “I wanted a dark-sky place from which I could shoot the

two hundred best objects in the sky,” he says. The most dramatic object he’s seen appeared last February, near a black mailbox about twenty miles east of town that has lately become a rendezvous for those who watch the heavens. “It was a yellow-orange ball that rose up vertically and hung motionless for twelve minutes, then started to descend. All along, I thought it was a magnesium illumination flare. But after hovering, it shot horizontally to my right, stopped cold, hovered for three to four seconds, and vanished. It covered four to eight miles in a few seconds—that figures out to nine thousand to fourteen thousand miles per hour. No sound, no sonic boom. I don’t know anything in our physics that can do this.”

Chuck calmly offers a theory about what he saw. “I don’t think it’s extraterrestrial technology. I’m of the opinion that it’s an interdimensional technology that’s been developed right here. Don’t get me wrong; I think the Roswell crash *did* happen, and we did come into possession of an alien craft and some beings. But I think what we’re seeing here are craft that our own government has been back-engineering from that vehicle.

“With my own eyes,” Chuck concludes, “I know there’s *something* going on they haven’t told us.”

On that point, pretty much every-

one who comes into the Little A’Le’Inn agrees. During the last seven years, Rachel, Nevada, has become the center of the galaxy for the truest of believers—ufologists, paranormalists, conspiriologists, alien abductees—who are convinced *something* is going on beyond the mountains that ring this desolate basin. That *something*—most here believe it involves extraterrestrials, and all assume it involves the government—is a powerful lure; according to some studies, between 560,000 and 3.7 million Americans think they have been shanghaied by flying saucers. So many of them were finding their way to Rachel—and so many more were anticipated, with the hit film *Independence Day* set partly in the area—that earlier this year, the state government, hoping to boost the depressed region’s economy, declared Route 375, the road that runs through town, Nevada’s official “Extraterrestrial Highway.”

But though there are many lights, there is no longer much sweetness in Rachel. Bitter factionalism has turned neighbor against neighbor in this isolated hamlet of about one hundred people. The conflict pits supporters of Glenn Campbell, a Bostonian who moved to Rachel almost four years ago to investigate and, initially at least, debunk the UFO sightings, against partisans of Pat and Joe Travis, the owners

of the Little A'Le'Inn, who have built a tidy business providing sustenance and shelter for the terrestrial wayfarers.

"There's a nice distinction between the loons at one end of town and me at the other," says the thirty-six-year-old Campbell. "The fact that anything goes down there makes me look good."

"When Glenn moved here, he didn't believe in UFOs," responds Pat Travis. "All of a sudden, Glenn became a believer. Why? For the money, honey."

KATHLEEN FORD IS TYPICAL OF THE new arrivals. One night a few years ago, to unwind after returning home from her late-night shift as a Las Vegas blackjack dealer, she tuned to a television talk show. The guest was John Lear, the disinherited son of Learjet founder Bill Lear. "And he's saying," Kathleen is recalling, "that the aliens have done a deal with the U. S. government. They give us technology, in exchange for . . . whatever. Maybe the abductions—that's part of the rumor. He says they're on the backslide of evolution and can't reproduce, so they need our body parts to have babies. He showed a film of a craft, which he'd shot near Groom Lake, where he said we were developing the UFO technology."

Groom Lake is a dry lake bed due south of Rachel whose name is one of several near-synonyms—the others include Dreamland and, most famously, Area 51—for a secret installation that lies adjacent to the Nellis Bombing and Gunnery Range, an Air Force combat-training and weapons-testing location, and to the Nevada Test Site, a region in which nuclear weapons are assayed. There is a real facility at Area 51, at which actual aircraft, notably the U-2 spy plane and the stealth bomber, were covertly developed. But the Air Force steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the existence of anything beyond mere "operations" out there, prompting UFO adherents to contend that the government, with or without the help of alien visitors, is building and testing flying saucers at the base.

"I'd seen a ship in 1977, in Texas," continues Kathleen, a forty-five-year-

old woman whose dark hair cascades over the shoulders of her lavender dress. "At the time, I thought it was a helicopter. But when I saw Lear's film, that was the light I saw! So I tracked this place down and came out. Then in 1993, I read a book called *Silent Invasion*. The writer talks about seeing the craft, but then they disappear. Yet their energy still shows up on film. Tesla globes, they're called."

She points a lavender-nailed finger at a photo on the back wall of the inn. It shows a hazy blotch poised a few feet above a dirt road. "The first time I went out to the Black Mailbox, I got this eyeball. It took the guy who developed it three weeks to come to grips with it. 'Kathleen, I don't think this is a ship,' he told me. 'This is a *being*.'"

When a trailer became available for \$250 a month, she abandoned her casino job and moved to Rachel, splitting the rent with a young Scottish woman who had also come to view the UFOs. Kathleen had planned to stay only a short while before heading on to Sedona, Arizona. But a week after moving to Rachel, her new roommate took an overdose of sleeping pills and threatened to jump off a mountain. So Kathleen has delayed her departure to see her companion through the crisis. Like most denizens of the Little A'Le'Inn, Kathleen is broad-minded.

Glenn Campbell, however, is exempt from her charity. "He libeled me, he libeled Chuck Clark, he libeled Joe and Pat Travis," she complains. "He's an opportunist, if you ask me."

IT'S UNDENIABLE THAT CAMPBELL WAS a latecomer to Rachel. But so were the Traveses, who arrived in 1988 to take over the Rachel Bar & Grill, which had lost its previous owners about \$500 a month, despite being the only such establishment for forty miles.

It was a propitious moment. About a year after the Traveses' arrival, a fellow named Robert Lazar, a thirty-year-old self-described physicist who liked to build and blow up bombs in the desert, came forward to say that he had been employed at a secret govern-

ment base near Area 51, at which he saw nine alien saucers.

Large parts of Lazar's story—for example, his claim to have received degrees from both MIT and Caltech—did not check out. Still, his story spread, by talk radio, television, and, later, the Internet, throughout the worldwide ufology community.

The effect of Lazar's tale was felt almost immediately at the Rachel Bar & Grill, where tourists started wandering in to ask about the objects they'd heard were flying nearby. Sensing an opportunity, the Traveses quickly added several motel rooms to their property and in 1990 changed the name of the place to the Little A'Le'Inn. Gradually, their own political views began to incorporate the convictions held by their growing number of visitors. "It's just a theory," says Pat, "but one of the things that have been discussed by a number of people is whether the government will use an alien invasion as the reason we all have to get behind this New World Order."

Glenn Campbell arrived in February 1993. A former computer programmer, he saw himself, somewhat grandiosely, as the modern equivalent of the lawmen who once rode into the West to impose order on the barbarous citizenry. "There was an intellectual challenge there," says Campbell, a bald, mustached man with a crisply erudite manner. "There was so much nonsense floating around. I enjoy being thrown into a wilderness and having to find my way out."

Campbell, who describes himself as a compulsive data collector, began driving and hiking around the territory to find out what he could about Area 51, planning (as many visitors to the region have done) to exploit his discoveries commercially. Very quickly, he ran up against the government's wall of secrecy. As a challenge, he started to lead expeditions to the mountainous vantage points overlooking the Groom Lake military installation. The contest between the citizen investigators and the military drew mainstream media attention, which provoked the military to arrest some trespassers and close several viewing sites. This, in turn, inspired more coverage, notably a live broadcast of CNN's *Larry King Show* from Rachel in October 1994. The reports lured even more ufologists to the area. They also attracted the notice of Bob Price,

"Funny thing about these E.T. believers," says a native. "They never seem to have a shortage of capital."

a Nevada state assemblyman who hatched the idea of renaming Route 375 the Extraterrestrial Highway as a way of boosting the region's economy, which locals say had been hurt by reductions in defense spending.

Rachel, in a sense, has become a symbol of the American economy's gradual transition from making things—out here, aircraft and bombs—to marketing symbols: in this case, the bulbous, noseless, big-eyed gray head immortalized by Steven Spielberg in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and featured on the bumper stickers, T-shirts, and figurines sold in Rachel.

Price's scheme, by all accounts, has been quite successful. The Little A'Le'Inn has gone from one part-time employee to eight full-timers. The Quik-Pik convenience store and gas station has seen its traffic pick up to seventy-five or more cars a day from an average of twenty-five to fifty before the highway's name was changed. "A funny thing about these extraterrestrial believers," says Burnadine Day, whose family owns the place. "They never seem to have a shortage of capital."

WITH BUSINESS PREPARING to boom, it was inevitable, perhaps, that Campbell and the Traveses would clash.

On the event that precipitated their enmity, all agree. Six months after his arrival in town, Campbell was awakened by a pounding on the door of the trailer he had been renting behind the Little A'Le'Inn. It was Joe Travis, ordering him off the property. On everything else—motivations, equipment, aftershocks—there is disagreement. In an account of the incident in the "Groom Lake Desert Rat," a newsletter he publishes, Campbell said that Travis was "very drunk" and was "probably carrying" a gun.

"My husband is a drinker, okay?" concedes Pat Travis. "But he was not wielding a gun on Glenn. He had it in his back pocket." Moreover, she says, Joe had cause to be angry at Campbell. Glenn had virtually taken over their place, attaching a fax machine to their telephone and even printing up business cards with the inn's address as his own.

Since the night of his ouster, the hostilities have escalated. The Traveses have accused Campbell of being a government agent. Campbell has called the Traveses "ill-educated" and "dysfunctional." They banished his products—notably his GROOM DRY LAKE TEST FACILITY shoulder patch and his 'Area 51' Viewer's Guide, a detailed primer on UFO viewing in the region—from sale at the inn and retained Chuck Clark to design a substitute patch and to write an alternative text.

Many in the town, newcomers and old-timers, found themselves forced to choose sides. The Day family, whose patriarch, a farmer named D. C. Day, founded Rachel in the 1970s, temporarily stopped selling Little A'Le'Inn merchandise at the Quik-Pik.



The Little A'Le'Inn is the center of the galaxy for the truest of believers.

Sharon Singer, Campbell's thirty-two-year-old assistant at his Area 51 Research Center, has quit taking her four children to their twice-weekly dinner at the inn and broken off her friendship with Pat Travis's daughter Connie. "I work for the enemy," she says, "so I've become the enemy, I guess."

Neither side is lacking in self-contradiction. The Traveses, for example, hate the very same government that has boosted their business some 35 percent. Glenn Campbell, meanwhile, has rather suddenly come to believe that "the aliens are real," a conviction that doesn't hurt his business. An advocate of rational analysis, he says his newfound faith derives from the testimony of a former government insider code-named Jarod 2, who told Campbell of his encounter with an alien. "I know him well enough to trust him a great deal," Glenn says.

If anything, the inconsistencies only underscore the changed character of Ra-

chel. Once a desert outpost where men and women came to mind their own business, it's now a place where people come to seek solace in a community of believers in abductions, imminent invasions, and/or cosmic awakenings. "This is a place they feel safe," says Burnadine Day. "We won't laugh. We listen."

A few people are listening silently as Mary Marrier tells her story from behind the bar at the Little A'Le'Inn. A woman of a certain age with thickly painted eyebrows and makeup with gold sparkles embedded in it, Mary has been in town for about two months. She was attracted to the place by a caller to a talk-radio show who claimed to be a guard at the Nevada Test Site. "He was an E. T. working undercover. Yellow Fruit, he called himself."

For the first time in years—since she started having psychic experiences, accompanied by a humming in her head—Mary feels at home. "It's like all the pieces of the puzzle of my life," she says, "are coming together up here in Rachel."

IT IS 9:30 P.M. OUT AT the Black Mailbox. A blue curtain has descended on the brushed-suede landscape, and the gnarly yucca

trees are fading into mountains some twenty miles distant. Most nights, a revolving band of UFO watchers, some local, some visiting, gather here for the arrival of a space vehicle that appears so frequently it's been dubbed Old Faithful.

Robert Meggers, who has come from the San Francisco Bay Area for his second visit to Rachel in three months, peers into his binoculars at the sky to the south.

"I'm seeing all kinds of orbs and lights out there," says Robert, fifty, who explains that he's been interested in UFOs since he was a child and heard the tale of Barney and Betty Hill, who claimed to have been abducted by aliens near their home in New Hampshire.

"Bob Lazar says they're working on particle-beam weapons here," says Kathleen Ford. "I've got pictures."

The Milky Way begins to shimmer in the east. Jupiter rises above Tikaboo Peak. A rock band named Possum Dixon drives up in a white

van. They'd just finished a gig in Vegas and were on their way to a one-night stand in Salt Lake City when their tour manager insisted they detour to Area 51. After a brief consultation with Chuck and Kathleen, they head off toward the mountains, hoping, says their guitarist, to be abducted.

Robert turns his binoculars west. "See those lights?" he says excitedly.

Chuck Clark tilts up the brim of his cap and looks through his own scope. "Those're choppers."

"Oh, goody!" says Kathleen, who claps in anticipation. "If the choppers are up, the saucers'll be right behind."

Another vehicle is heard approaching from the Extraterrestrial Highway. Chuck can tell who it is by the sound of the tires. "That's security," he says. The 4x4 turns right at the mailbox and heads past the pilgrims. Chuck taunts its occupants by flashing his laser pen-light repeatedly into the vehicle's interior until it passes into the darkness.

"Can you believe the government denies there's anything going on here?" says Howard Goldstein, a retired cab-driver from Las Vegas, who with his wife has accompanied Kathleen to the site. "Everybody knows it. They've got pictures. No wonder people are losing faith in government."

Which is, perhaps, the most ironic contradiction in Rachel, Nevada: The same government that built the area and owns most of the desert in which these sky watchers stand is, partly by design and partly through arrogance, promoting an ideology that scorns government.

By refusing to acknowledge the existence of a facility that is baldly evident to anyone with two eyes and then by taking land to protect the secrecy of a base that officially does not exist, the military is effectively telling the population here that they are children. So they act like children, conjuring up UFOs and alien-government conspiracies. The state government then encourages their fantasies by endorsing the extraterrestrial sightings and inviting others to participate. The government, in effect, is nourishing the notion that there is no fixed truth—that the only thing that counts, as Glenn Campbell puts it, is "a nice, solid story with lots of details."

"UFOs," says Campbell, "can be anything you want them to be. If you want to believe something, here's an opportunity to believe it." ■

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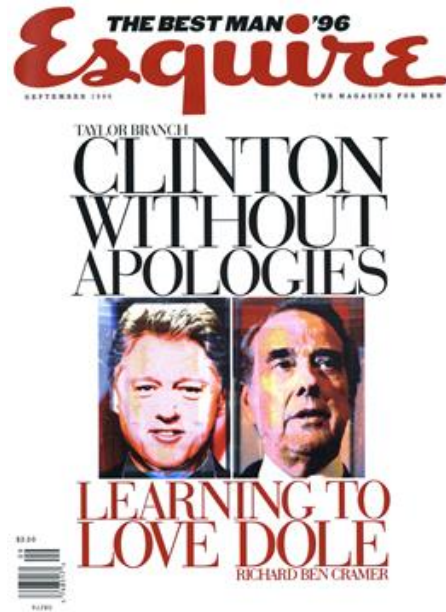
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