



Staten Island Advance

Sept. 1, 2014

Wagner planetarium director Dennis Anderson ponders UFOs and the enigma of the 'Arthur Kill Lights'

By ANDREW PAUL MELE, Special to the Advance

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — “Watch the skies! Keep watching the skies!” This admonishment came from the lips of a character in the 1951 sci-fi thriller, “The Thing From Another World.” Americans have been doing just that for at least a couple of centuries, the current craze extending from a 1947 incident that has been dubbed the onset of the modern flying saucer era, and has 49 percent of Americans convinced of their existence.

On June 24, 1947, Kenneth Arnold, a private pilot, was guiding his single-engine craft at an altitude of about 9,200 feet above the Cascade Mountains in Washington State. It was a clear, sunny afternoon at about 3 p.m. when the Boise, Idaho businessman sighted a group of dazzling objects flying at incredible speeds he calculated to be in excess of 1,600 miles per hour. Arnold judged them to be round — saucer-like — thus the terminology “flying saucers.”

On July 2, 1947, just weeks after Arnold’s sighting, some debris was recovered in the desert near Roswell, New Mexico leading believers to pronounce that the government had indeed discovered a crashed alien craft as well as several of its occupants.

Inevitably Hollywood became part and parcel of the phenomenon with such sci-fi flicks as “It Came from Outer Space” and “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” in the early 1950s. Even the 1996 film, “Independence Day,” latched onto the Roswell incident as a feature of its story.

The overwhelming numbers of UFO sightings led the Air Force to set up Project Blue Book, an agency to investigate reports. They did so from 1948 until 1969. The copious sightings since 1947 have produced more than 10,000 UFO reports.

The phenomenon of unidentified sightings ultimately reached Staten Island in an incident at around midnight on Saturday, July 14, 2001, that came to be known as the Arthur Kill Lights. Dozens of Islanders reported seeing lights in the southwestern sky on a clear, cloudless night. The lights appeared in formation at about 45 degrees above the horizon.

Witnesses viewed the scene from Arthur Kill Road and the West Shore Expressway. The Waterloo Cafe, located opposite the Blazing Star Burial Ground on Arthur Kill Road, provided the most significant witnesses. The consensus of their testimonies revealed a series of lights, numbering from four or five to as many as sixteen or twenty, bright orange or orange-red in hue and appearing to be solid round objects.

Witnesses numbered about fifty, including the owner of the cafe, but not all came forward. Those that did agreed that there was no sound emanating from the lights and no one could see any wings.

By evaluating the stories, it was deduced that the Arthur Kill Lights were no more than 1,000 feet in the air. They were described as an inverted V-shaped configuration and they have never been explained.

Amid the absurd and bizarre tales of alien encounters, the proven hoaxes, the exaggerations, and just plain nonsense, there have been far too many stories that could not be laughed away and remain unexplained. The Arthur Kill encounter and others like it have

attracted serious investigators, like Dennis Anderson of Tottenville, to give their utmost to determine what is going on.

Anderson, currently director of the planetarium at Wagner College, has served as adjunct assistant professor for 15 of the 25 years he has been at Wagner and has been requested to investigate numerous UFO reports.

Anderson has been head of the Amateur Astronomy Association of Staten Island and is a member of the Center for UFO Studies and the Intruders Foundation. He has conducted observation classes at Great Kills Park, Blue Heron Park and other Island locations. He has appeared numerous times as a guest on a CTV sci-fi cable show and hosted his own TV pilot, "UFO Hunters," which appeared on the Sci-Fi Channel.

Growing up in Tottenville, Anderson was blessed with an inquisitive nature, one that was fed on trips with his Uncle Lou to Ward's Point at the tip of Tottenville, where they dug up Lanape Indian relics like clay pipes and arrowheads.

"I have been looking at the sky since I was 4 years old," Anderson said.

It was at that tender age that he began cutting pictures from newspapers and magazines and placing them into a scrapbook. When he was 12 years old, Dennis came across a dog-eared paperback book in his older brothers' desk, "The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects," written by Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, and he was off and running on what would become his life's passion.

In his report of the Arthur Kills Lights sighting, published in the International UFO Reporter, Anderson concluded with the observation: "Late on the night of July 14, 2001, and into the early morning hours of July 15, something as yet unexplained manifested itself in highly sensitive airspace over the New York/New Jersey border. It is now known that unknown targets without transponders, some at heights of 99,000 feet, were picked up on radar at Newark International Airport, less than 20 miles from Manhattan." He goes on to say that the media, the military, and the police treated it as "good summertime fun not worthy of serious consideration. ... this, just two months before we no longer would consider our country 'always safe and secure.' "

UFOs most assuredly exist. This is not necessarily to endorse the idea of aliens from distant galaxies traversing the Earth in saucer-like space craft. Unidentified Flying Object, a phrase coined by an Air Force officer in 1951, refers to any sighting not immediately identifiable — meteors, the planet Venus, swamp gas, ball lightning, atmospheric conditions, optical illusions or — yes — aliens from distant galaxies.

There is no official explanation as yet to the Arthur Kill sighting, but Anderson continues to search for the truth. Of the Waterloo Cafe witnesses, only the staff came forward. Among the patrons at the Waterloo Cafe were several Coast Guard personnel, whom Anderson suggests would have been excellent observers. There were several dozen other witnesses that night, and if any would come forward now, it would help to shed some light on the puzzle.

Often fear of ridicule or lack of knowledge as to where to make such a report hinders witnesses from coming forth. The search for truth should never be hampered by such mundane concerns. If any would be willing to aid the investigation, they are encouraged to contact Dennis Anderson at Wagner College; 718-390-3432. Your assistance, even so many years later, may help to unravel one of the world's most intriguing mysteries.

Anderson points out how far we have come "from the Wright brothers to the moon in just 60 years. Who can tell what a civilization just a few hundred years older might be able to accomplish."

While he does not endorse the idea that UFOs are necessarily aircraft from outer space, he believes that “something is there. I don’t know what it might be. It could be extraterrestrial, interdimensional or,” he adds, “something so extraordinary we are not capable as yet of figuring it out. There are simply too many unexplained incidents to merely write off the whole UFO thing.”

The struggle for answers endures even as the 200 to 300 reported sightings every year make it difficult to turn away. Dennis Anderson certainly will not. Who knows, the man from Tottenville may come up with the eventual denouement. If not, it certainly won’t be for lack of trying. In the meantime, “Keep watching the skies!”