

# 50

What crashed here in 1947 is a matter of dispute. But whatever happened then is good for business today.

## Years After Roswell

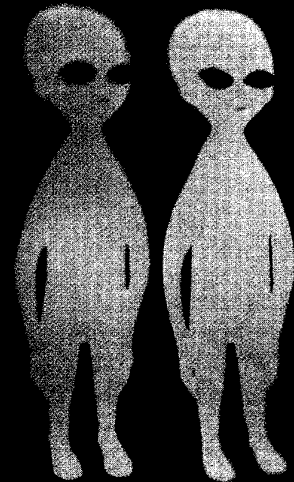
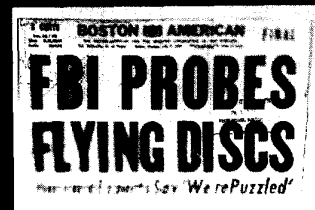
RAIN STREAKS THE WINDOWS of the 19-seat Mesa Airlines twin-prop as we touch down on one of the Roswell airport's three long runways. Built for the big military jets that once landed at a now-closed air

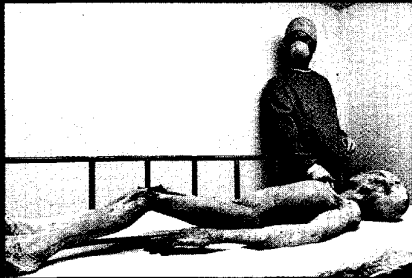
By Dawn Stover

base here, the airport is being eyed as a potential site for an all-night rock concert expected to draw as many as 150,000 people to this town of 50,000 on July 5. The occasion: the 50th anniversary of the Roswell "incident," the most legendary UFO crash of all time.

The rock concert isn't the only event planned to commemorate the 1947 crash. The Roswell UFO Encounter '97 anniversary party planned for July 1 through July 6 will also include a UFO conference, a film festival, an alien costume contest, a "Crash and Burn Extravaganza" spaceship-building contest, laser shows at the local planetarium, and "Alien Chase" foot races. With 20,000 overnight guests expected, every motel in town is booked solid.

Roswell has become almost synonymous with flying saucers and aliens. Books, movies, and Web pages have spread the story of The Incident to the far corners of the Earth. Is there any truth to the tale? Photographer John Carnett and I spent three days exploring the Roswell area. We were looking for clues that could explain a mystery: What crashed here 50 years ago? And why did the government try to cover it up?





Visitors to the International UFO Museum and Research Center (below) can read old newspaper articles about aliens (below left) or see exhibits such as the mannequins (above) used in the Showtime movie about the 1947 "incident." A visit to Roswell wouldn't be complete without a trip to one of the alleged crash sites. At right is the massive rock that Jim Ragsdale claimed was split in two by a spaceship impact.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN B. CARNETT



Popular  
Science

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Glenn Dennis (left) worked at the Ballard Funeral Home (above) in 1947. On July 7, he says, a man called to inquire about the availability of hermetically sealed baby caskets. Dennis also claims he saw shiny debris crammed into ambulances parked outside the Air Force Base hospital.

We soon learn that Roswell is a town with two of everything: two Texaco stations, two Denny's restaurants, two Best Western motels, two UFO museums, and two alleged UFO crash sites. Even the mayor has a twin. And there are at least two sides to The Incident: the believers who are convinced that extraterrestrials plummeted to their death near here in 1947; and the debunkers who insist that a top-secret government project was all that fell from the sky.

#### **INTERNATIONAL UFO MUSEUM AND RESEARCH CENTER, DOWNTOWN ROSWELL**

The early days of the Roswell Incident are chronicled on the walls of a converted movie theater that is now the largest UFO museum in town, welcoming more than 155,000 visitors since it opened four years ago. One morning in early July 1947, a ranch foreman named W. W. "Mac" Brazel found some odd-looking metallic debris littering a sheep

pasture. The debris included thin fragments that Brazel claimed he couldn't cut with his knife or burn with matches.

On July 6, at the urging of his neighbors, Brazel finally took some of his debris to Roswell—the nearest big town, but still about 75 miles away. Brazel presented the debris to the county sheriff, who then turned it over to officials at the Roswell Army Air Force base. The next day, Brazel led two intelligence officers to the ranch field where the debris was scattered. They spent all day picking up pieces and then headed for Roswell.

On the way back to the base, Major Jesse A. Marcel, the intelligence officer of the 509th Bomb Group based at Roswell (the other officer hasn't been identified), stopped at his house to show the debris to his wife and 11-year-old son. Jesse Jr., now a physician in Montana, says he remembers his father waking him late at night so that he could see pieces of a flying saucer: metal foil, chunks of what looked like Bakelite plastic, and a lightweight I-beam inscribed with purplish hieroglyphic-like symbols.

Marcel gave the debris to Roswell Base Commander Col. William H. Blanchard, who then summoned 1st Lt. Walter G. Haut., the base public relations officer. Haut is one of the few people directly involved in The Incident who is still alive.

Haut, who was 25 years old at the time of the Roswell Incident, told us that he never saw any of the reported debris from Brazel's field. But he vividly remembers Blanchard's orders: "Haut, put out a press release. Basically say

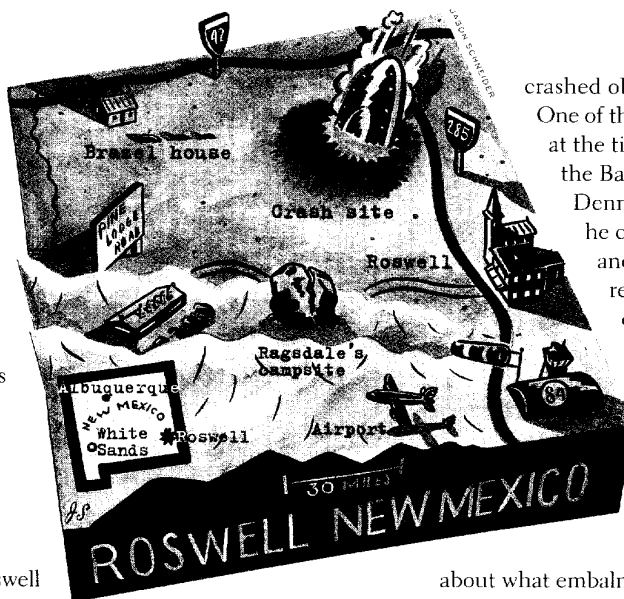


that we have in our possession a flying saucer.”

Around 10:30 on the morning of July 8, 1947, Haut delivered the press release to the local newspapers and radio stations. *The Roswell Daily Record* for that day carried the eye-popping front-page headline “RAAF Captures Flying Saucer on Ranch in Roswell Region.” Haut began getting phone calls from all over the world.

But no sooner was the story issued than it was retracted. On July 9, the Roswell paper ran a story saying that Brig. Gen. Roger M. Ramey—commander of the 8th Air Force headquartered in Fort Worth, Texas, where Marcel had been ordered to take some of the debris—had explained that the so-called flying disc was nothing more than a weather balloon. It had all been a case of mistaken identity.

Back in Roswell, not everyone was convinced that the



Within 75 miles of Roswell are the original debris site and two alleged UFO crash sites. All are located in sparsely populated areas.

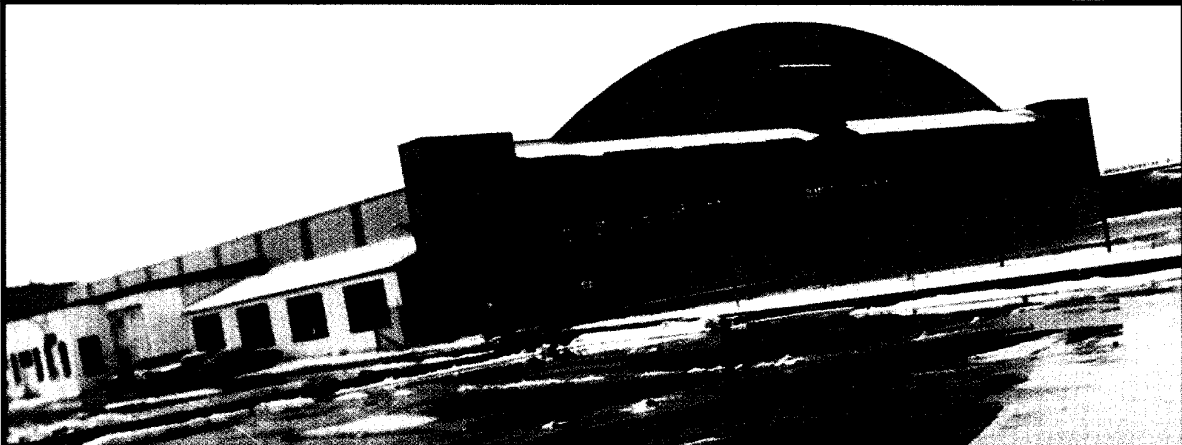
crashed object was a weather balloon. One of the doubters was Glenn Dennis, at the time a 21-year-old mortician at the Ballard Funeral Home. We met Dennis at the UFO Museum that he co-founded with Walter Haut and Max Littell in 1992. Dennis recounted two unusual phone calls that he received on July 7, 1947. “The calls were from a guy who said he was a mortuary officer,” recalls Dennis. “He said he needed to know how many two-foot-six-inch hermetically sealed baby caskets were in stock. Then he called back to ask about what embalming fluids would do to a body.”

#### HUB CORN'S RANCH, 30 MILES NORTH OF ROSWELL

A trip to Roswell wouldn't be complete without a visit to all of the UFO sites. For a \$250 fee, we hire Bruce Rhoads, a retired teacher who works as a volunteer at one of the UFO museums, to give us a tour in his Chevy Suburban.

Our first stop on the tour was a 24-square-mile sheep ranch owned by Hub Corn. His father bought the ranch from Florence McKnight in 1976, but not until 1994 did Corn learn that several people had identified his property

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Spaceship debris was allegedly stored in Hangar 84 (above). Walter Haut (top) wrote the bulletin saying saucer debris had been recovered.



New Mexico mud turns to pottery on the Chevy Suburban that Bruce Rhoads (below) uses to take visitors to Roswell's UFO sites. The original debris site is near an abandoned ranch house where Mac Brazel lived (below right). Debris was temporarily stored in the shed next to the house. One alleged crash site is at the base of a bluff on Hub Corn's ranch (right). The site is in dispute because the ranch's previous owners swear that no military cleanup crew was there in 1947.



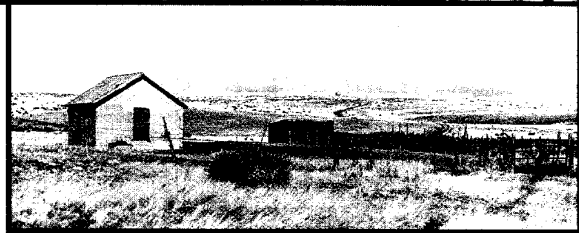
as the site of a 1947 crash landing. Curiosity seekers began wandering onto the ranch, so Corn decided to start charging a \$15 entrance fee. Since then, the ranch has become a popular tourist attraction. "People just want to be here," says Corn. "Some bring flowers, some cry when they see it."

We all walk down the quarter-mile trail to the crash site, at the base of a bluff running along a seasonal creek. "See those little American flags over there?" asks Corn, pointing to a couple of small flags protruding from the rocky face of the bluff. "That's where they found the spacecraft, tilted on its side." A second set of flags about 20 feet away marks the spot where an alien sat holding a black box, according to one account. Corn tells me that five bodies were eventually recovered from the site, along with a wedge-shaped ship.

Then again, just three weeks before our visit, Jim McKnight, whose aunt sold the ranch to Corn's father, signed an affidavit that hangs in the UFO Museum in Roswell. In the affidavit, McKnight says that his family owned the ranch in 1947, and that no military personnel ever set foot there to recover a spacecraft or any other debris.

#### **RAGSDALE'S CAMPSITE, 50 MILES WEST OF ROSWELL**

Suddenly, after all this time, a second crash site is identified. On a recently released videotape made just five days before his death in 1995, Jim Ragsdale says that he was trysting with a girlfriend in the forested El Capitan Mountains on the weekend of July 4, 1947. Lying "buck naked" in the back of his pickup truck, they heard a loud noise as a spaceship came crashing through the trees about 50 yards away. According to Ragsdale, the craft was damaged only slightly, although the impact split a large boulder at the site. On the videotape, Ragsdale says that he and his girlfriend crawled inside the craft and saw the bodies of aliens, their little seats, and a bejeweled instrument panel. Ragsdale says he and his companion fled



the morning after the crash, when they saw military vehicles approaching the area.

Rhoads drives us to the impact site that Ragsdale identified from photographs. What we see is a seven-by-ten-foot rock split in two by an impressive crack. It seems unlikely, to say the least, that such a spectacular crash would not have been heard at Pine Lodge, a popular nightspot only a mile away that would surely have drawn a crowd on the July 4 weekend. (The log-cabin lodge has since burned to the ground.) And what guided those military vehicles to the mountain campsite within hours of the crash? Radar in those days only reached about 30 miles from the Roswell base.

It seems more likely that Ragsdale, a truck driver who admittedly drank a lot of beer that night in 1947, fabricated the story as a legacy to his grandchildren, who will receive a share of the profits from the videotape he made. Or perhaps in his last days he confused the spaceship crash with a plane crash that had occurred in the same area. In the 1940s, plane crashes were common in the mountains near Roswell.

#### **DEBRIS SITE, 75 MILES NORTHWEST OF ROSWELL**

Ground zero in the whole Roswell story is the original debris site on the sheep ranch managed by Mac Brazel. The windshield wipers on the Suburban can't keep up with the onslaught of mud as we fishtail along the remote dirt roads leading to Brazel's two-room house, now abandoned. Next



to the house still stands an old tin shed where debris was stored until military personnel arrived to haul it away. The field where the debris was found is about two miles away, in a treeless area of rolling hills. Although many UFO aficionados consider the event that took place here to be the best-documented case of an extraterrestrial encounter, not one scrap of physical evidence remains at the site or in the hands of witnesses. The military scoured the area for even the smallest fragments.

So why did the soldiers who were sent to clean up this area behave so strangely? People who lived in the area at the time claim that their travel was restricted, and that they were ordered not to talk about what they had seen.

The Pentagon now admits that General Ramey wasn't telling the whole truth when he said that the pieces found here had come from an ordinary weather balloon. Government officials now say that the debris actually came from a 700-foot string of weather balloons, radar reflectors, and acoustic sensors that was launched from Alamogordo Air Field, New Mexico, on June 4, 1947. The top-secret experiment was called Project Mogul.

Project Mogul was the brainchild of the late physicist Maurice Ewing, of Columbia University and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. During World War II, Ewing discovered the existence of an ocean layer that could easily conduct the sound of underwater explosions for thousands of miles. Ewing speculated that a similar

sound channel might exist in the upper atmosphere, and that detectors placed there might eavesdrop on Soviet nuclear detonations and even detect ballistic missiles screaming toward their targets. Project Mogul was designed to test Ewing's theory.

Charles B. Moore, now a professor emeritus of physics at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, worked on Project Mogul as a graduate student at New York University in 1947. He says the balloon flights launched from Alamogordo in June and July of that year used as many as two dozen neoprene balloons in strings longer than 600 feet, with octahedral radar reflectors attached. The wreckage found near Roswell closely matched the Project Mogul material launched from Alamogordo, Moore says.

And remember those hieroglyphic-like symbols Jesse Marcel's young son saw? They bear a striking resemblance to the flower-like purple symbols on the tape that was used to reinforce the Project Mogul radar targets. Why the colorful designs? The targets were made by a toy company, which because of wartime materials shortages used novelty tape they had in stock.

Finally, in September 1994—at the request of New Mexico Congressman Steven H. Schiff—the government's General Accounting Office (GAO) released a "Report of Air Force Research Regarding the Roswell Incident," along with Pentagon documents that had been classified for 50 years. The only document GAO found linking UFOs and the Roswell Army Air Field was a classified report that said: "The Office of Public Information was quite busy during the month answering inquiries on the 'flying disc' which was reported to be in the possession of the 509th Group. The object turned out to be a weather balloon."

The report had been classified only because it mentioned the 509th Bomb Group, which at the time was the nation's only nuclear strike force—a fact that was a closely held secret. The *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, was based in Roswell. In fact, the entire area around Roswell is sensitive. The White Sands Missile Range, where the first nuclear bomb was tested, is nearby and is still a weapons-testing site that is also used to stage war games.

#### CITY HALL, DOWNTOWN ROSWELL

The office of Roswell Mayor Thomas E. Jennings is decorated with stuffed aliens and UFO T-shirts. Hanging from the ceiling lamp is a small flying saucer.

"We're developing another industry in Roswell," Jennings tells me prior to our departure, "and it's called tourism." He estimates that some 25 percent of Roswell's motel bookings are for people visiting the museums and crash sites. The town has even created a new slogan to attract overnight guests: "Crash in Roswell."

To many businesspeople in town, it really doesn't matter what happened here 50 years ago. "It fell into our lap," says Jennings, "and we're trying to capitalize on it." ◆

