



# HISTORY



## UNDENIABLE PROOF? DEBATE RAGES ON OVER MCMINNVILLE UFO PHOTOS

Isn't it funny how life can change radically in just a few moments? Something that initially seems innocent and banal can spiral out of control, rapidly take on a life of its own and have major impact on a national and even international level. This very sort of thing happened in a big way here locally to a humble rural family outside of McMinnville, Oregon, just over 50 years ago. A simple chore that usually seemed uneventful became, in just a few chaotic seconds, a life-transforming experience, and a pair of snapshots would vault onto the world scene, forever altering the debate surrounding the search for extraterrestrial life and UFOs.

By now, some of you are familiar with the fantastic story surrounding the now famous photos captured on a farm outside of McMinnville. If you require a refresher, here are the important details: Around 7:30 at night on Thursday, May 11, 1950, Evelyn Trent went out to feed her chickens and rabbits behind the farmhouse where she and her husband Paul lived. The animals, as she tells it, gave no indication of any sort of disturbance. While attending to her chores, Evelyn was astonished to see a large, metallic-looking, disc-shaped object hovering silently in the sky a little to the northeast of their farm. She ran towards the house to fetch her husband Paul, while yelling for him to grab the camera. For a short time the two scrambled around looking for their trusty folding Kodak Roamer, then they both ran back outside.



Paul Trent with his Kodak Roamer  
Oregon Journal June 10, 1950

The disc, still visible in the sky, was moving slowly to the west. Paul clicked off a snapshot and advanced the film as fast he could. The object began to gather speed and turned toward the northwest, forcing Paul to move rapidly to his right to get a second picture. The whole event happened very quickly, and both photos were taken within 30 seconds.

It would be another month before Paul Trent developed the roll of film containing some snow scenes, the weeping willow in his front yard, two images of a UFO, and three family picnic shots from Mother's Day. Paul, thinking he had witnessed a government experiment or secret project, remained quiet about his strange sighting. Even after the photos were developed, he was reluctant to share them with anyone. He did, finally, show the pictures to his friend and banker, Frank Wortman, and ultimately it was Wortman who alerted the local newspaper, the *Telephone Register*. The paper quickly dispatched a reporter out to interview the Trents and acquire the photos, but when the reporter asked to borrow the negatives, the Trents couldn't find them. After some looking, they were discovered under the couch, where the kids had shoved them while playing.

As innocent as this story sounds on the surface (for a UFO sighting, that is,) the photos that Paul Trent took would eventually become more significant than anyone could have predicted on that overcast evening in 1950. June 8, the day after the reporter **continued page 10...**



**...UNDENIABLE TRUTH?** continued from page 9 fished the negatives out from under the davenport, the *Telephone Register* ran the photos on its front page and instantly ignited a firestorm. The next two days saw the Portland and Los Angeles papers running articles about the Trent photos, and soon the story was far larger than Paul and Evelyn had wished for. On June 12 and 13, the story aired on national news and circulated worldwide on the International News Service (INS) and the Associated Press (AP). *Life* magazine, then the nation's largest circulation magazine, reprinted the photos in its June 26 issue. For a time, all the attention prompted the national press to brand McMinnville as 'Saucerville.'

The Trents themselves told the story on July 7, after being flown to the East Coast to appear on the New York-based television program, "We the People." Interestingly, the show's producers instructed them to bring the negatives along to New York. The show 'borrowed' them, and the Trents never saw the negatives again. When they inquired about their whereabouts, the only answer they got was that somehow they had been 'misplaced.'

National radio and TV personality and self-described UFO authority Frank Edwards became fascinated by the images. He claimed to have personally taken two

enlargements of the photos to the Pentagon. "I was told," he said on his national program, "they were the best civilian photographs of an Unidentified Flying Object that the Air Force had ever seen." Edwards repeatedly promoted the *Telephone Register's* front page article and recommended everyone send 10 cents to order a copy for themselves. The *TR* quickly became inundated with requests from all over the country for their remarkable front page. In all, the paper went to press three times, and over 10,000 reprints of the paper were shipped out to 48 states, the District of Columbia and Canada during the three weeks following its initial publication. One of these reprints is now on display in the lobby at the Hotel Oregon.

In the weeks and then years following the Spring 1950 incident the media frenzy began to cool, but the controversy surrounding the pictures—and their negatives—did not. The photos would become the most hotly debated UFO photographs ever, taking on a life of their own, growing in significance and attaining elite status as one of the most reliable and well-documented cases in UFO history. Over time, the snapshots have been subject to intense scrutiny, re-investigation and re-analysis by many investigators and scientists, but every time a new round of questions is raised, the images' authenticity is upheld.

The Trents gave their account of that May 11 incident again and again to numerous regional and national newspapers and magazines. Later, Air Force Investigators and/or FBI agents visited the Trent house on more than one occasion and took photos, searched the house and questioned the family. None of these initial investigations exposed discrepancies in the Trents' account, and, perhaps more significantly, none of the papers' photo editors—some who handled

the original negatives—saw anything to convince them that they were fakes.

Attention was refocused on the photos again in the late '60s. The US Air Force, in conjunction with the University of Colorado, commissioned an investigation into

the UFO phenomenon (aka the Condon Committee.) The three-year investigation, led by prominent physicist Edward U. Condon, aimed to thoroughly examine the evidence and determine once and for all if a case for the existence of UFOs could be made. It was during this investigation that the negatives conveniently resurfaced. 17-years lost, they turned up in a UPI file and were handed over to the skeptical Condon Committee.

Perhaps no other event solidified the Trent Case's importance in UFO lore more than the findings of the Condon investigation. After years of exhaustive scientific inquiry, the authoritative



*Shortly after this snapshot was taken the object sped away silently.*

*Courtesy News-Register*





committee concluded that, "... This is one of the few UFO reports in which all factors investigated... appear to be consistent with the assertion that an extraordinary flying object... flew within sight of two witnesses."

Following the conclusion of the Condon report, the negatives were returned to UPI, and in 1970 they were sent back to the *News-Register* (formerly the *Telephone Register*) in McMinnville. When they arrived back at the paper, 20 years gone, the negatives had been tampered with considerably; someone had cropped the negatives, trimming down the edges and reducing their overall size so that parts of the original image were missing.

The Trents, for their part, never really tried to get the negatives back. In fact, the thought that they could be valuable items never seems to have interested them. The images were reproduced countless times in publications and on television, and then via the internet, all without obtaining permission or a release from the Trents. They never benefited financially from the photos, and in his last interview in 1998, Paul spoke about this. "I took the pictures, but I don't want them. First thing I know is we'd have too much trouble." Evelyn agreed, "Like I said, I would never take another picture. Just too much publicity."

The Condon Report's conclusion not only re-established the Trent case at the forefront of UFO lore, it sparked a rash of theories by skeptics who attempted to discredit the photos. Some claimed the camera lens had been oiled; others were convinced we were looking at an outdoor light swinging from the power lines above. As these things go, the debunkery spawned more investigation, and in 1975, respected UFO investigator and optical physicist Dr. Bruce Maccabee (and keynote speaker at McMinnville's first UFO Festival) acquired the negatives. Maccabee, with his background in optical data processing at the US Naval Surface Warfare Center, put the photos to every kind of available test, seeking signs of fraud as well as data about the odd object suspended in space.

Maccabee and a number of other leading researchers' findings strongly supported the claims by the Condon report, igniting a new round of exchanges between researchers and skeptics.

Scrutiny continued through the '80s and '90s with cutting-edge photogrammetric analyses (please don't ask this writer) done by Brad Sparks in tandem with Dr. Maccabee. New hoax theories were posited suggesting the images were a prank and the saucer was actually the rear-view mirror off of a '40s pickup truck. And as recently as 1999, a new attempt at debunking the photos was published, once again bringing the seemingly innocent snapshots and the Trent case to the forefront of the UFO question.

The historic Trent photos continue to be relevant today. On the internet and at meetings around the world, the Trent Case is still argued and controversy surrounds the photos and their authenticity. Interest in the strange event shows no sign of waning, and the pair of images, taken just outside of McMinnville (aka, Saucerville) are still considered by many to be among the most credible and compelling proof for the existence of UFOs that we have.



Perhaps we will never know what really happened that summer evening back in 1950; the Trents themselves were never sure. What we do know is that an out-of-this world event this significant, happening in our very own backyard, deserves one heck of a party. And so, on the anniversary of the photos, we intend to throw one. McMinnville's UFO Festival in McMinnville, centered at the Hotel Oregon, is now the nation's second largest annual UFO gathering in the country. At this, our sixth festival, we can't promise that we'll get any closer to the truth about UFOs, but we can promise that you'll have a good time.

Believers and skeptics alike can join in celebrating those 30 chaotic seconds in which the Trents lives were changed, and in which a pair of photos, forever canonized in the UFO annals, were innocently clicked off.