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In this 1964 photo, Zamora, then a Socorro policeman, watches as Air Force personnel use a Geiger counter to check the arroyo where he saw the object

WHAT DO LONNIE SEE?

The Question Has Haunted Him for Nearly Two Decades

Lonnie Zamora has lived at the same address in Socorro for 35 years. Actually, he's lived in two houses at that address. A blue wooden one, now abandoned, belonged to his mother. He's a small white stucco place which Zamora built when he got married. Both houses are located in southwest Socorro, on an unpaved road that is difficult to find: There is no street sign. Yet for the last 20 years people have somehow found Zamora's home. After circling the Lujan Funeral Parlor several times and then passing the nearby cemetery once or twice, the inquisitive frequently give up and ask, though not at the graveyard, "Where does that guy who saw the flying saucer live?"

A few neighbors who know Zamora well occasionally pretend they have no idea where he lives. Sometimes the curious are even sent on wild-goose chases.

Folks in Socorro do these things because they know that Zamora doesn't like to talk about what happened in the early evening of April 24, 1964. "Lonnie's had it up to here," says one friend. Zamora, in fact, only gives interviews when the mood strikes him. And in recent years the mood had not struck.

"You'll never get him to talk," predicted a woman who works at the Socorro Public Library.

However, not long ago, in a sudden change of mood, Zamora did agree to talk. His explanation was that if he did talk, he hoped that the whole mess might finally go away. The interview took place in the paneled living room of Zamora's Socorro home — the white stucco place.

Zamora is a short man, about 5 feet 7 inches tall. He is solidly built in the manner of someone who has done physical labor: His wrists and forearms are thick, his hands, large and calloused. His thinning gray hair is worn in what must be one of the last flattops in Socorro County.

Zamora speaks slowly, choosing his words carefully. When he speaks, a gold-capped front tooth glistens. But he doesn't speak often. Zamora has always been a man who prefers to listen. As he listens, he cracks his knuckles repeatedly.

"What did I see?" Zamora asks in a polite but somewhat bored voice. "It was more frightening than anything that could happen. If you're a policeman, which I was back then, and you get in a gun battle, you're scared. But once it's over, it's over. But this you can't forget."

What Zamora has never quite forgotten is what he has always contended he saw in a deserted arroyo south of Socorro: a shiny oval-shaped vehicle and two small, peculiar-looking figures dressed in white coveralls.

The event occurred at 5:50 p.m. on a Friday. At the time, Zamora was an officer with the Socorro Police Department. Alone in his patrol car, he was following a speeder north on California Avenue, Socorro's main thoroughfare, when he heard behind him and to his left, a "loud noise, like an explosion." Glancing back, he says, he glimpsed for a moment in the distance, a "shooting flame."

Ignoring the speeder, Zamora braked, turned his police car around and rushed to the area that had attracted him — a deserted, shrub-spotted arroyo a about a mile from downtown.

As his white Pontiac bounded over a gravel path, Zamora viewed in the distance what he said appeared to be an overturned car. Leaving his own vehicle, Zamora proceeded on foot. As he moved closer, the officer saw two small figures "about the size of boys," dressed in white coveralls, standing beside an object that looked for all the world like an egg. Pretending from the bottom of the object were girder-like legs. On the side of the craft Zamora spotted an upside-down red V.

As he drew to within 100 feet, Zamora called to the

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figures. When they did not answer, the officer retreated to his patrol car, reached in and grabbed his radio. Excitedly he asked for help. Crouching by his car, not quite understanding what was happening, Zamora suddenly heard a *hing hing* noise. Another flame appeared and then the object took off, to the southwest, cruising about 20 feet above the ground as it traveled.

From the moment Zamora saw the object until it left was later estimated to be less than two minutes. Yet within a couple of hours the arroyo was swarming with people. The biggest task that authorities faced was to protect evidence of the alleged landing: four indentations in the earth and a scorched greasewood bush.

Experts of every stripe peered at that evidence. Teams of Air Force investigators came from White Sands and from Kirtland. Another Air Force group, composed of crack UFO detectives, jetted in from Ohio. The import of the incident was elevated a notch or two when Dr. J. Allen Hynek arrived in town. A professor of astronomy at Northwestern University, Hynek was and still is recognized as one of the world's foremost UFO researchers.

Since there were no ready explanations for Zamora's sighting and since Zamora seemed so earnest, the story made international news. Though Socorro at the time had about 6,000 residents, the city suddenly became a circled spot on the map. Tourists and flying-saucer buffs appeared at the arroyo almost immediately. Within a couple of days, the marks in the earth and the burned greasewood bush were gone. They'd been trampled.

That did not stop people from talking or writing about the event. Zamora's alleged encounter became the subject of an entire book and at least two movies. Hynek, who has always said he was as baffled as anyone by what happened, nonetheless called the incident "one of the most authenticated landing sightings on record." (Since people began keeping track, more than 10,000 sightings have been reported.) The Socorro sighting was a big one though, and as such, nearly every UFO text would include a chapter on it. A "classic case," announced Hynek.

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There is little left in Socorro today of that classic case. A fenced-in monument was planned, but it never was built. The Chamber of Commerce, which once considered turning out post cards of Zamora's account, has nearly forgotten it ever took place. Only on a backroom shelf in the Chamber's small office is it remembered. In a dusty frame sits a montage of newspaper clippings describing the incident.

The same woman in the public library who claimed Lonnie Zamora would never cooperate, was also certain no one else involved in the event would talk, either. "Can you blame them?" she said. The librarian may have been entitled to her opinion: Two copies of a book written about the Socorro incident, have been ripped from the library.

Yet of all persons still living who had any connection with the 1964 drama, none contacted refused an interview. And, unlike Zamora, most of them were, in fact, enthusiastic about talking about the strange sighting.

James Luckie, now 78, is the retired undersheriff of Socorro County. Luckie was in the police station the evening Zamora radioed, in an agitated voice, this message: "You gotta come out here! You gotta see this to believe it!"

Luckie was one of the first to arrive at the arroyo. "The bushes were smoldering like somebody'd cut them from the top with some big flame thrower. Lonnie was white as a corpse and he ain't exactly no paleface normally. He was sweatin' like a sperm horse. But it was cold sweat."

Luckie says he asked Zamora what he had seen. "Maybe," answered Zamora, "I seen the devil."

Today, Luckie has on the living room wall of his Socorro home a copy of the same framed document tucked away at the Chamber of Commerce. Luckie says the Socorro newspaper manufactured about 100 of the mementos and sold them for $2.25 each.

Because he arrived at the scene early, Luckie was later interviewed by a radio station in Los Angeles. A week after that he received a letter from a UFO investigator in Spain. "One of these days," says Luckie, a man who never liked to move too fast, "I'm gonna have to answer that letter."

Two other persons came to the arroyo shortly after Luckie. One was D. Arthur Byrnes, an FBI agent. By coincidence, Byrnes was working in the Socorro police station that day on another matter. Now retired in Albuquerque, Byrnes says he went to the scene in an unofficial capacity.

"Lonnie was sitting out there with what might be considered a worried look. I tried comforting him. I was the one who called the people at White Sands. But, hey, whatever happened out there didn't BoT anybody. I always thought about it matter-of-factly."

For eight years, Ted Jordan was stationed at Socorro with the New Mexico State Police. Now retired after 25 years with the state police and living in Seminole, Okla., Jordan heard Zamora's radio call, too, and went to the arroyo. He had a 35mm camera with him and took a roll of film: of four 6-inch deep indentations in the ground, of the scorched bush and of what Jordan remembers to be "footprints, shaped like coffee cups."

Jordan says that the following day one of the Air Force investigators asked him for his film. "The dude said he'd give me duplicates," recalls Jordan. "So I handed it over. I forgot all about it until a month or so later. Then I called and asked where was the film. They said sorry, but my film didn't turn out. They said, and this part always bothered me, that my film had been ruined by radiation and the pictures didn't come out."

The troublesome part of all of this was that although the impressions in the ground and the seared bush were seen by many, no one saw what Lonnie Zamora said he saw. Allen Hynek, the distinguished UFO consultant, says: "It's really a pity, but no one's fault, that other witnesses did not see the object land or take off."

Because of that fact Zamora became a target of skeptics. His character and motives underwent scrutinization. As that began to happen, Zamora withdrew. Crank telephone calls in the night caused him to clam up. Other persons who had followed Zamora to the arroyo experienced the same thing. "I just quit talking about it to every Tom, Dick and Harry," says James Luckie. "I got tired of being called a damn liar. People would say to me, 'Oh, you're a fool, you never saw nothin.'"

However, those who knew Zamora well never questioned his story. "He's a good man, and he was always a good policeman."

Allen Hynek calls Lonnie "basically sincere and reliable. Not capable of contriving a complex hoax."

Hoax. The word began to pop up as soon as the story broke. After all, the history of UFOs then, as now, is a history heavy with folks often regarded as kooks. Was Zamora one?

Felix Phillips lived four blocks from the arroyo. Phillips told investigators that on the evening of April 24, he was at home and his front door and windows were open to catch the spring breeze. Phillips said he heard nothing. Not at 5:50 p.m., not at any time.

Did Zamora make up the whole thing? Was he drinking that evening? Was this just another swamp gas mirage, a frequent occurrence elsewhere at the time? Hynek says no way. "I found nothing that tends to discredit Mr. Zamora." Art Byrnes, the ex-FBI agent, relies on alcohol. "I knew Lonnie before that incident and I never knew him to drink. There was never any indication of narcotics. I always found Lonnie very stable. And Lonnie wouldn't go for a publicity stunt if one were proposed. He's always been too honest."

But the hoax idea would not go away. A debunker of this case and others, Philip Klass, published a book in 1974 entitled *UFOs Explained*. Klass suggests that the Socorro event was a scheme to pull the community out of an economic depression. To support his theory, Klass says scientists at Socorro's New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, who surely might want to study a UFO sighting in their back yard, seemed totally uninterested. Furthermore, Klass points out that the alleged UFO landed on property owned by Holm Bursum, mayor of Socorro at the time and a prominent banker. Bursum, contends Klass, would "not be unhappy to see an influx of tourist dollars."

Holm Bursum is no longer mayor of Socorro, but he still lives there. He chuckles at Klass' conclusions. "The man is silly. Sure, it was my land where that took place. I went out and took a look like everybody else. And I was as excited as everybody else. It was like saying you saw a ghost in a graveyard. But I sure didn't plan it."

Bursum discounts the idea that Lonnie Zamora fabricated the happening. "To my knowledge, Lonnie is not a daydreamer. He's not a practical joker. He's a very serious person and always has been."

A few months after the incident, Ray Senn, city clerk of Socorro, announced that the town was going to try to cash in on its sudden notoriety. When a Hollywood movie company came to Socorro, Senn led them around with relish. When the movie people said they would premiere in Socorro their film about Zamora's sighting, Senn whooped with joy. "Then they told me they wanted $15,000 up front to do that," remembers Senn. "Well, $15,000 was a lot of money in those days. We were babes in the woods. But we weren't that ignorant. We said no."

The movie, titled *Phenomenon 77*, was shown in parts of the country, though few in Socorro can recollect seeing it, including Ray Senn. Today, the memory of April 24 and what followed amuses Senn, at least where Zamora is concerned. "If it had been anybody else but Lonnie who said they had sighted a UFO," says Senn, "I would have doubted it. Lonnie's just too straight of a guy."

"Lonnie's a real fine fella," adds Opal Grinder, once owner of a Whiting Brothers Service Station on Socorro's California Avenue. Grinder remembers another film company, this one a documentary outfit from England, arriving in Socorro. That firm came to his gas station to shoot footage of the owner. "They came to me," says Grinder, "because on the same day just before Lonnie said he'd heard that noise and saw that flame, a car came into my station. It was a '55 gray Cadillac with Colorado plates. I'll never forget it."

Grinder says a man and two small children were riding in the car. The man asked Grinder if there were any funny-looking, low-flying airplanes in the area. Why? wondered Grinder. "Because," the man answered, "one just made a pass at my car down the road. And a police car went tearing after it."

Grinder told his story to the Air Force. "They said they would look for the man, but I don't know if they ever did. I advertised for him myself, but I never found him."

With no witnesses to corroborate him, Zamora started giving others the silent treatment. Holm Bursum says he can understand Zamora's reticence. "I think Lonnie just got tired of people coming up and saying, 'What's new on Mars?'"

Zamora's son, Michael, says his father has never talked to him about the incident. "He's a very to-himself person in all ways," says Michael. Lonnie Zamora's wife, Mary, agrees. "He's quiet. I'm surprised he would talk to you."

A tall, slim woman, Mary Zamora works in the records section of the Socorro General Hospital. She has always been a big influence on her husband. After the incident, Zamora could not sleep; he was plagued by nightmares. Mary Zamora pressed him into switching to a night shift and to make sure he always had a partner with him on patrol. (On April 24, 1964, Zamora had just left his partner off for dinner when the he heard the explosion in the arroyo.)

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said he saw. (Byrnes can't recall saying such a thing.)

Shortly after Zamora's sighting, Stanford spent several days in Socorro gathering information. Returning by car to his home in Phoenix, Stanford says he was passing through Datil, N.M., when he spotted something crossing the sky. The object was, he estimates, traveling between 1,200 and 1,400 mph. Definitely a UFO, Stanford claims. And such a shame, he says, that no one else saw it.

Now the spooky story. Ted Jordan, the former state policeman, says that when he was stationed at Socorro he saw lots of peculiar things in the sky. He says that one night he was checking for speeders on Interstate 25, about four miles north of town. "Suddenly I look up and I see this evening star. Well, you always see the evening star, only this one begins to move. I watch it for a while and it keeps moving. I owned a reflecting telescope so I raced home and got it and put a 400-power lens on it. Well, that dude was still moving. I watched it go south of Socorro and then come back. It was taking its sweet time checking out Socorro. It certainly did not look like any kind of star.

* * * *

There may be few souvenirs left from that event of two decades ago, but there remains numerous questions. The biggest, of course, is: What did Zamora see?

Most people who have studied the case in depth truly believe Zamora saw something. James Luckie, the former undersheriff, feels it was an American spacecraft. "It was," confirms Luckie, "the outfit they went to the moon on. It come up from Alamogordo. The reason I know this is that when I got out there I smelled diesel fuel. I know that smell 'cause I worked on highways for 25 years. And what UFO uses diesel fuel?"

"You can't rule out that what Lonnie saw was related to the potential moon landing," says Ray Senn, the onetime city clerk. "The craft Lonnie described turned out to be nearly exactly like the one that went to the moon."

"To my knowledge it wasn't big enough to be an Apollo spacecraft," counters Art Byrnes. "And if that kind of craft had blasted off it would have made a hole in the ground."

Though author Ray Stanford cites all sorts of military obfuscations in the case, he does not believe the government was covering up a visit to Socorro by a NASA device. The visitor, concludes Stanford, a self-proclaimed "ufologist," was extraterrestrial.

The United States Air Force's official report is inconclusive. Zamora's sighting is still on the unexplained list of Project Blue Book at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. Project Blue Book is the home of data taken from all reported UFO phenomena.

The Air Force's findings, or lack thereof, do leave little questions unanswered. A few minutes before Zamora's sighting, someone telephoned an Albuquerque television station to report a UFO was "heading south of the city." There were no reports on radar screens on the early evening of April 24, 1964, but the screens at White Sands and Holloman Air Force Base terminated at 5 p.m. After the object allegedly landed in and then took off from the arroyo, a crystalline-like substance formed on the greasewood bush that had been seared. Those people around Socorro familiar with the area's plant life could not explain the substance. Neither could the Air Force.

"I became suspicious of the military's investigation," says Ted Jordan, "when they said my film had been damaged by radiation. If it was ruined by radiation, doesn't that say that maybe there was something strange in the area?"

Then there is Lonnie Zamora. "People say I saw a flying saucer," says Zamora. "I can't say if I did because I don't know what a flying saucer would look like."

Zamora says that at first he thought it was some kind of Air Force plane because the Air Force investigators took charge of everything. "They were really busy here for a while."

Now he isn't sure of anything except: He was at the wrong place at the wrong time. "If something like this should ever happen to me again, if I should ever see anything strange out there, I know what I'll do," says Zamora, stroking his big knuckles. "I won't tell nobody."

Lonnie Zamora: After years of explaining and defending himself, he's weary of it all

Working nights did not ease Zamora's pain. Arriving home, he would plop down in a chair in a daze and wonder what he had seen in that arroyo. He would question why he had to be the one to see it. Finally, Mary Zamora urged her husband to visit a priest at San Miguel Mission. It helped, says Zamora. "The priest told me to stop thinking about it all the time."

As close as she is to her husband, Mary Zamora says he has told her little about what he saw in the arroyo. The family keeps no scrapbooks. "All I know," sighs Mrs. Zamora, "is what I read in the newspaper."

* * * *

Lonnie Zamora was born in Magdalena, N.M., 50 years ago. His father, Domingo, was a cement plasterer. The youngest of nine children, Zamora was 13 when Domingo died. His mother, Rafelita, moved the family first to Morenci, Ariz., then later to Socorro.

From the time he was young, Zamora has always known hard work. When his mother died while he was still a teen-ager, Zamora quit high school and took a job in construction. Later, after marrying Mary and becoming the father of two children, he took an; job he could. He worked at New Mexico Tech in maintenance. He was a bailiff for a local judge. A long-time ambition was to become a New Mexico state policeman. A lack of education prevented him from making it.

Instead, Zamora went to work for the Socorro Police Department. By all accounts he was a competent officer. He was considered conscientious and trustworthy. Zamora had been with the police department for five years when he went to the arroyo.

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Being a small-town lawman did not prepare Zamora for instant celebrity status, and he has trouble coping with it still. After strangers showed up on Zamora's doorstep without an appointment and ordered him to take them to the arroyo, he grew irritated. When pests insisted Zamora accept long-distance telephone calls — collect calls, often — he became bugged. Of the hundreds of letters Zamora has received, he has only answered a handful. He grew weary of defending himself long ago.

From the outset, Zamora decided to cooperate with only those people he trusted, like Allen Hynek. Even today Hynek remains a friend to Zamora. They keep in touch. The famed astronomer occasionally asks Zamora to join him at speaking engagements. Zamora respectfully declines. "I ain't no speaker," he says. Zamora recently turned down an invitation to be flown to Mexico to meet with a group of individuals who all claimed to have sighted UFOs. "They wanted me to join their club," Zamora says. "I ain't no joiner."

Money, even in the form of airline tickets to Mexico, has never interested Zamora. Zamora says a writer from a flashy supermarket tabloid once descended on Zamora's home with an offer: The writer, Zamora says, was willing to hand over $100 if Zamora would change his story, spice it to suit the tabloid's readers. ("COP BEAMS UP TO MAKE ALIEN BUST.") Zamora closed his door in the writer's face.

Zamora decided to leave the Socorro Police Department 13 years ago. For five years he ran a Chevron station on New Mexico Highway 80, on the western fringe of Socorro. In the mid-1970s he again became a city employee, joining the maintenance department. Today he drives an earth mover. He supplements his income by serving in the National Guard.

A lesser man might have turned to drink after going through what Zamora did. Zamora turned to work and, he says, to God. His mother gave him his religious faith. "I pray every day," says Zamora. "I couldn't have gotten through this without God's help."

He says he doesn't think much about the event unless someone else brings it up. He has been back, but not lately, to the lonely arroyo located just west of where a KOA campground now stands. He doesn't like to go there, he says. He would rather be at home where he enjoys watching television. *Here Here* is his favorite program. No, he has not seen *E.T.* or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He does not go to the movies.

"My husband is a simple man but a good one," says Mary Zamora. "He wouldn't talk about this, but he is kind-hearted. When he was a policeman he was always helping out vagrants, you know, people stranded. When he owned the service station, he did the same thing: took money out of his own pocket to give to somebody who was in trouble."

* * * *

Two Socorro-related stories: one droll, the other, spooky.

Ray Stanford is the person who wrote an entire book on the events surrounding April 24, 1964. The title of Stanford's 1976 work is *Socorro Saucer in a Pentagon Pantry*.

Two copies of Stanford's book have been stolen from the Socorro Public Library. And curiously, that book is about theft: Among other charges, Stanford accuses the government of confiscating evidence, including a scoop of vitrified sand and a rock supposedly sprouting zinc-iron alloy particles. Stanford also claims the Air Force attempted to make Zamora withhold information about the inverted red V Zamora said he saw on the side of the craft (Zamora can't recall the Air Force saying such a thing). Finally, Stanford asserts that Art Byrnes, the FBI agent, told Zamora he did not have to report, if he didn't want to, the small figures in white coveralls he

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