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The Continuing Circle Saga

By now, it is likely that everyone knows about the Bower/Chorley hoax admission. When the story first broke, it was carried extensively by the media, and it seemed that cerealogy was doomed. TV and newspapers here in Canada boldly proclaimed that "all" the circles in England were explained as the work of BC. Suddenly, all media interest in any fortean phenomena was extinguished; for the most part, this condition still persists today.

Of course, things are not as cut-and-dry as they might seem. As an objectivist, I was immediately suspicious of the BC claims. "Skeptics" such as CSICOP members were delighted at the admissions and didn't bother to consider any problems with the explanation. But it should have been intuitive that there was something wrong with the claims. A "complete" explanation is usually never encountered in science, and there are always loopholes or flaws in the design of "immutable" laws.

The first problem with the BC story is that the two men could not have made all of the British circles and agriglyphs. In addition, there would be no way for them to have made the circles in other parts of the world. This problem with the claim is easily circumvented by noting that BC are only two of the army of hoaxers who might have been at work. This might also explain why characteristics of circles vary somewhat between sites.

The next question to be addressed is whether or not BC really made the circles at all. This problem is not trivial, and it seems that it has not been fully resolved. When the media first covered the story, BC had been filmed before, during and after the creation of an agriglyph. Terence Meaden, Colin Andrews and Pat Delgado were each shown to make pronouncements of authenticity at some circle sites, though later explained that they had been pressured for a quick response by the media at the time. But nearly everyone who viewed the single agriglyph made by BC in front of the cameras agreed that the site was sloppy and "suspicious".

Although the numbers of circles claimed made by BC started out at 1000 or more, the figure has been pared down to a more reasonable 100 or 200. Even this figure seems a bit high, but might be possible, if we allow BC to have a lot of energy and several years to work on their technique. On (the National Geographic's) Explorer TV show in November, other hoaxers were shown to take considerable planning in order to produce a complex in complete darkness before the cameras (not done by BC). Even so, they were seen by a chance witness, and when a cerealogist was called in for his opinion, it was dubbed a hoax without much delay.

The source of the story is a bit of a problem as well. The tabloid which initially broke the hoax story had earlier ran a story that suggested ancient Sumerians were communicating with humans through the circles. Investigation by cerealogists found that the story had been generated through a "public relations" firm called Maiden Bridge Farm. MBF was operated by a husband and wife who had an unlisted telephone number (a bit odd for a PR firm) and which was disconnected shortly after they were located by the cerealogists. It seems that MBF paid some money to BC to come forward with their claims, contacted the tabloid to get a reporter's interest, then backed out of the picture. This immediately aroused the interest of conspiracy theorists, who suggested that the MoD or a subversive group had deliberately set cerealogists up for a fall. Although a plausible scenario, there is of course no hard evidence for the theory.

The most frustrating thing about the whole affair is that it should be very easy to settle the arguments about BC's involvement. It would appear to be a simple task: get BC to give accurate descriptions of all the sites for which they were responsible, including dates, locations, type of crop, etc. As far as I have been able to determine through reading the latest cerealogy journals and letters from my British colleagues, this has not been done. The closest that has been accomplished is a series of verbal, heated debates between BC and agitated cerealogists in the media.

However, the damage has been done. Cerealogists have been "burned" by some hoaxers, and the media have been warned away from the phenomenon. But what will the future bring?

The Canadian Connection

In mid-summer of 1991, Gordon Kijek and the Alberta UFO Study Group (AUFOSG) were prepared for an upcoming season of UFO investigations. Earlier in the year, Gord had asked me to assist in the formation of the group, and I had sent him some information about ufology groups and their operation. In August, Gord called me to tell me that a circle formation had been discovered near Lethbridge. He was unsure of how to investigate the site, but I gave a few of my ideas and wished him luck. Gord has seemed to be an able researcher, and I was confident that he would have the matter under control. Soon, he called me about his findings and the news that other sites had been found. The deluge had started.

Less than ten sites were reported in Alberta. One was a remarkable agriglyph (the first of such in North America) which received considerable media attention. Others were single circles, quadruplets, and triplets. One site near Okotoks was judged immediately suspicious by AUFOSG because it appeared that the centers of the circles had been disturbed; a speculated method of producing fake circles involves using a stake at the center of an inscribed circle using a chain to mark the circumference.

It is interesting to note that in 1990, there were circles reported throughout Western Canada, except in Alberta. But in 1991, the only province with circles was Alberta. None of the Canadian circles during the previous years had any associated effects, though in 1991, the Alberta circles were said to cause headaches, equipment malfunctions and give rise too "eerie" sensations and noises. These effects parallel those reported in England by some cerealogists, and it was curious that they would be found one year and not the next. More curious was the fact that Gord Kijek is prone to migraines, and he experienced no problems when inside the circles. He also called me on his cellular phone from inside a circle, with no malfunctioning!

Do such effects really occur? Michael Strainic, reporting on the investigations of Chad Deetken on his trip to Alberta, wrote an excellent article for the MUFON Journal which detailed Deetken's findings. Deetken has a different research perspective than that of AUFOSG, including his investigation style. For example, in 1990, Deetken visited some circle sites in Saskatchewan; during his time there, he decided to camp overnight in a circle. In the middle of the night, Deetken reported a "feeling of terror" which overcame him, and he bolted from the site. He had earlier documented how the area was permeated with some sort of "energy". Not surprisingly, when he decided to sleep overnight in one of the 1991 Alberta circles, he experienced "tension" and "dizziness" during the night, as did his companions.

Although suggesting that "paranormal effects" were associated with the Alberta circles, Strainic also noted that such effects were not often found. Indeed, compass needles were said to operate normally, as did recording equipment and cameras taken to sites. Strainic noted that anecdotal reports of animal effects at circles were common, according to Deetken. But this was not the case in Manitoba, and such reports were not made to AUFOSG in the Alberta cases.

One interesting series of effects involved microwave ovens which were said to have malfunctioned, including one which was said to have turned itself on. AUFOSG members as well as Deetken all checked into these reports, though there was admittedly no confirming evidence of these events.

So, what happened in Alberta? There exist two disparate investigation records of the circle sites. AUFOSG found virtually no evidence of "paranormal effects", physiological effects or equipment malfunctions at sites, but Deetken did. It is likely that each investigator's inherent biases played significant roles in the interpretation of data. Michael Strainic's fascinating report is of great use to other researchers in the analyses of crop circle data, because it parallels the British experience. In this way, we can better understand the British situation, and how cerealogy may be operating in that country.

Radioactivity?

Recently, it has been claimed that several crop circles are radioactive. Specifically, it has been reported that soil samples taken from two British circles and some from recent American sites have significantly-higher levels of radioactivity than control samples from the same areas. Further, this radioactivity has been traced to higher-than-normal levels of activity caused by certain rare, radioactive elements such as Europium, Ytterbium and Rhodium. If true, than this certainly speaks for the creation of crop circles by aliens and utterly invalidates any other theory, including hoaxing.

The claims are made by Michael Chorost and Marshall Dudley in a MUFON paper. Advance notice of their claims is already in circulation, and many people are very excited about their findings. Mike sent me a copy of a draft and called me to discuss the writeup, in case I had some comments. As I read the paper, I had some of my own reservations, but I decided to take the paper to show two friends who are physicists at the University of Manitoba. They were less than impressed, to say the least. However, I persisted (read: I annoyed them) until they described exactly what they were doubtful about.

My own reservations concerned the sampling techniques and the small amount of data upon which to base a claim. Also, I was worried that there had not been any testable theory posed in advance of finding the data. The Manitoba physicists found more problems in the physical attributes. Very rare radioactive elements had been discovered through a comparison of peaks on a readout of an energy spectrum produced by an analysis of the soil samples. Such peaks were not present in the control sample readouts. Because of the difficulty in producing these artificial elements, Chorost and Dudley devote much of their paper to ways in which deuterium (an energetic particle) bombardment of the soil could create the rare elements. In the end, they concluded that this deuterium bombardment was responsible for the presence of the radioactivity, and that such a beam may have also have been related to the formation of the circles themselves, though how and why is unknown. They actually don't say that a UFO was responsible, although this could be read into their report.

However, the finding of these elements is not only strange, it is downright impossible (uh-oh, I'm sounding like Donald Menzel). The reason is that if a deuterium bombardment did occur, then many other elements would have been found as well. For example, even weak activation of soil by deuterons (or protons, for that matter) will create Cobalt-56 out of Iron-56. Since there is a lot more Iron in soil than Ytterbium, the radioactive Cobalt would be definitely found. Since it wasn't, deuterium bombardment probably did not occur. An analogy is this: suppose you went into a someone's room and found a few gold-coloured coins on the floor. You could see them as evidence that the room's occupant was a bank robber, because of the "loot" scattered about. But if this were true, where would all the other types of money be, like dollar bills and bonds? And what if the coins turned out to be wrapped chocolate?

Dudley and Chorost do caution that more intensive research and more thorough surveys of fields are required for comparative data. It may be that the distribution of elements in the soil just happens to be high in that particular area. Another source of possible error is in the interpretation of the energy peaks and the checking of an energy table. In fact, using the standard energy table, we found several other elements that should have been created in the deuterium bombardment, but

were not mentioned.

Greg Kennedy, a circle researcher from Quebec, found the claims of radionuclides in crop circle samples to be unsupported by the data. If radiation was found, he noted, it certainly did not come from the "deuteron beam" suggested by the American cerealogists. It's possible that some sort of exotic combination of elements were somehow in the soil samples, but it was just as possible that the samples were contaminated in some way. Greg tested samples of the Alberta circles given to him by Mike Strainic from Chad Deetken. No anomalies were found. He also has been looking at samples from other Alberta circles which originated from Gord Kijek. Now, if there are no radionuclides in the Alberta samples, it does not necessarily negate the American results (of the British cases). It could mean: a) the Alberta circles are fakes; b) the British circles were hoaxes; c) a different "beam" created the Alberta circles; d) the testing was inconsistent; or e) somebody screwed up. But who? I think the only way to resolve this is to get several independent labs (and I wouldn't hesitate to get Phil Klass involved here) to test the same samples for comparative analyses. Along with this would be a standardization of experimental cerealogy. And there are a number of procedures that would probably satisfy most skeptics.

What I suggested to Mike was the following experiment. First, postulate that a deuteron (or proton) bombardment will cause some observed effects. Take samples from inside and outside a circle site. Test them on the same instrument. Record your results. Next, send the same samples to a different lab without passing on your data or findings. While the second lab is analyzing the samples, recalibrate your instrument. Obtain a new set of samples, with a different control sample, and analyze this new set using the same procedure. Have the other lab repeat its steps and test the new set of samples. Then, you'll have four sets of data for comparison. Look specifically for certain elements. Cobalt-56 is a standard test element. Check for Iron, Magnesium, Sodium, then Lead, Strontium, etc. If there are significant differences found (and I would use an alpha of about 0.05), then you have something that you can point to and say: "This needs further examination!"

Sure, it's a long procedure, but remember, what you're trying to do is prove an external mechanism for the creation of crop circles, which are already widely assumed to be caused by hoaxers. The skeptics have already launched their arguments against the reality of the crop circle phenomenon; Dennis Stacy sent me a preprint of an article in the Skeptical Inquirer on this topic.

Another reason why so much care needs to be taken is that in all the history of UGMs (unidentified ground markings), "saucer nests" and "UFO landing sites", a very, very small number had any associated radioactivity. Cerealogists often argue that crop circles are different from other UGMs, but it should be obvious that they are really quite similar. Crop circles are kinds of UGMs, and the link with UFOs definitely exists. Bower and Chorley claim they even got the idea for their artistic endeavours from the Tully "saucer nests" of the 1960's. It would be rather odd for UGMs to suddenly be laced with radioactivity; it is more likely that cerealogists are frenetically searching for evidence to show that crop circles are unlike other UGMs, and believe that they have found the radiation as their proof.

Now, much to my wife's consternation, I do have some radioactive soil safely stored in a cement container in my house. It came from the Michalak site, from the "saucer nest" found near Falcon Lake in 1967. The area was so radioactive that the Government closed the area for health concerns at the time. Nuclear waste dumps were checked, and Michalak went to a nuclear research establishment for testing. For many years, it was widely assumed that the radiation was either due to a clever "seeding" of the area with radium particles by a hoaxer, or was actually caused by a spacecraft with a leaky reactor. However, recent tests sponsored by UFORDM gave another interpretation: that the radiation came from natural uranium ore, and the odd peaks found in the energy spectrum came from byproducts of radon, a gas.

But, of course, things are not quite that simple. This latest interpretation requires that researchers at a major government nuclear research establishment failed to recognise the peaks as being due to natural uranium and radon. While this is possible, one can wonder what other mistakes might have occurred, and what were their consequences?

Circle Roundup: After Granum, Alberta, near the beginning of September, there were no more Canadian UGMs reported. In the United States, there were cases reported in North Dakota, New York, Kansas, and the noted case near Argonne. However, summertime down under has produced a new crop of circles and UFO reports in Australia. Reports of "over 100" circles on the island continent are making headlines as I write these notes. Here in North America, we wait for springtime to see what might occur.

From the Mailbag: Laurence Sokoloff, whom some have likened to an alien, sends me obscure articles he comes across during his literary endeavours. His latest came from Paris Match for 12 Decembre 1991, with the accompanying note: "Chris - This article is about French scientist Jean-Pierre Petit, who maintains that startling scientific discoveries have been revealed to him by aliens from the planet UMMO, located about 15 light-years from Earth. His book on the subject, Inquiry into the Aliens Who Are Already Among Us, has become a best-seller in France. Of course, these are people who like Jerry Lewis." Thanks for the article, Larry!

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Snailmail et al

It would be difficult to list every missive I have received over the past 6 months, and downright dangerous. More than a few people have pored through previous LOCs and WAHFs in previous issues and complained that I missed their names. If it happens, it's an accident, really! However, let me throw caution to the wind and comment on a few letters.

Len Stringfield sent me his latest Status Report VI (thanx, Len!); it is a very readable survey of current crash-retrieval stories, ranging from Roswell to Carp to Christian Page's "alien" photo from Montreal. Christian, by the way, is rapidly emerging as one on Canada's finest ufologists, with the added dimension of contributing UFO info from French Canada which was generally inaccessible until recently. Mike Strainic and Lorne Goldfader in BC have been contributing cases and other info to my Canadian UFO Survey. Mike's article in MUFON about Chad Deetken's circle expeditions has already been commented upon.

John Schuessler has sent me his UFO Potpourri; Bonnie Wheeler sent along her Cambridge UFO Research Group Newsletter (honestly, Bonnie, what is your xerox bill?); Bob Girard's Arcturus Book Service Catalog is worth reading just for his annotations!

A special thanks goes out to John Salter, who continues to document his fascinating experiences and keep his close friends abreast of the latest (TV makes you look thinner, John!). MUFON rep Eric Aggen publishes UFO Paradox occasionally, and it is usually chock full of interesting Lazar or alien tech stories. I am proud to say that I am among the non-subscribers to Saucer Smear, published by James Moseley. Where else can you read a running tirade between believers and skeptics, with barely a hint of sarcasm? Jim is definitely worthy of his title, Supreme Commander! Smear is absolutely essential to any fortean's reading.

As for cerealogy, Paul Fuller's Crop Watcher and Pat Delgado's CPR Newsletter are the two circlezines I receive most regularly. Coming from two different "camps", they provide complementary (and often discordant) views on the British circle scene. I would like to note that Jenny Randles has resumed her exchange of Northern UFO News with SGJ, which was interrupted by a span of 10 years. Ah, but that was back in the days of UFOSIS ...

As I am not a paying member of MUFON, I only get its Journal intermittently. However, Walt Andrus and Dennis Stacy have both been corresponding with me and we have been sending things back and forth throughout the year. Dennis sent me a draft of an anti-cerealogy article from an upcoming Skeptical Inquirer, and asked me for a few comments and ammunition for his response to CSICOP. Oddly, my package to him was returned unopened. MIB? CIA? M-O-U-S-E ...

Eric Herr in San Diego is compiling a list of physical trace cases that support his magnetic propulsion system theory. John Musgrave has moved to BC, and has been somewhat quiet of late. (How's trix, John?) What can I say about Paul Cuttle, the intrepid fortean who keeps Canada Post in business? I wish I had the time to track down all the material you find, Paul!

As an experiment, I have been encouraged to offer the SGJ as a textfile in the UFO International echo, available on computer BBS's. If it doesn't work, I would like to thank the people who post me or netmail me with info. Linda Bird in Arizona has been very helpful in providing info on UGMs down her way. And her pix of the "Starthenon" are out of this world! Dark skies, Linda! Sheldon Wernikoff, a BBS regular, has thankfully snailmailed me some stuff to save a lot of typing. His access and interest in circles is a significant contribution to the field. I must thank Harsha Godaveri who got me onto the BBS's in the first place, and who uploaded my disks until my feeble system was up and running. The bad news is, Harsha, I've contracted three different viruses since being on the BBS's, and I'm going to give up until it gets a bit safer. I don't want to lose another hard drive!

Michael Chorost has been keeping me abreast of his detailed work on circles, including his catalogues of cases and his articles in various journals. Similarly, another MUFON contributor, Vince Migliore of California, has sent along his comments about the circle scene. I have had many letters from people along the lines of: "please send me everything you have about crop circles and/or UFOs". Sorry, but I don't send more than three filing cabinets at a time through the mail.

It is fascinating to receive information from researchers with differing viewpoints; the "alien technologists", the "Lear/Cooper" camp, the "nuts-and-bolts" theorists, the "plasma vortex" theorists, the mystics, the contactees, the debunkers, etc. It has always been my philosophy and approach to the field that the only way to get an adequate understanding of the phenomena is to examine all (both) sides of the arguments, no matter how esoteric or stoic. A pet peeve of mine is the preponderance of new "experts" who lack any kind of background in the genre. Circle researchers who have never studied other kinds of trace cases are one kind of irritant, as are ufologists who haven't done their homework and haven't bothered reading any of the historical literature that would shed light on their "new" cases. Until Bower and Chorley mentioned the Tully saucer nests, many cerealogists had never heard of the case. Similarly, "plasma vortex experts" sometimes scratch their heads when told of Phil Klass' articles in AW&ST, or of Persinger's TST. Actually, I think one problem is the overwhelming amount of information that has been published on the subject during the last forty or fifty years. Chester Cuthbert, the Canadian expert on the paranormal, also has one of the largest collections of science fiction literature. He told me that when he began collecting SF, it was possible to get everything published during the course of a year. Then, when SF actually became popular and it went commercial, he couldn't keep up, so he had to specialize. One of his "specializations" back then was flying saucer literature, which sprang out of SF literature. But by the late 1950's, saucer literature was blossoming and it started to become difficult to collect even this small field. The situation has progressed to the point where UFOlit is nearly impossible to collect in its entirety. A single one of Bob Girard's catalogs now contains more titles than were ever published a mere 20 years ago! (In the Seventies!) Even with the help of compilers like George Eberhart, getting a complete overview of the UFO or circle field is not easy, and it's not getting any better. Vanity presses continue to churn out accounts of contact with the space brothers; collecting only Billy Meier material could send you into the poorhouse in a year!

Miscellanea

A number of interesting books of note have been added to the UFOROM library, among them: Angels and Aliens by Keith Thompson (1991); UFOs Over Canada by John Robert Colombo (1991); The Algonquin Experiments by James Penman Rae (1978); UFO Report 1992 edited by Timothy Good (1991); and Things That Go Bump in the Night by Emily Peach (1991).

Colombo's latest tome is a collection of anecdotal accounts, all in the first person, of UFO sightings in Canada over two centuries. The lack of the investigation reports of the cases gives it more of a folkloric approach to the subject rather than an overview such as the earlier UFO Sightings, Landings, Abductions by Yurko Bondarchuk. Nevertheless, it provides a refreshing viewpoint of the witnesses' own interpretations of their experiences, and is a worthwhile read.

On a different topic, it looks like the infamous Carp UFO crash/retrieval is not quite dead. Len Stringfield included comments about the matter by Clive Nadin, Christian Page and myself in his latest Status Report. I continue to get the latest ravings from its originator(s), including ramblings about Red China taking over the world and how the Brotherhood will protect the Holy Grail and save us from the aliens. The accompanying photos are mostly blurry, though one shows a guy in a bad alien mask. Sad, sad. We have been able to show that the packages are mailed from Ottawa/Hull, so the suspicion falls on UFO buffs in that area.

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A special note to Canadian readers: it's time once again for the annual Canadian UFO Survey! Send just your report data to the address below for inclusion in the yearly case roundup. And while you're at it, some of you (Americans included here!) have not provided details of UGMs and crop circles for the annual NAICCR report. Tsk. They're waiting for you!

Thanks to all who provide data or otherwise contribute to the information exchange in ufology, cerealogy or forteana. You are the reason progress continues to be made in these fields!

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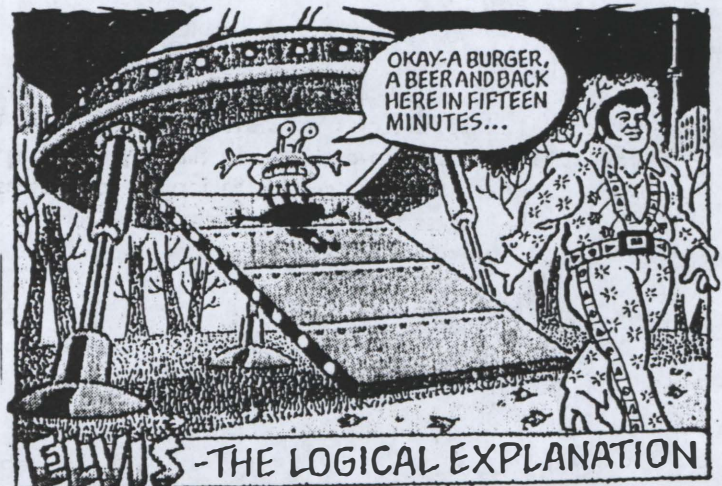
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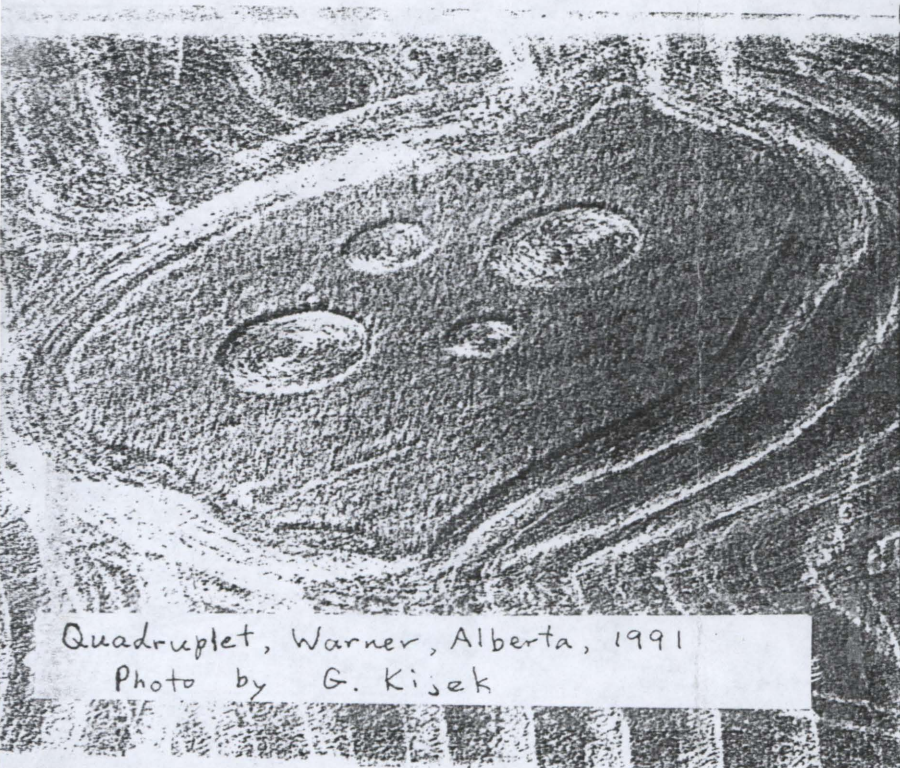
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Vicki was 6 lbs 14 1/2 oz and arrived during a blizzard!

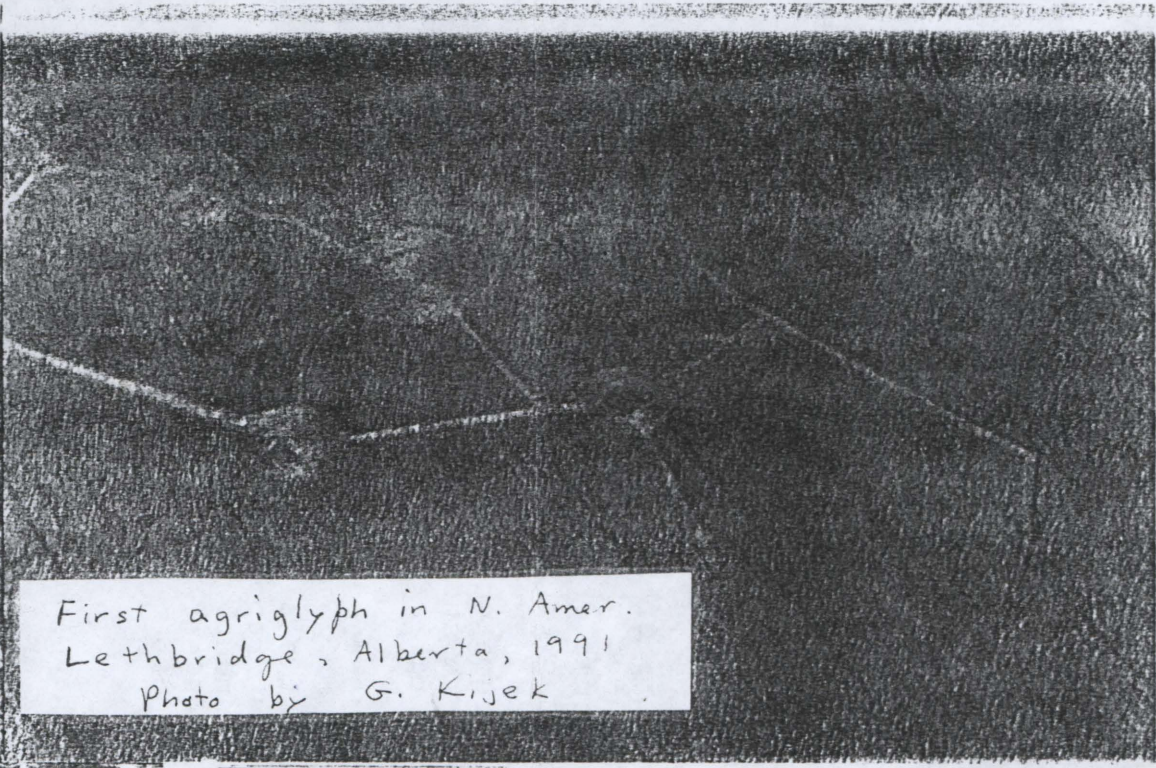
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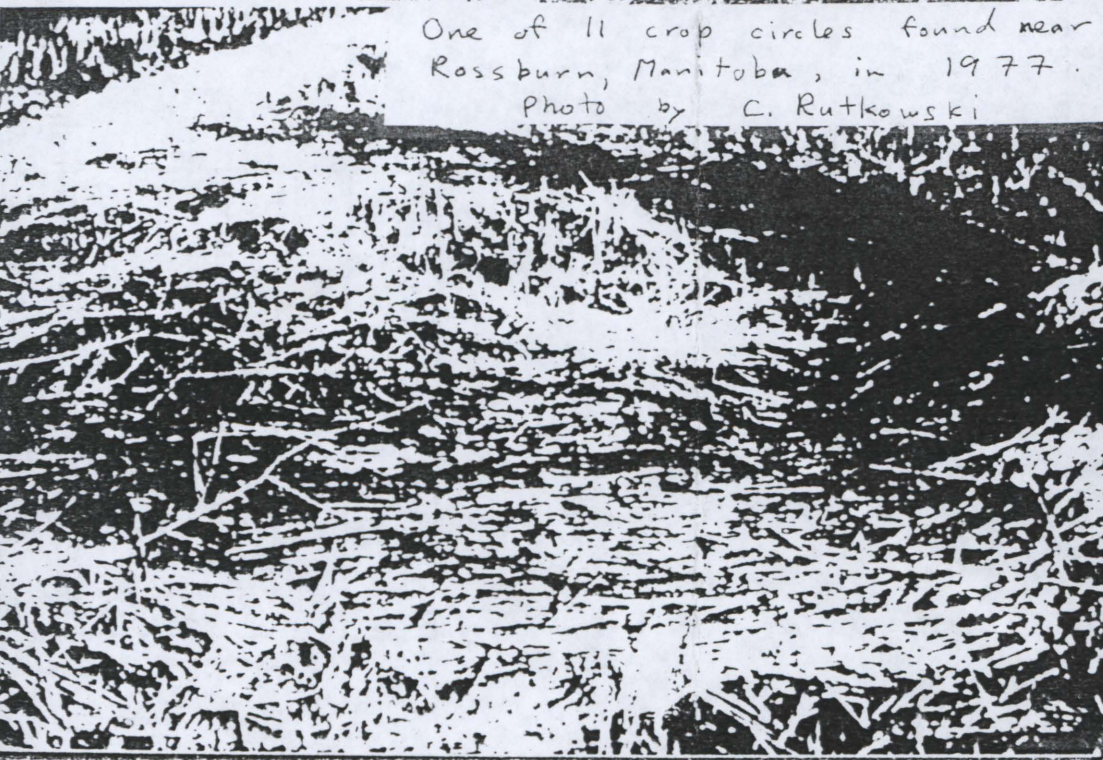




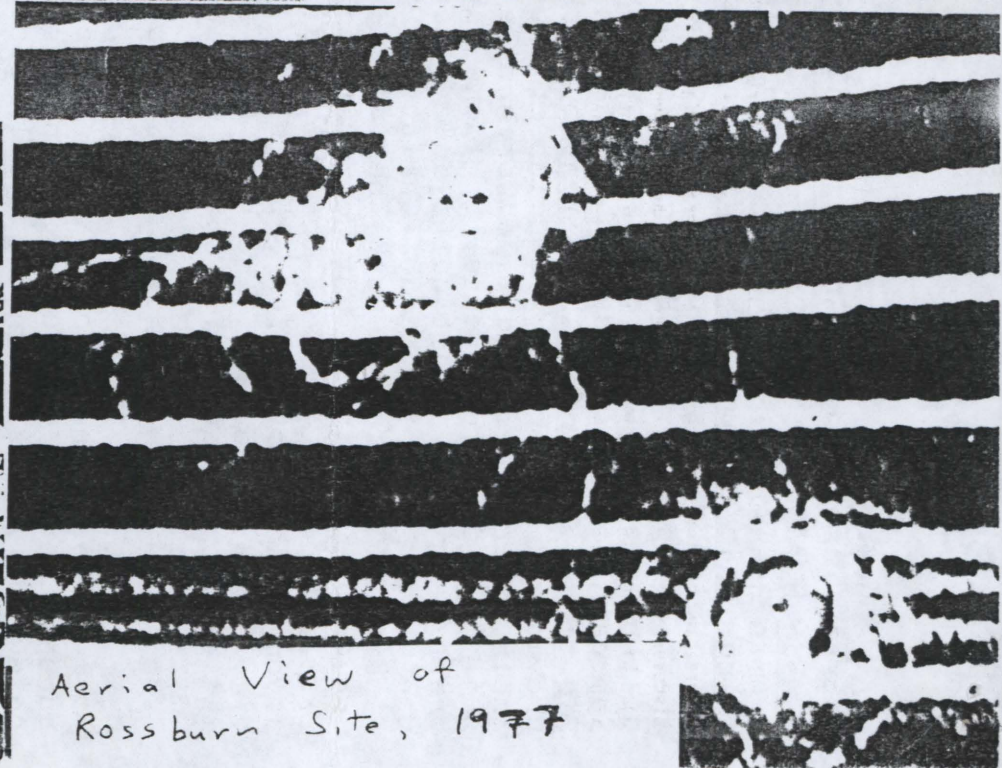
Quadruplet, Warner, Alberta, 1991
Photo by G. Kijek



First agriglyph in N. Amer.
Lethbridge, Alberta, 1991
Photo by G. Kijek



One of 11 crop circles found near
Rossburn, Manitoba, in 1977.
Photo by C. Rutkowski



Aerial View of
Rossburn Site, 1977