

Verbose encounters at Giant Rock

► 'Cosmic Awareness & New Age Expo' in Palm Springs celebrates a belief in friendly visits by aliens from outer space.

By Mark Henry
The Press-Enterprise

LANDERS

Long before the aliens of "Independence Day" destroyed the White House, some people believe a spaceship touched down on a far different mission near the high-desert community of Landers.

As the story goes, flight-test engineer George Van Tassel was beamed aboard ship the night of Aug. 24, 1953 — not to become the subject of nasty experiments, but to receive a gift designed to benefit all mankind.

More than 40 years after Van Tassel's account helped launch the New Age movement, the public's continued fascination with UFOs has reached new heights with "Independence Day," a blockbuster film that turns E.T. into a villain.

While the science-fiction thriller has wowed audiences, many "true believers" say the film capitalizes on our fear of the unknown and misconstrues the nature of visitors from outer space.

"I haven't seen the movie yet," said Landers resident Matthew Boone, a grandson of Van Tassel, who died in 1978. "I don't like negative publicity about my friends."

Boone says he'll join hundreds of other people this weekend at the "Cosmic Awareness & New

Age Expo" in Palm Springs, which is billed as a celebration of 50 years of close encounters in the Southern California desert.

The conference, which continues through tomorrow at the Palm Springs Marquis Hotel, features UFO pioneers and a keynote speech by Robert Wise, director of the 1951 science-fiction classic "The Day the Earth Stood Still," says conference organizer Tim Beckley. Workshop topics will range from alien autopsies and shamanism to UFO healings and various prophetic teachings.

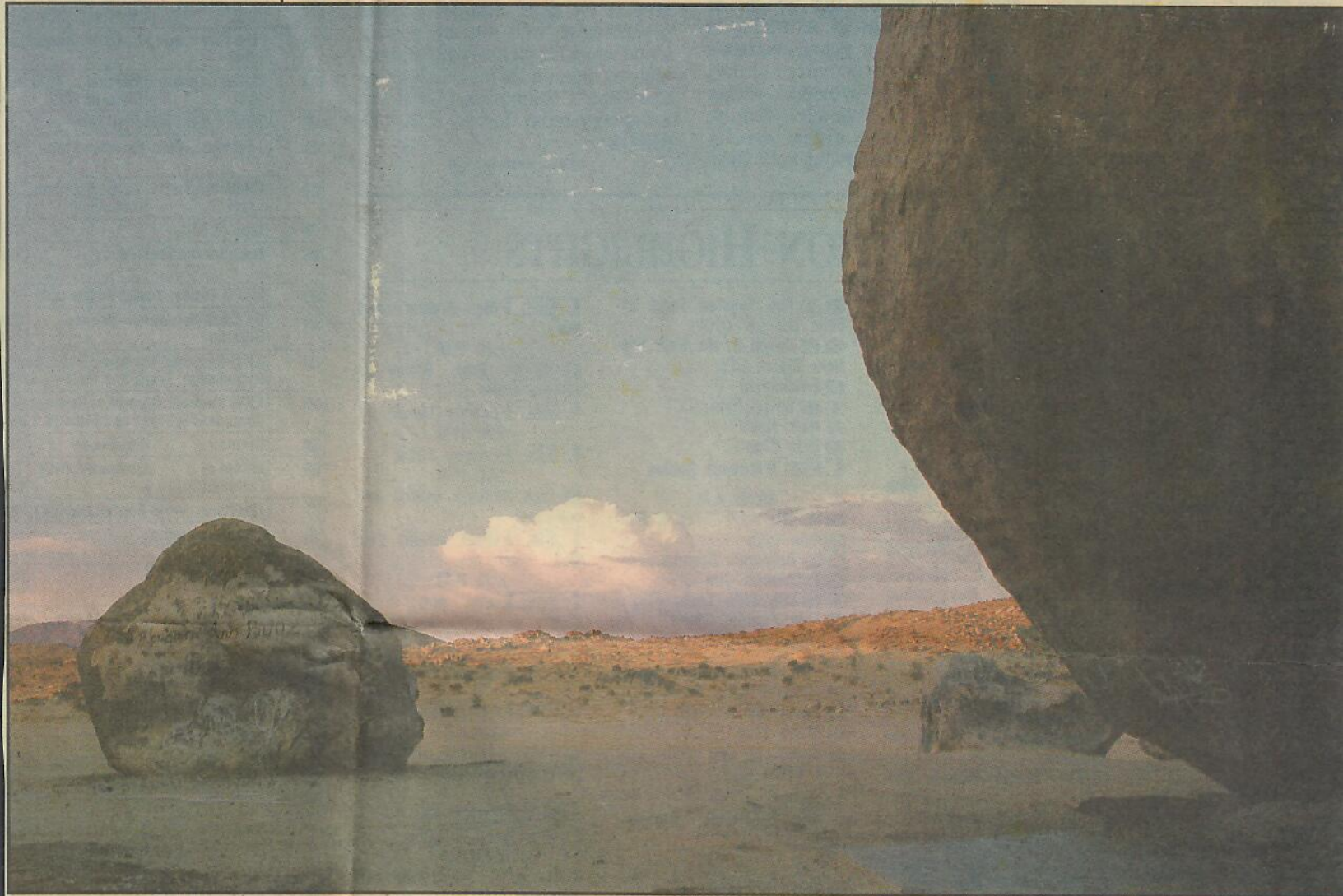
Guests also are invited to meditate with "Max," billed as a 36,000-year-old crystal skull brought to Earth as a gift from space astronauts, adds Beckley, an author and editor of UFO-related magazines.

The weekend gathering comes at a time of great public interest in the paranormal or in science fiction, as evidenced by the popularity of "The X-Files" on Fox Television, the never-ending "Star Trek" movies and television shows and the debut of NBC's "Dark Skies" this fall.

Wise, who won Oscars for best picture and best director for "West Side Story" in 1961 and "Sound of Music" in 1965, remains skeptical of the more outlandish reports of alien encounters and alleged government coverups. But Wise says he grew up reading science-fiction magazine stories about flying saucers and is fascinated by accounts of visitors from outer space.

"I've always been a believer in UFOs," the 82-year-old director says. "For us to think we're the only possible intelligence in the universe is the biggest ego trip possible."

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Photos by Andy Rogers / The Press-Enterprise

A view from Giant Rock, where George Van Tassel held UFO conventions for 17 years.

He believes the popularity of "The Day the Earth Stood Still" stemmed in part from the story taking place at well-known American landmarks, such as Washington, D.C.

But unlike the creatures depicted in "Independence Day," the benign alien in Wise's film does not destroy the White House but warns earthlings to start getting along and stop risking nuclear war. Some viewers drew parallels between his film and the Christ story, Wise adds.

Gabriel Green, a Yucca Valley resident and president of the Amalgamated Flying Saucer Clubs of America, says "The Day the Earth Stood Still" offers a more accurate depiction based on his own experiences and contacts with extraterrestrials.

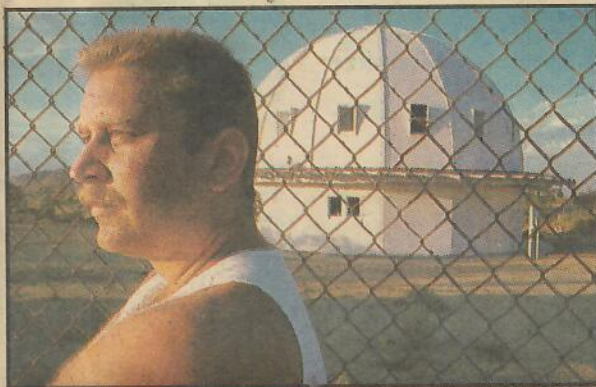
"'Independence Day' is going to raise consciousness although people in our movement who know better say it gives a distorted view," he says.

Green, 71, says he addressed all but one of the annual UFO conventions that Van Tassel sponsored from 1954 to 1971 at Giant Rock, about 35 miles north of Palm Springs.

As many as 10,000 people would show up at Van Tassel's private airstrip — not far from where he says the spaceship landed in 1953 — to hear UFO experts tell of face-to-face meetings and sightings with benevolent beings, Green recalls.

"It was not just to entertain ourselves," he says. "It was to gain knowledge of the universe."

Hundreds also visited a dome-shaped building about three miles away called the Integratron that Van Tassel built supposedly using



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Matthew Boone, pictured outside the Integratron, which his grandfather says he built from plans designed by extraterrestrials



A scene from "Independence Day."

20th Century

a formula given to him by the space visitor in 1953.

The Integratron was designed to create an electromagnetic field to eliminate old age, but needs another visit by the same being to activate the formula, according to Van Tassel's grandson.

Even so, many visitors say they experience a strong energy ema-

nating from the structure. The Landers Chamber of Commerce still gets several calls each week from people asking directions to the Integratron and Giant Rock, and private planes and helicopters occasionally land at the deserted airstrip.

Green says he continues to support UFO and New Age confer-

ences because they give new generations of young people information they need to expand their consciousness.

"Instead of wanting to be cowboys and Indians, they'll want to be spacemen," Green says. "I already know what 'beaming' and 'beaming down' is from watching 'Star Trek.'"



A sketch made by Matthew Boone of a UFO that he says he saw near his home in Landers