

West Linn Golden Spheres Display

An Oregon MUFON Case Study

by

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Abstract

Keywords: Clouds—Cluster—Spheres—Multiple UFOs Display—Golden

Description	A large display of golden spheres (100?) spiraled slowly vertically up and down in the setting sun on a showery day till obscured in the clouds.
Witnesses	Laura Fleming (pseudonym) and briefly two co-workers.
Date and Time	March 8, 2001, at about 5:30 PM PST.
Place	Outside a small West Linn, Oregon, strip mall near Walling Way and Highway 43.
Weather	Thick cumulus clouds with light rain earlier and then some clearing during the UFO sighting.
Duration	About 10 minutes total duration.

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INTRODUCTION

This case involves a very detailed display of anomalous, uniform, golden, shiny spheres up against a background of cumulus clouds with a low sun angle. The nearly ten minute duration allows for plenty of time to observe and evaluate to try to determine what the golden, shiny spherical objects were. The sheer number of objects almost certainly puts this sighting in the anomalous category.

Although we have only eyewitness testimony of the principal witness, Laura Fleming, we consider this case a reliable observation of an anomalous event. We have known the witness for over four years and believe her to be an intelligent and reliable witness in general and to this event in particular. She is very sincere in her convictions about the appearance and behavior of the UFO display she witnessed. We have no reason to doubt her sincerity or testimony in any regard.

Unfortunately, we were unable to contact either of the other two witnesses that Fleming mentioned as having at least briefly seen the UFO display. Fleming lost contact with one witness and the other failed to respond to our inquiries. This failure to respond is perhaps due to the disturbing nature of this spectacular UFO display. Sometimes when UFOs are too close or too spectacular, the mind simply cannot comprehend and, in effect, shuts down to varying degrees. In order for the personality to provide itself protection, it tries to avoid an anxiety-producing subject or event. This is sometimes evident in UFO cases. There is this possibility in this sighting.

SIGHTING NARRATIVE

Laura Fleming has very ably written up a narrative of her sighting and we quote her here (with slight editing). Editorial comments are inserted in brackets. See *Figure 1, Reconstruction of UFO Sighting by the Witness* and also *Figure 2, Illustration of Golden Spheres by the Witness*.

On Thursday, March 8, 2001, around 5:30 PM, Fleming stepped outside her place of work at a small strip mall in West Linn, Oregon. Her office was located on Highway 43, a main road running through West Linn with lots of traffic at that hour just after most workplaces had closed. The total sighting duration was about ten minutes.

. . . I [Laura Fleming] walked out of my office into the parking lot to look at the ominous cloud formations that had been massing that afternoon. A massive black cloud had been building for hours, and I was monitoring it to see what kind of storm it would produce. [KR: Weather data shows light rain tapering off by 5:30 PM, so the main front had passed through and turbulent cumulus rain show type clouds are not implausible.] In the foreground was a large, white cloud bank, low enough to give me an unobstructed view of the black cloud bank. Oddly enough, it was intensely sunny, despite the clouds. Our office . . . look out in a northeasterly direction As I looked at the huge, very dark cloud behind the shopping center [KR: another strip mall with a McDonald's restaurant.] across the street, I noticed a large number of objects hovering around in a kind of slow, corkscrew pattern. At first I thought it might be a huge flock of birds, but then realized they weren't moving like birds, and everything was at half-speed.

The objects appeared to be gold, metal balls, moving in slow motion, carefully avoiding each other as they hovered up and down. I estimated there to be about 100 of them, but I can't give an exact number. The orbs, or balls, were gathered in groups, moving along [three] paths. A column of orbs in the center moved up and down, like an elevator, while other orbs travelled around the column, corkscrewing their way up; a second group corkscrewed their way down, giving the appearance of an animated double-helix moving around the column of orbs. They appeared between the two cloud banks, and they must have been sizable for me to be able to discern them as balls and not birds or something else. They may have been over the Willamette River, a short distance away [KR: about one mile to the north]. It was an amazing display, but I can't imagine the purpose of the strange formation.

I was awe-struck; I watched for 30 seconds or so, and then called for my office mates to come see the swarm. Two co-workers came out—everyone else was gone—and I asked them what they

thought we were looking at. At first they seemed astonished, but then frightened, and couldn't really articulate what we were seeing. One went back inside, deciding he couldn't explain the sighting. The other person sort of shrugged and followed him into the building. Later, they both seemed unnerved and didn't want to discuss the event, even though I was very excited and curious.

I also had my two small dogs with me—they were allowed at work. They came out with me when I first noticed the orbs, but they seemed unconcerned. They are Pomeranians—one is particularly excitable, but they acted completely normal through the whole event. It was as though nothing was in the sky at all.

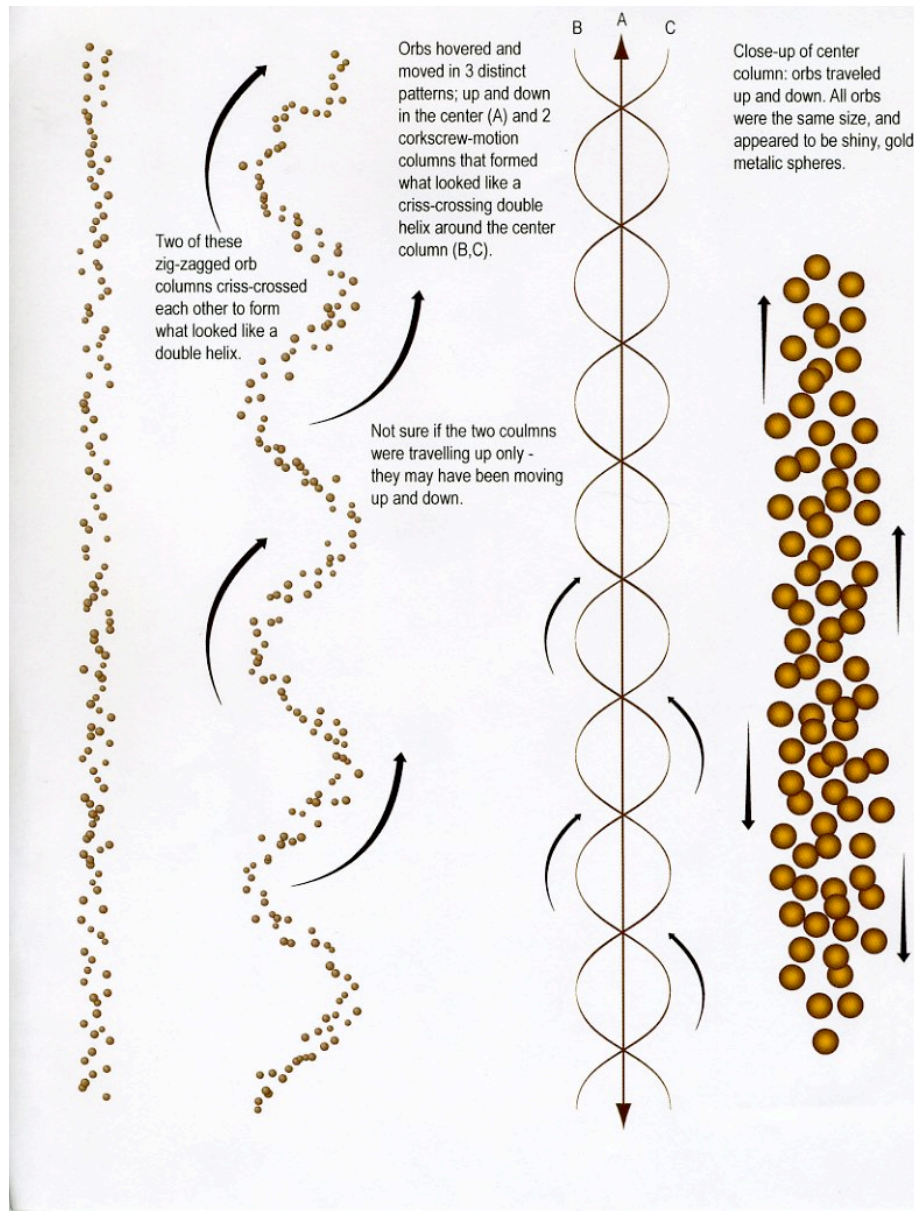


Source: Laura Fleming

Figure 1. Reconstruction of UFO Sighting by the Witness

This reconstruction of the sighting by the witness, Laura Fleming, consists of a photograph (taken later in 2003) from the sighting spot in the direction of the sighting. Clouds and the golden spheres UFO display are added to simulate what the event looked like to Fleming.

The balls appeared solid and opaque, with no wings or exhaust discernible. The only sound was of the traffic passing by, and I wasn't able to detect any sound from the orbs. (No one else seemed to notice! I figured someone would see the orbs and stop, but no one did.) The sun was very bright, not at all blocked, and the rays fully hit the spheres, making the sun reflect off of them as if they were metal. The sun made the cloud behind the orbs particularly dark, and one could not see through it. This event lasted about 10 minutes, until all the orbs had drifted into cloud cover



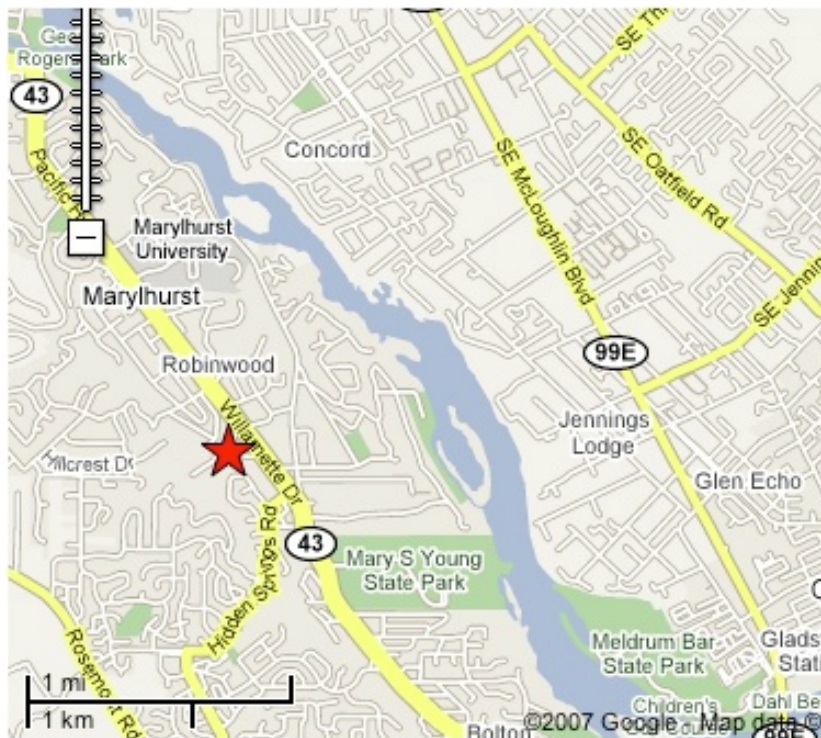
Source: Laura Fleming

Figure 2. Illustration of Golden Spheres by the Witness

This excellent illustration by Fleming shows the golden spheres display in detail. (Fleming is a graphic artist by profession.) Note the active movement of the spheres within their basic linear and spiral structures.

ENVIRONMENT

The greater area of Fleming's sighting consists of mixed residential and small business concerns with two major traffic arteries: Highway 43 (Willamette Drive) on the west side of the Willamette River and Highway 99E (SE McLoughlin Blvd.) on the east side of the Willamette River. Note that there are a number of car dealerships along Highway 99E and they do frequently use party type balloons with occasionally larger ones. The significance of this is discussed in more detail in the *Evidence* section later. There are no major industrial companies in this area nor any military or other large governmental installations. Marylhurst University and Mary S. Young State Park are nearby.



Source: Google Maps

Figure 3. West Linn, Willamette River, and Milwaukie, Oregon

The (red) star marks the spot along Highway 43 (Willamette Drive) in West Linn from which Fleming's UFO display was observed. Note the Willamette River and across it, farther east, the town of Milwaukie, Oregon. Along SE McLoughlin Blvd from Glen Echo south to beyond the 99E sign north are numerous car dealerships that sometimes use multiple balloons anchored outside on and near their cars to attract attention. See the Analysis section of this Case Study.

Neighborhood

In the immediate surroundings of the sighting spot are many family residences with some apartments and a number of small business in the small strip malls along Highway 43. From the sighting spot, the view off to the north, northeast, and east is unrestricted except for some 50 to 100 foot tall trees about 300 to 400 feet away. The buildings in the “Starbucks” strip mall across Highway 43 are around 30 feet or so. Highway 43 (Willamette Drive) is a heavily traveled road between Portland and Lake Oswego, and Oregon City/Milwaukie across the Willamette River to the east.



Source: Google Maps

Figure 4. Sighting Area

The (red) star marks the sighting spot in the small strip mall that Fleming worked at. She stepped outside at 5:30 PM and saw a UFO display of many small, golden sphere rotating around each other. This was in the direction of the Starbucks coffee shop noted in (red) letters. A McDonald's fast food restaurant is directly across the street noted also in (red) letters.

Weather

On March 8, 2001 at 5:30 PM, the weather in the West Linn, Oregon, area was breaking up overcast with building cumulus clouds right after a frontal system had gone through. The winds were light at around ten mph out of the south. The visibility was 10 miles. The cumulus clouds provided a dramatic backdrop for the sighting, especially since the sun was setting and was apparently illuminating the shiny anomalous spheres making them golden in appearance.

EVIDENCE

The UFO evidence in this case consists solely of the following:

- Witness Laura Fleming's testimony.

Other environmental evidence is discussed, too.

Testimony

Keith Rowell interviewed Laura Fleming on April 7, 2007, at her home. Douug Hartley also interviewed Fleming

Fleming is an articulate and reliable witness. This is shown by her precision in describing what she saw and by her many years of friendly and helpful interaction with the investigators. (Laura has consistently supported Oregon MUFON with her willingness to volunteer her time, money, and expertise.) Laura has readily cooperated with both Doug Hartley and Keith Rowell in our investigation of her sighting. Her descriptions of her UFO sighting are especially clear and well thought out. We have no reason to doubt the truth of any of her communications with us. She is simply being honest and straightforward about a puzzling experience.

Fleming mentioned two other witnesses to the sighting, but, regrettably, we were not able to contact either of them. So, we were not able to get their possible corroboration of events described by Fleming. However, we feel confident that Fleming's descriptions reflect the reality of a truly anomalous UFO-type display at the time and place she specified.

Environmental Numbers

Some numbers that help us below in the *Analysis* section are the following.

According to an astronomy program, the sun on March 8, 2001 at 5:30 PM in West Linn, Oregon, was at an azimuth of 257° and an elevation of 5° above the horizon. Also, the sun set at 6:07 PM that day.

Balloons and Car Dealerships

Many car dealerships do business across the Willamette River in Milwaukie, Oregon, along Highway 99E (SE McLoughlin Blvd.). There are perhaps as many as ten dealerships situated along 99E to the north-east and east of Fleming's West Linn UFO sighting spot. Many of these dealerships use party balloons and sometimes more heavy duty balloons similar to party balloons of red, white, blue, black, etc., colors. See *Figure 5, Typical Large Party Balloon Cluster*.

A broken loose cluster of party balloons could conceivably be the source of the stimulus for Fleming's UFO. The balloons would have to be golden, white, or shiny, silvery (Mylar®) to produce what she saw. Investigator Keith Rowell drives by these car dealerships at least two or three times weekly (since he lives nearby in West Linn) and he has never noticed golden or silvery balloons. He has seen white, however, along with blue, red, and black occasionally. He has also seen clusters of certainly 10 and perhaps as many as 20 to 30 balloon. Much beyond 10 or so is rare, however. He has also, once in his life, seen a broken loose car dealership balloon cluster floating away into the sky. He specifically kept his eyes on the balloons just to see how long he could maintain sight of the balloon cluster since he could easily do so because he was outside a business establishment on Highway 99E at the time. He lost sight of the balloon cluster within five minutes even though it was a calm, blue sky day. The balloons rose slowly in the sky as they simultaneously moved away into the distance.



Source: partymakerdiscountmegastore.com

Figure 5. Typical Party Balloon Large Cluster

About 50 to 75 balloons make up this typical bundled together large party balloon cluster. The cluster is about 40 to 50 feet in length. The balloons are tightly bound to each other. There movement relative to one another is slight at best. These kinds of balloon clusters have been sighted at car dealerships along Highway 99E, but are quite rare. (This example is taken from the Internet and was not found along Highway 99E.)

ANALYSIS

This case consists only of witness testimony and environmental facts gathered after the event. Some comments will be made regarding consistency of environmental and weather evidence. And the usual questions about UFO size, distance, speed, etc., are addressed here, but remain only guesses due to the lack of measurable parameters from the witness. However, a knowledge of the weather and environmental evidence will allow us to assert that the guesses are not just mere speculation.

Consistency with Environmental Facts

We found Fleming's testimony to be entirely consistent with environmental and weather-related facts gathered after the event. We would say that Fleming goes beyond the average witness in her observation skills because we found virtually no inconsistencies in her testimony and after-the-event facts.

UFO Distance

In this case, the UFO display was seen against some large cumulus clouds, but we have no measurements of how far away the cumulus clouds were, but a range of one half mile to five miles seems reasonable here. Visibility was 10 miles on this day. Fleming herself guesses that the UFO display was perhaps over the Willamette River to the north, which is about one mile away. *So we will assume that the UFO display was at first viewing about one mile away.*

UFO Altitude

Here again, we have no good observations from which we can make some specific measurements. However, we do have Fleming's excellent reconstruction illustration of the event. So, we will take that and make some measurements and calculations from that. See *Figure 1, Reconstruction of UFO Sighting by the Witness*.

We will assume that the optical axis of the camera is parallel to the ground (since it looks close to that in the photographic portion of Fleming's illustration). Let's calculate the angle of elevation of the top of the Starbucks roof above the horizon from the UFO viewing spot as shown in the *Figure 1, Reconstruction of UFO Sighting by the Witness*. The size of a six foot man judging from the door way into the Starbucks is 0.65 inches (26 pixels) in a measurement in Photoshop. The roof top is about 3 inches (112 pixels). By ratio and proportion, we have the roof top at 28 feet.

The distance from the UFO viewing spot (the camera's viewpoint) to the Starbucks roof top is about 250 feet from a Google Earth measurement. Thus, the angle of elevation of the Starbucks roof top from the viewing spot is about 6° by taking the arctangent of 28/250 feet. Knowing this angle with reasonable certainty, we will guesstimate an angle of elevation of about 20° to the center of the vertical dimension of the UFO display.

Using this 20° guesstimate and Fleming's guess of the UFO display being about one mile away, we can use a little trigonometry on right triangles and come up with an *altitude for the UFO display at around 2000 feet*.

UFO Size

We can get a ball park idea about UFO size again from Fleming's illustration, *Figure 1, Reconstruction of UFO Sighting by the Witness*. We know from measurements cited under *UFO Altitude* earlier that 6 feet high at 250 away is 26 pixels high in the illustration. By measurement from the illustration, Fleming's depictions of the individual UFOs is about 3 pixels. Assuming Fleming's guesstimate of one mile (5280 feet) for the UFO display and assuming proportionality for small angles, a six foot size object at 5280 feet should be depicted in Fleming's illustration as a 1.2 pixel size. Since she depicted her individual UFO spheres as around 3 pixels, we conclude that the individual UFO spheres making up the display were around 15 to 20 feet in diameter. This seems too big for something real in the sky in such huge numbers. This would surely be noticed by passersby you would think. Thus, we conclude that Fleming's UFO display was actually closer to her than a mile away. It was perhaps one half a mile away. This would make the UFO spheres around half the size at seven to ten feet in diameter.

As an aside it should be noted that investigator Keith Rowell has seen—and photographed and videotaped—spheroid cluster shaped UFOs in the West Linn/Lake Oswego area (see the Appaloosa Way UFO case) and he believes what he saw was something on the order of five to ten feet in size at the most in both cases. Investigator Doug Hartley has also videotaped in the Portland metro area a spheroid-shaped UFO and this was also something more on the order of three to five feet in size as a best guesstimate.

UFO Speed

Fleming says in her testimony about the UFO display that the total duration was around ten minutes. She does not say that the display changed in size either with respect to the spheres themselves making up the display as a whole or with respect to the total height or width of the display itself. In other words, the UFO display essentially did not change size or shape. But she says the UFO display simply "drifted" away into the clouds at the end. So, the UFO display was more or less stationary and had no speed with respect to the ground, or at the most moved only very slowly away from her.

In order to show that the UFO display was probably *not* the closest reasonable identification candidate—a cluster of balloons, consider the following.

Let's assume that the UFO display was an cluster of 100 or so party type balloons that broke loose from one of the car dealerships across the Willamette River on Highway 99E. We know from weather data for the date that the average wind speed right around 5:30 PM was about 8 mph from the SSW. (See *Ap-*

pendix A, Weather Data.) We also know from *Figure 4, Sighting Area* and *Figure 1, Reconstruction of the Sighting by the Witness* that Fleming saw the UFO off in the NNE direction. So, if the UFO stimulus was a cluster of party balloons it would be essentially moving directly away from her.

In ten minutes' time, the cluster of party balloons would have moved about 1.3 miles at 8 mph.

To get a ball park figure on the height of the UFO display, let's again assume the display was in fact a cluster of party balloons of about one foot diameter. Using Fleming's reconstruction illustration (*Figure 1, Reconstruction of the Sighting by the Witness*) and measuring pixel dimensions of the "balloons" and the total height we end up with a total height about about 75 feet.

We will assume that Fleming's illustration shows the closest distance that the display was from her at perhaps one mile away as she says (over the Willamette River to the north). Thus, we have the following conclusion if the UFO display was in fact a cluster of broken loose party balloons from a car dealership, we know that in ten minutes' time if the balloon cluster started out about a mile away, they would travel about another mile farther north. So, the apparent size of the balloon cluster from top to bottom would appear to shrink to about half the size it was at one mile away. Fleming, however, did not observe this shrinkage by at least one half its original size.

CONCLUSION

A good strategy for identifying a possible UFO is to propose a list of possible identifying objects or phenomena. Then a good faith effort is made to see how many of the typical identifying characteristics of known objects and phenomena do actually fit the facts developed in the presentation of the evidence and analysis of the UFO case. If too many of the identifying characteristics of known objects or phenomena are not a good enough fit, then the investigator is left with a reasonable "identification" of a case as a MUFON "unknown."

This case is an easy one because none of the reasonable identification candidates are very good fits at all. *We believe that this case should be "identified" as a MUFON "unknown."*

Possible Candidates for Identification

The most reasonable identification candidates are the following:

- **Balloons.** As indicated earlier in the *Evidence* section, there are many car dealerships to the east along Highway 99E that frequently use balloon displays to attract attention to their cars and trucks. One of these balloon clusters could have gotten loose. However, this is a rare occurrence in itself. Also, Fleming described around a hundred separate spheres making up the UFO display. The car dealership virtually never have this many balloons clustered together. In addition, the wind direction was from the SSW and Fleming was looking NNE so the broken loose balloon cluster would have had to travel against the wind over one mile to be NNE of Fleming. Also, Fleming did not describe a significant diminishing of the overall size of the display in a ten minute span of time and the balloons would travel on the wind at least a mile northward in that time. The golden color (silvery but reflecting the warm glow of a low sun) of the spheres is very unusual for car dealership balloons. The coup de grace, perhaps of the balloon hypothesis is the active movement of the spheres within the whole display. *Figure 2, Illustration of Golden Spheres by the Witness*, indicates that there was extensive movement of individual spheres up and down the vertical dimension of the UFO display. *For all of these reasons, the balloons hypothesis is rejected as an identification of Fleming's UFO display.*
- **Optical or Electrical Weather Phenomena.** Since the sun at a low angle shining on the scene is a significant part of this UFO display and since the weather was rainy that day, some sort of optical or possibly electrical weather phenomena being the stimulus of this UFO display seems at least remotely plausible. A standard field guide to North American weather (Ludlum's *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Weather*) was consulted. The following phenomena are noted:

1. *Rainbows*. There is not the slightest match here. Rainbows are multicolored. This UFO display was only golden. *This stimulus is rejected for lack of similarity.*
2. *Parahelia (sun dogs)*. This interesting optical effect consists of bright spots to the left and right of the sun at the same altitude. *Since the sun was off to Fleming's left, we reject this stimulus as an identification.*
3. *Halos*. This effect is a brightly shining ring surrounding the sun (or moon). *Since the sun was off to Fleming's left, we reject this stimulus as an identification.*
4. *Crepuscular Rays*. These are vertical, horizontal, or disk-like reflections of sunlight in the sky. These phenomena are caused by reflection off of ice crystals somewhere in the sky. *The weather that day does not support the existence of ice crystals so we reject this stimulus.*
5. *Lightning*. Lightning comes in various forms but is, of course, of very short duration. *Due to the short duration, we reject this stimulus.*
6. *Ball Lightning*. This strange phenomenon is universally agreed by scientists to be a real, but still little understood, phenomenon. It is considered to be a plasma phenomenon and generally appears in times of nearby thunderstorm activity. The brightly glowing, usually isolated, balls can appear outside, or sometimes inside houses, and seem to float on the winds. The problem here is that ball lightning has never been described as part of a display of a hundred or so other ball lightning instances. Ball lightning is actually more rarely reported than UFOs! *We reject this stimulus.*

Final Resolution

Since the identification candidates fail for the reasons just given, we believe that Fleming has witnessed a genuine MUFON "unknown."

Appendix A: Weather Data

The following weather data for March 8, 2001, in West Linn, Oregon, was taken from the excellent Weather Underground site (*wunderground.com*).

Table 8. Medford Area Weather March 20, 2007

Time	Temp. (°F)	Visibility (miles)	Wind Direction	Wind Speed	Precip.	Conditions
4:53 PM	48	10.0	SSW	9.2 mph	None	Overcast
5:53 PM	46.9	10.0	SSW	8.1 mph	None	Overcast
6:53 PM	46	10	SSW	5.8 mph	None	Mostly Cloudy

Appendix B: Witness CMS UFO Description

The following is witness Laura Fleming's CMS UFO description:

Short Description of UFO Event:

Over 100 gold spheres, moving in a double-helix column in bright sun.

Detailed Description of the UFO Event:

On March 8th, 2001, around 5:30 PM, I walked out of my office into the parking lot to look at the ominous cloud formations that had been massing that afternoon. A massive black cloud had been building for hours, and I was monitoring it to see what kind of storm it would produce. In the foreground was a large, white cloud bank, low enough to give me an unobstructed view of the black cloud bank. Oddly enough, it was intensely sunny, despite the clouds. Our office was on Highway 43, in West Linn, OR., which looks out in a North Easterly direction (Mt. Hood is East of where we are). As I looked at the huge, very dark cloud behind the shopping center across the street, I noticed a large number of objects hovering around in a kind of slow, corkscrew pattern. At first I thought it might be a huge flock of birds, but then realized they weren't moving like birds, and everything was at half-speed.

The objects appeared to be gold, metal balls, moving in slow motion, carefully avoiding each other as they hovered up and down. I estimated there to be about 100 of them, but I can't give a exact number. The orbs, or balls, were gathered in groups, moving along 3 motion paths. A column of orbs in the center moved up and down, (like an elevator), while other orbs travelled around the column, corkscrewing their way up; a second group corkscrewed their way down, giving the appearance of an animated double-helix moving around the column of orbs. They appeared between the two cloud banks, and they must have been sizable for me to be able to discern them as balls and not birds or something else. They may have been over the Willamette river, a short distance away. It was an amazing display, but I can't imagine the purpose of the strange formation.

I was awe-struck; I watched for 30 seconds or so, and then called for my office mates to come see the swarm. Two co-workers came out, (everyone else was gone) and I asked them what they thought we were looking at. At first they seemed astonished, but then frightened, and couldn't really articulate what we were seeing. One went back inside, deciding he couldn't explain the sighting. The other person sort of shrugged and followed him into the building. Later, they both seemed unnerved and didn't want to discuss the event, even though I was overly excited and curious.

I also had my two small dogs with me (they were allowed at work). They came out with me when I first noticed the orbs, but they seemed unconcerned. They are pomeranians (one is particularly excitable),

but they acted completely normal through the whole event. It was as though nothing was in the sky at all.

The balls appeared solid and opaque, with no wings or exhaust discernable. The only sound was of the traffic passing by, and I wasn't able to detect any sound from the orbs. (No one else seemed to notice! I figured someone would see the orbs and stop, but no one did.) The sun was very bright, not at all blocked, and the rays fully hit the spheres, making the sun reflect off of them as if they were metal. The sun made the cloud behind the orbs particularly dark, and one could not see through it. This event lasted about 10 minutes, until all the orbs had drifted into cloud cover, and as cloud cover moved over them.