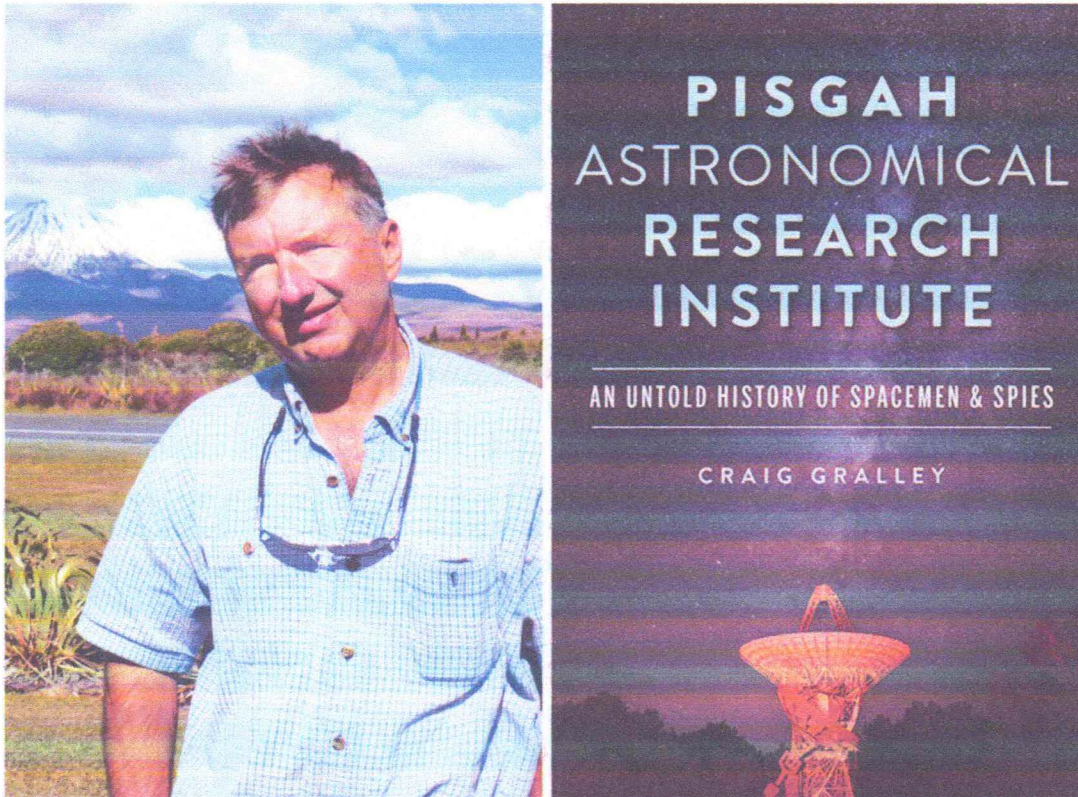


Book chronicles complex, colorful story of Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute

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Justin McGuire

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Craig Galley spent more than three decades as a CIA analyst, but even he found it difficult to untangle the complicated history of Transylvania County's Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute.

PARI began life in 1963 as a NASA satellite tracking station before becoming a top-secret National Security Agency site in 1981. Since 1999, it's been a nonprofit education and research observatory.

Along the way, the 200-acre campus tucked into Pisgah National Forest near the town of Rosman became shrouded in myths and rumors. Did the site house nuclear missiles? Was it a submarine base? Was the government hiding evidence of extraterrestrials? And just what was the purpose of those enormous satellite dishes?

“This is one of the great mysteries of Western North Carolina,” says Gralley, who lives in Brevard. “It’s a story of transformation. It’s not a straight line, so it’s not necessarily an easy story to understand.”

Gralley’s new book, *Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute: An Untold History of Spacemen & Spies*, marks the first time the complete history has been chronicled, he says.

“I have an understanding of how to access declassified documents, so that helped,” he explains. “But I really had to use my analytic skills to pull it all together, because nobody comes out and tells you exactly what the facility’s all about, especially because it was a formerly highly classified site.”

Gralley, a retired CIA senior executive, will speak and sign copies of the book at PARI’s annual Space Day open house at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday, May 6. The open house runs from 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Space race

On May 25, 1961, President **John F. Kennedy** told Congress the United States “should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.”

But the government had little understanding of space science, Gralley says, including how to communicate with astronauts via satellite technology. Thus was born the Rosman Satellite Tracking Station, established in 1963 as part of the worldwide Spacecraft Tracking and Data Acquisition Network. Its work was used in developing the manned space programs Project Gemini and Project Apollo.

NASA chose the site as an East Coast hub for the network because it was in an ideal geological location: a bowl-shaped depression surrounded by granite, which helped keep out extraneous signals, he says. Also, North Carolina was centrally located between Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland and NASA’s launch site in Cape Canaveral, Fla.

The Rosman site had 15-20 satellite dishes in operation. The two largest, which stood 26 meters (or about 85 feet) tall, are still in operation at PARI as radio telescopes. In 1967, the western 26-meter dish received NASA's first color photo of the full Earth from space.

NASA allowed public tours of the facility at a time when satellite technology was new, Gralley says.

"There were brochures at the welcome stations as people were entering North Carolina," he says. "People would come out here and just kind of gawk at the satellite dishes, and that would be plenty for them to get their imaginations soaring into space."

Cold War secrecy

The site's openness came to an abrupt halt in 1981 when the NSA, an arm of the Department of Defense, took control of the site and renamed it Rosman Research Station. Signs reading "Unauthorized Entry Prohibited" were posted, and armed guards patrolled the grounds. DOD didn't even acknowledge it operated the site until 2008, 14 years after it left.

The NSA used the station to intercept signals traveling on the Soviet Union's geostationary communication satellites, which were used for both military and commercial purposes.

"What's interesting is that [Rosman Research Station] came online just as **Ronald Reagan** became the 40th president and had some priorities about rolling back communist gains in Latin America," Gralley says. "It's probably no surprise that DOD saw that Rosman had capabilities that NASA no longer needed."

In 1985, the government started investing about \$200 million into the site, which to Gralley suggests it was identifying unique signals and maybe even breaking the encryption of those signals.

Urban legends and conspiracy theories about the facility started to emerge in this era.

“You had people who were uncleared [to receive classified information] coming in from the outside to do a lot of the new construction,” Gralley explains. “It’s like a game of telephone, where you have people who say, ‘I worked on these tunnels.’ And before you know it, you have other people saying the tunnels are long and thin and probably hold nuclear weapons. The more people talk, the more fantastic it becomes.”

In reality, the tunnels were simply used for communication cables that connected the satellite dishes to the administrative building. But with DOD remaining silent, speculation about what was happening behind Rosman’s chain-link fence continued.

Some said the site was used for animal sacrifices and satanic rituals. Others believed it was a former POW camp used to house German prisoners during World War II or that there was an underground city beneath the campus that held captive space aliens. Some online sleuths have even noted the similarity between the names “Rosman” and “Roswell, N.M.,” the site of an alleged 1947 UFO crash that conspiracy theorists say the government covered up.

Getting educated

The Soviet Union fell in 1991, effectively ending the Cold War, and three years later DOD closed the Rosman Research Station.

The campus was transferred to the U.S. Forest Service, but the agency didn’t have the resources to maintain it, Gralley says. After several years of inactivity, the federal government proposed dismantling the facility.

Enter **Don Cline**.

A retired engineer from Greensboro who founded Micro Computer Systems in 1977, Cline first visited the Rosman site in 1997 and decided it should be transformed into a first-class educational center. The next year, he and his wife, **Jo**, acquired the site and launched PARI as a nonprofit astronomical observatory dedicated to educating future generations of scientists.

PARI operates multiple radio telescopes and optical telescopes for research and teaching purposes and offers summer space camps, tours and weekend events.

“Don is working on something here for which there is no model,” Gralley says. “This is a unique hands-on facility that offers tremendous opportunities for students not only in this area but from all over the world. There are a lot of graduate students who never have access to optical or radio telescopes, but grade school kids around here have access.”

Gralley says Western North Carolinians should be proud of PARI and its impact on the region and the United States.

“It mirrors the major challenges that faced our country during this whole period,” he says. “It helped to win the space race, it helped us successfully navigate through a difficult period of the Cold War, and right now it’s helping us address a major challenge in trying to educate our students so that they can succeed in science. It’s a tremendous story.”

PARI is at 1 PARI Drive, Rosman. For more information on the book, go to avl.mx/cmr.