

Text

Obituary: Charles Johnson

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by *Christopher Reed*

When Charles Johnson looked out of his window, the view of California's Mojave desert stretching to the horizon neatly confirmed his beliefs as president of the International Flat Earth Society. But what of the frequent arrivals of Nasa space shuttles at the nearby Edwards air force base, and the photographs of earth as a globe that astronauts brought back?

Johnson, who has died aged 76, scoffed. "It's just a stupid old airplane carried piggy-back and dropped over Lancaster (the town where he lived). It hasn't orbited earth, that we know."

The congruence of these two - America's pioneers into the cosmos, and the white-bearded Johnson with his crackpot theories - were further proof, if any is needed, that California rivals England as the home of eccentrics. Through his quarterly Flat Earth News, which once had 3,500 subscribers, Johnson maintained that our planet was a disc of unknown dimensions, with the North Pole in the middle.

For him, the sun and moon, each 32 miles in diameter, circled the disc at a constant height of 3,000 miles. So-called sunsets, which he liked to watch from his porch as he smoked a cigar, were optical illusions. And the 1969 televised moon landing was really filmed in Arizona with a script by science-fiction writer Arthur C Clarke.

Before chuckling at Johnson's wrongheadedness, it should be noted that his society was an English invention. He took over in 1972 from the late Samuel Shenton of Dover, and the society traced its origins to the Universal Zetetic (investigating) Society, founded in England in 1832 by Sir Birley Rowbotham, who wrote a tract called *Earth Not A Globe*. In 1888, the even more gloriously named Sir Walter de Sodington Blount conducted a series of experiments on the Old Bedford Level canal, proving, he said, that the earth did not curve.

This, at least, was Johnson's account of his society's origins. He and his late Australian wife, Marjory, measured the surface of Lake Tahoe, in northern California, to arrive at the same conclusion. Furthermore, Johnson insisted, his wife did not hang by her feet when she was young - in a place that should never be called Down Under.

Johnson was only eight, and living in Texas, when he became committed to flat earthism. He recalled spinning a globe in class, listening incredulously to his teacher talking about gravity, and then looking out of the window at a lake, where he observed no curvature. He was an articulate defender of his beliefs and, although not highly educated, was a forceful and fluent writer.

He always insisted that the globe theory was invented by scientists - "the same old gang of witch doctors, sorcerers, tellers of tales, and priest entertainers" - attempting to obliterate Christian beliefs. Johnson was convinced that Jesus believed in a flat earth because he "ascended" into heaven, and "if earth were a ball, there would be no up or down."

Born in San Angelo, Texas, Johnson graduated from the local high school, and moved to San Francisco, where he was an airplane mechanic for 25 years. He began corresponding with Shenton, who specified before his death that Johnson should replace him at the society's head, and, by the mid-1990s, its membership had grown to nearly 4,000.

Members paid Dollars 25 a year and were given a map of the flat world. This was also, Johnson pointed out, the insignia of the United Nations, demonstrating that its founders were, at heart, flat earthers.

His last years were marred by a near-fatal mishap, when his house burned down in 1995. He managed to rescue Marjory, who was, by then, in a wheel chair and needed oxygen to breathe. All his records were burned, and Marjory died the following year.

Johnson moved into a caravan next to the ruin of his home, but local authority officials evicted him because it did not have the required wooden foundations. He moved in with his brother, his only survivor, on the outskirts of Lancaster, and began to rebuild the society. It now has about 100 members.

Charles Kenneth Johnson, flat earther, born July 24 1924; died March 19 2001