

be his first time in the air. It was such an overwhelming experience that it left him misty-eyed, and Prater still feels a great sense of freedom and peace during his early morning trips around the valley.

"One March, I flew to Smith Mountain just at sunrise," he recalls. "There were no leaves and the whole thing looked like the dawn of creation. Nothing I've ever seen has been as beautiful as that. For me, that's the kick of flying."

An addict to two-packs of cigarettes and 10 cups of coffee daily, Prater loves people but hates large parties because he feels "a pressure to entertain" the group. Instead, he prefers the company of close friends and feels free to tell them tall tales and even invent a half-brother named Denton.

But that's for fun. In truth, he has had some pretty strange experiences of his own.

In 1964, the Marion police dispatcher called him to check out an unidentified object on the hill across from the radio station. When he did, Prater saw an egg-shaped, glowing, pulsating structure. Police cars arrived, crowds gathered and Prater and a friend decided to investigate for themselves.

"The higher we climbed, the more terrified I became," he says, "but before we got to the top, the thing went a hundred feet straight up in the air, made a 90 degree turn and was gone. All that was left was a burned circle and a crushed tree. I have no doubt that the object was an extraterrestrial craft.

"I'll never buy the fact that we are God's chosen people and that the only life exists on this planet," he says.

Then, there's the case of the strange bobby pin. Prater and his wife discovered it when they inherited a sewing machine from the great aunt who had helped raise him, a woman who mixed Christian faith with her belief in the spiritual and who once promised to "come back" if she could find a way.

Usually, the old bobby pin stays put in a drawer. But Prater says that in times of turmoil, it will appear on a coffee table or bedside

stand.

Last year, for example, the couple's son was saved from being crushed to death when he accidentally overturned hundreds of pounds of ham radio equipment. It landed on a fallen chair which served as a brace and when the equipment was cleared away, Prater found the bobby pin on the floor . . . a fact that he can only explain with the possibility that the family cat had carried it there.

"I believe in a lot of strange stuff," he says. But he is quick to also point out the luck factor in his life, especially concerning his wife, whom he happened to meet because her car was stranded on Marion's Main Street on Halloween Night, 1966.

"I had been engaged to a bunch of girls," he says, "but I knew she was 'it' the first time I saw her." They have been married nine years now and he still "marvels" at his good fortune.

Despite the fun and games of being a radio personality, there is a dark side to the profession. Prater's working life is filled with letters and phone calls from troubled listeners with drug problems, personal problems, loneliness problems, school problems, sex problems.

"I'm past being shocked," he says, though he gets all the shockers including obscene calls, homosexual calls, bomb threats and even propositions. "If I don't get a dozen a week, there's something wrong."

His home phone number is off-limits even to the station switchboard and though it is unlisted, it still leaks out. He has had to change it five times.

"The unstable ones scare the hell out of me," he says. "Some of the people out there are tied together so loosely that I could walk out one night and they might blow me away."

But it's a fear that does not keep him from loving his job or from taking pride in the station's survey standing as Number One in teen, adult men and adult women listeners in the valley.

"This is a dynamite station," he says, "and a dynamite staff."

The big cities just can't offer him more.

By Norma Lugar