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Fortean scholars, those who examine unclassifiable, mystifying phenomena, now have a new enigma to puzzle over—disappearing water!

THE NIGHT THE WATER VANISHED

BY JIM MILES

Fortean scholars, those who examine unclassifiable, mystifying phenomena, now have a new enigma to puzzle over: disappearing water!

On the early morning of February 14, 1979, irate citizens of Hugo, Oklahoma, awoke to find they had no water. Authorities were visibly shaken when it was discovered that during the night water pressure in the city's South Third tank dropped dramatically. That was at 1:15 a.m. And within 45 minutes the tank was dry—remaining empty for close to 3½ hours. Not even a small leak in a hydrant or main was discovered. By 5:30, the tank had miraculously filled again—to capacity—and without human intervention.

Hugo's Superintendent of Water-Sewer Operations, Vernon Kizier, and director of Public Works Bud Founderburk analyzed every aspect of the phenomenon, but could find no natural explanation.

Hugo Mayor Don Nash shook his head. Apparently, a force capable of consuming a million gallons of water in less than one hour, has the capacity to make a

sudden strike in one area and then travel to another to do it again.

Authorities speculated about what could have happened if a fire had broken out during this period. Mayor Nash said the only available water would be brought in by the fire trucks.

At about 4:30 people began complaining to Mayor Nash, the police department, and Water Superintendent Roy Satterfield. After a few calls the Mayor phoned Satterfield, who had already diagnosed the problem and directed Steve Wilson, a public works employee who lives near the Hugo Lake Reservoir Pump Station and Water Treatment Complex, to immediately turn on all pumps.

By 5:30 the tower was full and water pressure restored to normal. It was explained that at night the pumps do not work at all because very little water is consumed, almost "zero" officials said, except in case of fire when the pumps are turned on to meet the emergency.

Water authorities said it would have required extra-ordinary cir-

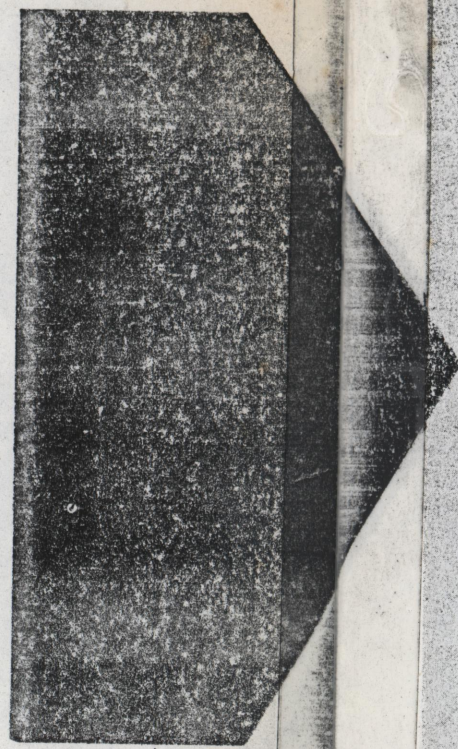
cumstances to account for the lost water, such as the opening of "at least" four fire hydrants at the same time. There was no evidence of this, and no sign of the lost water. Also, a large break in a water main could cause the loss of pressure, but Nash said: "We have checked this out. If we had a major break, the water pressure would not have been restored as rapidly as it was when the pumps were turned on this morning. As the chart shows. It was not a malfunction."

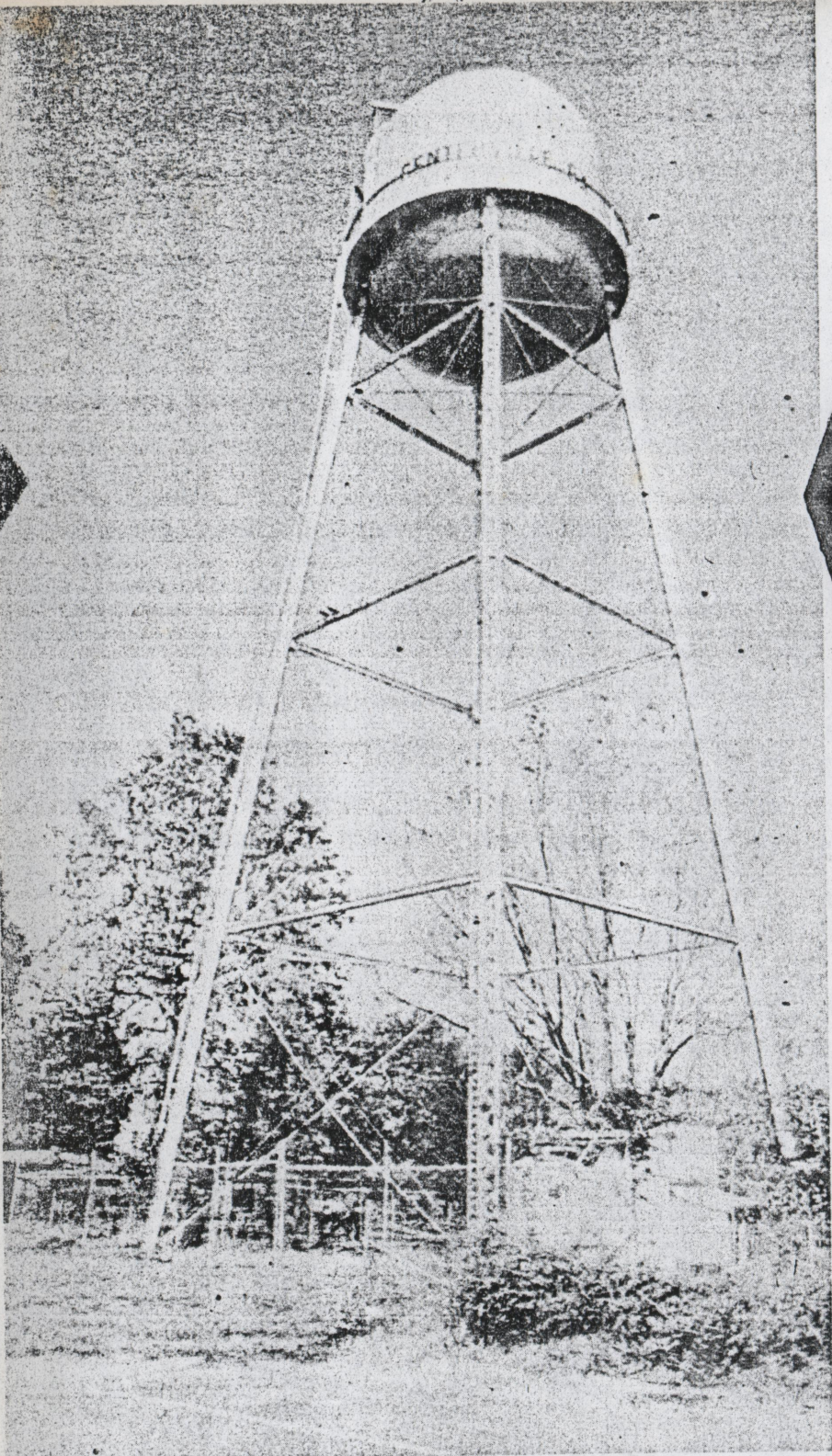
Unusual variations in the pressure chart had first been noticed a week earlier. They were puzzling but not dangerous.

On Feb. 7 the water pressure dropped from 67 pounds to 57 pounds in 15 minutes. Normal pressure was restored at eight a.m.

A much larger drop occurred on the next night, in 20 minutes beginning just before five a.m., from 67 pounds to 33 pounds. It was returned to normal at six a.m.

On Feb. 12 the same drop was experienced as on the second occasion, then on Valentine's Day





it plummeted from 67 pounds to zero in 45 minutes. Nash and his staff had been studying the problem since it began, but made no public disclosure until this potential tragedy occurred. The city was also upset because it lost a substantial sum of money from the actual water lost, electricity expended to run

the pumps, and treatment of replacement water. "A potential tragedy of the most grave sort existed during the hours the city was without normal water pressure," said Mayor Nash, who believed the theft was politically motivated sabotage perpetrated by someone who was upset with him personally or the



city. He announced early that he would not be running for re-election.

He further stated, "If this is an act of political recrimination, and if it is against me or intended to embarrass me or my administration, I want all parties involved and the general public to know that I will not seek re-election as mayor. I make this announcement at this time in hope it will cause the problem to go away."

Bob Rabun, Hugo's attorney, said that criminal charges would be pressed against anyone caught tampering with the city water supply.

An immediate meeting of city and county employees was scheduled for 2:30 that afternoon for the purpose of studying the shocking problem.

Security around the water tower was increased and the problem has not repeated itself in Hugo. But it moved south exactly nine days later.

On Friday, Feb. 23, 421,000 gallons of water disappeared from two water tanks in Commerce, Texas, sometime between 11 p.m.

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and 4 a.m. Most of the water, 350,000 gallons, was missing from an overhead tank, and 71,000 gallons from a storage tank on the ground.

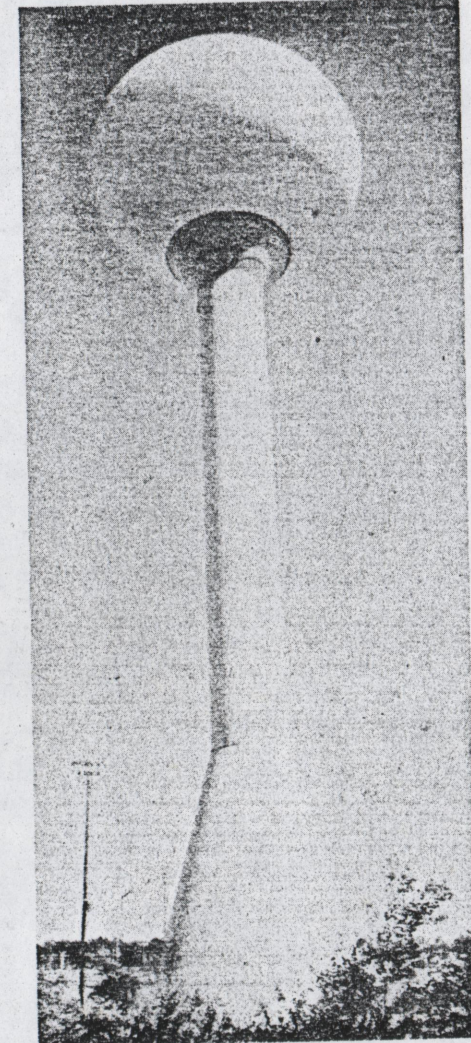
City Manager Morris Howard was alerted to the problem early in the morning when residents began calling to complain that there was no water at all in their pipes. Investigation showed that the tanks were dry, and police were dispatched throughout the city to check all fire hydrants in search of what the utilities department assumed was a giant leak. Only a small one was found in one hydrant, and it would have taken weeks to empty either tank.

Superintendent of Water-Sewer Operations, Vernon Kizier, and Director of Public Works Bud Founderburk analyzed every aspect of the incident, but found no natural explanation.

"There's an explanation," claimed Howard, "we just haven't hit it yet."

The only plausible theory they entertained was that Eastern Texas State University, which comes on city water every Friday at 4 p.m., somehow used it up.

"But they do that every Friday, so how could that be it?" said a



puzzled Howard. "It's just a mystery."

One million, four hundred and twenty one thousand gallons of water rustled in the space of nine days, and not a drop of it can be accounted for. There was no sabotage, no leaking hydrants or water mains, and no very thirsty lawns. There is just something with a cosmic sense of humor that delights in puzzling mankind by dropping unexplained objects from the sky, sending weird creatures crashing through the forests and manifesting itself in a dozen other ways which sends humanity up the wall. So what can we do about it?

Well, for a start, Commerce police were detailed to check the water level in their tanks at least three times during the morning hours and record the data in the police log. If the water level falls below a certain level in the overhead tank, they were ordered to notify Kizier.

Of course it never did. Such phenomena refuse to operate while they're being watched, and do not perform on command. Rest assured that it will strike again, but like Candid Camera, it shows up when you least expect it. □

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