

The Gurdon Light Phenomenon: You Must See It to Understand It

By NANCY COONS SPARKS
Of the Gazette Staff

— GURDON.

Every fall since the mid-'50s, a new wave of Arkadelphia college students treks through the deep night woods, tottering over trestles, toeing gingerly over rotting ties, squinting ahead to where a triangle of sky points to the apex of the narrowing railroad tracks — until someone gasps "There it is!"

"It" is the Gurdon Light, one of those deliciously unexplainable phenomena that has caught the imagination of generations of students — and recently has merited a scientific investigation by faculty and students of Henderson State University at nearby Arkadelphia.

Dr. Charles Leming, a professor of physics there, supervised the study, which was part of a one-hour credit course called "Physics Theories — Fact and Fiction." Allowing the students to look into reports on pyramid power, the Bermuda Triangle, UFO's, biorhythms and the like, Dr. Leming was happy to offer the course to the students "on demand," he said, since "in the end, with analytical-type scrutiny, these things usually don't stand up."

Each term, students would tackle the theories that interested them, research the facts and incidents and make a presentation to the class. "Carl Sagan says it's a failure in religion, the need to believe in these things," Dr. Leming said. "We almost always end up debunking them."

One group built a bed of nails to prove how harmless the distribution of pressure points could be. Another traced the disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle and found that nearly all the supposed freak disappearances had been solved in a mundane manner. One student even said he read auras, but insisted the students would have to take off their clothes and stand in front of a sheet. (That theory was never tested.)

But then a student suggested a subject dear to the hearts of Arkadelphia students — and the debunking didn't come so easy.

The Gurdon Light has a story, a ghostly story, one that ties into families that still live in the area. It seems a railroad foreman was bludgeoned to death with a spike maul by one of his employes right along the Missouri-Pacific tracks where the light appears (north of Gurdon between state Highway 57 and Interstate 30.) The employe had been accused of sabotaging the tracks, trying to wreck the Sunshine Special, but actually causing the wreck of a freight the day before. (No one was killed, according to the December 10, 1931 *Southern Standard*, but a group of hoboes was treated for injury at Gurdon.) Alone on the tracks that night with his foreman and angered by the accusation, the story goes, the workman struck him with a shovel. The victim rose and tried to run away, but addled by the blow, he tripped in the sink hole of a rotted stump and fell. The workman finished him off with the spike maul, then walked into Gurdon — where he was arrested for "acting suspicious." After a confession was solicited, a search party found the body, before collapsing for the final time, the victim had crawled in a trail of blood for nearly a quarter of a mile.

The workman was electrocuted for the crime in February 1932.

The Gurdon Light, legend has it, is the victim's lantern, swinging eternally down the Mo-Pac rails.

Skeptics prefer the theory of highway headlights.

But highway headlights don't necessarily explain the phenomenon — and Dr. Leming admits he's stumped. Viewed through filters, the light never polarized, which any mirage would do. No electromagnetic current could be traced on a galvanometer. And the light appears consistently, regardless of atmospheric conditions. "I've never heard of anyone going out there who didn't see it," he said.

On a hot evening, a party of 12 professors, students and curious visitors parked their cars at the railroad crossing, smeared their bodies with insect repellent and headed down the rarely used

track that connects Gurdon to Okolona. Dr. Leming, a yard-long aluminum torch slung over his shoulder, led the way, along with the student who headed the investigation, Mike Clingan.

Clingan wore a baseball cap and a Texas T-shirt. An English major and the state chess champion in his third year of school, he already has more than 140 credits under his belt. (He began attending Henderson while still in high school, he explained.) The Gurdon Light project has gotten under his skin, it seems: Clingan comes out to the track almost every night, usually alone. Sometimes he walks a way in, then sleeps on the tracks until real darkness has settled in order to observe the light. "You have to come out here alone to really experience it," he said.

The daylight was fading from gray to charcoal as the company picked their way along between the ties. Along either side of the track, creatures shrieked and burbled in the swamp water. Chuck-wills-widows whooped in the trees where branches no longer could be distinguished in the darkness.

Clingan walked beside the visitors. "Have you heard the story of the murder?" he asked. He told it — in carefully measured tones, watching his feet as he walked, pausing after the description of the victim's bloody crawl across the forest floor.

The visitors listened to the crunch of their feet on the gravel. "I finally got ahold of an old timer today to ask him about the Light," he said. "I didn't tell him anything about it, but I asked him when he'd first seen it."

"You know what he said? 1931."

They walked on, watching their feet.

"Better look ahead a little," he said. "Snakes like to crawl up on the rails after they've absorbed the sun all day." They slowed a little and squinted into the darkness ahead.

"You know, there's an old blacks' cemetery out here along the tracks, too," he said. "It hasn't been kept up for years. Some guys came out here once to hide in the tombstones to scare people — but they got scared away." Clingan didn't say by what.

They listened to their feet for a while.

"There's a tree out here somewhere that's supposed to be where they hanged people when Arkansas was still a territory," he said. "They buried them under the tree, too. People say if you park your car under it, it starts to shake."

The frogs chortled from the swamp.

Suddenly the gravel dropped away beneath their feet and they were crossing bare ties on a trestle, a pool of thick water glistening underneath. "Sometimes guys come out here and hide under the trestles," he said. "They wait and reach up through the ties — and grab girls' ankles."

They walked a little faster, waiting for the crunch of gravel under their feet again. No one spoke for a while; the chuck-wills-widows were silent. Only the steady hum of night creatures and the crunch of feet could be heard.

Fireflies were blinking and fading around them; stars were gathering into thick clusters overhead. There was no moon yet.

Then, a firefly blinked on the horizon at the point where the tracks dwindle to nothing. It blinked, glowed orange, swung to the right and disappeared.

"That was it!" someone croaked. The group slugged on, watching the horizon.

The orange glow crossed again — much larger than a firefly's blink, sweeping a downward arc across the track, then swinging back and fading away.

It shook a little as it crossed.

Like someone swinging a lantern.

One of the visitors tried to swallow but for some reason found her mouth curiously dry.

The group had stopped, silent. They began to move again, faster, crossing trestle and creek, stepping over rotten ties, glancing from path to horizon and back. It was almost totally dark and the chuck-wills-widows had been replaced by hoarsely hooting owls.

The light passed again, a redder flash this time. It seemed closer.

The group stopped, about a mile and a half from their cars. Several sat down on the ties; two set up tripods and cameras.

"It looks like car lights to me," said Bob McClanahan, a student in a cowboy hat and a military shirt. He lit a cigarette.

Clingan explained: The interstate was about four miles away. A couple of logging roads "for four-wheel drive" and Stickey Road "which hasn't been kept up for years" stretched between the party and the interstate. There was a large hill in between. That meant if the light was caused by passing headlights, it would have to be refracted up and over the hill to be visible on the other side.

"Look, the rails absorb heat all day," McClanahan said. "That's why snakes lay up against the rails at night." If the rails radiate heat, he explained, they could form a cushion of warm air that would bump into a cushion of cooler air above; that could create the conditions necessary for reflections. "It's called an inversion layer," he said.

"Yeah, but that takes special conditions," Clingan argued. "I just don't think they could occur all the time."

He scratched a mosquito bite. "Me, I don't make theories. All I know is, I've seen it in all kinds of weather, when it's windy and when it's rainy. I've seen it behind me and in front of me. It was here long before the interstate was built. It didn't polarize, which means it's not a reflection. It doesn't show on the galvanometer, which means there's no electromagnetic current."

He stared up the track. "I just hate to think of something out here that I can't explain."

The light flashed, bluish this time, bounced up and disappeared.

McClanahan said, "I still think it's car lights."

"I hope so," Clingan said. "Golly."

"Have you ever felt like you were going to drown and you got really scared?" Clingan continued. "I came out here one night and started to feel that same way."

Dr. Leming moved closer to join the conversation. "I've heard tales of some awfully spectacular sightings," he said. "people being chased by the light and all — but I think it depends on how hysterical the group is."

"It performs better for singles — or should I say doubles?" another professor said with a laugh.

The light was blinking, glimmering for a second, maybe two. "When I first came out here I said, oh, it's just the interstate," Dr. Leming said. "But then I talked to people who said it was here long before the interstate. If it's the interstate, it's not every car that goes by, because it doesn't appear that often."

Clingan has attempted to gauge the length of time it would take a car to cross the horizon point at a 45 degree angle (the angle of the interstate to the tracks) at 55 miles an hour.

Moving at about 80 feet per second, he explained, the lights would be visible much longer than the second it takes for the Gurdon Light to appear and disappear.

He also has walked close enough to the highway to hear the sounds of specific trucks — and insists the sound never coordinated with the appearance of the light.

Yet, somehow, the researchers never appear to have made a concentrated, once-and-for-all effort to solve the mystery. For instance, no one has tried to string people along the length of track between interstate and crossing, attempting to isolate the light. No one has placed a man on the interstate bridge and one on the track to compare, via walkie-talkie, the passing of a truck with the appearance of a light. No one has tried to compare the spectra of the

light with the spectra of a headlight.

But no one really wants to. Debunking the Bermuda Triangle was one thing. Stripping the Gurdon Light of its chilling romance is another. Where would the freshman girls from Ouachita Baptist University go in the fall to be terrified? Where would couples take their coolers of beer, waiting for the flash of unexplainable light to squeeze them closer together for safety? Where would young chess champions go to lie on their backs alone and watch the stars come out, listening to owls and frogs and mysterious cracklings in the deep swamp brush?

They certainly wouldn't go to the Gurdon Light if some ambitious physics student proved it were merely headlights.

It's better to watch the bobbing light and wonder.



Dr. Leming (below, right), others sit along railroad tracks at Gurdon, wondering, 'What's that light in the distance, on the horizon?'

— Staff Photos by Mark Whinn

