



By Harry S. Pease of Insight

UNCS

YOU could almost feel the weight of the darkness. The moon rested somewhere below the horizon. Sodden clouds rejected most of the starlight. If a thin beam slipped through a crack in the overcast, the wet woods swallowed it.

Silence matched the dark. Now and again a stray breeze grumbled under its breath in the black tips of the spruces. Between times, you could hear your own pulse.

Tiptoeing across the soaked gravel road, a doe sounded like a cement mixer. She turned disdainfully in the beam of a flashlight, stepped onto the upholstered forest floor and vanished soundlessly.

When the flashlight snapped off, the blackness surged forward again. Urban people rarely encounter a void as complete as that perceived by the unadapted eye and ear in deep woods.

We waited.

We didn't know exactly what we were waiting for. My assignment was to find out about the mysterious Watersmeet Light, but we didn't have an eyewitness description of it.

We had been assured that it existed, first by Marion Johnson, who lives on Milwaukee's East Side, and later by such authorities as a Michigan State Police sergeant and various north country newspaper folk.

THE light appears in a remote area between Watersmeet and Paulding in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a dozen miles north of the Wisconsin line on US Highway 45.

They say you can spot it from a point along the Bass Lake Road, near the ghost town of Bonifas.

Or you often can see it from the hill on the Robbins Pond Road above Dog Meadow.

Maybe the best place of all is on top of Dingman's Rock, a two-million-year-old basalt outcrop that shoves up out of the earth and rises 1,500 feet above sea level.

We had chosen the hill above Dog

Meadow because it's easiest to find in the dark. You just drive north from Watersmeet on 45 about four miles, turn left onto the town road and stop on the high ground.

Our eyes and ears sharpened with the passage of the minutes. We could hear cars a long way away on the highway. We could see a dimness — not so much a brighter as a less dark V — as we looked ahead down the road and the power line that ran beside it.

Then we saw the light. Right ahead of us, it began as a diffuse glow and then condensed into a hard knot of brilliant white.

You had the feeling that maybe it was moving, but you couldn't be sure you weren't moving your head instead.

It could have been big and distant or small and close. There was no way to tell.

The silence remained unbroken.

That first apparition was too startling for us to make any serious observations. No matter what anybody tells you, you don't expect to see anything like that. You're so busy just looking, you forget all the tests you planned to make.

You just stand there until the light dims and disappears. Then you ask yourself, "What was it?"

You can hear lots of stories around Watersmeet.

THE place got its name because it sits atop a three-way divide. At least according to legend, Indian tribes used to meet on the sand flats just outside the present town.

Lac Vieux Desert, from which the Wisconsin River leads toward the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico, lies to the south. Most of the streams lead north to Lake Superior. A few flow east to join the Brule and thence to the Menominee and

Lake Michigan. People who traveled by water would choose such a council ground.

A DIFFERENT NORTHERN LIGHT

The glare of publicity falls on a spooky glow in the woods

LIGHT

The light, they say, is the ghost of the old messenger in search of his loyal dogs

From this tradition arises one explanation for the light in the woods. In several similar versions, the ghost of a chief long dead seeks something of value on the land from which his people have been driven.

Another story draws in part upon history.

In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln directed the construction of a military road from Fort Wilkins, at Copper Harbor on the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula, to Fort Howard at Green Bay. Troops using it were to protect copper supplies essential to the Union war effort.

The road followed a much older trail that passed through Dog Meadow and the Watersmeet area. In summer, military mail had moved by water. During the freezeup, couriers took it to Green Bay by dog sled over the old trail.

The story goes that one of the mail carriers was set upon and killed at Dog Meadow. His dogs attacked the attackers, and the animals

also were killed. The light, they say, is the ghost of the old messenger in search of his loyal dogs.

There are more modern possibilities.

An old-timer, known to his neighbors only as Pancake Joe, owned a portion of the woods through which the Upper Peninsula Power Co. line runs. He fought the company when it wanted to chop a right of way through his trees, but he lost.

Now, they say, his restless spirit returns and dances in helpless fury beneath the wires.

Another set of theories was born of the flying saucer age, perhaps encouraged by a book which alleged that saucers fed from New England power lines and caused a major East Coast blackout in 1965.

"For a while," said Bob Zelinski, the operator of Sylvania Outfitters in Watersmeet and a most articulate woods runner, "everybody said, 'Well, it's the UFOs landing and sapping juice from the power lines.'

"People would ask me — I'm supposed to be the expert — 'What does the power company say about losing watts, or whatever?'"

"I'd say, 'They're in cahoots with the government. You'll never find out. You know how that goes. They ain't going to tell.'"

Zelinski, to whom I am indebted for much of what I know about the light, said he had heard a story about an engineer who died in a

train wreck, still out there with his lantern trying frantically to flag down the other train. The wurdaman doesn't regard that one as well substantiated, though.

"My neighbor who used to live across the street claimed that those lights were without a doubt from ore boats on Lake Superior," he said. "He said he had followed them down the shore."

Lake Superior lies about 50 miles to the north, on the far side of a pretty big range of hills.

WE KNEW only a couple of these stories that first night when we went out, unguided, to see the light. No question about it, it has an eerie quality.

It comes and goes. For a while you just watch, trying to liken it to something familiar. You're a little afraid to turn away, because you might miss something that you should see. Gradually, though, you get organized.

You burrow into the camera bag for the binoculars. They don't show much more detail of the white light, except that it seems to reflect around and look double.

Through the glasses you sometimes see a dimmer red light or two. Sometimes you see both colors at once, sometimes not.

When we started timing the lights with a

(continued on page 16)

(continued from page 15 - JOURNAL, Milwaukee, WI - Nov. 30, 1980)

watch, a certain regularity became evident. Quite a few "on" periods lasted just about three minutes, with a break of about a minute.

When the light stayed on longer, the break was shorter.

Luck, or a benign spirit, took a hand when we had determined this much. The clouds parted. Right down the road, the constellation Cassiopeia adorned the sky. Opposite the open top of the W above a star that could only be Polaris.

We had turned left off northbound 45, but we weren't looking west. Somehow we had been fooled by bends in the road; the light lay in the direction of the North Star. That turned out to be a key observation.

Also, the light lay right along the power line. Could that figure in it?

We knocked off for the night and headed back to the motel for another look at an Ontonagon County map.

Had we been looking west, which is your impression on the ground, we would have been gazing into 15 miles of empty wilderness. Passing north, which the stars said we really were doing, we were looking squarely at a distant stretch of Highway 45.

Sometimes white lights? Sometimes red? All in view about the same length of time? Similar interruptions, as though cars ran through a depression in the road? Light on longer, shorter dip? Maybe two cars in view at once?

It would need some checking the next night, but we had a start.

THE day dawned on soggy snow. We sought out Zelinski and reported our suspicions.

He grinned. "You sort of shot holes in the story a little bit," he said. Then he told me another story, in its way as wonderful as the light.

Just about everybody in the Watersmeet-Paulding area has known the truth since the light first was noticed. But the whole thousand of them, more or less, have built up the legends and kept the secret almost intact.

"I was, I think, in the seventh grade when some high school kids were out parking on that road and the light appeared," he began. "They figured it was somebody coming, but nobody ever came. They got scared and left."

"Everybody had to go see this light. I remember I was in the Boy Scouts and we took the scoutmaster out from one of the meetings. He was very skeptical about this light idea in the first place, but when we saw it everybody was climbing trees and running all over for a better view."

"My dad went up there with some friends. He took binoculars and did the same dirty, dastardly deed you did. He also looked at a map and figured out a few things. I guess they resolved, to their satisfaction, what was causing this phenomenon."

"But I found out in seventh grade that no one would accept an explanation for this. It was unexplained. Who wants a logical explanation?"

For quite a while, Zelinski said, it was pretty much a local sensation. Sure, kids would drive up from Rhinelander and Eagle River to see it, but the real promotion didn't begin until seven years ago.



Map by John Pinchard of The Journal

"I noticed the interest in the light, and a few other businessmen did, and for a while we did promote it," Zelinski said. "It's in the Watersmeet brochure, and on place mats. We even advertised it on TV."

"Paulding wound up advertising the light too, but they did it out of Rhinelander. We did it out of Marquette. Somehow we got the guy from Upper Peninsula Travel & Recreation interested. Talk about connections! He had it in every paper all the way from Duluth to Milwaukee."

"Right during Christmas they had it that Watersmeet had its own Christmas star. George Roberts over at the Paulding general store even had some buttons made that said 'I saw the light.'"

A LOT of people came and stayed until they figured out what the light was, but it never made any difference, Zelinski said. There always was a resurgence of interest.

"If this would have been a little bit different, I would have been hauling people," he said. "I've got a van and I would have figured out a whole itinerary of ghost towns and mysterious phenomena."

"Except, at some times it's just too obvious what the light is. The worst time to see it is when it's very clear. So I never went to town on it, though I've hauled people up there."

"I charged \$4 a piece and loaded up 12 people. That's nice. You don't have to work during the day if you can pull this kind of stuff all night long."

He began to laugh so hard he could hardly talk.

"They listed me as a source of information on this light because I'm hardy and I guess I'm not afraid to open my big trap, or something. But when anybody asks, I tell 'em I haven't the slightest idea what that light is."

"Then, just to dissuade 'em from using binoculars, I've told 'em, 'Don't do that. You'll burn your eyes.'"

"I purposely steer 'em wrong. I tell 'em, 'Go north on Highway 45. Turn west on Robbins Pond Road.' That blows their orientation right away, because you aren't doing that."

You've got to purposely make directions simple, but confusing."

He said competing resort communities made serious efforts to debunk the light when it first was a popular feature. It didn't matter. People kept coming to Watersmeet and having fun.

"I've taken parties of 45 out — you know, I'm leading the pack and everybody's hanging onto the next guy going through the woods. It's a riot," Zelinski said.

"At Dingman's Rock there's a railing to support a wall tent — I guess something some deer hunters used. I tell everybody (his voice took on a tone of awe), 'I don't know what that is, but it's been in the field a long time. I don't know whoever does that, but it looks just like Stonehenge. I'm sure there's something mysterious about it.'"

Once again, he couldn't talk for laughing.

"There's been a number of reports of investigations. The best one was that NASA investigated. Some UFO groups investigated. They say *National Geographic* investigated, and *Readers Digest* investigated. I don't know if anybody ever investigated."

"I've had people say they were parked there and their car headlights and electrical systems and batteries just went dead. When those stories are noised around, I say I don't know whether it's true or not, but you hear that."

The snow was thinning. Zelinski got out a topographic map and pointed out the lay of the land. Sure enough, the mysterious lights in the woods are auto headlights and taillights on Highway 45. You pick them up on the long hill at Maple Grove Cemetery, 11 miles from Dingman's Rock.

The cemetery lies about 1,315 feet above sea level. Paulding is down in a hole between there and the lookout points. The village puts a little glow in the sky — just enough to give an onlooker a false horizon.

"The power line has a lot to do with seeing the light, because it provides an open area for a long distance," Zelinski said.

There's nothing remarkable about seeing auto lights that far. In real darkness you can see the flare of a match 10 miles away. However, people don't always get an honest answer when they raise the question.

"A TV guy asked if the light had been seen before the advent of the automobile," Zelinski recalled. "Somebody said his grandfather owned a Stutz Bearcat, the first car in the area, and Grandpa saw the light from that car in the same spot."

Sometimes you don't have to tell tall tales. Zelinski once led two carloads of Michigan travel agents out to look. One group saw the light and charged down the road in pursuit. The other stayed put. Naturally, the ones on the hilltop could see that the light stayed on. Those who hustled to lower ground lost it.

The chasers returned. "We couldn't see it at all," they reported. "See it? It was right over you all the time," their colleagues assured them.

A disclosure like this may ease a lot of consciences. Like others in the past, it won't mar the mystery light. People have too much fun being fooled. Even Uncle Sam must understand.

"There's a sucker shorn every minute" says a government placard in the Watersmeet Post Office. But it shows a postal inspector, not a backwoods guide. 2