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Fireballs

Flash in the sky causes quite a stir

Lydel Sims is a columnist for The Commercial Appeal in Memphis. His column will appear regularly in the magazine.

Did mysterious "fireballs" once roam the rural areas of the nation, striking terror in the hearts of homebound travelers?

Decide for yourself. A recent report of such an event has produced plenty of other testimony on the subject. It's enough to make your hair stand on end.

Let us begin with an account from Grady Franks of Earle, Ark.

"I had a similar experience back in 1922 on a country road near Sugar Tree, Tenn.," Franks reported. "I was about 18 years old and had walked my girlfriend home on a Sunday afternoon and stayed around until time was called on us about 'good dark.' I started the three-mile walk home on a pitch dark, cloudy night after a recent rain."

The road was full of mud holes, so Franks used his pocket knife to cut a walking stick to feel along with. About half a mile along the way, something strange happened. "When I



turned with the road, I saw a light on the right side of the road about the size of a water bucket, rising out of nowhere. My hair not only stood on end, but my toes curled."

Nonetheless, he marched boldly toward the light, which he described as "phosphorescent-like," and banged his hickory stick on the old hollow stump it seemed to be coming from. "Nothing happened except the thump ..."

Back about 1929 or 1930, Horace Embrey told me he was walking home from Coldwater, Miss., to the Greenleaf community. He was going downhill along a road with high banks on each side. The night was clear.

Suddenly a ball of light came over the fence and down to the road, moving across toward the other side. It seemed self-contained, about the size of a plate, and it moved very slowly. Embrey got down on his hands and knees and put his hand through it as it moved past. Nothing happened.

And, he assured me, he's never seen anything like it, before or since.

In 1934 or 1935, Mrs. Lilyan T. Summerall said she and her sister were walking home after a ball game in a school gymnasium near Huntsville, Ala. It wasn't a stormy night, she's sure, or they wouldn't have been walking.

Both of them saw what they thought was a car light on a

nearby road.

They watched for it to turn a corner. "To our utter amazement, it turned before getting to the corner and was traveling along a creek bed at about the speed a car would. We spoke not a word, but looked at each other and took to our feet. I am convinced no marathon runner ever exceeded our speed."

Their parents said it was "phosphorus," but that didn't help a bit.

Mrs. Nel Ford remembers her uncle's tale of riding his horse home from a date near the border between Mississippi and Alabama, and a "ball of fire" coming toward him and spooking his horse.

Mrs. Othel Martin recalls how people in a state-line area near Hattiesburg, Miss., would gather on summer evenings to watch "fireballs" in a low area where heat had accumulated during the day. She never saw any herself.

And what's the scientific explanation for all this? Well, we haven't got it worked out yet. But stand by. Some definitive authority is sure to show up sooner or later. Meanwhile, be careful where you walk on dark nights.