

Tulsa man tags new theory on Hornet Spook Light

By Marta Churchwell
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If Keith Partain's theory is correct, September will be the beginning of extensive sightings of the Hornet Spook Light, the mysterious optical phenomenon that dances in the countryside near the Hornet community.

Partain, of Tulsa, Okla., is among a string of researchers who have traveled to this Southwest Missouri community, attempting to unravel the mystery of the light, which wavers to and fro, and varies in size, shape, brightness, color, distance and movement.

Some have explained it as being foxfire, a luminescent gas given off by decaying wood, while others hypothesize that it is plasma, an ionization of atmospheric gases that cause a glow. Still others have dispelled it as an optical illusion: a reflection and refraction of lights on vehicles traveling nearby Route 66.

Partain's hypothesis is that most of the time the phenomenon is the result of vehicle lights from the highway. He bases this on research that

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showed that sightings of the light began to escalate after Route 66 was constructed.

Still, there were reports of sightings before construction of the highway in 1933. These sightings, he says, were the "real" spook light.

He says sightings of the true Spook Light are rare, occurring in 10- to 11-year intervals that correlate with the sunspot cycle. When the sunspot number is low, when there are few or no flares and the magnetic field of the Earth is "quiet," the "real" Spook Light appears, he says.

"When it's (the sunspot cycle) at its maximum, it's highly unlikely that you'll see the Spook Light. All you're seeing at those times are car headlights."

The 34-year-old industrial lab technician explains that a high sunspot cycle blocks radiation from entering the atmosphere. When the sunspots are low, radiation is allowed to enter the atmosphere, energizing gases. He suspects that these energized gases form ball lightning and this is what the Hornet Spook Light is.

"Ball lightning is an unusual phenomenon that consists of a ball of charged particles of ionized matter," he explains. "But scientists do not understand how or why ball lightning exists, nor can they predict when or where it will appear."

For this reason, he says the light is not restricted to the farm-to-market road where most people claim to see it.

"It's restricted to that region of Oklahoma that happens to be close to that road." The Missouri-Oklahoma state line intersects this road.

Although Partain says computer projections put the sunspot minimum in spring of 1987, the number of flares and sunspots are dropping so rapidly that he projects this September to be the ideal time to test his hypothesis.

For the next 18 months, particularly in September, he will travel to the Hornet area to test his theory, possibly using such equipment as a galvanometer, which would measure electrical fluctuations of the light, and a magnetometer, which registers changes in the Earth's magnetic field.

"Ball lightning is more of an observational phenomenon than something you can capture and put in a jar," he says. "All I can really do is observe it. If I can bring a video camera, it would show it passing in front of objects and prove it isn't car headlights."

"If it's the real Spook Light, you can see any solid object behind it. If

you see it wiggle at the end of a road, all you're seeing are car headlights."

Partain, who holds a master's degree in natural sciences, has been studying the Spook Light for six years.

He read of the light in a Tulsa newspaper and, because of his fascination with strange phenomena, he traveled to Hornet to view the light. He failed to see it in his first four trips.

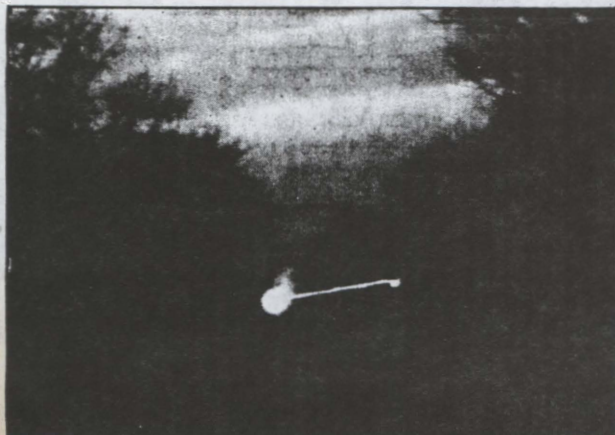
"All I saw the fifth time was a little wiggle at the end of the road. It wasn't very impressive. So I became skeptical of what I saw and decided to start digging."

He pored through every piece of literature he could find on the light, studied the history of the area, examined geologic, topographic, seismic and magnetic maps, analyzed photographs of the light, and contacted physicists and other specialists in inexplicable phenomena.

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An article he wrote on the light was published in *Pursuit*, a magazine of the Society for the Investigation of the Unexplained. He also is attempting to have a book published on the light.

"All I'm trying to do is dispell statements that have been circulating for the past 51 years that have no basis in fact," he says. "I'm tired of ghostly stories and debunking. I'm doing this as a scientist, a historian and a journalist who is simply trying to tel the people of Missouri and Oklahoma the truth."



Globe File Photo/MARTA CHURCHWELL

The Spook Light is shown here as it splits into a smaller fragment. The 30-second time-exposure was taken just as the light fragmented, leaving a trail from its mother light. Partain says this is a photograph of the "real" spook light, not a reflection and refraction of lights from vehicles traveling a nearby highway.