

# Experts unable to agree on cause of mysterious light

Associated Press

A mysterious light show that flashed across the night sky east of the Mississippi sparked earth-bound debate Wednesday with few able to agree on what caused it.

It was described as everything from a pinpoint to a moving spiral to a glowing cloud to "a big ball of fire." Residents of one Kentucky county said they saw a bright flash and heard a bang that shook their houses.

"It was the scariest thing I ever saw, but it was pretty, all white," said Brenda Newton of Rochester, N.Y., who saw the light about 10 p.m. Tuesday when she and her parents went looking for a place to watch the annual Perseid meteor shower.

She thought she saw a meteor, but "then it started to get bigger, and it had a tail. By the time we got out of the truck, it had begun to spiral. It lasted for a few minutes, then became like a dim star and floated toward the west."

"It was definitely not a meteor," said Denise Sabatini, vice president of the Syracuse, N.Y., Astronomical Society. "Meteors burn off after seconds. This lasted five to seven minutes. It was really quite spectacular."

Some speculated it was a satellite or rocket release of barium gas, used to study the upper atmosphere. But workers at Cape Canaveral, Fla., the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., and the NASA facility at Wallops Island, Va., all confirmed there were no launches Tuesday.

Others thought it might be a satellite breaking up in the atmosphere.

"We didn't show any scheduled space objects to re-enter the atmosphere at that date and time and location. Right now that's all we have on it," said Capt. Sigmund Adams, media relations staff officer for the Aerospace Defense Command, which tracks satellites.

There was speculation it was the failure of a new Japanese satellite. But officials at Japan's Tanegashima Space Center said

there was nothing wrong with the vehicle.

At Ohio's Bowling Green State University, physics and astronomy Professor Ronald Stoner said he suspected the display was caused by the Perseid meteor shower, produced by the remnants of a comet.

"It is caused by little bits and pieces of dust from the comet. They're very small," he said. "If there were a larger piece, and an icy piece of material, something about the size of a snowflake, it might well cause something like this. It would vaporize and leave a glowing cloud behind it."

Tom Boone, director of the Rauch Planetarium at the University of Louisville and a member of the Smithsonian's Scientific Event Alert Network, said the network received reports of the lights from nearly every state east of the Mississippi River.

Only residents of Kentucky's Clark County, east of Lexington, heard a boom accompany the light show.

"Some people said they saw a great big ball of fire," said Clark County Deputy Larry Lawson. "The people said their homes shook and windows vibrated as if there had been an explosion or earthquake, but it was just for just a very few seconds. They said the whole sky lit up."

"All these people weren't imagining or seeing things. Some of them were very terrified over it right after it happened. Some said they smelled something like gunpowder."

Karl Kamper, an astronomer at the David Dunlap Observatory in Richmond Hill, Ontario, outside Toronto, said he was one of four astronomers there who witnessed the light. He described it as a star-like object low in the southern sky, surrounded by a small spiral cloud.

"We watched that spiral enlarge and rotate," he said.

He said the spiral could have been fuel spewing from a damaged satellite. And he said it must have been extremely high because it was seen over such a large area and because meteors burn relatively low in the atmosphere.