

# Press & Sun-Bulletin

4 SECTIONS

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35¢ NEWSSTAND

## Spiraling light in sky baffles experts

### From staff and wire reports

A mysterious light show that flashed across the night sky in the Southern Tier and many states east of the Mississippi sparked earthbound debate yesterday, 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," although astronomers said it probably was related to the annual Perseid meteor shower.

Residents of one Kentucky county said they saw a bright flash and then their houses shook when something went bump in the night with a bang like dynamite.

At the meteor watch at Beaver Lake Nature Center near Baldwinsville, outside of Syracuse, astronomy buffs who gathered to watch the Perseid shower caught sight of a large "reflective cloud" that moved steadily across the sky for five to seven minutes, said the vice president of the Syr-

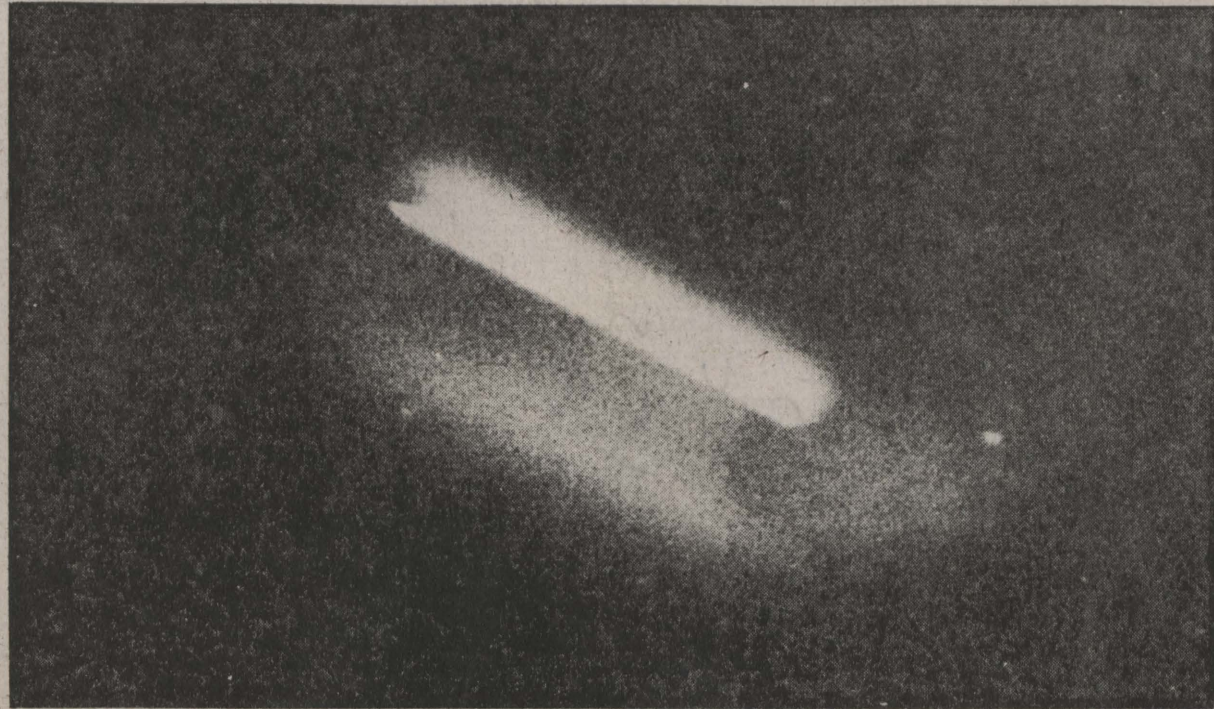
acuse Astronomical Society. "It was definitely not a meteor," said Denise Sabatini. "Meteors burn off after seconds. This lasted five to seven minutes. It was really quite spectacular."

Sabatini described the scene this way: "It started out as a pinpoint of light. It was as if it were releasing some type of reflective gas into the air, and as the gas was released into air, it was as if it was spiraling around the pinpoint of light."

She described the spiraling as "like pouring milk into coffee. It was a whitish type of cloud. At first I thought it was just reflection of the moon off a cloud. But it was very iridescent, very vivid."

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,

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LORRAINE WHITAKER PHOTO

Photo shows the spiraling object that was seen Tuesday night in many states east of the Mississippi.

### About the photo

Amateur photographer Lorraine Whitaker of Lanesboro, in Susquehanna County, Pa., took this photo Tuesday night while out taking pictures of the moon.

Whitaker, taking some night shots from the deck of her Viaduct Street house, said she was waiting for the moon to clear some trees when she saw a bright, white spiral cloud along with what seemed to be a star pulling the cloud. She said it was moving so fast she was surprised she was able to get it on film. "I was in the right place at the right time," she said.

Whitaker photographed the object using a 35mm camera with an 80 to 200 zoom lens. Her camera was mounted on a tripod, and she made the several-second exposure on 400 ASA Kodacolor film. Whitaker said photography is a hobby for her, and that she had just completed a summer course in color photography at Broome Community College.

PHOTO BY LORRAINE WHITAKER

# Object seen Tuesday night baffles experts —

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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 Tanegashi-

ma 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."

A Cornell University astronomy professor also said it was most probably related to the Perseid meteor shower, which will continue for several days, but she also said it may have been a trick of light.

"When people who watch the stars once, maybe twice, a year go out and look hard for a while they're bound to see things they think are strange," Martha Haynes said. "The reason for the large number of reports is probably because there were a lot of people out last night to look for the (meteor) showers and when you're in that mind set anything like the light of a

plane on the horizon looks strange."

Sherman Larsen, director of the Center for UFO Studies in Glenview, Ill., said his group received telephone reports yesterday from Elkhart, Ind., and Chicago. "In each case, witnesses said an object appeared to have exploded in the sky and then moved into a cloud," he said.

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 Mis-

issippi River. Only residents of Kentucky's Clark County, east of Lexington, heard a boom accompanying 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.

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.

It was also speculated the event was a rocket, but other experts disagreed. No government agency claimed responsibility for a Tuesday launch.

"I'm giving speculation, but

based on the description of the event, it sounds like a rocket," said E. Jay Sarton Jr., curator of the Kopernick Observatory in Vestal Center. He said members of the observatory staff and almost 50 people who called in described the object. "It sounds like an atmospheric test," he said.

Edward J. Uiszkowski of Vestal, who spotted the object from his back yard, said the white object was moving in a northeasterly direction and at first resembled an airplane. "I glanced up into the sky at 10:15 and I saw this white object spiraling. At first, I thought it was an airplane or something," Uiszkowski said. "It looked like a bunch of fireworks followed by a white cloud."

The object was seen by Detroit skywatchers who had gathered for an outdoor lecture and a look at the annual Perseid meteor shower. The campfire was blazing and marshmallows were roasting when suddenly one of the attendees stood up, pointed up into the southeast sky and shouted, "What is that?"

Chuck Barnes, head naturalist at the Troy Farm and Nature Center, described what they saw. "It was glowing like a spiral pinwheel standing on end and moving on a line from southeast to northwest," he said yesterday. "We first saw it about 40 degrees up from the horizon. It appeared to be about five or six times larger than a full moon."