

What I saw wasn't car lights.

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# Bragg Rd. is spooky place to go

By RICHARD STEWART  
Houston Chronicle

**S**ARATOGA — Some places are so spooky-looking, so lonely and eerie and unworldly that they just ought to be haunted.

Bragg Road is one of those places — and not only on Halloween.

For years people have been seeing ghostly lights floating up and down the road — eight miles long and straight as a rifle shot — that links FM 787 on the edge of Saratoga to FM 1293.

It's in the heart of the Big Thicket, that vast, almost mystical, forest that forms a biological crossroads between north and south, east and west.

The tiny town of Bragg, named for Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg, a one-time chief engineer on the railroad, was established in 1901 when a branch line was put in to connect the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe railroad with Saratoga.

The tracks were pulled up in 1934, and most of Bragg was dismantled, too.

Today there's nothing left of the town. The road was left where the railroad had been.

The sand road is just wide enough for two cars to pass and trees and brush crowd up against it like spectators along a parade route. Limbs and leaves seem to reach out to grab at passers-by, almost transforming the road into a tunnel.

"The thing to do is drive in there about half way and roll down your windows, turn out the lights and the engine and wait," said Mildred Schutte, 65, who lives a couple of hundred yards from the Saratoga end of the road.

"And listen," she said, her eyes dancing.

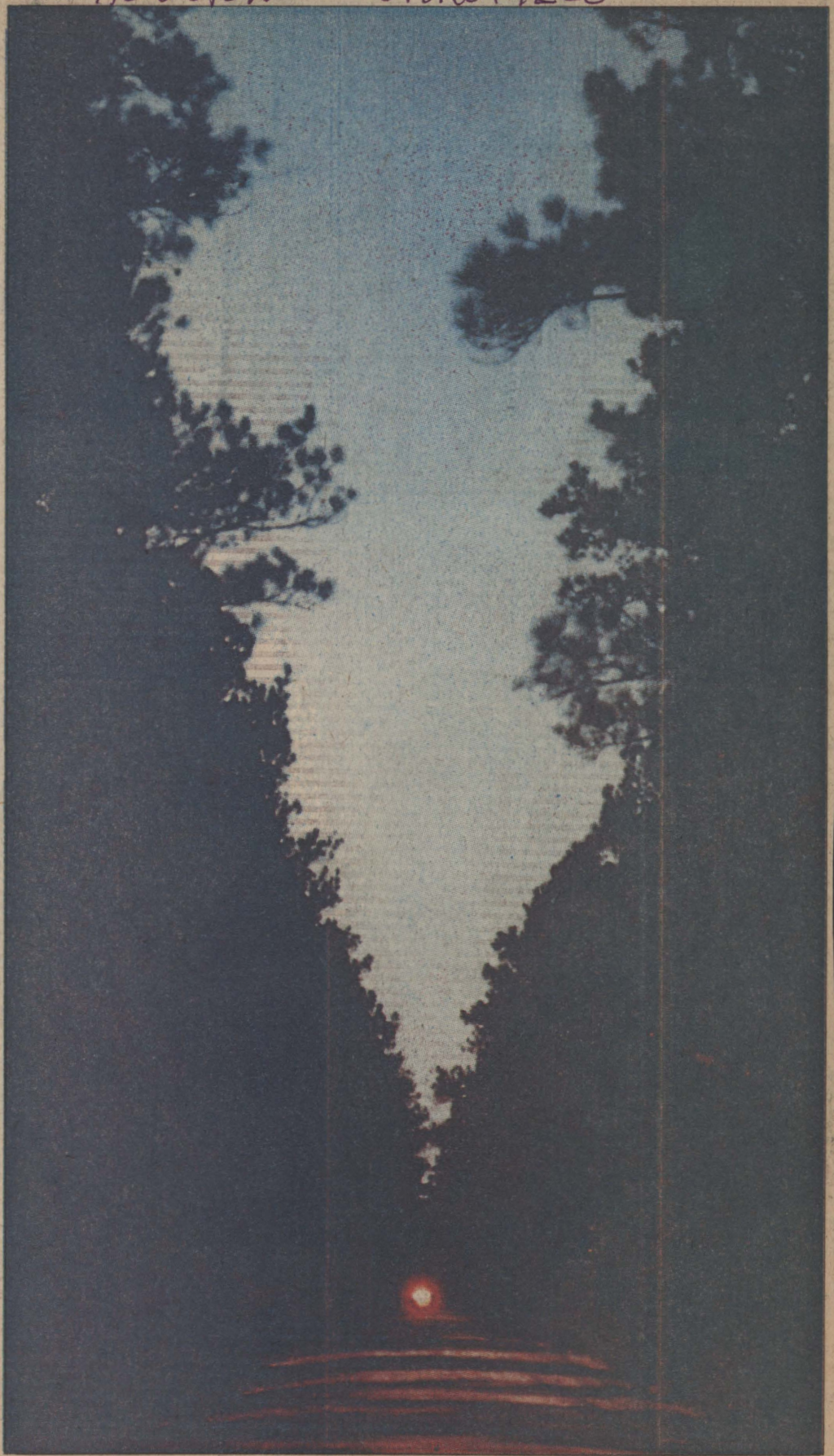
Turn out lights on Bragg Road on a moonless night, and it's almost like turning off the light in a closed closet. The sky peeking through the trees is only a lighter shade of ink.

It sounds spooky, too. Insects sing in chorus, and, somewhere out in the trees, an owl hoots his mournful call.

And then, as real as the ear or imagination can make it, there's the sound of something rustling through the road side brush.

Maybe it's just an armadillo.

Maybe it's one of the wild hogs called



Blair Pittman

See SEEING on Page 15.

For years people have been seeing ghostly lights floating up and down

Bragg Road — a lonely eight-mile stretch in the heart of the Big Thicket.

# 'Seeing the light' is a frightening experience on Bragg Road

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Continued from Page 1.

Piney Woods rooters.

Or maybe it's the ghost of the railroad brakeman who, some say, was decapitated in an accident on the very line that is now the road. His head was never found, old-timers will tell you, and now his restless spirit prowls the road with a lantern in a never-ending search for it.

About that time, a dim light blinks way down the road.

And then it gets brighter. It's not like car lights. It looks like a Coleman gasoline lantern being carried a few hundred yards away. It seems to sway as if it's being carried by a person walking.

You find yourself grasping the steering wheel tight enough to leave marks on your hands. It's time to start up the car, but pronto. Turn the key and there's a sickening nothing. It's in the wrong gear.

Get it in gear, twist the key quickly and try again. You say a little prayer that the ol' buggy won't fail you now. The engine answers as if it's as ready to get away as you are.

You turn on the lights — bright lights — and the radio too. Not just music. It's time for a talk show — the calming sounds of real, living people out there talking about something that doesn't include headless brakemen and mysterious lights on dark, lonely roads.

The light dims and then brightens once more, turning from a dull yellow to almost white hot, as if the person carrying it is pumping up the lantern making the mantles glow white hot.

And then it turns blood red, white hot again and blinks out.

All the time there's all that spooky Big Thicket looming out there, with trees that look like gargoyles reaching out with boney hands and tales of rogue bears and black panthers, wild men and long-dead spectres.

Logic says the light is from a car, but look through binoculars for a reassuring view of two headlights, and there's only a pulsating luminescent glow up the road.

Moving. Toward you. In the dark. On a road that's miles from nowhere.

Sometimes the light goes out. Relief comes. Until it shows up again in the rear view mirror. How did it get back there? Nothing passed.

Where did the light go? Nobody lives on the ghost road. Nobody living, anyway.

Most people say the ghost, if there is a ghost, is the headless brakeman. Others say it's from Mexican railroad workers murdered by a foreman who stole their pay, or a night hunter who is forever lost in these boggy woods, or long-dead Spaniards guarding gold buried out here long, long ago.

Not everybody sees it.

Schutte, who came to Saratoga as an infant, has yet to see the light.

She remembers hearing about it since the days when the railroad was still there.

She has her own ghosts, anyway — a whole family of them.

Her family has been seeing and hearing a strange family around their home for more than 50 years.

"There's a man and a woman, a young boy and a baby," she said. "They don't bother me. Sometimes something will turn up missing, or they'll leave a little something that I knew wasn't where I found it. I have a music box

that hasn't been wound up in years and the other night after I went to bed it came on and played just one round."

Some see the light lots of times.

"I've seen it at least 20 times, and I've never failed to see it when I went out there," said Houston photographer Blair Pittman.

Pittman said he first saw it in 1973 when he was shooting pictures for a National Geographic article about the Big Thicket.

He believes it is diffused light from auto headlights either farther down the road or on FM 770 at the road's southern terminus.

"What I saw wasn't car lights," said Debbie Collier, 32, a Saratoga secretary.

When she was a teen-ager, car loads of teens would park along a pipeline right-of-way about 1½ miles up the road.

They would turn up a car radio and dance, or talk or do other things young people would do.

One night she and a carload of friends saw a glowing ball of light in the road in front of them. "It looked like it was about head high, about 300 yards in front of us," she said.

As the driver sped forward, the light moved ahead.

Then it went out.

"Then we happened to look behind us, and it was behind us, heading towards us, and I really got scared then," she said.

That kind of close encounter with the light is much more rare than the far-off maybe-car-lights kind of sighting, said Joan Harper, 52, of Votaw, editor of the *Big Thicket Messenger* newspaper.

Her late brother, Dick Morse, told of seeing a ball of light coming down the road late one night. "Before he could get back into the car,

it shot right by the car," Harper said.

The heyday of light sightings came in the early 1960s when the light got plenty of publicity.

"Light-seers poured onto the road by the hundreds," wrote Texas Folklore Society President Francis Abernethy in his *Tales from the Big Thicket*. "People of all ages and intellects came to see and test their belief in the supernatural. They shot at it, they chased it, and they tested it with litmus paper and Geiger counters. A preacher harangued the road's multitudes from the top of his car, marking the Light as an ill omen of the world's impending doom."

Archer Fullingim, the late publisher, editor and printer of the *Kountze News*, filled several issues with what people thought about the light.

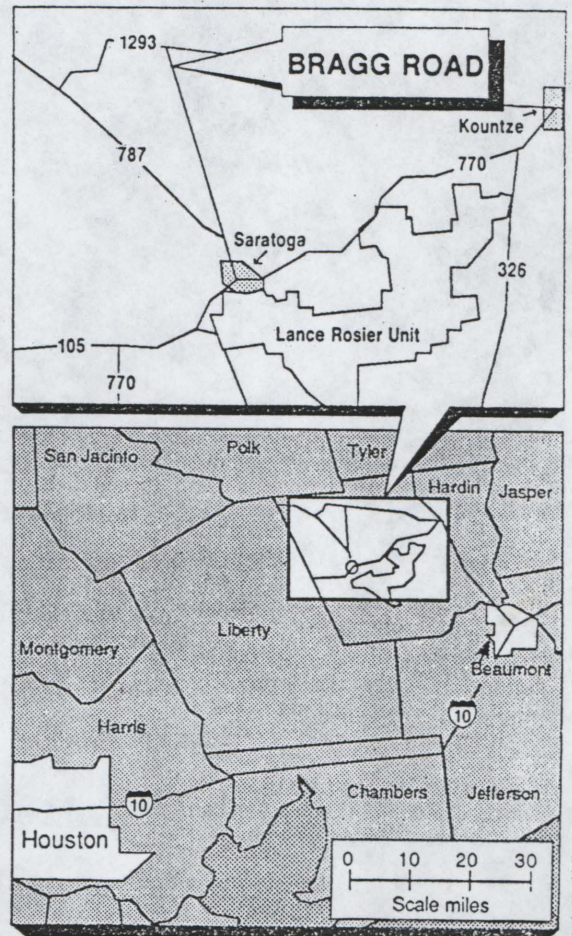
"The crowds quit coming after I published the explanations of geologists that the luminous balls were gaseous substances arising from the swamps of the surrounding Thicket, and I was thoroughly hated for printing a logical explanation," Fullingim wrote.

Every Halloween brings a new interest in the road.

This year, as in other years, the Big Thicket Museum will lead a trek down the road. Collier and her husband, Jack Collier, will take a score of youngsters on a Halloween night hayride down the road.

Maybe they'll see the light, and maybe it is the spirit of a headless brakeman or some other unfortunate ghost.

Even if the ghost light doesn't show up, Bragg Road is a spooky place to be on Halloween night.



B.C. Oren / Chronicle